

A Spiritual Perspective on Solo Musical Improvisation: A Music Therapist's Heuristic
Journey

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Abstract

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The purpose of this inquiry was to explore the music therapist's personal experience of music improvisations when these were performed with a spiritual intention. The main goal was to gain insight into her personal connections to music and spirituality, and better understand their implications in her role as a music therapist. The research process included 14 improvisation sessions of one hour each, which took place over a period of two weeks. The data collection procedure was performed according to Moustakas' heuristic methodology, and was based on the music therapist's improvisation recordings and reflexive journals. Three main themes were revealed: the significance of spiritual holding in the process of musical improvisation, authentic musical expression as a path to self-discovery, and the growth towards a positive and integrated sense of self as a result of combining musical expression and spirituality. The inquiry was summarized with a creative synthesis which took the form of a narrative description of the music therapist's research experience. In conclusion, personal and professional implications of the results were discussed. Limitations of the study and areas for future research were also identified.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Significance and Need

According to the code of ethics (1999) by the Canadian Association for Music Therapists (CAMT), the exploration of personal experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and values is essential for the achievement of a responsible practice in music therapy. Considering that music therapists mostly rely on music in their professional work (Kagin, 2010), personal explorations with music are recommended for professional development (Forinash, 1992). Forinash (1992) states that the use of music for therapeutic purposes requires music therapists to explore the limits and boundaries of their musical expression in order to improve their application of music during clinical work. Similarly, Hesser (2001) encourages music therapists to relate to their own personal responses to music for the purpose of gaining a better understanding of the client's needs. In fact, the latter can lead them to higher levels of empathy, and thereby provide them with a better understanding of the client's therapeutic experience (Camilleri, 2001). Taken together, the self-exploration by the music therapist is an important endeavor and can contribute to the development of their clinical work.

According to Arnason (2005), spirituality and music improvisation are activities that can expand the experience of oneself, and thus encourage personal connections. Indeed, some authors believe that spirituality calls for self-exploration through acceptance and connection to the self and other (Stolzfus, Green & Schumm, 2013), whereas musical improvisation is said to promote self-awareness and introspection through creative expression (Keith, 2004). In either case, both music and spirituality are considered as beneficial for well-being (Kagin, 2010; Mannes, 2011). In fact, according to the literature, music has always played a significant role in the expression of spirituality for therapeutic and healing purposes (Lipe, 2002; Sutton, 2007). In a literature review exploring music, spirituality and health, Lipe (2002) states that music therapists commonly "address issues of spirituality within the framework of their clinical practice" (p. 216), which requires them to address spiritual goals within musical interventions. However, until to date only few studies have explored the music therapist's personal experiences, attitudes and beliefs in regards to the use of music and spirituality in their personal and professional life (Barton & Watson, 2013; Shrubsole, 2010; Sutton, 2007).

According to Sutton (2007), exploring personal spiritual values is essential to the responsible use of personal beliefs in the music therapy setting. Hence, the goal of this study is to explore the music therapist's personal connection to music and spirituality. In addition, it will help to better understand their implications in the clinical setting.

According to the author, the exploration of music together with spirituality is seen as a process that can promote self-knowledge, which in turn is the mechanism by which both processes can be fully understood.

Personal Context

As long as I can remember, music and spirituality have been sources of hope for me when facing difficult moments. Both have helped me to overcome challenges and have contributed to positive changes in my life. Firstly, spirituality has helped me to engage in self-exploration. Secondly, music—more precisely musical improvisation—has helped me to express unexplored parts of myself. When I started using music as a therapeutic tool, my personal beliefs slowly began to influence my perceptions of the musical process. I felt that the therapeutic use of music coincided with the spiritual values of faith, selflessness and unconditionality that I came across in my personal spirituality. For example, in the course of my music therapy training I learned that music therapists should believe in their musical interventions, remain selfless in their musical expression and thus focus on the clients' needs, and show unconditional acceptance for their music. Indeed, I wondered if there was a relationship between the therapeutic use of music and spirituality. Was I experiencing a spiritual connection with music during musical interventions? Did my spirituality influence my musical expression during interventions? Did I unconsciously tap into my spiritual self while making music? I felt that there was something intangible in my connection to music when I played it with clients, and I wondered if there was a connection between the musical and spiritual parts of myself. In order to address this question, I felt the need to engage in personal explorations with music and spirituality. Considering I always used musical improvisation for introspection and self-connection purposes, I relied on this method for the exploration of music and spirituality.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this research was to examine my personal experiences, values, attitudes, and beliefs in regards to music and spirituality in order to better understand their implications in my work as a music therapist. To examine this topic, I used heuristic self-inquiry, as this research method relies on the researcher's subjective experience to gain insight on the studied phenomenon (Moustakas, 1990).

Research Question

Primary research question. What is the music therapist-researcher's personal experience when she engages in solo music improvisations with a spiritual intention?

Assumptions

I initiated this research study with the assumption that there was a spiritual aspect to life, and that spirituality could be explored with intention. Also, based on the choice of the heuristic methodology, I assumed that personal explorations of my own spiritual experience would be of use to others (i.e., music therapists, clients and individuals who wish to engage with similar processes).

Delimitations

By choosing a heuristic first-person based inquiry, I delimited the exploration of this study to my personal experiences and perspectives. For the data collection process, I delimited music instruments to the voice and the piano. The piano and the voice were chosen due to the following reasons: (a) my comfort in using my primary instrument, the piano, for improvisational and self-exploration purposes and, (b) the significance of the voice in spiritual and musical forms of expression (Austin, 2008). Finally, I delimited my experience of spirituality as my personal connection to a higher source. This approach informed my rationale for the immersion into the spiritual phase of this inquiry.

Definition of Terms

The definition that I used for the concept of *solo musical improvisation* was based on: (a) Bruscia (1998), who defines the improvisatory experience as the act of making music "while playing or singing, extemporaneously creating a melody, rhythm, song or instrumental piece" (p. 116), and (b) Solis and Nettle (2009), who present a broader definition which describes musical improvisation as the spontaneous outlet of emotional states through musical creation. Proceeding from both definitions, I defined the concept

of *solo musical improvisation* as follows: the spontaneous creation of music while playing or singing melodies, rhythms, songs or instrumental pieces by oneself. When defining the term *spirituality* within the scope of this research, I used the following description presented by Dalton, Eberhardt, Bracken and Echols (2006), “[spirituality is] a form of reflection and introspection in which the primary goal is to explore one’s relationship to the transcendent and/or a spiritual source. Spirituality includes forms of religious and non-religious practices as well as secular beliefs and practices” (p. 5). With respect to defining the notion of *spiritual intention*, I relied on the latter definition of spirituality, thus formulating the concept as follows: the inner force that motivates the desire to engage in a relationship with a spiritual source for the purpose of personal meaning. Finally, the definition of the term *spiritual perspective* was based on Merriam Webster’s description of *perspective* which was described as: a point of view (Merriam Webster, 2017). Based on this definition, I defined *spiritual perspective* as follows: a viewpoint that stems from spiritually oriented views.

Chapters Summary

The study is divided into 5 chapters. Chapter 1 highlights the significance of the study in the field of music therapy, and describes the researcher’s personal relationship to the topic. In addition, the purpose of the study, the research question and the key terms and definitions are described in this section. Chapter 2 consists of the literature review which is divided into 5 parts: (a) a brief definition of spirituality, (b) spirituality and music therapy, (c) considerations of the therapist’s relationship to spirituality, (d) the presence of music in spiritual journeys, and (e) self-exploration and improvisation in music therapy. Chapter 3 describes the methodology of the study, presenting the main guidelines used to conduct this heuristic self-inquiry. Chapter 4 presents the results, and Chapter 5 concludes the study with a discussion of the results including a creative synthesis and implications for future research.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

Spirituality: A Brief Definition

The word *spirituality* had many different meanings throughout Western history. Until the 13th century, the term was used to describe individuals who had chosen to live a life inspired by the Spirit of God or *life in spirit* (Sheldrake, 2010). In ancient Greece, philosophers believed that a man or woman with *spirituas* was granted great intelligence and reasoning abilities. Religious connotations of the word *spirituality* only emerged at the end of the Middle Ages, as they were then used to designate clerical endeavors (Sheldrake, 2010).

In a book titled “A Sociology of Spirit” Flanagan and Jupp (2007) examine the evolution of spirituality in contemporary society, highlighting the growing separation between spirituality and traditional religion. According to the authors, social tendencies show a movement towards personalized forms of spirituality which manifest in the form of a disengagement from traditional religious views. Indeed, religious values are often based on ancient scriptures and traditions that served as foundation for community building. However, in modern times religious norms are being reconsidered as people seek for spiritual satisfaction in the *self* (Aldridge, 1995; Flanagan & Jupp, 2007; Potvin, 2012). In fact, Flanagan and Jupp (2007) report a trend in which the *self* is at the focal point of the spiritual experience. Terms like *well-being* and *mindfulness*, which are based on subjective experiences, are shaping traditional and standardized spiritual views, into personalized practices and approaches.

Defining spirituality in music therapy. The term *spirituality* is often used by scholars, music therapists, and clients to describe musical experiences that lead to moments of awe, transcendence, or connectedness with the self, others, and the universe (Fachner & Aldridge, 2002). Regarded as an important dimension of personal well-being, spirituality is approached with great consideration for individual differences, and music therapists remain sensitive to personal values, beliefs, and practices when it comes to defining spirituality (Fachner & Aldridge, 2002). Potvin and Argue (2014) completed a literature review on the status of spirituality in music therapy and found that spirituality can manifest in as many forms as there are individuals. In this context, finding unanimous agreement on a definition of spirituality is a challenging task given the different

experiences and interpretations attached to it (Marom, 2004). Notably, any attempt at finding a comprehensive definition of spirituality is challenged by the elusiveness and the complexities of the topic (Potvin & Argue, 2014). Despite the difficulties in defining spirituality, the literature presents several views and perspectives on the concept.

Helen Bonny (2001) considers spirituality as an endeavor that promotes self-exploration and connectedness with the self and others; she states that: “Spirituality involves a process of looking deep inside and discovering our inner unity with all life” (p. 60). Furthermore, she defines spirituality as the intention to engage with the inner self and to discover the universality that enables us to relate to our surroundings. Magill (2009) refers to spirituality as the inner source that motivates the quest for meaning within the universe and ourselves. Other definitions examine spirituality from a health care perspective. For example, Kidwell (2014) defines spirituality as the need to find purpose in personal, interpersonal and transpersonal interactions in moments of illness. In examining spiritual moments among hospice patients, she considered spirituality as an essential element for wellness. Likewise, Aldridge (1995) studied the implications of music therapy and spirituality in palliative care. In his study, he describes spirituality as a form of transcendence, a “new consciousness” (p. 108) that gives us life beyond our physical, motor, and emotional capacities. By transcending the present moment, patients create new meaning and surpass their medical condition.

Spirituality and Music Therapy

During the 1960’s, at a time of great spiritual exploration, Helen Bonny introduces the Bonny Method of Guided Imagery and Music (GIM) into the field of music therapy. Based on her spiritual journey with music, she developed a model promoting the use of receptive music as a way to engage in deep and heightened levels of consciousness. While participating in GIM therapy, clients can experience music in a mystical and transpersonal way, which may trigger internal healing processes (Kagin, 2010). A similar mechanism has been observed for shamanistic practices. Aigen (1991) notes that the concept of music in therapy is comparable to the concept of music in shamanistic rituals. In both contexts, the purpose of music is to heal through inner explorations and changes in consciousness, and thus allow participants to experience well-being and personal transformation (Aigen, 1991; Kagin, 2010). Psychodynamic

music therapy models also focus on the exploration of consciousness and introspective processes as treatment (Dillard, 2006). These models include techniques such as; receptive music, improvisation, song analysis, and client-selected music to encourage the exploration of spiritual related themes. The latter are addressed through the analysis of lyrical content and song messages, as well as through the verbal and emotional communications of the client (Kagin, 2010). In summary, the implementation of structured musical experiences encourages the safe exploration of personal and existential topics (Dileo, 1999). It allows clients to tap into their personal spirituality in the music therapy setting.

The need to understand the therapeutic and healing functions of music encouraged music therapists to engage in reflexive inquiries examining the spiritual and transcendent aspects of music (Aigen, 2008). The book “Listening, Playing and Creating” edited by Carolyn Kenny (1995), presents several essays, articles, and case studies exploring the power of music and sound. Within this work, the narratives of music therapists relating their experience of spirituality and transcendence are presented. The latter address themes involving the mystical implications of silence, the transcendent effects of musical tones and the spiritual powers of drumming. The links between spirituality and music are also explored in a literature review by Lipe (2002) addressing the influence of music and spirituality on wellness. This review of over 50 articles, with 30 of those being music therapy studies, found that music was the most widespread and the most effective tool used by therapists to address their clients’ spiritual health.

Music therapy methods of achieving wellness can include integrative approaches focusing on the mind, the body and the spirit (Darrow, 2008). The music therapy in wellness model, for example, is based on interventions involving singing, relaxation, wellness exercises, therapeutic drumming and active music making to address spiritual goals (Darrow, 2008). In a book called “Music and Soul Making”, Crowe (2004) reports how music therapy interventions can be beneficial for the creation of spiritual connections with the self and others. According to the author, techniques such as improvisation, music making, and group singing encourage the emergence of the inner spiritual nature. Moreover, Crowe (2004) maintains that the human spirit is liberated

through creative expression, leading to experiences of affiliation, play and self-development.

Considerations of the Therapist's Relationship to Spirituality

According to Blair (2015), who examined the influence of therapists' spirituality on their professional work, engaging in spiritual practices increases therapists' composure and openness during therapeutic interventions. Exercises such as self-reflection, prayer, and meditation encourage therapists to remain present and empathetic during sessions. Dunn, Callahan, Swift, and Ivanovic (2013) suggest that therapists who practice mindfulness exercises before sessions report being more focused in their work; furthermore, their sessions are rated by clients as being more effective. Although spiritually-oriented therapists use their personal faith as a resource to positively impact their work, challenges related to the implementation of spirituality in the clinical setting may arise (Barton & Watson, 2013). Therefore, working with clients on spirituality can be a challenging task if the therapist and the client do not share the same faith, or if the client and the therapist have rigid religious viewpoints (Kagin, 2010). In such cases, it is important for therapists to remain open and flexible, and maintain healthy boundaries between the client's spiritual views, and their own personal beliefs. In fact, having spiritual values means that therapists need to find a balance between their personal spirituality, and how they address spirituality in their work. Lawler (2007) breaks down spirituality experienced by therapists into two categories. In the first category, personal spirituality is described as the therapist's personal experience of spirituality in relation to the self, others, nature, and a higher source. In contrast, professional spirituality is seen as a spiritually-informed behaviour for the benefit of the therapeutic outcome. In fact, her study reveals difficulties for therapists in clearly defining and conceptualizing the notion of professional spirituality. These results lead to the conclusion that understanding personal spiritual beliefs from a professional perspective remains a challenge for therapists. Nonetheless, when therapists try to integrate and harmonize personal and professional forms of spirituality—they engage in a self-examining process that leads to personal growth (Lawler, 2007). However, the lack of clinical training during those self-reflection stages remains an issue. As therapists are left alone in their explorations, they lack the necessary support and supervision to guide their quest (Blair, 2015). Such

inherent risks as ideological conflicts, unintentionally forcing unwanted viewpoints upon clients, and the projection of personal spiritual needs on clients, can interfere with the therapeutic work (Blair, 2015; Kagin, 2010). Therefore, it is important for therapists to be able to identify personal biases as well as unconscious motivations and reactions when dealing with spiritual matters. The exploration of their personal spiritual views can provide them with the necessary knowledge to address clients' spiritual needs in a way that respects ethical and professional boundaries (Marom, 2004). On the other hand, some viewpoints disagree on the inclusion of the therapists' spirituality in the therapeutic work, supporting the idea that therapists' spiritual matters should remain personal and separate from the clinical context (Freeman, 2008; Froman, 2009).

The music therapist's relationship to spirituality. There is a lack of research addressing the impact of music therapists' personal spirituality on their professional work (Barton & Watson, 2013; Magill, 2001; Potvin, 2012; Salmon, 2001). Nonetheless, the literature that does exist shows that the therapist's spirituality plays a significant role in the therapeutic context (Arnason, 2005; Barton & Watson, 2013; Kagin, 2010). In a phenomenological study examining music therapists' spirituality, Barton and Watson (2013) report that spirituality is often used as a resource by music therapists to cope with termination, loss, and challenging situations within the clinical setting. Indeed, music therapists turn to spirituality in contexts such as; painful endings, the death of a client, the need for heightened therapeutic connection, and spiritual support for clients (Barton & Watson, 2013; Sutton, 2007). Moreover, a survey conducted by Kagin (2010) shows that personal and daily spiritual activities help music therapists avoid spiritual and emotional weariness, compassion fatigue and burnout, as it helps them recharge their energy levels after therapeutic interventions.

Some studies show that music therapists with a spiritual orientation tend to perceive music as a divine and spiritual energy (Kagin, 2010; Sutton, 2007). Because they experience music in a spiritual way; they perceive music as a life-enhancing undertaking, and a way to address their personal spiritual needs (Kagin, 2010; Sutton, 2007). When used in therapy sessions, music contributes to the creation of supportive spiritual connections, and thus becomes a source of well-being and safety for clients with spiritual needs (Barton & Watson, 2013; Lipe, 2002). Music therapists with spiritual

orientations may also establish connections between music and spirituality, music and prayer, and the implications of music in mindfulness and transcendental experiences. Although they might not actively use music for spiritual purposes, they may still consider music as a source of spiritual expression (Barton & Watson, 2013).

The Presence of Music in Spiritual Journeys

Improvised songs, chants, and laments have been used across many cultures and traditions to express emotions such as grief and mourning. They helped to facilitate spiritual journeys as well as ritualistic ceremonies (O'Callaghan, 1996). Often used to promote healing and worshiping experiences (Cook, 1997), music is still viewed as having a transcendental and spiritual nature. Thus, music is seen by some as the sacred path connecting the inner realms to outer realities. For example, in Native American tradition music is used to establish and restore spiritual connections with oneself, others, nature, and animals, as well as spiritual entities (Campbell & McAllester, 1994). Also referred to as *Baraka* by the Tajiks in Central Asia, the great spiritual powers of music are viewed as great mystical forces during religious ritual (Koen, 2005). Music is also praised for its vibrational qualities considered as a significant facilitator of spiritual experiences. For example, several African cultures believe in the vibrational qualities of music and sound for the promotion of spiritual health (Nzewi, 2006). Similarly, the North Indian Hindus consider sound as a “vibratory healing remedy” (Cook, 1997, p. 82) emerging from a divine source (Cook, 1997).

Many musicians, priests, and shamans use their musical skills for the attainment of spiritual goals (Potvin & Argue, 2014; Nzewi, 2006). For example, techniques such as the repetition of musical patterns and the use of cyclical and rhythmical drums are used to induce trance states and altered states of consciousness (Cook, 1997; Nzewi, 2006). In addition, gradually increasing the tempo, the volume, and the vocal range during musical performances serves the purpose of opening the mind and making it malleable to change (Koen, 2005). Lyrical content as well as the meaning of words and improvisation also contribute to spiritual and transcendental experiences. Texts such as sacred scriptures, mantras and prayers are integrated to music in order to support spiritual journeys (Cook, 1997; Tee & Loo, 2014). The latter involve improvised recitations of religious scriptures,

the repetition of holy words, and meditative singing (Chen, 2005; Koen, 2005; Press, 1975; Rosauer & Hill, 2010).

Self-Exploration and Improvisation in Music Therapy

Bruscia (1998) defines the improvisatory experience as the act of making music “while playing or singing, extemporaneously creating a melody, rhythm, song or instrumental piece” (p. 116). The latter can be experienced alone, in duet or in a group setting. In clinical improvisation, the therapist exposes the client to the spontaneous creation of music, with the purpose of generating constructive changes and transformations (Bruscia, 1987). It provides a space where individuals can freely express themselves and release inner tensions and impulses. Analytical music therapy (Priestly, 1994), for example, is a model based on the use of improvisational music to address emotions. This music therapy model includes improvisation techniques involving free-association and self-exploration methods, in which the client’s projections and personal explorations are analysed in order to address and work out unresolved issues (Bruscia, 1987; Darrow, 2008). Similarly, vocal psychotherapy (Austin, 2008) is a music therapy method based on the use of improvised singing to achieve therapeutic goals. The aim of vocal psychotherapy is to explore the client’s unconscious mind through spontaneous vocal expression. It involves techniques such as vocal toning and free associative singing, and includes moment-to-moment vocalisations with the therapist (Austin, 2008). Paul Nordoff and Clive Robbins, pioneers in the Creative Music Therapy approach (2007), developed an improvisational music therapy model that focuses on spontaneous musical interactions as a means of increasing self-awareness and accessing the musical child (Cooper, 2010; Darrow, 2008). Their approach is based on the principle that free musical expression encourages meaningful communication, as it touches upon the most profound and lively parts of the self. Hence, according to the Nordoff-Robbins approach, true and authentic connections are created naturally through the improvisational experience.

Indeed, clinical improvisation offers the possibility for uncensored personal expression, and thereby provides the opportunity for clients to fully experience personal emotions and life stories (Bruscia, 1987). The expression of hidden thoughts and emotions involves self-exploratory processes, where past and present material is brought to consciousness. This may lead the client towards “emotional awareness and insight”

(Stark, 2012, p. 23) as the improvisational process brings about novel information on the self (Wigram, Pedersen & Bonde, 2002). By leading the way to spontaneous and non-verbal forms of communication through music, music improvisation bypasses systematic reasoning (Lichtenstein, 1993) and becomes a path to personal discovery.

When the self is expressed musically, new connections and meanings are formed. Kenny (2006) describes the process of translating the self into music as a *movement toward wholeness* (p.102). This *wholeness* is described by Austin (1996) as a sense of unity of the mind, the body, and the spirit for the formation of a unified self. In short, the full expression of internal ideas and feelings through the improvisational music experience produces a creative field of insights and connections where the self is transcended and pushed towards a broader sense of existence (Kenny, 2006). According to Ruud (1995), clinical improvisation changes personal perspectives and changes one's experience of self. Within the improvisational process, self-expression becomes a source of change, self-revelation, and personal discovery (Bartal & Ne'eman, 1993).

Spiritual aspects of improvisation in music therapy. Arnason (2005) provides several reflections on spiritual dimensions in clinical improvisation. She believes the improvisational music experience has spiritual qualities such as: (a) strengthening the ability to deepen and widen one's experience of self, (b) inducing changes in consciousness, (c) leading towards growth and transformation, and (d) opening access to inner resources. Similarly in Forinash's (1992) study, the testimonies of several music therapists also reflect the elusive and mysterious nature of musical improvisation. The theme *the unknown* emerged from the data describing clinical improvisation as a mysterious and powerful process that can only be experienced while being in the moment. Music therapists also qualified the experience as hard to define and thus highlighted the elusiveness and the non-verbal nature of the process. Although the spiritual aspect of improvisation is not explicitly evoked in the study, elements of mysticism are implied in the use of terms such as *unknown*, *mysterious*, *powerful* and *undefinable* to describe the process. Nordoff and Robbins might refer to this part of the self as the musical child, the hidden dimension that holds the deepest creative impulses and for which no limitations, cognitive nor communicative, exists (Nordoff & Robbins, 2007).

Summary

The concept of spirituality has greatly evolved across Western history (Sheldrake, 2010). Although several studies attempt to describe it, spirituality remains elusive and difficult to define (Potvin & Argue, 2014). Several studies address the implications of spirituality in healthcare, and examine its significance in the field of music therapy (Lipe, 2002). Very few studies, however, focus on the music therapist's personal experience of spirituality (Barton & Watson, 2013; Magill, 2001; Potvin, 2012; Salmon, 2001). Yet, the exploration of personal values and spiritual beliefs is seen as essential in the personal and professional development of therapists (Barton & Watson, 2013; Forinash, 1992). The purpose of this study was to further explore the music therapist-researcher's connection to music and spirituality, and gain insight on how these processes relate to her work as a music therapist.

Chapter 3. Methodology

Heuristic research is a methodology developed by Clark Moustakas (1990) which consists of studying a human phenomenon by immersing oneself into the research question. The researcher takes on the role of both data collector and informant, aiming at individual self-knowledge for better understanding of the overall human experience (Wheeler, 2005). “This question or problem...will always reflect a personal concern of the researcher with respect to understanding themselves, and the human world in which they live.” (Given, 2008, p.5). Heuristic inquiry brings the researcher to discover most of the significance and meaning to the study through subjective experiences such as self-dialogues, personal insights, and inspirations (Kleining & Witt, 2000; Moustakas, 1990). The idiosyncrasy and subjectivity inherent to the research questions require the researcher to use a methodology that attaches significance to the human experience in research. Furthermore, the heuristic method encourages personal processes and personal discoveries (Moustakas, 1990; Wheeler, 2005). This philosophy that echoes with the self-exploratory nature of processes such as meaning-making, spiritual meditation, and solo musical improvisation are essential to the proposed research question. With its focus on personal perspectives and the lived experience, the heuristic approach was best suited for the purposes of this study, which sought to understand my own human experiences of music and spirituality.

The first step in this heuristic approach consists of the initial engagement phase, where the researcher is exposed to material and experiences such as literature, books, and classes, as well as personal and social experiences leading to the formation of the research question. During this phase, the researcher discovers potential areas for inquiry and reflects on ways to fill the gap in the literature, in his/her sphere of interest. The next step, the immersion phase, is the moment where the researcher is exposed to the research question by physically and emotionally experiencing the question. This step requires the researcher to understand the studied phenomenon through lived experience. During the third and fourth step, the incubation and illumination phases, the researcher studies and analyses the research question in the light of newly acquired insights and perspectives, after periodically retrieving from the research process. The research process is followed by the explication phase, in which the researcher elucidates and explains his/her results

by answering the research question. Finally, the last step consists of the creative synthesis, which can include a narrative description or a piece of artwork representing the integration as well as the researcher's intuitive interpretation of the whole research process. In short, heuristic research is "The lifting out of the full nature, essence, and meaning of the experience which brings one into touch with creative resources, enables one to develop a new view of self and life, and makes possible movement toward authenticity, self-efficacy, and well-being." (Moustakas, 1990, para. 12).

Participants and Materials

I was the only participant of this heuristic inquiry. The materials used included a self-reflection journal, an audio recorder, a candle, a piano and my voice.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedure

The initial engagement phase. The initial engagement phase lasted for a period of 6 months. Conceptualizing my questions in relation to spirituality, music, and self-expression was challenging and I was compelled to look into the literature for specific terminology. As I gained deeper understanding of these topics, I began experiencing both music and spirituality differently. In the light of my novel findings, I felt the need to further explore my personal views on these topics. Correspondingly, my desire to improvise, play music, and explore new spiritual practices emerged. I began reflecting on the commonalities between my experiences of musical improvisation and my spiritual practices. This interrogation contributed to the clarification of my research question, and led me to naturally plunge into the immersion phase.

The immersion phase. During this phase I lived with the research question by immersing myself with experiences related to music and spirituality. The immersion phase consisted of one musical improvisation per day for a period of 14 days. The improvisational experience consisted of vocal and instrumental (piano) non-referential improvisations, and lasted for an average of one hour each. The latter were recorded, and followed by reflective journaling. The recordings were played back after the improvisational process, towards the end of the immersion phase. Spontaneous reflections that emerged following the improvisation and journaling sessions were also recorded.

Rationale for the musical improvisation. For the purpose of this study, the spiritual practice of concentration meditation was used during the music improvisation process. Concentration meditation seeks to induce spiritual awareness by consciously directing the attention towards the inner self (Stanley, 2013). The most important aspect of this practice is to keep a focused attention on “sound perceptions, words, breath, feeling, intention, or a particular area of the body” (Stanley, 2013, p. 107) to induce stillness and “to open oneself to spirituality” (Stanley, 2013, p. 107).

The first step of the improvisation involved the lighting of a candle, which is a common ritual in spiritual, religious and ceremonial instances. This step was followed by a moment of silence in order to mentally prepare for the upcoming experience (Koen, 2005). The next step was to focus on the breath. According to Stanley (2013), the breath is considered by many as the source of spirit, life and wholeness, and is an important part of any spiritual practice. It is helpful to gradually shift the attention inwards and to foster self-connection (Austin, 2007). Based on these assumptions, the improvisational experience incorporated breathing to access deeper levels of consciousness and staying tuned to spontaneous musical inspirations. The third step involved the expression of spontaneous vocal melody or toning pitch that emerged from inside. The purpose of this step was to engage in an authentic expression. The fourth step consisted of providing musical support for the vocal improvisation. Musical support in the form of repetitive and rhythmical patterns is often used in spiritual practices as a way of holding and sustaining musical expression (Austin, 2007; Nzewi, 2006). The fifth step required the synchronization of breath with the music. According to Stanley (2013), synchronising breath, movement and sound was a common practice for spiritual healers to foster calmness and facilitate internal transformations.

Letting go and experiencing the musical process by accepting anything that arises as fundamentally beneficial was essential in this experience. Holzel and al. (2011) defined this concept as *emotional regulation through reappraisal* where an experience or feeling initially perceived as negative or undesirable is re-evaluated as having a positive outcome (growth, change, etc.). This concept is one of the main features of meditation (Holzel & al., 2011) and overall spirituality. Hence, it was important for me to enter the improvisational experience with mindfulness and openness.

The musical improvisation session. The improvisation sessions took place in a room equipped with a piano, a candle, a table, a computer, and an audio recorder. The candle was placed on the piano, beside the cellular phone recorder. The computer was set on a table behind me; as I sat on the piano bench.

The spiritual intention was operationalized as follows:

1. Light the candle.
2. Begin with a moment of silence and focus on the breath.
3. Wait for a melody or toning pitch to emerge, sing the melody or toning pitch.
4. Play a supporting chord or supporting harmony in ostinato to accompany the vocal melody or toning pitch.
5. Synchronize the music with the breath.
6. Let the vocal and piano improvisation unfold spontaneously.

Also:

7. Pay attention to the vibrations of the piano and the voice.
8. Pay attention to physical and/or emotional responses.

Except for step 1, which served as a preparation for the musical experience, the preceding steps could be performed in any order.

The journaling phase. I conducted the data collection by completing a reflexive journal shortly after each musical improvisation and whenever it felt necessary, based on my experience of the musical and spiritual improvisational process.

The incubation phase. During this phase I completely retreated and avoided anything related to the research question. According to the principle of *finding when not searching*, this phase seeks to remove oneself from research-related material in order to facilitate insightful and spontaneous discoveries during the next phase, the illumination phase. In this phase I completely withdrew from any spiritual and musical practices for a period of 14 days.

The illumination phase. This phase is explained as a natural shift in awareness where the mind changes and gains new perspectives and insights after completely withdrawing from the data. Previously inaccessible and unnoticed information is suddenly revealed as the mind becomes more receptive to new ideas (Moustakas, 1990).

During this phase I reviewed the collected data, listened back to the recordings, and added new ideas and impressions as they came along. Having been away from the data for a sustained period of time, I reorganized the data into new themes and categories.

The explication phase. This phase consists of the analysis, organization, and structure of the previously collected data with regards to the research question. Patterns and relationships are formed based on the researcher's intuition and tacit knowing (Moustakas, 1990). I used Neuman's (2010) coding technique which required the following steps: (a) open coding: pointing out ideas from the data and organizing them into categories; (b) axial coding: grouping and organizing similar categories into main themes based on the research question; and (c) selective coding: identifying and quoting passages that are relevant to the main themes.

After the coding process, I prepared a detailed interpretation of the results in light of the research question. As required by the heuristic process, each coding procedure included the following steps: reflection, analysis, and immersion into the data.

The creative synthesis phase. In this final stage of the inquiry, the researcher creates an artistic product reflecting his/her understandings, intuitions as well as the meaning of the whole research experience (Moustakas, 1990). For this phase, I wrote a narrative description using my spirit and my imagination to relate my personal experience and insights on the research process.

Criteria for Evaluation

The present study was conducted in keeping with the standards and evaluation criteria for qualitative music therapy research (Wheeler, 2005). Reflexivity was ensured through the disclosure of self-reflections and research concerns with professors and peers, in which personal ideas were shared and analyzed. The reflexivity process also included the examination of personal reflections as well as emergent thoughts throughout the research process. Finally, ethical integrity was established in this research process through methodological thoroughness and conscientiousness, which means that the data was handled with personal awareness and authenticity (Bruscia, 1998).

Chapter 4. Results

The primary research question of this inquiry was: What is the music therapist-researcher's experience when she engages in solo music improvisations with a spiritual intention? Presented in this chapter are the themes and categories that emerged from the data analysis. The inserted quotations were directly extracted from my personal journals.

Theme 1: The Significance of Spiritual Holding in Solo Musical Improvisations

The candle as a representation of the spiritual. In the context of the present study I used the candle light as my source of connection to *spirituality*. *I decided to light a candle*, in order to fully engage in the spiritual experience and feel my way to a higher source: *I looked at the candle for spiritual support, and every time I looked...it gave me strength to reach inside myself*. Thus, I was able to experience my personal spirituality through my connection with the candle, as it *gave my spirituality form and shape*. As a music therapist, the symbol of the spiritual candle was translated into the presence of an *inner spiritual light*. This inner light reminded me to focus my attention inwards during challenges in my work. For example, I noticed how I could quickly experience self-doubt and disconnect from my inner self when I had difficulties in the clinical setting. I felt how this response was detrimental to my sense of presence during sessions. Responding to my inner light, however, required me to connect to myself and access my inner resources. Much like with the candle, I realised that my inner light also carried the strength and support I needed to trust in my interventions as well as the therapeutic process. Hence, connecting to my inner self became significant in my experience of spirituality with regards to my work as a music therapist.

The candle as a witness of my musical expression. Throughout the improvisational process, the candle represented a *witness* and a *presence* to my musical expression. The data revealed how I experienced this presence as a soothing and compassionate energy, free of any judgement: *I was going to stop (playing) because I judged my music, but when I looked at the candle, I thought it was ok to continue and fully explore*. In fact, this connection felt therapeutic as the candle embodied an unconditional presence; a flame that would stay lit regardless of what I played. Experiencing such a presence during musical explorations sensitized me to the need for

unconditional acceptance during music making. For example, in my role as a music therapist, this reminded me of the importance to accept the client's musical expression unconditionally. Having experienced the presence of an unconditional witness myself, I understood that it was important in the manifestation of authentic expression. Moreover, experiencing the presence of an unconditional witness gave me the opportunity to experience my own music in a positive way. Instead of limiting myself by engaging in self-criticism, I experienced the fullness and depth of my musical expression. I gained more knowledge of my own music, and my personal responses to it, which informed my musical interventions. Indeed, I felt more confident in my musical interactions with clients, and was more comfortable in identifying any musical countertransferences. If any emotion emerged during the musical process, I felt like I could manage it, because I had been exposed to, and I had handled my own emotions during the improvisational process.

The emergence of a safe space for musical expression. As I engaged in further data analysis, I noticed the influence of the spiritual intention on my experience of music improvisations. Creating music in a spiritual environment encouraged me to honestly express myself. Part of it was due to my personal values and beliefs concerning my relationship with spirituality. I had always tried to remain as authentic and as honest as I could when I engaged in my spiritual practices, and this attitude was reflected in the way I approached my music. By providing me with a compassionate space, my spirituality encouraged me to engage in honest musical expression: *spirituality is also a safe space for me...(where) I'm able to express myself safely...and be in touch with something that's really honest.* The same was true when I engaged in music with a spiritual intention—I tried to approach music making as honestly and authentically as I possibly could. The spiritual environment also encouraged me to engage in honest forms of expression by providing me with a compassionate space where my creative impulses could emerge. As a result of this, I became less critical of my musical expression, and instead I experienced more kindness and acceptance: *I can see without judging and just accept my mistakes...accept everything that comes with my music.* I felt an aura of trust emerging from my improvisational experiences. Furthermore, I was able to let go and enjoy my personal expression, *because I put it in the hands of something that is greater than me, which was very relieving. It was like playing in a state of rest, where I could put a hold*

on my judgement. I had the feeling that anything that I played, felt, and thought was welcomed. This feeling of acceptance brought me a sense of safety, and it allowed me to experience the musical space with less fear and more freedom.

Theme 2: Authentic Musical Expression: A Path to Self-Discovery

The musical components of a spiritual intention. As I listened to my recordings, I noticed recurrent patterns across my musical improvisations. Firstly, there were four main moods that best described my music; somber, mystical, melancholic, and hopeful. I did play joyous and cheerful things at times, but they were not as significant. I always used the sustain pedal, and the tempo was usually between 65 and 90 beats per minute. I played in minor tonalities such as the phrygian and harmonic modes, and used legato and *expressivo* dynamics, which provided a sentimental atmosphere to the music. The music revealed a lot of emotional expression, and listening back to the recordings triggered feelings of sadness, contemplation, and hopefulness within me. Even when I experienced novel emotions during the improvisational process, the end result was rather *pleasant and harmonious*. This reminded me of the psychoanalytical concept of sublimation, where undesirable emotions are transformed into acceptable and aesthetically pleasing forms. Indeed, the music could convey a sense of beauty, yet emerge from a *vulnerable* place. The transformational process of my thoughts and emotions also implied their materialization into tangible *musical vibrations*. Notably, the physical vibrations of the piano strings as well as the vibrations of my own voice felt healing to me. For example, playing deep reverberating chords and singing long tones made me feel good and connected to myself. Using my voice was particularly *cathartic*, especially when I supported and *held* my singing with piano chords. I would engage in vocalisations like humming and toning, or explicitly sing lyrics that reflected what I felt in the moment. The topics would range from existential reflections, to personal feelings and past experiences. Although I did not explicitly sing about spirituality, I made some spiritual references in the way I expressed myself vocally. I sang vocal patterns that are similar to traditional Indigenous chants, and used Gregorian/medieval-like church modes. I was never trained in these particular techniques and I felt quite surprised to experience them in my improvisations. Although they might be linked to my cultural and religious heritage, I could not determine for sure the origin of these manifestations. Moreover, I

noticed that I would sing *repetitive vocal patterns*, and play *repetitive rhythmical chords* on the piano. Indeed, repetition was a recurrent theme of my improvisations. I remember experiencing the present moment with more intensity when I used musical or rhythmical repetitions. It felt comforting and it gave me a sense of feeling *healed* by the music. The manifestation of silence was also a significant factor in my experience of healing during the musical process. Each improvisation was initiated with a *moment of silence*, and I would occasionally include lengthy pauses in the middle of my performances. These moments of stillness made me feel connected to myself, and brought an awareness to the presence of the instrument. It also allowed me to contemplate my connection to a higher source.

Meeting with the music. During the improvisational process, music quickly became a medium for communicating and translating my emotions. I developed my connection to music through the exploration of my own musical expression, and found many similarities between the music I created and myself: *my music is me...every trait I can define myself with I can use to define my music; spontaneous, sensitive, dispersed, changing*. I noticed that I projected my emotional states into the music, and that in turn, my musical explorations enhanced my self-knowledge. *Interestingly the more I explored myself, the more I learned about myself not in the sense of getting answers to existential questions but in the sense of discovering parts of me and knowing that they exist*. Exploring my musical improvisations allowed me to connect with my feelings in a meaningful way. I could create a melody or rhythmical pattern, and translate my emotions into sound by giving them a form, a meaning. As I got more acquainted with the improvisational process, I felt more comfortable with the music I created, and began experiencing the benefits of regularly engaging in creative musical endeavors, *Overall I feel more creative, relaxed, have clearer boundaries*. Also, this experience allowed me to recognize the importance of being creative in my work as a music therapist. It encouraged me to approach my musical interventions with more spontaneity and let imagination become a part of the therapeutic process. For this reason, I needed to learn how to tap into my creative self during interventions, and trust that it would help me address challenging situations in the clinical setting. For example, if a client did not respond to one my musical interventions, I could improvise and find new ways of

reaching him/her. Having explored my own music, I also knew that there was a lot to communicate musically, and that by remaining authentic, I increased my chances of effectively interacting with clients. It also allowed me to tap into my own vulnerability, and develop a sense of empathy for clients engaging in therapeutic processes with music. Thus, I gained a better understanding of clients' experience during musical explorations which gave me more tools to guide them in the therapeutic process. For instance, I knew that I would have to support them by establishing honest musical connections. I would also learn how to read their personal expression and emotional states by paying attention to their music.

Uncovering and overcoming difficult emotions. As I engaged in the improvisational journey, I experienced an array of emotions, some of which were challenging. In one of my journals I wrote: *this improvisation was very intense...in the amount of frustration that I felt.* Although I had previously experienced those feelings in my life, I never felt the need to face them and express them as I much as I did during this research process. It was as if I was on a mission to face and thus transcend my negative feelings: *at one point I stood up and wanted to quit...but I changed my mind and decided to stay with the piano and face this frustration...taking the time to enter this feeling.* It almost felt like meditation at times, as I would contemplate my feelings, observe them, focus my attention on them, and perform them musically: *I tapped into a painful part of myself...I kept singing repeatedly.* The musical process allowed me to remain present with my own feelings, and thus express them as often as I needed too. Hence, it became a way of *working through* painful emotions. The data revealed how being exposed to the painful parts of myself became essential to the transformation of difficult emotions into positive aspects, *but it felt good to express and verbalize the pain.* The improvisational process became a cathartic experience in which negativity could be acknowledged, accepted, and later transformed into something meaningful and constructive. As a music therapist, experiencing negative emotions during the improvisational process allowed me to acknowledge and accept my own weaknesses. I reflected on the need to remain patient and compassionate in regards to my professional work. This process also thought me not to be extremely demanding with myself. Although I could not necessarily reach nor help every client, which was a source of worry for me at times, I learned how to withdraw

from the idea of *flawless* interventions. Experiencing my emotional self through music also allowed me to discover the amount of feelings that could be experienced and expressed through music. Although I knew there was so much more to learn, I felt more prepared to address emotions with clients during music therapy. In fact, I felt more comfortable with the idea of dealing with emotions within the context of a musical intervention. I wanted to encourage clients to play their emotions, to express them, and translate them into music, in order for them to fully experience and connect to their own self for the benefit of therapy.

Touching upon mysterious parts of myself. Besides the negative emotions that I carried, I discovered aspects of myself that were new to me: *I felt like I have expressed an unknown part of me...something I didn't know was inside me.* What I felt could not be defined with words, and neither could I nor my music, *I realize that my singing and my playing allow me to "be" infinite. Without boundaries.* In fact, improvisations allowed me to explore how far I could go in my musical expression. Some things were definitely perplexing and unusual, like the exploration of unfamiliar parts of my vocal range and vocal expression (i.e. very low or high registers, whispers, breathing), the initiation of physical contact with the piano (i.e. playing with the palm of the hand or fist) or the need to adopt unconventional body postures (i.e. leaning forward and backwards, knees close to the floor), *I surprised myself in the things I did during my improvisation. Some things were weird...but I still went along with them.* Being acceptable did not matter that much, I felt more concerned about being honest, and this could be challenging because I had to venture myself in my creative impulse. At times, this path led me to mysterious, dark, and bizarre musical directions: *I was playing something in the lows and thought it was dark. I was going to stop because I judged my music, but when I looked at the candle I thought it was ok to continue and fully explore and listen to this darkness.* Experiencing and expressing indescribable sensations allowed me to connect with mystery, and begin to embrace the idea that there is *something more* to this reality, *all this is so new to me...I don't know how it feels exactly...I suppose it is mysterious. But not a frightening mystery, a good and safe mystery...it's hard to explain.*

Theme 3: A Growth Towards a Positive and Integrated Sense of Self

Searching for well-being and harmony through connections with music and spirituality. My need for well-being manifested in many ways during the improvisational experience. First, it came forth in my desire to experience catharsis from the act of expressing myself musically: *I was playing the music from a different place than usual and it was doing absolutely nothing to me...I mean that it didn't feel as cathartic.* I would often explore different musical possibilities until I experienced a connection with music: *I felt blocked at the beginning...then I felt connected to the music and the improvisation felt more meaningful to me.* I often experienced a sense of connection to the music when I harmonised and brought different aspects of my musical expression together. For instance, when I joined the piano with the voice, *I really felt whole because I was using my voice and my playing,* and at times, when I implemented rhythmic patterns to the music, *I released the pedal and began playing with more rhythms...it was very inspirational.* I also felt the need to experience inner well-being by accepting the good and the challenging aspects that I carried within myself: *I think the purpose is to feel at peace. And it's difficult because you have your body, your spirit, and you have the real experience of life as well as your inner world, and the challenge is to feel good within and between all those parameters.* My need for wellness was apparent through my desire for internal harmony. By seeking for spiritual connection, I might have been searching for well-being and harmony: *I trust that it (spiritual candle) guides me towards what I need...I feel that it makes me more accepting of everything that comes out of me.* Spirituality encouraged me to work towards cultivating acceptance and finding ways to integrate different aspects of myself: *why not create a happy space inside of us with all our wounds, with all our flaws, with all our bad experiences and include them in a happy self.* Indeed, a big part of the endeavour was strongly motivated by the need to foster connections with music and spirituality, in the search for well-being and internal harmony.

Cultivating a compassionate and nurturing self through the spiritual intention. Creating music in a spiritual environment encouraged me to engage with unconditional acceptance, and promoted authentic musical expression: *when I played while feeling angry, I could let it out without judging myself as bad or inadequate*

because for that time the music was accepted. Through my relationship with the spiritual, I learned healthy ways of dealing with my weaknesses and vulnerabilities. This is when I felt that self-compassion was one of the main themes of my improvisational journey. I slowly began developing more empathy towards myself, and I knew that I had to be more accepting of the things that manifested during music; *I just have to accept that things are the way they are. Just say and accept the fact that “ok I’m not perfect, and I have wounds”.* I felt more protected from the need to constantly judge and analyse myself. The spiritual intention inspired me to hold myself, nurture myself, and develop more love for myself: *try and feel good and accept whatever you have inside and love it...you know.* Music helped me discover, listen and receive different parts of myself, whereas spirituality was experienced as the channel that granted me the positive attention that I needed to accept whatever came forth, *I overcame this emotion by looking at the candle and reminding myself of unconditional acceptance. That is when I came to the conclusion that it was ok and I needed...to hold it (the feeling) and love it and attend it.* I learned that when I granted myself with positive attention, I was also caring for myself. The fact that I had taken the time to sit, to listen and express my feelings musically, made me feel nurtured and content. In one of my journals I wrote, *I feel safer and I trust myself more* and I sang the following lyrics: *I move forward with trust as the light brightens my path.* As I began to feel more comfortable with myself, I slowly moved away from the standards of an ideal self and began experiencing more freedom, *I feel less pressure to be an ideal me...and it feels freeing.* I grew closer to feelings of wellbeing, gratitude, compassion and authenticity.

Integrating my experience of music and spirituality in my work as a music therapist. In order to approach my work with integrity, I felt the need to integrate my personal beliefs on music and spirituality to my work as a music therapist. As I engaged in this research exploration, the data analysis revealed a sense of vulnerability in my professional identity, emerging from the need to know how to incorporate my spirituality to my professional work. I noticed, however, that as I engaged further in this research process, my knowledge and comfort with music and spirituality grew, allowing me to better understand my relationship to both processes: *I need music...with spirituality because it’s a way for me to communicate things and perhaps experience and give*

meaning to the realm of emotions and feelings. Learning more about my relationship to music and spirituality allowed me to define my own beliefs, and develop a sense of self-acceptance with regards to my personal and professional self. For example, in one of my journals I described how I began to feel more comfortable with the idea of using my personal intuition in my clinical work: *I should accept how I am and how I'm doing my work...I don't always need to know from which part of myself it (my interventions) comes from, or need to control them (my interventions).* By learning new things about myself, I also realised that there was a lot that I didn't know, and I had to *accept that I don't know and that I can't always explain why.* In fact, this led me to reflect on the need to trust myself as a therapist. The exploration of my personal spirituality was significant in that sense, as it helped me trust in my own inner light and internal guidance: *I trust that it (the candle) is also within me, and that it guides me towards what I need.* Consequently, I developed more groundedness and confidence in my work, and reported feeling more *calm* and *poised* in my interactions with clients. Exploring my personal relationship to spirituality also enabled me to trust in my ability to establish authentic connections within myself, and thereby, with others: *I know what it's like to feel connected, I know...I guess I will also feel it when it comes to others.* I also realised that my musical explorations helped me develop a sense of trust in my ability to communicate musically. Indeed, I experienced a feeling of *knowing my music*, which encouraged me to be more confident in my musical interventions, and trust in the musical process. Moreover, I acknowledged the potential of musical expression through improvisation, and how it could help and relief, but also be frightening and challenging for the self. As a result, I developed a sense of empathy for clients engaging with music therapeutically, as I could better relate to their experience having undergone the process myself. Indeed, I manifested the desire to use my experience as a guide for future interventions with clients who also show spiritual needs: *my spirituality helped me integrate and experience my music in a more profound way, and my music helped me better integrate and embody my spirituality, through sound and music. Maybe I could use this information to help others in their spiritual and musical quests.* Finally, I realised that my improvisational experience resulted in a therapeutic experience with music, as it produced favorable and beneficial effects on my personal and professional self.

Chapter 5. Discussion

Implications

Personal implications. I engaged in this research process with the intention to gain insight into my personal values and beliefs in regards to music and spirituality. In addition, my goal was to develop a better understanding of these processes and how they influenced my work as a music therapist. The findings of this inquiry are discussed within the following working framework: (a) my connection to spirituality, (b) my connection to musical improvisation, and (c) my connection to my own self as a researcher and music therapist, and the relationships between these elements. The following themes that emerged include; the significance of spiritual holding in the process of musical improvisation, authentic musical expression as a path to self-discovery, and the growth towards a positive and integrated sense of self.

Throughout my research process, I experienced my connection to spirituality as a holding space, where my musical and personal explorations could safely unfold. The experience of a trusting environment allowed me to indulge in authentic self-explorations, thus dealing with challenging aspects of myself. According to Kenny (2000), the creation of constant and safe enough spaces to hold complex and challenging experiences are defined as *rituals*. In fact, rituals help us connect with ourselves and other elements of the universe, and be receptive to deeper levels of experience (Aigen, 1991; Jones, Baker & Day, 2004; Kenny, 2000). When rituals are implemented with the intention to promote awareness and connections to a higher source, they are qualified as spiritual (Leonard & Carlson, 2005). Leonard and Carlson (2005) note that spiritual rituals can be implemented through artistic endeavours such as listening to or creating music. This can result in experiences of wellness, growth and transformation. In the context of the present study, my spiritual ritual with music brought such changes. Since music therapy is based on the application of music for the enhancement of self, well-being and quality of life (Davis, Gfeller & Thaut, 2008), experiencing music as a life and self-enhancing process helped me situate my experience within my practice, and within my role as a music therapist. I learned how to incorporate values such as self-acceptance, compassion, trust in my work, in addition to exploring the need for authentic relationships with clients. During sessions, I learned how to connect with clients, and

remain present, open, and attentive to their music. By compassionately attuning to clients, I could better support, mirror and reflect their musical expression. I also learned how to trust myself, my interventions and my music within the clinical setting, as well as constructively deal with emotions during the musical process. If feelings such as sadness and anger manifested in the clients music, I learned how to use my own experiences and explorations with music to guide my interventions, and support them through theirs.

My connection to spirituality. After gaining awareness on my connection with spirituality, this research experience has encouraged me to be more grounded in my spiritual beliefs. Experiencing the *holding* qualities of spirituality allowed me to reflect on the use of spirituality as a personal resource for coping with personal and professional challenges. In the same way, the literature from Barton & Watson (2013) addresses the use of spirituality as a source of support for music therapists with spiritual beliefs. Relying on the candle, for example, gave me spiritual strength and courage to further engage in my musical explorations. In fact, I perceived the candle as a holding and supportive *witness* through the improvisational journey. In therapeutic terms, this presence is described as the *therapeutic witness* (Adler, 2007). The latter represents an unconditionally accepting presence that encourages authentic forms of expression during therapy (Adler, 2007). As the improvisations unfolded, I gradually internalized my connection to the candle by developing my own inner witness—this integration process helped me to foster self-acceptance and inner trust (Adler, 2007). Furthermore, I noticed how spirituality helped me to develop a self-awareness that can help me attune to myself and the needs of clients during therapeutic interventions. Thus, I can use my personal spirituality as a personal resource for more presence in the clinical setting. Moreover, exploring my own spiritual beliefs gave me confidence in my ability to help clients in their spiritual explorations. According to the literature, the exploration of personal connections to spirituality can increase the therapist's ability to support clients in their spiritual journeys (Barton & Watson, 2013). This may include, creating a suitable spiritual atmosphere, finding a sense of meaning and purpose within the therapeutic experience, and offering a positive and holding therapeutic environment (Murray, Kendall, Boyd, Worth & Benton, 2004; Sutton, 2007).

My connection to musical improvisation. The improvisation process allowed me to discover hidden thoughts, feelings, and emotions, thus granting me with a better understanding of myself. Through this experience I was able to explore my vulnerabilities, my strengths and gain insight into my personal stories and challenges. As I addressed my emotional needs through the musical process, my understanding of the improvisation process increased. I experienced improvisation as a way of working through personal and emotional challenges which in turn exposed me to the therapeutic implications of musical improvisation. Through this awareness, I developed a sense of empathy for the client's therapeutic experience with music. As Hesser states (2001), the exploration of music therapy processes (such as musical improvisation), "prepares us to work more sensitively with others" (p. 54). As my explorations with music unfolded, I gained a greater insight into the spiritual aspects of music. For example, I performed and improvised chants that were evocative of my ancestral roots although I had never been exposed to these forms of expression in the past. In addition, I played repetitive rhythms and melodies, in a way that enhanced my experience of music and self. I also engaged in contemplative moments of silence (Cook, 1997; Nzewi, 2006). I strongly believe that having explored music in a spiritual way will help me to address clients' spiritual needs in the clinical setting. It will help me to guide clients through their own spiritual journey by using musical variables (such as rhythm and tempo) that may relate to the client's spiritual experience with music (Lipe, 2002). Furthermore, my immersion in the musical process encouraged me to connect with my own musical expression. I developed a sense of *knowing my music* and gained awareness on my personal responses during music. Hopefully this will transfer to my ability to remain conscious of my contributions to the musical dialogue with clients, and be aware of musical countertransferences (Quinn, 2003). It may also allow me to be more receptive and mindful of the clients' music, and encourage me to listen to his/her musical expression with more presence. McCaffrey (2013) describes this process as the *mindful meeting of equals*, a process by which music therapists attune to themselves for better connections with clients during clinical improvisations.

My connection to self. Finally, the literature reveals that engaging in improvisational as well as spiritual endeavors promotes self-growth and transformation

(Arnason, 2005; Forinash, 1992; Ruud, 1995; Sutton, 2007). In fact, creative and spiritual endeavours are similar in that they both encourage growth through processes involving self-connections (Mountain, 2007). My experience of growth resulted in greater love and acceptance for myself. The safe and compassionate space provided by spirituality was at the root of this transformation. It gave me the necessary safety to express my true self, and engage in authentic musical explorations. By relating this experience to my professional work, I noticed that I had always tried to place compassion, connectedness, and authentic expression at the center of my practice. Interestingly, I noticed how these values could have implications both in therapeutic and spiritual contexts. For example, the literature describes compassion and acceptance as spiritual qualities that can enhance therapeutic presence (Kumar, 2002; McCollum & Gehart, 2010). I thus realised that my spiritual self and my therapist self could both be integrated within a healthy professional identity. As a result, I felt a sense of groundedness in knowing how to take on my role as a music therapist.

Professional implications. The results presented in this study can be beneficial for music therapists who wish to explore their spirituality in relation to music in personal and professional life. This might inspire them to conceptualize their own experience of music and spirituality and address them in a way that is in line with their personal values and beliefs. Some might choose to engage in self-explorations with other art forms involving movement or visual arts, while others might decide to explore their spirituality through specific practices such as prayer and meditation. In either case, this research highlights how musical and spiritual explorations can be experienced in ways that celebrate one's individuality. As creative art therapists, connecting to our personal expression and creativity is essential in understanding the therapeutic implications of creative processes. In addition, this study may provide a deeper understanding of the influence of a music therapist's spiritual beliefs on his/her experience of music. Acknowledging how spiritual beliefs affect our practice provides important information on both our personal and professional identities and thereby contributes to our growth and development as music therapists. It can also help identify blind spots, and thus contribute to the informed use of spirituality in the clinical setting. I also hope that this inquiry will encourage music therapists with spiritual orientations, to engage in

explorations of their spiritual beliefs through musical processes. Given that music therapists are mainly dependent on the medium of music, defining spiritual beliefs and their musical implications could be useful in determining personal approaches to music therapy. Moreover, music and spirituality have often been used conjointly for healing and health purposes, and understanding how music therapists define this relationship can be essential for engaging in responsible practices of music therapy (O'Callaghan, 1996; Sutton, 2007). This research could also encourage music therapists with spiritual beliefs to explore the presence of possible rituals in their practice of spirituality. Gaining awareness on my own experience of rituals, for example, allowed me to engage in my spirituality with more intentionality. Hence, by exploring their own personal rituals, music therapists could gain more insight into their spirituality as well, and use this knowledge as guidance in their spiritual interventions. Also, it is important to collaborate with clients in the creation of appropriate therapeutic environments, such as comfortable rituals, when addressing their spiritual needs (Leonard & Carlson, 2005). Given that spirituality is such a personal topic, respecting the client's individuality is fundamental to the application of healthy interventions. Finally, I hope this research will encourage music therapists to bring about essential dialogues on ways to address spirituality in music therapy. Indeed, the informed use of spirituality is essential to the application of music therapy interventions that remain sensitive to the client's belief system, and thus respects ethical boundaries (Sutton, 2007).

Creative Synthesis

The following narrative synthesis reflects my experience of this research process. The writing and creation of the narrative unfolded organically, and describes my understanding of the connections between: (a) spirituality and myself, (b) musical improvisation and myself, and (c) my personal experience of these connections.

Experiencing musical improvisation as a spiritual act

Engaging in musical improvisation with a spiritual intention allowed me to connect with my own self. Indeed, translating my feelings and thoughts into music made me understand that it would be reductionist to define myself within existing labels and concepts, as the music I created and embodied, seemed to extend far beyond the physical realm. I experienced music as the medium through which I could truly reveal myself and

give meaning to my spiritual experience. The music was soft, nostalgic and free, somber at times, and my melodies were spontaneous enough to convey my thoughts and emotions in a cathartic way. In the midst of this process, the spiritual atmosphere, emerging from my intention to connect with a higher source, provided me with a safe and holding space for authentic expression to unfold. My musical expression was accepted and received, and I felt accepted and received. The candle radiated spiritual light and unconditionality, and guided me through my musical experience. Finally, the interaction between the music, the candle and I yielded me with enough compassion to inspire me to continue growing into a nurturing and accepting therapist.

Limitations

The study was limited by the time frame of the data collection phase. I collected the data for a period of 14 days, which could have limited the results. A longer period might have allowed further explorations of the topic, and generated more detailed and comprehensive findings. Furthermore, my experience of spirituality was subjective and limited to my personal values and beliefs, which may greatly differ from one individual to another. My cultural background and religious identity might have had a significant impact on my work, and thus narrowed the perspective of this inquiry to my particular viewpoint. Moreover, as I am in the process of completing my music therapy education, my lack of clinical experience could have limited the interpretation of my results with regards to its clinical implications. Finally, my lack of experience using the heuristic methodology may have influenced my application of this research methodology, and thus limited its efficacy.

Future Research

Future research could explore music therapists' opinions on the spiritual and healing aspects of music, and how they apply it to therapy. Addressing this topic could raise important questions related to the spiritual use of music in sessions, and help develop informed music therapy interventions in spiritual contexts. Other findings could examine the musical variables and other elements of the music therapist's and the client's expression while addressing spiritual goals. Exploring the latter could bring awareness to the ways in which music can be used and played for spiritual purposes in the clinical setting. Moreover, exploring the difference between receptive and active music

experiences when addressing spiritual goals, could help tailor and adapt interventions for clients. Another interesting avenue for future research would be the exploration of music and spirituality from a group or community perspective. The latter could provide valuable information on existing practices that inform interpersonal forms of spirituality. This could provide tools for music therapists who wish to serve larger groups with spiritual needs. Lastly, exploring other forms of creative arts and their spiritual implications could be useful in defining music therapy interventions incorporating various art forms.

Closing Thoughts

Music therapy gave me the opportunity to touch upon the therapeutic aspects of music, and thus broadened my perspective on its potential for wellbeing. As a result of this, I was encouraged to use music in an informed way and consider it as a valuable tool to address my quests as a researcher and music therapist. I engaged in a spiritual process with music that allowed me to further explore my relationship with both music and spirituality, and understand their impact in my professional work. I discovered that as a music therapist, exploring my relationship to music deepened my understanding of its therapeutic implications in the clinical setting. Indeed, I noticed that music was a powerful way to connect with the inner self, and thus become a source of transformation. I also realized that my personal spirituality encouraged me to cherish values of acceptance, compassion, and authenticity, in the creation of healthy musical connections. Taken together, what I learned from this inquiry was the importance of using music to foster healthy connections with clients, in order to touch upon the *living* part of their beings, and trigger positive transformations.

Although I feel that this research process has allowed me to grow personally and professionally, I know I still have everything to learn and discover. As new experiences and challenges arise, my views and perspectives on this research experience will certainly change. Indeed, growth is a process that unfolds over the course of a lifetime.

It seems appropriate to conclude with Bonny's (2001) thoughts on spirituality:

“Spirituality is filled with inclusionary attitudes of love, acceptance, adoration, appreciation for all life forms, and a sense of unity and purpose that extends into the past and into the future”. (p. 60)

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