

## ARTICLE

# The engine hums... occasionally it even sings: A response to Sara MacKian's keynote 'The constant hum of the engine...'

Lars Ole Bonde

Aalborg University, Denmark

### ABSTRACT

In this response to Sarah MacKian's conference keynote I take a personal experience as point of departure: my almost lifelong engagement with Bach's cantata *Ich habe genug*. This leads to a discussion of the relationship between music and spirit, and how we as researchers can approach experiences with this relationship. A theoretical model of *four levels of meaning* in music opens up a number of ways to understand the affordances and appropriations of 'deep', 'strong' or 'spiritual' music experiences to clinical and non-clinical listeners. Examples from theory and empirical research in the receptive music therapy model *Guided Imagery and Music* (GIM) are used to illustrate a development from a more static-content-oriented approach to a more dynamic-process and interpersonal understanding of spiritual/transpersonal experiences with music.

### KEYWORDS

spirituality,  
research,  
meaning in music,  
surrender,  
Guided Imagery  
and Music (GIM)

#### Publication history:

Submitted 10 Jan 2019

Accepted 1 Mar 2019

First published 24 Nov 2019

### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Lars Ole Bonde, PhD, is a musicologist, a certified music therapist (DMTF, FAMI), a clinical supervisor and primary trainer in Guided Imagery and Music (GIM). He has worked as a teacher and researcher at Aalborg University since 1991; from 2012-2018 as ordinary professor. From 2008-2018 as professor II at the Center for Research in Music and Health (CREMAH), the Norwegian Academy of Music, Oslo. He has published several books and hundreds of peer-reviewed articles. During 1992-2017, he served as associate editor of the *Nordic Journal of Music Therapy*. His musical autobiography was published in *The Lives of Music Therapists: Volume Two* (2017). [lobo@hum.aau.dk]

In 2013 I co-edited the anthology *Musical Life Stories* (Bonde, Ruud, Skånland & Trondalen, 2013). The book contains the results of a number of qualitative studies on how music is used in everyday life, and through the lifespan. Many of the studies mention what is experienced as spiritual dimensions of 'health musicking' (singing, playing, listening or, in other ways, participating in "appropriation and appraisal of the health affordances of the arena, agenda, agents, activities and artefacts of music practice" (Stige, 2002, p. 211; see also Stige, 2012). The anthology also offers a number of short narratives where the authors/researchers – from the areas of musicology, music psychology, music education and music therapy – tell about 'music in their own life story'.

In my personal narrative – mentioned towards the end of MacKian's keynote paper (MacKian, 2019) – I recall how listening to Bach's Cantata No. 82, *Ich habe genug*, helped me in my youth to endure years of trouble in my family, with a depressed and, at times, desperate and suicidal father,

creating chaos, especially during the night. The strange words (based on the Bible's story about the old Simeon and the presentation of Jesus in the temple) and especially Bach's musical interpretation offered me an unexpected comfort, embracing my anguish and pointing towards hope and release; in a way it was my first deep experience of how music can transcend the sufferings in everyday life, be it connected to depression, grief, anger, illness or spiritual despair. Then, I did not think about the music in spiritual or therapeutic terms; it was more like a wise 'friend' comforting me and talking directly to me over the gap of centuries, saying, for example, "Yes, it is OK to long for death as an end to all sorrow."

In 2017 I was approached by a music journalist from BBC Radio 4 who had read the narrative and invited me to share my story in a programme about Bach's cantata in the Radio 4 series *Soul Music*. I accepted; we had an interview in the summertime, and I forgot all about it. Then suddenly, in January 2018 (a month after the conference *Exploring the Spiritual in Music*), I received a lot of emails from friends in the UK who had just heard my voice on the radio. A Danish journalist also heard the broadcast and invited me to do an interview for her newspaper, *Kristeligt Dagblad*. A lot of Danes responded to the story following that article, and, in fact, responses to both the broadcast and interview have been continuous throughout the year. The BBC journalist recently sent me an email stating that no programme in the series had ever evoked so much response. In December 2018 I had the pleasure of actually *singing* the cantata for the first time, invited by a friend and his amateur baroque trio. I sang it the day before my mother-in-law passed away, and it felt like the *Schlummert ein* aria was a song dedicated to her. This chain of unexpected and loosely related events leads me to reflections about what this is all about – you may talk about what Jung called "synchronicity" here!

I can immediately relate this experience, spanning half a century, to the two ways "music feeds into the healing and therapeutic language of Spiritualism", suggested by MacKian (2019, p. 25) in her empirical study of Spiritualism in Stoke-on-Trent, And I would even say that the two notions of the relationship between music and Spirit have a much broader context than Spiritualism:

1) *Using music as a message to Spirit*. Not only as a member of a congregation or a specific religious faith/conviction but also spontaneously, and in unexpected contexts, can you use music as a 'message to your spirit'. We know, for example, what a deep impact Peter Gabriel's *Don't Give Up* (including the instrumental version) has had on many people (Fuglestad, 2018) or how certain songs comforted the Norwegian people after the terror attack at Utøya (Knudsen, Skånland & Trondalen, 2014). Bach's cantata told me/my 'teenage spirit' not to give up and not to worry about death and dying. I think many radio listeners and newspaper readers have resonated with that 'message', which is spiritual-existential in nature, not religious in any specific way.

2) *Spirit using music as a message*. It is well-documented (especially by Swedish musicologist Alf Gabrielsson and colleagues; see Gabrielsson, 2011) that great music, independent of style and genre, can be experienced as (personal) 'messages' sent from God, angels, deceased ancestors, your 'core self', 'the Universe' and so on. Since I was 10-11 years old, I have felt that Bach's music 'talked to me' – about life, death, being, something beyond the surface of daily living... let us just dare call it a 'spiritual voice' sounding throughout my life. I felt something similar when I 'met' Arvo Pärt's music 30 years ago. It makes sense that both composers work with balancing simplicity and complexity – in musical terms – mirroring a basic condition faced by every human being.

## ONTOLOGY AND EPISTEMOLOGY

But how shall we understand and study ‘spirituality’, ‘non-ordinary states of consciousness’, ‘transpersonal experiences’ and similar concepts when we work as clinical music therapists and/or study music experiences as academic researchers? MacKian has formulated some very useful and clear answers to that question, and – with my background as a music therapy clinician, supervisor, teacher and researcher – I resonate with that.

I have taught music psychology for decades, and since 2007 I have based my teaching on a theoretical model that takes many dimensions and layers into account in our attempt to understand what music affords and how music is appropriated by people with different backgrounds and interests (Bonde, 2009; Ruud, 2001). I use the concepts of affordance and appropriation as developed originally by Gibson (1966/1983) and especially by DeNora as related to music (DeNora, 2000, 2007).

The existential, spiritual, religious or transpersonal dimensions of the music experience are often located on the ‘semantic’ level (i.e., in how people make special meaning out of sounds and music) (see Table 1). Actually, however, I think that the spiritual dimension of music can be experienced and described on all four levels:

Level 1: A millennia-long metaphysical tradition –from Pythagoras to Kepler (and ‘New Age’)– connects the physical properties of music (for example the overtone series and interval theory) with the nature of the universe.

Level 2: ‘Understanding/breaking the syntax’ of a given style –even of ‘free’ improvisation– is often accompanied by intense feelings of happiness by musicians.

Level 3: The depth of the semantic level is described in MacKian’s Simon Rattle quote (MacKian, 2019, p. 27), which also touches upon the pragmatic level: “Music is not just what it is, it’s what it means and what it can do for people. One of the things work on music can teach people is what joins them rather than what separates them.”

Level 4: When we listen, sing, play or dance together, we may learn –existential or even spiritual– lessons on what joins us as human beings.

Level	Music	Focus	Effects
1. Physiology	Music is sound	The physical and psycho-acoustic properties of music	... as vibrations/ on the body: resonance, movement, vitality contours
2. Syntax	Music is language / Structure	Music and syntax: rules and generative principles	... as an aesthetic phenomenon: experience of coherence and beauty in music
3. Semantics	Music is language / Meaning	Music and meaning: sources and types of meaning	... as an existential and spiritual phenomenon: experience of mood, relevance, meaning also outside music itself
4. Pragmatics	Music is interaction	Musicking: music as process, an activity, interpersonal exchange	... as a social & cultural phenomenon: play, ritual, community

**Table 1:** Four levels of meaning in music (from Bonde, 2009; based on Ruud, 2001)

As music therapists, we must be open to all these affordances and appropriations by our clients –including the ‘dark side(s) of music’– even if our professional knowledge and personal beliefs do not immediately help us to understand or share them. As researchers, we must be just as open to people’s experiences, but also ask critical questions about the purposes and contexts, the interests and resistances of the participants – just like MacKian does when studying Spiritualism and Mediumism in Stoke-on-Trent. This is not about (absolute) ‘Truth’; it is about what people in different contexts experience as Truth and Reality.

Epistemologically, I have been inspired by Ken Bruscia (my GIM trainer and one of the leading international music therapy researchers) who, in an interview with Brynjulf Stige, defined “three sources of meaning (in music)” (Stige, 2000, p. 85-88, paraphrased by me below):<sup>1</sup>

*Meaning as Implicate Order:* The –*a priori* given– implicate order of the universe itself; the source or foundation of all meaningfulness. It can only be experienced from a particular, personal mode or location, for example in a mystic’s meditation or an epiphany.

*Meaning as Experienced:* Experiential samples of the implicate order, in principle accessible to every human being but often ineffable in nature; for example GIM clients’ transpersonal experiences.

*Meaning as Constructed:* We all relate our (music) experiences to our lifeworld and are capable of creating (metaphorical or artistic) meaning *in terms of our own world* (i.e. influenced by culture); for example when GIM clients from Western cultures imagine archetypal scripts or creatures.

As a GIM client and therapist I have encountered some examples of ‘meaning as experienced’ and many, many examples of ‘meaning as constructed’, but never of ‘meaning as implicate order’. However, it was an epiphany, the experience of ‘being played’ or used as a musical medium, that led Helen Lindquist Bonny, violinist and the creator of GIM, into her lifelong quest of offering musical (peak) experiences as a means of transformation to all people with an open attitude towards the unknown (Bonny, 2002).

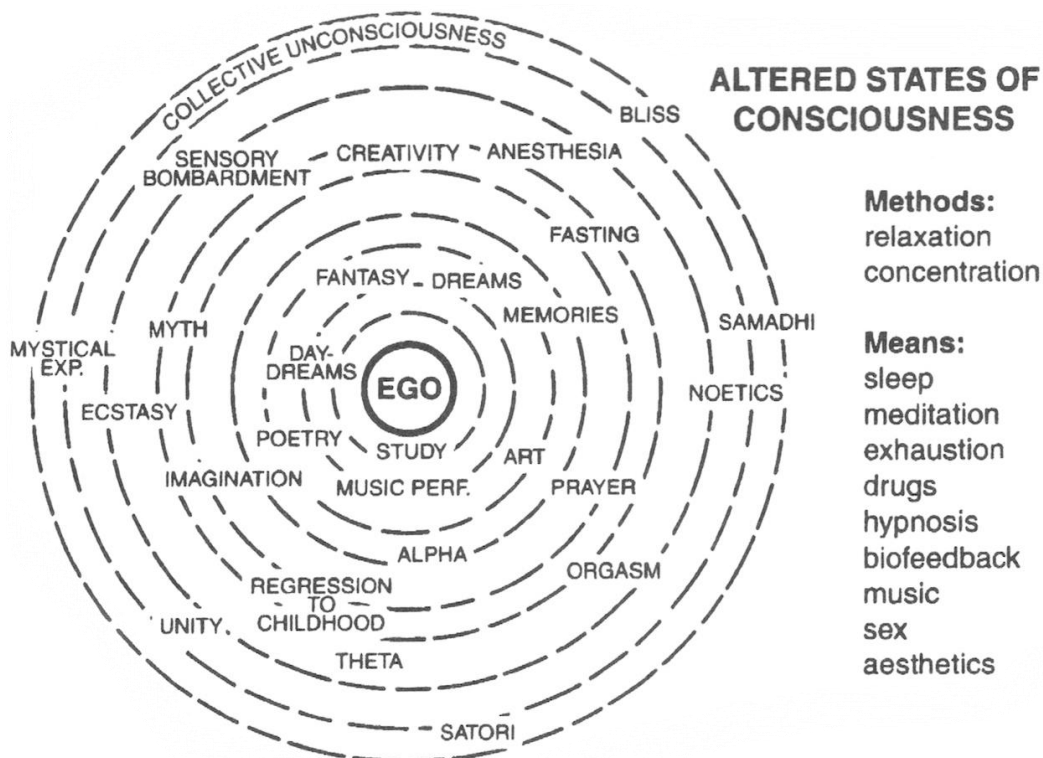
The already-mentioned phenomenological research by Gabrielsson (2011) documents and describes three different types of “existential or transcendental” music experience (as one of seven main categories): *existence* – music as a mirror of life; *transcendence* – extra-sensory perception, ecstasy or trance states, out-of-body experiences; *religious* – visions, holy spaces, meetings with holy beings, angels and so on. I understand experiences of these types as ‘spiritual’ in the broadest sense: they connect the experiencing person with something beyond (the personal) body and mind. Related to culture, this ‘something’ can be called ‘spirit’, ‘Brahman’, ‘Atman’, ‘Vipassana’, ‘transpersonal realms’ or many other things (Wilber, 1983).

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<sup>1</sup> See also Lawes’ article on ‘the real illusion’ in this volume (Lawes, 2019).

## THE SPIRITUAL IN GUIDED IMAGERY AND MUSIC

An important part of my clinical work and research during the last 20 years has centred around the receptive music therapy model Guided Imagery and Music (GIM). I was attracted to GIM already when I heard about the model in the 1980s firstly because I immediately resonated with the idea of (what has later been called) “Deep Listening” to classical music as a source of existential knowledge, and secondly because the theory of consciousness behind the model was very inclusive, as illustrated in Figure 1.



**Figure 1:** Helen Bonny's 'cut-log' diagram, showing altered states of consciousness and methods/means to enter these (Bonny, 1975/2002, p. 82; © Barcelona Publishers, reprinted with permission)

Helen Bonny developed the so-called “cut-log” to describe the many layers and states of consciousness that she knew from her life as a musician, a minister’s wife, a music therapist and a researcher studying music experiences in LSD-induced altered states of consciousness. When LSD was prohibited in the US around 1972, she invented GIM as a drug-free, music-based exploration of consciousness. After a relaxation induction, she would say to her client or group of ‘travellers’, “*Let the music take you where you need to go.*” If the clients were open to it, the music could take them to any of the layers in the cut-log, including the “Freudian” layers of the Ego and the personal unconscious, the “Jungian” layers of the collective unconscious and the archetypes, the “Grof” layers of life before physical birth, and the “spiritual” or “transpersonal” layers beyond the personal life story. Such a “travel” is not always a positive and reassuring experience; it can include (re)encountering traumas, complexes, emptiness and abysses of darkness. That is why a competent therapist is necessary to accompany and assist the client.

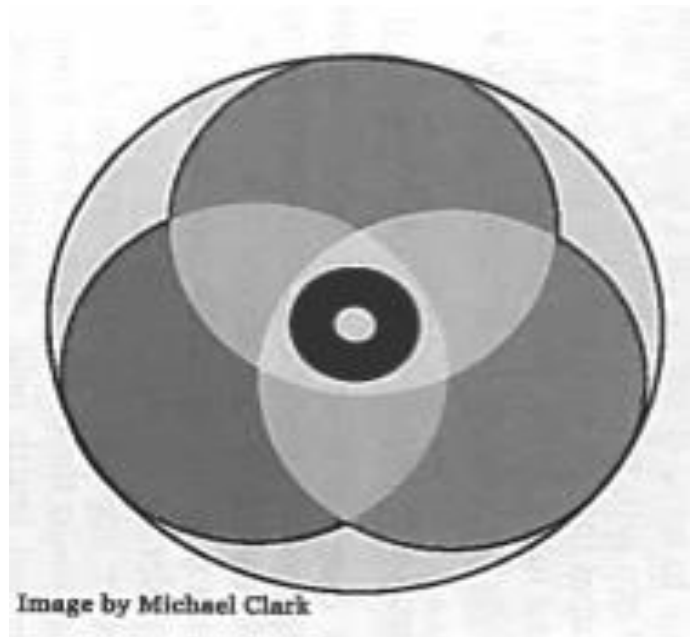
The cut-log has been further developed by Bonny's colleagues and successors Frances Goldberg and Marilyn Clark. Goldberg (2002) set the circles in motion in her dynamic holographic model; and Clark (2014) has suggested the Venn diagram as a more appropriate way of illustrating the dynamics of GIM as overlapping circles.

A few examples can illustrate how spiritual or transpersonal experiences have been studied empirically in GIM research:

Abrams (2002a, 2002b) interviewed nine experienced GIM travellers about their peak experiences and identified nine unique (i.e., personal) patterns of experience and ten common themes: body and physicality; healing and wholeness; self; relationship; humanity; life meaning; spirituality; qualities of consciousness; music's core depths; independence of the 'guide'/therapist.



**Figure 2:** Goldberg's holographic model (Goldberg, 2002, p. 368; © Barcelona Publishers, reprinted with permission)



**Figure 3:** The Venn diagram<sup>2</sup> (Clark, 2014, p. 12; © Reprinted by permission of the Association for Music and Imagery)

Blom (2011, 2014) developed an interpersonal theory of processes in GIM which indirectly contributes to a demystification or 'profane' contextualisation of spiritual and transpersonal experiences that are often reported in GIM. Blom's theory is based on analysis of GIM session transcripts, and the analysis documented how transpersonal or spiritual experiences of 'surrender' were connected to a GIM client's "*ways of relating/being in relation*; to courses of events in her inner world, to the music and to the therapist's presence" (Blom 2011, p. 12). Six specific relational modes were identified. They are defined and exemplified in Table 2 below.

Bonde and Blom (2016) documented that GIM music programmes designed to facilitate and support "strong music experiences" were actually able to do that. Through analysis of transcripts of 'music travels' and collaborative interviews with participants and the therapist in the study, it became clear that the complexity of the music selections and the sequencing of the selections had a

<sup>2</sup> The three big overlapping circles represent the fields of music, client, therapist. The centre and periphery represents the Self with all the layers and states of consciousness in living motion (like in Goldberg's holographic model).

profound influence on the imagery and the occurrence of “surrender” experiences. This can also be related to the taxonomy of therapeutic music developed by Wärja and Bonde (2014): Music with a high degree of complexity and unexpected shifts can afford and stimulate experiences of non-confirmation (category five in Blom’s system of relational modes, see Table 2) often leading to “surrender” (category six, where the music is less complex, actually often quite simple and beautiful).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The research briefly described above illustrates how it is possible to study meaning as experienced and constructed scientifically, using phenomenological and hermeneutic methods within an interpretivist paradigm (Murphy & Wheeler, 2016). This is in line with what MacKian suggests for interdisciplinary dialogue.

	Category of analysis	Definition	Examples from GIM sessions
1	Focus of attention – sharing attention	First-person descriptions and expressions of where in the experiential field the attentional focus of the traveller is, establishing a starting point for movement and direction.	<i>I see myself, I can sense water</i>
2	Movement and direction – sharing intention	Descriptions and expressions of intention, directions, movements, experienced as more or less deliberate.	<i>Warm air is coming towards me Perhaps I will fall</i>
3	Affectivity – shared and conveyed in words and expression – attunement	Descriptions and expressions of the affective qualities surrounding and colouring the relational sequence, (vitality affects and/or categorial affects).	<i>Sad and melancholic, pleasant and powerful</i>
4	Share and regulate coherence/correspondence in attention, intention and/or affectivity	Expressions of experiencing qualities of recognition and/or confirmation and belonging. Also often strong activating affects.	<i>The air is balancing my body, me I can feel the mountain under my feet</i>
5	Share and regulate difference/non-confirmation in attention, intention and/or affectivity	Expressions of experiencing tensions, differences, ruptures and/or non-confirmation. Often also anxiety, shame or other inhibiting affects.	<i>I need to work in order not to fall Feel fear, and dizziness</i>
6	Surrender in relation to something ‘third’, something ‘greater’ and/or ‘beyond’	Expressions of letting go and transcending fields of tensions and duality.	<i>I am connected to, one with, Nature I am light, it is inside and around me</i>

**Table 2:** Relational modes and the process of surrender in GIM sessions (based on Blom 2011, 2014)

Based on experiences using Blom's relational modes' categories (Blom 2011, 2014) in the training of GIM therapists, I also recommend that we stop focusing on the 'content' –the intrapersonal aspect– of the imagery in GIM sessions and, rather, look at the interpersonal processes of sharing the music-assisted experiences. The transformational power of 'surrendering' to something bigger than yourself –a numinous quality– is much more important than what this "something bigger" may be.

It is actually possible to see some clear lines of development in how spiritual/transpersonal experiences have been understood in GIM research since the 1980s – and gradually also reflected in clinical practice. We have moved:

- from a static/spatial to a dynamic understanding of consciousness where creativity, inspiration and insight can be seen from different, also non-personal, perspectives;
- from understanding music not as time *or* space but as a multidimensional timespace where the music experience is held within a complex field with musical elements in interplay with both clients' and therapists' consciousness;
- from focusing on processes instead of content when studying music and imagery experiences, and thus avoiding categorial definitions of, for example, 'spirituality';
- from intra- to interpersonal understanding of spiritual/transpersonal experiences in GIM, focusing on how processes (and content) are shared in the therapeutic dialogue.

As an illustration, my personal story with Bach's *Ich habe genug* can therefore be understood in many different ways. In my youth, I was not interested in how this could be understood theoretically – I simply experienced, spontaneously, that the music spoke to me in a very special way, nurturing my 'Self' and comforting me in times of agony. It was an intrapersonal process allowing me to benefit from a vast timespace afforded by Bach's music. Today I may interpret what happened as self-therapeutic grief work (Vist & Bonde, 2013) but I can also choose to see it as a case of spiritual healing through music-listening (Bruscia, 1998, 2014). It would also be possible to describe the 'Bach field' as a 'therapeutic (virtual) landscape' (or 'timespace'), referring to some of MacKian's ideas from contemporary geography literature. Interestingly, these 'healing landscapes' seem to open when 'the gods of science' have nothing to offer, or when our rational minds have come to a limit and we are in limbo.

As researchers, we are probably limited to studying meaning as 'constructed' or 'experienced', but as clinicians and human beings we must be open to the existence of an 'implicate order'. The conference *Exploring the Spiritual in Music* –and Sara MacKian's keynote– showed me that this openness is not only possible in an interdisciplinary context; it may also be an answer to the question of the limitations of 'evidence-based practice'. Evidence can offer labels or criteria on how to choose between options at a pragmatic surface level, where statistics can show 'significant effects' or differences between (music) 'interventions'. But at a deeper level, other, more mysterious processes are active – as the placebo and nocebo effects remind us. These processes are difficult to grasp and explain, not least when they are related to the multisensory, non-verbal world of music – maybe because they are related to an enigmatic yet powerful 'engine of life and vitality' (or 'implicate order') in ways that we may not understand but are still able to experience now and then.



[...] a metaphoric hum might take on a more nuanced timbre, and the presence of spirit is revealed through a familiar tune resonating directly and obviously with the physical world of those for whom the message is intended. (MacKian, 2019, p. 23)

Occasionally, the engine sings...

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## Η μηχανή βουίζει... μερικές φορές μάλιστα, τραγουδάει: Μια ανταπόκριση στην κεντρική ομιλία της Sara MacKian «Το συνεχές βουητό της μηχανής»

Lars Ole Bonde

### ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Αποκρινόμενος εδώ στην κεντρική ομιλία της Sarah MacKian ξεκινάω με αφετηρία την προσωπική μου εμπειρία: τη σχεδόν διά βίου ενασχόλησή μου με την καντάτα του Μπαχ *Ich habe genug*. Αυτή οδηγεί σε μια συζήτηση για τη σχέση μεταξύ μουσικής και πνεύματος, και για το πώς εμείς ως ερευνητές μπορούμε να προσεγγίσουμε εμπειρίες που βιώνονται μέσα από αυτή τη σχέση. Ένα θεωρητικό μοντέλο για τα *τέσσερα επίπεδα νοήματος* στη μουσική φανερώνει τους διάφορους τρόπους με τους οποίους μπορεί να κατανοήσει κανείς τις δυνατότητες [affordances] και τις ιδιοποιήσεις [appropriations] που έχουν οι «βαθιές», «ισχυρές» ή «πνευματικές» μουσικές εμπειρίες για τους ακροατές εντός κλινικών και μη κλινικών πλαισίων. Τα παραδείγματα που χρησιμοποιούνται είναι από τη θεωρία και την εμπειρική έρευνα του μοντέλου δεκτικής μουσικοθεραπείας Guided Imagery and Music (GIM) ώστε να αποτυπωθεί η εξέλιξη από μια πιο στατική και προσανατολισμένη στο περιεχόμενο προσέγγιση προς μια πιο δυναμική διαδικασία και μια διαπροσωπική κατανόηση των πνευματικών / υπερπροσωπικών εμπειριών με τη μουσική.

### ΛΕΞΕΙΣ ΚΛΕΙΔΙΑ

πνευματικότητα, έρευνα, νόημα στη μουσική, παράδοση [surrender], Guided Imagery and Music (GIM)