

# MUSICKING THE COSMOS

by June Boyce-Tillman



The idea (Boyce-Tillman 2011) for this new form of peace-making choir originated in an event done for over nine years in Winchester Cathedral and the university and other faith venues including a Hindu temple in Southampton and St John's church in Hackney. It was based on creating a piece for peace by chance/choice methods. Each time had different participants from different faith and spiritual traditions with differing responses and outcomes. These participants included a rabbi singing Jewish cantillation, school choirs, community groups, university choirs of different kinds and the Islamic call to prayer. Each participant was free to use the 'performance' in whatever way they thought it would contribute to peace. The context draws on Levinas' and Buber's notion of the valuing of difference in the Other. It sees performance as process rather than product.

It originally contained a variety of sections but started with a collection of chants that fitted together because they were based on a single chord and a candle lit peace procession on a single note. It was designed to reflect a new model of peace-making based on choice and not overall control. It showed the creativity of a diverse group of people given freedom to exercise their own choices - unity without uniformity.

With a new cathedral dean, the event could no longer be hosted in the cathedral and with the COVID shut down, I became fascinated by the possibility of the ZOOM platform for peace making. Faced with the complex time of COVID awareness, there are many virtual ensembles that are often recorded individually and put together by a single person. The problem with the ZOOM platform is that it is impossible to have a single shared pulse. So I considered whether the two sections of the chants and the single note procession could work musically without a shared pulse, combined with chance/choice methods. So this piece explores what can be done musically without a shared pulse, the notion of a shared single note and a set of chants that are based on the same chord might address the problem, combined with the notion of chance/choice.

It starts with sitting quietly imagining a lovely hum surrounding the world – the environment, other people, yourself. This turns into an instrument giving a single note on which they sing shalom. Then there is the free choosing of the various chants or the single note or just listening. The instrument initiates the last singing of the first chant and we all gradually come to rest on a final chord. Gradually it shuts down to a hum and bring it gradually to an end where we sit in silence contemplating the planet.

We have now tried this three times – once in the context of the University of Winchester and twice using international participants under the direction of Neil Valentine, director of the University Music Centre assisted by Dr Vicky Feldwick who has helped shape the event from the beginning. It is highly experimental as it means abandoning many things we have thought central to shared musical performance – the shared pulse being the crucial one. We all have to unlearn old ways and develop new skills. The behaviour of the technology also gives interesting dimensions as to who is heard clearly and who is not. The notion of what is good and what is not is challenged and people have to claim the power by accepting their own contribution as valid.

It has given people a sense of singing together in an entirely new way. Instead of working against any time lag the internet has, this way of musicking actually utilises it to create beautiful harmonies. We celebrate each other, our connections, our music, our singing and promote peace in these difficult times. These comments from participants are indicative of the spiritual practices that are involved:

- You have to abandon everything you have learned
- I could carry on in my own way
- It was challenging to work in a new way.
- Timing does not matter – that is the gift.
- Not having to worry about being with anyone else was very liberating.
- I was not required to produce perfection
- Initially it was very weird. I had to listen to my own voice. I thought I am not going to be able to make this but I became more self-confident as it went on and then I did not want it to stop. I did more improvisation. I felt connected with the rest of the world. It was a good experience.

In the last event we had sixty-five participants from countries in four continents, including South Africa, Toronto, US, the Hebrides islands, Wales, Spain and Germany, drawing on the Music, Spirituality and Wellbeing International Network. Participants from other musical traditions such as Hindu, Sikh and Muslim ornamented the musical material in their own ways. People took out various instruments and started to improvise on flutes, clarinets, piano as they saw fit. Neil held it together with a viola drone and improvisation. Singers made melismatic curves over the texture. One singer put together parts of the chants to make a new chant. Others mixed listening with singing. One person put in a sssh sound from time to time. Participants were making judgements in relation to what others were

doing. It was a global improvisation to be found at  
([https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCqvtZMpCGEKjkGz293A4qzQ?view\\_as=subscriber](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCqvtZMpCGEKjkGz293A4qzQ?view_as=subscriber))

I was so thrilled that a structure created fourteen years ago for a cathedral space in the UK is flexible enough to be adapted to a locked down world dependent on a ZOOM platform:

### **SPACE FOR PEACE**

Once it was the soaring arches of Winchester cathedral that vibrated  
Now it is the waves of the internet  
Once it was the air circulating around ancient vaulting  
Now it is the wires of technology  
Once it was bodies meeting and greeting  
Now they are transmuted through varying screens and microphones  
Individual lines fusing and merging  
A cosmic symphony in a world cathedral  
Is not easy to control  
An unseen but crackling source  
Devises its own ways of operating and combining  
But I can belong - just as I am  
Along with a million others<sup>1</sup>

The project raises fascinating questions in areas such as ownership in collaborative artistic endeavour and it contrasts with dominant notions of ownership, intellectual property. My music education at Oxford University initiated me into ideas of 'the composer' and 'the work' (Goehr, 1992) which was (in that education) a written score reproduced as faithfully as possible. One participant described this as a 'loom on which the world could weave.' It is very close to Vygotsky's notion of a scaffold (Holzman, 2008) that enables people to grow.

Here we see how powerful intrapersonal interactions can trigger the spiritual experience:

Somehow the singing wore down all the boundaries and distinctions that kept me so isolated. Sitting there, standing with them to sing, sometimes so shaky ... that I felt like I might tip over. I felt bigger than myself, like I was being taken care of, tricked into coming back to life. (Lamont 1999 pp. 47–8)

It is reshaped every time. There is no definitive form. Many of the comments saw a recovery in this of a spiritual dimension (Illman, 2012, Boyce-Tillman, 2016) within their own frames. One respondent was more into a New Age understanding:

from an energetic perspective in this informed isolation comes the opportunity for internalisation of a deeper connection with the natural world... As we find ways to

---

<sup>1</sup> Unpublished poem by June Boyce-Tillman May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2020

reach out through our technologies and connect, we are also accessing in a deeper way our energetic selves beyond our physical bodies, the subtle energetic bodies as our humanity comes to this place of crossroads.

Another participant is from an Islamic background:

I do believe that virtual spaces allow us new ways of listening, not diminished ways of listening, but new ways. This space allows us to create ecosystems of hearing and being together "en-semble" in togetherness, that shows us how to positively use technology in a 'live' way and in a way that brings forth values that are universally applicable in a kaleidoscopic expression of our pluralism. For indeed, Allah reminds us in the Quran that Allah created us into tribes and nations that we may know one another, that we may know our common origin.

A South African theology student ended movingly by claiming he felt embraced by the experience which deepened his sense of belonging. One participant said: "I was lost and it was wonderful." This ability to handle uncertainty is an essential part of the COVID crisis but reproduced in a safer form by the interaction between people with the uncontrollable medium of the technology playing a key part in the musicking as had the columns of the cathedral. Both shapes of *Space for Peace* confronts human beings with mystery, the abandoning of rationalism –

a mixture of certitudes and uncertainties; of probabilities, hypotheses, realities that surpass us, and fundamental questions to which we have no answers... It is one of those words that is indefinable, but that can in the final analysis be part of any definition (Begara, 1999, p133).

I sought to bring the polarities together as a way of exploring mystery and re-enchanting the world:

We have also lost the sense of mystery. This dualism of "either ... or" thinking has also given us a fragmented sense of reality that destroys the wholeness and wonder of life. It misleads and betrays us when applied to the perennial problems of being human in this world. Therefore, we need to move away from an "either ... or" attitude to a "both ... and" attitude. In certain circumstances, truth is a paradoxical joining of apparent opposites, and if we want to know that truth we must learn to embrace those opposites as one. ..This is the realm of profound truth – where, if we want to know what is essential, we must stop thinking the world into pieces and start thinking it together again (Kaggwa, 2008)

This is a musical event with an intention for peace. I hope it will show the creativity of a diverse group of people given freedom to exercise their own choices - unity without

uniformity. – all done with the intention of calming a troubled world with the assistance of technology.

For **JOINING INSTRUCTIONS** email [June.boyce-tillman@winchester.ac.uk](mailto:June.boyce-tillman@winchester.ac.uk)

Rev Professor **June Boyce-Tillman** is Professor Emerita of Applied Music at the University of Winchester and Extraordinary Professor at North-West University, South Africa. June has also set up the online International Network for Music Spirituality and Wellbeing <http://mswinternational.org/>

Virtual Space for Peace - connecting people across the world, promoting peace, bringing connection through music.

## References

Boyce-Tillman, June (2011), Making Musical Space for Peace. In Laurence, Felicity & Urbain, Olivier (2011), *Peace and Policy Dialogue of Civilization for Global Citizenship*, Vol. 15, *Music and Solidarity: Questions of Universality, Consciousness and Connection*, New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, pp. 185–201.

Buber, Martin, trans Kaufmann, Walter (1970), *I and Thou*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

Gebara, Ivone (1999), *Longing for Running Water*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press

Goehr, Lydia, (1992) *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music*, Oxford: Clarendon press

Holzman, Lois (2008), *Vygotsky at Work and Play*, London and New York: Taylor and Francis.

Illman, Ruth (2012), Incarnating Encounters, In Giordan, Giuseppe and Pace, Enzo (eds.) (2012), *Mapping Religion and Spirituality in a Postsecular World*, Leiden and Boston: Brill, pp. 43–62.

Kaggwa, Robert (2008) Unpublished Review of *Between*

Lamont, Anne (1999), *Travelling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*, New York: Pantheon Books.

Levinas, Emmanuel, trans Lingis Alphonso (1969), *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.