



Audio Divina: Introducing a Musical Aid for Spiritual Direction

Mary Terry Rankin

For the last several years I have been pursuing my conviction that carefully selected music can create an interior environment that enhances the possibility of divine encounter. My conviction was born out of experiences with prayer and music that began in adolescence. When I was 13 years old, I entered Shriners Hospital for a series of operations on my leg. I remained there with my leg in traction for nine months, confined to bed, even though I felt quite well most of the time. Looking back, I can see that I was sustained throughout this experience by music and by prayer. Alone on the ward for several hours each morning, while the other children attended school in the hospital classroom, I often listened to a radio station that featured classical and popular music. I noticed that occasionally the music took me inward to a source of comfort and strength. Some of the orchestral music in particular seemed to give expression to my feelings while providing a sense of well-being.

Throughout the weeks and months of experimental procedures to increase the length of my leg, the knowledge that many people were praying for me was a great source of comfort. I also developed a spontaneous way of praying that I learned years later was very similar to the ancient Christian prayer form of *Lectio Divina* (sacred reading). This is how it happened. The night before I entered the hospital, we stayed with a family friend who lived near the facility. During the night, this friend awakened to record a message intended for me. Next morning as I read the words, it seemed like God was speaking directly to me. In the months that followed, I read the message every day until some of the phrases became a part of me: "Let all the hurts be quiet before me" and "You are mine and I am yours forever and ever." During the three-and-a-half years of corrective surgeries, I learned through necessity the value of quieting my body and focusing my mind to be present with God. Music and the practice of sacred reading were my guides. Surrender into God's care was my lesson.

These early experiences undoubtedly influenced my decision to become a psychotherapist with additional

training in the Bonny Method of Guided Imagery and Music. This form of music therapy uses carefully sequenced classical music to access the imagination and gain self-understanding. In more recent years, my interest in music and prayer led me to the Vancouver [British Columbia, Canada] School of Theology for a master's degree in spiritual direction. My desire to develop a music-assisted form of contemplative prayer took shape as I reflected on my own journey and engaged with theology, Christian spirituality, and spiritual direction.

Spiritual Development and the Ability to Listen

The generations born after World War II in North America, specifically Baby Boomers and Generation Xers, exhibit some common characteristics in their approach to spirituality. This group does not automatically assign value to tradition, authority, or religious institutions. The relevance of beliefs and knowledge is determined by what is personally significant (Emberley, 5–6). A personal experience of the sacred is often pursued through a variety of practices from various traditions, and these pursuits are often in the context of an informal peer group. Although they break away from tradition, these individuals express a genuine desire to seek a relationship with God or the transcendent. Their desire corresponds to a need for connection with permanence in a very fast-moving, changeable world. Contemporary seekers are satiated with the excesses of modern life and are aware of a hunger for mystery—an experience of transcendence that nurtures the soul (Hendricks).

This really is a moment in the culture where many are attracted to silence, solitude and mystery, and that can be across the political spectrum, from fundamentalists to extreme liberals, because those experiences of silence, mystery, and solitude hold out the hope of being in touch with something more permanent. (Beaudoin)

We live in an environment in which quiet time and inner reflection run counter to the demands of our technological society. The inner voice is all too often drowned out



by increasing demands for instantaneous and continuous communication. The resulting decrease in our ability to listen deeply has far-reaching consequences.

The ability to listen—to receive sound—plays an important role in psychological and spiritual formation. The magnitude and subtlety of our hearing faculty is quite profound. Hearing begins in the womb, with the child listening to his or her mother's heartbeat, and is usually the last sense organ to close down at the time of death (see Berendt, 135, 139). Webster's *New World Dictionary* defines *to listen* as "to pay close attention." Spiritual directors know that good listening skills are a primary requirement for spiritual development. Listening well is a prerequisite for meaningful connection on many different levels. The ability to listen and thereby be present for another is a necessary skill for successful interpersonal relationships. Self-knowledge depends on the ability to listen inwardly and reflect on life experience. It is through the receptive mode of listening that we may encounter holy Presence or receive guidance from "the still small voice" within.

Persons who come to us for spiritual direction often appreciate the value of a contemplative practice and the importance of quiet time with God, but perhaps they have not found a prayer form they are willing to pursue with any consistency. A prayer practice in which the only requirement was a willingness to listen to music might have broad appeal. An easily accessible contemplative practice could meet the need of spiritual directees for a doorway into their interior lives. My own experiences with music have provided such a doorway with great predictability.

Music and Contemplation: *Audio Divina*

Music listening is a tool that can help us revive our capacity to listen in deep silence. Throughout human history the power of music has been utilized as an aid to prayer, worship, and healing rituals. American composer Aaron Copland testified to the mystical power in music:

I have been concerned with the creation of music for more than thirty years, with no lessening of my sense of humility before the majesty of music's expressive power, before its capacity to make manifest a deeply spiritual resource of [hu]mankind. (quoted in Bonny and Savary, 115)

Music can be described as the artistic arrangement of sound and silence. We cannot appreciate musical sounds without hearing the silence that surrounds each note or phrase. In her book *The Nature of Music*, Maureen McCarthy Draper explains the central role of silence.

Music is sound *and* silence. It is the spaces *between* the notes that create rhythm, melody, and meaning, and the greater the composer—and the performance—the better the quality of the silence. (34)

I knew from personal and clinical experience the power of music to influence inner states. But what about its power to influence silence? Would the quality of a contemplative silence be affected by what musical sounds came right before it and right after it? And if so, which kinds of music would be appropriate to create a quality of silence that would attract even people unfamiliar with sitting in deep prayer?

In December 2003, my exploration of these questions resulted in the development of *Audio Divina*, a music-listening experience designed to lead one into a quality of silence conducive to "resting in God" or being present with the Holy. *Audio Divina* integrates knowledge from two sources that address interior states of consciousness. *Lectio Divina*, an ancient Christian prayer form that includes contemplative silence, provides the structure for musical sequences. Music therapy principles inform the selection of appropriate music.

Lectio Divina as a Five-Step Pattern

Lectio Divina requires listening on several levels—first to scripture, then to one's own heart, and finally to God in the silence. Macrina Wiederkehr, author of *A Tree Full of Angels*, has developed a practical working model of *Lectio Divina*.

1. Read scripture or inspired writing *until the heart is touched*.
2. Reflect on the meaning of a phrase that touched your heart. Let it become a mantra.
3. Allow the mantra to flow into prayer.
4. Slowly drop off the words of your prayer-mantra until only one word is left. Finally, let go of even that word and rest in sacred quiet.
5. Use journaling for further integration of your



prayer experience and to keep a record of your spiritual journey. (59–60)

I have adapted this five-step pattern to create the structure for sequences of music and silence in *Audio Divina* music programs. Although the music varies, the following pattern shapes the listening experience in every *Audio Divina* program. Music is chosen for its ability to do the following:

1. Engage the attention and access the inner landscape.
2. Allow for introspective and intimate exploration of interior space.
3. Provide gentle reassuring guidance toward silence, as thoughts, words, and feelings are released.
4. Enhance the experience of sacred silence.
5. Call the listener out of silence, giving time to gather what has been experienced.

In the fifth step, the return of the music after a period of silence allows for integration and closure but also serves another important function. I have observed that the psyche will “let go” more deeply into silent prayer if it knows the way back into everyday awareness. To illustrate my point, imagine yourself standing ready to dive into a large swimming pool that has no ladder or visible means for climbing out. Next imagine the same pool with a ladder clearly visible at the far end. The ladder allows one to swim in deep waters with confidence.

Similarly, *Audio Divina* programs provide music to support exploration of the interior landscape while moving toward the uncharted territory of contemplative silence. The listener can surrender deeply into silence, assured that the music will return, bringing structure once again to the inner experience. In a sense, music becomes a vehicle for transporting the psyche back and forth between ordinary consciousness and contemplative awareness.

Music Selection for *Audio Divina* Programs

Music selections are from Western classical and sacred music traditions, as these genres of music offer the necessary characteristics for *Audio Divina*. Programs are formulated to guide listeners effortlessly into a deep quiet that is inviting and yet well contained. Five to fifteen minutes of silence are programmed into each musical sequence. I have established several criteria for select-

ing music that leads one into a contemplative silence. While it is necessary to find music that engages and holds attention, the sounds also need to encourage *release* of imagery instead of evoking imagery. The music needs to have a very subtle sense of movement—moving toward quietness. Perhaps most importantly, the music selected to precede silence needs to have the qualities of a steady, reliable guide—a trustworthy companion to follow into deep silence and back out again.

When I review music for *Audio Divina* programs, I am listening for passages that are reliable but not so repetitive as to become predictable. The music must be supportive while encouraging exploration of the inner landscape. It needs to have a steady forward movement, which at times will be very subtle. The music needs to have a relationship with silence that is respectful, providing a sense of spacious containment for the listener. Finally, as in the safe return from an expedition, the ending music needs to provide a gentle transition from silence to a time of integration and closure. Music selection for *Audio Divina* also includes attention to personal qualities of the composer and, most importantly, the quality of a particular performance.

Analysis of the First *Audio Divina* Program

A detailed description of the first *Audio Divina* music program serves to illustrate the concepts being discussed. *Audio Divina* Program #1 combines the work of contemporary composer Patricia Van Ness with that of Johann Sebastian Bach. While separated by centuries and by style, both composers are musical innovators with a highly creative approach to composition, and both express their religious or spiritual values through the vehicle of music.

Van Ness (b. 1951) is schooled in medieval chant and polyphony. Performers of her work are steeped in a love for medieval music while being fully committed to making “a living music that is fully contemporary in its emotional impact and presence” (Program Notes, *Angeli: Music of Angels*). Her music represents a truly remarkable blending of old and new while preserving the integrity of medieval music.

It is reasonable to assume that Van Ness is expressing her own connection to the Divine through the words and music of her chants. Reverence, beauty, and intimacy



with God shine through her music. Here is an example of the text (which is translated into Latin when performed), taken from the *Angeli* CD's program notes:

Mysterious ones,
Angels of light;
Bathed in swirling song,
Love pours from God's eyes
And astonishes you.
You are swept in a river of gold;
Song flows from you like a thousand suns.

Johann Sebastian Bach (b. 1685) has been referred to as the "patron saint" of church musicians. One aspect of Bach's genius was his ability to synthesize and absorb all the styles, forms, and genres of music in his time. Assisted by his prolific imagination, he developed all the hidden musical potentialities that had previously been overlooked (Grout and Palisca, 403). Bach's music is dramatic and emotional but also highly structured with attention to technical detail. This combination of feeling and precision allows the listener to explore thoughts or emotions within a secure and predictable framework. A devout Christian, Bach dedicated all of his compositions to the glory of God.

Format of *Audio Divina* Program #1

In preparation for listening to the music program, I suggest two possible options. These suggestions would apply in both individual and group settings. Begin by reading a brief passage of scripture or inspired writing to focus the mind. For example, "Be still, and know that I am God!" (Ps 46:10) or the famous line from Julian of Norwich: "All shall be well." When the music begins, allow your attention to be drawn to the sounds. A more open-ended focus would be to simply allow the beauty of these sounds to draw your spirit toward its source. Allow approximately twenty minutes to complete the whole program.

Track 1. Seraphim (approx. 5 minutes). Swirling layers of sound are created by a wide vocal range and converging and diverging harmonies. The attention is fully engaged during this "opening up" of inner territory. This music has the capacity to activate energy in the body and create alertness while giving a musical description

of spiritual realms. Instead of "reading until the heart is touched" (*Lectio Divina*), this music says, "Listen until the heart is touched" (*Audio Divina*).

Track 2. Ego Sum Custos Angela (approx. 3 minutes). The mezzo-soprano solo voice allows for a more introspective and intimate exploration of interior space. The *vielle* (medieval fiddle) accompaniment encircles the vocal line and suggests a protective presence (Program Notes, 6). The mood is reflective and prayerful, similar to the meditation stage of *Lectio Divina*.

Track 3. Bach: Adagio from Cello Sonata in G Minor (approx. 3 minutes). There is a quality of gentle conversation between cello and piano. The cello provides a steady, reassuring presence, guiding the listener quietly forward. The piano stops and starts, gets distracted, and ultimately follows along. This is much like the prayer stage of *Lectio Divina*. The music allows for the dropping away of thoughts and words as quiet draws near.

Track 4. Silence (5 minutes). The cello's final resonating note ushers in a deep quiet that feels protected and supported by the preceding sounds. It can be helpful to recall the final sound or to recall the words from scripture if the mind is unable to rest for the full five minutes. A deep relaxation is possible, knowing the music will return at the proper moment. This is like the contemplative stage of *Lectio Divina*.

Track 5. Lucis Angeli (approx. 3 minutes). Voices summon gently at first, and then more insistently. This music echoes the sounds heard in the beginning track of music but with less ornamentation. There is time to remember and gather what has been experienced in the silence as the music moves toward an end.

Audio Divina is based on the following assumption: **The quality of a meditative silence can be influenced by sounds that lead into and sounds that lead out of the silence.** Therefore, attentive listening to carefully selected musical sequences leading into and out of the silence can create an environment conducive to encounter with the Sacred during the silence.

This contemplative method provides an aesthetically pleasing invitation into deep quiet through music listening and has the potential to stimulate interest in a regular prayer practice or spiritual discipline. It can also provide a fresh approach to prayer for those experiencing a dry spell in their discipline. Because silent time is programmed



"Five Smooth Stones" (detail) — Sarah Rehfeldt

on the CD, there is a freedom to relax into the process. One need not keep track of time, as the music will always return at the appropriate moment, signaling reentry into ordinary consciousness. Learning to trust the music in this way is like learning to trust God's guiding presence.

Whether used occasionally or consistently, *Audio Divina* can bring physical relaxation and mental focus while ushering in a deep quiet. Thus, the benefits of contemplative silence are accessible to all people through the simple act of listening to carefully selected music. *Audio Divina* can stimulate a hunger for the Divine while simultaneously providing spiritual nourishment through the beauty of music. While all spiritual disciplines require perseverance, the perseverance required here is that of surrendering to the music, allowing it to carry the self toward its source.

Applications

Audio Divina has been used successfully with a variety of individuals and groups, including individuals in psychotherapy and spiritual direction, women's spirituality

gatherings, and clergy retreats. My experiences with *Audio Divina* in the context of various small groups have been quite rewarding. One workshop participant expressed the response of many when she learned that *Audio Divina* had roots in Christian tradition. Disappointed in her Christian upbringing and having left the church long ago, she was delighted to discover a contemplative practice shaped by Christian tradition that had contemporary relevance. Others have commented on the depth of physical relaxation, comfort with the silence, and ease of sharing in a group.

I am particularly interested in *Audio Divina* as a method for group spiritual direction. I have used a format in groups that includes reading a passage of scripture or inspired writing for group reflection and brief discussion. We then move into twenty minutes of prayer with *Audio Divina*. The remainder of our time is spent journaling our experiences and sharing (not required) how God is moving in our lives.

Dixie Black, a psychotherapist and spiritual director in Vancouver, has incorporated *Audio Divina* into her



personal prayer life as well as into her work with clients and directees. In a personal interview (Jan. 28, 2008, Vancouver), she reported:

I find the music really gives my mind a place to go, when I'm all over the place. The music at the end is actually very helpful in bringing me to consciousness after deep silence. By the time the music has finished I'm present. I love that it's twenty minutes in length. I really like having the music as that guide. My mind doesn't have to split by tracking the time. It offers a boundary.

For one person I just used it [*Audio Divina*] once and she found that it enabled her to focus on a mantra. She learned what it felt like to have the mind "go with something," and felt that if she could focus on the music, she could focus on a mantra.

I have another client who uses the *Audio Divina* CD fairly regularly.... It's been a tool for her that has allowed her to make meditation a more regular practice.

There are several things to consider before suggesting *Audio Divina* as a regular prayer practice for persons in spiritual direction. Some people are not drawn to music and would find music-assisted prayer unhelpful. Since *Audio Divina* music programs are created with Western musical compositions, the question of their applicability for spiritual directees with other cultural roots has been raised. I believe that classical music and sacred music from any tradition give expression to universal human longings and experiences. This is an area that needs further exploration.

When a spiritual directee expresses interest in *Audio Divina*, it is important that you listen to the music together as a first experience with this contemplative practice. Spiritual directors need to familiarize ourselves with the method and be able to anticipate what the experience might elicit for the spiritual directee. For example, the quality of the silence (five minutes on Program #1) may be unique in the spiritual directee's experience, and our immediate validation of a new prayer experience is a privileged honor. We may find that some spiritual directees have an unexpected association with the chosen music or the experience of silence. Some may wonder about the

text in a choral passage or dislike a particular instrumental passage. (Choral music is chosen for the musical sound, not the meaning of the text. I have been careful, however, to choose text that is congruent with contemplation.) Interestingly, some who have reported their dislike for a musical choice have also reported a deeply relaxing experience in the silence.

It has been suggested that *Audio Divina* has relevance for hospice care, prison ministry, congregational discernment, and various other settings. The power of music to engage the imagination, to express our inexpressible longings, to invite deep reflection, and to bring us gracefully and mysteriously into the presence of the Holy is a gift to be cherished in the ministry of spiritual direction. ☒

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