

MUSIC TO FREE THE SOUL

Peter Reason applauds a revolutionary work uniting arts and the spirit

Experiencing Music – Restoring the Spiritual: Music as Well-being

June Boyce-Tillman

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Winchester Cathedral was packed. A buzz of anticipation ran through the gathering. Their children, their mothers and fathers, their friends and relations, had been preparing for months and were about to perform. *The Great Turning*. What could this be? Something to do with the environment; something new; something different.

The Reverend Professor June Boyce-Tillman, colourful in her flowing robes, took to the conductor's podium. After a moment's quiet, she gestured to the percussion. Into the silent cathedral came a crash of cymbals, rising and falling in complex rhythms, soon joined by the deep notes of trombones, evoking the Big Bang that started our universe on its evolutionary path. As the cymbals died away the cathedral was filled with a softer sound, coming, it seemed, from all directions: maybe falling rain, maybe tumbling grain. We were spellbound, wide-eyed: what could it be? And then children were ushered into their places behind the orchestra, each tapping together two stones. The choirs then sang of the formation of Earth: "Come, Gaian beings, we form the parts of Earth. In honouring and sharing we bring new life to birth."

What we were experiencing had its roots in *Stories of the Great Turning* (2013), stories of how contributors were addressing the challenge of our times in their everyday lives, the challenge that Joanna Macy describes as the Great Turning (see *Resurgence & Ecologist* March/April 2013). Boyce-Tillman had

been so taken by the stories in the book – to which she'd contributed a chapter – that she had adapted the text and set it to her own music.

For the next hour or so we were drawn into the four themes of the Great Turning: the great age of Gaia; gratitude for her gifts; the challenges of uncertainty, doubt and despair; our dreams and hopes for humanity.

This was a participatory event, with musicians from across Hampshire: eight school choirs, six community and university choirs, and an orchestra.

The music itself was immensely

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varied: simple children's songs, modern harmonies sung *a capella*. Some sections were solemn, some boisterous choruses. In the finale, we all joined in the hymn *We Shall Go out Renewed in Our Commitment* to the tune of *Danny Boy*. Music over, everyone rose in appreciation. We had witnessed and participated in an experience we knew was special, a musicking – to use Boyce-Tillman's term – that took us beyond performance into a deep sense of participation and transcendence.

Now Boyce-Tillman's book *Experiencing Music* explores the philosophy and practices behind this kind of music-making. There is, she says in her Prelude, a longing to bring the wandering soul of the West back

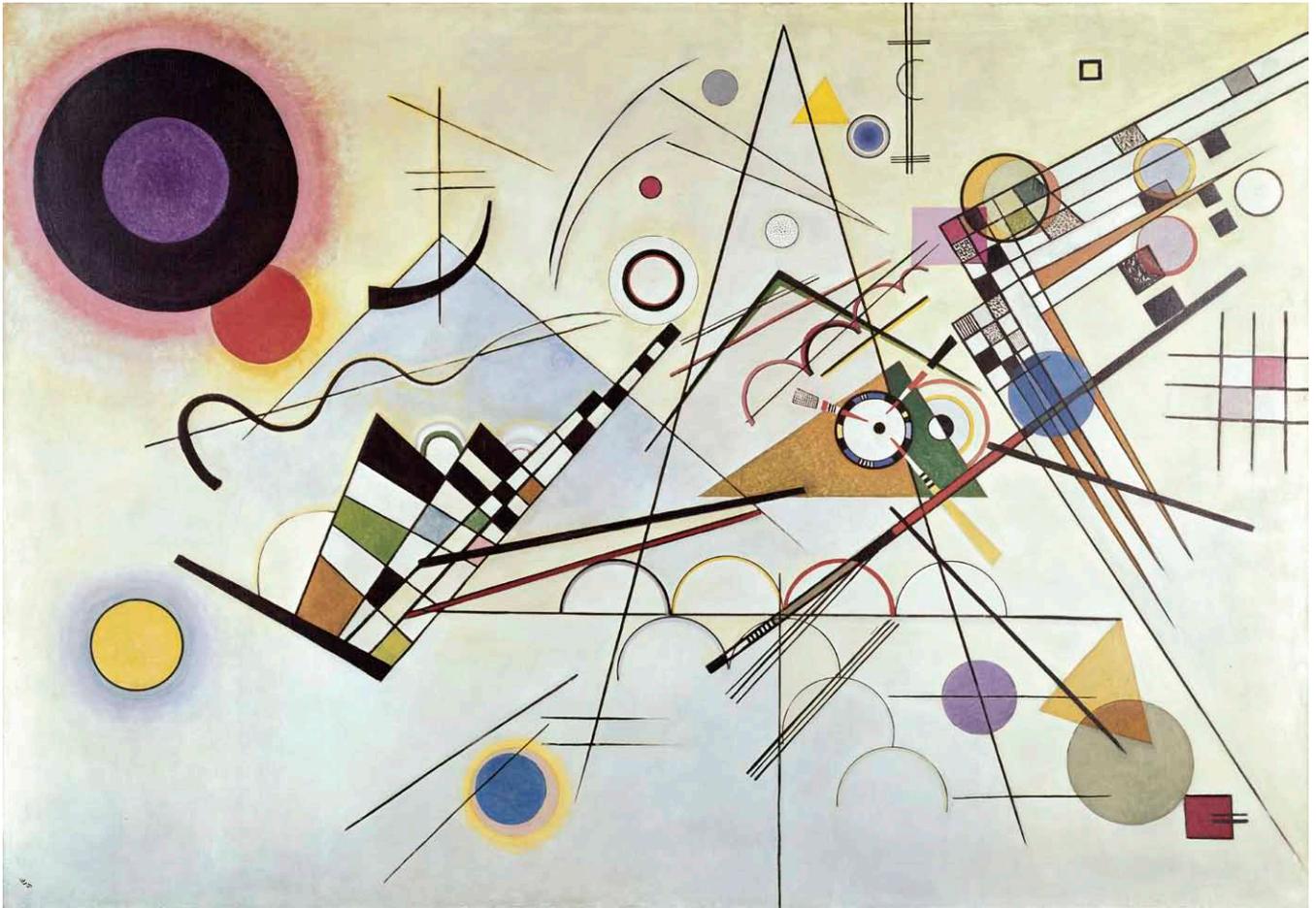
home: "How can we approach music in a way that will empower people to discover the spiritual aspect of musicking with integrity and judgment?" The restoration of soul would bring about a greater sense of aliveness and belonging; it would also bring us into a sense of mystery – that "curious, almost paradoxical sense that all is well with the world" – and so of peace of mind.

This resouling of the Western world is taking place in the context of a "religionless spirituality", which Boyce-Tillman explores in her second chapter. She asserts that the Western world has been "missing god" since Nietzsche declared his death; we are bereft. Can musical experience provide us with the nurture that we lack? Can we have spirituality without religion?

Drawing on process philosophy and theology, Boyce-Tillman insists that we must change our view of spirituality to process rather than product. We must experience god as a verb, 'go a-godding', so to speak: spirituality not as a thing to be achieved, but as an ongoing exploration between humans and the divine throughout the cosmos.

The book explores four domains of music experience. The Material domain includes the body and voice, the instruments, the sounds of the other-than-human world. In this domain Boyce-Tillman also includes the buildings in which musicking takes place as acoustic spaces, instruments in their own right. She describes her experiments of placing musicians in different parts of the space and close to walls "so that the walls support the sounds from behind and are coaxed into resonating".

The domain of Expression brings together the subjectivities of composer, performers and listeners. Whatever the intentions of composition and performance, the experience brings its own



Music can take us beyond performance into a deep sense of transcendence
 Composition Number 8, 1923 (oil on canvas), Kandinsky, Wassily (1866–1944) / Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, USA / Bridgeman Images

meaning, influenced by its context: music can be about companionship and vulnerability, freedom and empowerment, emotion and reminiscence. Boyce-Tillman describes this in Platonic terms as a search for The Truth.

The domain of Construction concerns quality within a particular musical idiom: the search for The Beautiful. Boyce-Tillman laments the dominance of the Western classical tradition, because it has cast a shadow on other idioms. For example, much traditional African music is expressed through complex rhythms: to an African ear Mozart's music, with its emphasis on melody and harmony, may seem rather simple and undeveloped. As a feminist scholar, she wonders whether the idiom of the Western canon, dominated as it is by mathematical form and monumentality, is in some ways a reflection of Western patriarchy.

In exploring the domain of Values, Boyce-Tillman asserts that music reflects not only an individual's values, but also a particular society's search for The Good. She describes her own

experiments in this ethical dimension of music, and her particular interest in musicking in the creation of pluralist culture and community.

These four domains weave together in an expression of Spirituality. The book evokes the Greek figure of Hermes, the calling of the "psychagogue", who can "transport the musicker to a different time/space dimension... move them from everyday reality to 'another world'". Boyce-Tillman chooses the term 'liminality' for this; it can also be described as peak experience, as flow, as trance. At its fullest, this experience integrates a sense of mystery with a narrative; empowers individuals while developing empathy; evokes a deep connection with the more-than-human, and unity with all beings and the cosmos.

In many ways this is a complex and academic book, drawing on writers from many traditions – musicological, psychological, philosophical and theological. In places it is a bit 'listy', and I sometimes wished there were more narrative and less references. But

Boyce-Tillman makes a huge contribution to our understanding of the links between musicking – and the arts in general – and our better human natures.

And it is revolutionary work. If this "radical musical inclusion" can help bring the Western soul home and give dignity to difference, musickers will truly inhabit the role of psychagogues – like Hermes, able to lead the soul from the underworld with love and empathy. Boyce-Tillman argues that late capitalism has invented "many underworlds to keep people trapped in cultures of consumerism, inequality, addiction and control". Music has always played a part in the liberation of subjugated cultures; June Boyce-Tillman is pointing out how it might play a part in the liberation and transformation of our own. R

Peter Reason's book, *Spindrift: A Wilderness Pilgrimage at Sea*, is published by Vala. He blogs at peterreason.net
The Great Turning: A Celebration Work by Rev Prof June Boyce-Tillman: tinyurl.com/great-turning-film