

Alliance for the Transformation of Musical Academe
What is ATMA? Part II
Spirituality and Gender
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In this second installation, I go into the creativity-based music-soul relationship that is at the heart of ATMA through the lens of the jazz Contemporary Improviser Composer Performer (CICP) framework. I follow this with a look at gender issues.

“Your creating, it comes from the soul,” Alice Coltrane stated, reminding us of musical wisdom from across cultures and time immemorial.

I begin by probing more deeply the improvisatory core of the CICP as what I call a “richly differentiated soul pathway.”

Spirituality

What are the spiritual needs of today’s musicians and music teachers? What are the spiritual needs of society at this moment in human history? How might ATMA address these needs? What about individuals who may not harbor spiritual inclinations of any kind—is there a place for this constituency in ATMA?

Today’s musicians and music teachers need tools and grounding that promote the heightened presence, well-being, self-awareness, mind-body integration and creativity that characterize peak performance across fields. They need an understanding of consciousness that cuts across wide-ranging cultural boundaries so that they can appreciate and celebrate the diversity of ways cultures across the globe have conceived of, and fostered connections to, the sacred. Today’s society is in urgent need of spiritual leadership that recognizes the infinitude of culturally-mediated spiritual conceptions as well as their underlying mystical unity.

I believe a closer look at the jazz CICP reveals principles that support growth of these capacities. A principle that has long been central to my work, and which is among the most important (yet most overlooked) aspects of the CMS Manifesto, elaborates on this point. This is the “systematic improvisatory development” continuum—which refers to the capacities for unprecedented scope, integration, rigor, self-organizing and other dimensions that are inherent in a comprehensive improvisation studies program.

From my book *Black Music Matters*:

Preliminary grasp of this idea is provided by thinking of the Contemporary Improviser Composer Performer process scope not as a horizontal array, as formidable as that may be, but as a vertical unfolding from an improvisatory source. Improvisation, in other words, directly encompasses aspects of composition, performance, and a host of other areas, and may thus be considered primordial within, and thus foundational to, the overarching musical epistemological spectrum. Imagine, then, a music studies program that unfolds from these roots, encompassing multiple approaches to improvisation (stylistically open, style-specific), composition (song form, small and large jazz ensemble, concert

music), virtuosic performance skills, rigorous melodic and harmonic studies along a broad modal-tonal-transmodal spectrum, robust grounding in globally resonant rhythmic languages that are united with musical embodiment, strong aural capacities, engagement with wide-ranging musical traditions and influences, cultivation of pedagogical expertise, technology studies, entrepreneurship, and a range of conceptual studies that span historical, cultural, cognitive, aesthetic, and transpersonal dimensions (consciousness/ spirituality).

This not only entirely changes the narrative when it comes to questions about rigor and achievement that commonly arise in conjunction with improvisatory work; it also sets the stage for inquiry into a particularly broad and inclusive spiritual vision.

On one hand is how the diverse epistemologies promote performance-based transcendence, or flow/peak experience, and how this develops over time. As these channels of creativity evolve both independently and also synergistically, they form a dynamic epistemological circuitry through which creativity and consciousness can flow and permeate the entire system. Peak experience can be invoked in any human activity; the question is how to deepen and integrate this experience so it more consistently informs practice and understanding. Integrating an exceptionally wide range of activity atop improvisatory foundations, the jazz CICP framework provides tools for growth in this direction. Hence the characterization of the system in terms of richly differentiated soul pathways.

When meditation and other contemplative modalities become part of the process scope, capacities to connect the entirety of the system with the soul level are further enhanced. One need only look for inspiration the long legacy of jazz innovators—including John and Alice Coltrane, Herbie Hancock, Sonny Rollins, Mary Lou Williams, John McLaughlin—who have also significantly engaged in formal contemplative practice in complement to their creative excursions. Inasmuch as contemplative practices typically have roots in formal spiritual/cultural lineages, creativity-driven spirituality not only connects with formal spiritual practice to yield a remarkably broad template, but important ramifications may be inferred for bridging various lines of division. For one thing, the model brings together spiritual-but-not-religious identities, for those so inclined, and more conventional religious identities (e.g. engagement with faith traditions), for those so inclined. Moreover, with robust creativity along with direct contemplative experience as unifying catalysts, an arts-inspired epistemological framework emerges that may help heal conflicts between religious lineages that persist around the globe.

This framework may also help heal the spirituality/academy divide that riddles higher education.

Contemplative and consciousness studies

While there is no denying that spirituality is a delicate topic in the academy, there may be encouraging signs that higher education has begun, albeit ever so slowly, to open its horizons to this realm. Here I am thinking of burgeoning contemplative and consciousness studies movements. Contemplative studies focusses on the incorporation of meditation and related practices as vehicles for sharpening cognitive functioning and cultivating self-awareness. Consciousness studies—in its fullest ramifications—grapples with the most

fundamental questions about the nature of mind, awareness, experience and thus the nature of the human being.

Unfortunately, the arts are notably underrepresented in these emergent domains, despite having much to offer and gain from this work. Here is where I hope ATMA to interact synergistically with its sister organization, Consortium for Consciousness Studies in Higher Education (CCSHE)—still in the planning stages—to bridge this gulf.

Several angles come into view. One involves what might be called “integrity of practice.” A hot topic in contemplative studies is the prevalence of mindfulness practices that have been extricated from their traditional Buddhist roots and appropriated for all manner of benefits—, freedom from anxiety, cognitive sharpening, productivity in the workforce, etc. This issue might be correlated with the prevalence of a Westernized conception of Buddhism that is particularly averse to the mystical dimensions of that lineage (and others), and which tends to dominate discourse at the expense of a more diverse and inclusive contemplative landscape.

This leads to a second contribution—having to do with ontology—that ATMA might make through its arts-based approach to consciousness. Although the arts are typically superseded by science and philosophy when it comes to the What is Consciousness? question, I believe the time has arrived for the arts to join other fields at the forefront of this investigation.

On one hand is the generation of ideas that is inherent in the creative process and questions that arise about the origins of ideas. The age-old idea that “your creating comes from the soul” points to transcendent dimensions of consciousness that run starkly counter to materialist tendencies to reject such. Noteworthy here are also tendencies in academic contemplative studies circles to misinterpret the Buddhist concept of *anatman* (or *annata*) as “no soul,” as opposed to its reference to the fleeting, impermanent nature of the egoic self. I believe ATMA and CCSHE can trigger conversation that yields a much more expansive view of consciousness and ramifications for creativity. Key principles from Integral Theory and its first-second-third person dimensions of wholeness may be uniquely instructive in this context. For example, the notion of soul and transcendent creative wellsprings (first-person, subjective reality) need not be seen as in conflict with postmodern emphasis on (second-person, relational) cultural criteria, nor materialists’ emphasis on (third-person, objective) neurobiological dimensions that impact creativity: All work together. And just as improvisation can be seen to underpin overarching musical creativity, soul can be seen as foundational along the consciousness continuum.

Further ontological ramifications may stem from the experience of heightened communion among performers and listeners in peak improvisatory creativity. “We felt like we were a single organism, as if the audience was part of the ensemble, participating in the generation of ideas.” This common description is suggestive of collective, or intersubjective consciousness, sometimes thought of in terms of field consciousness, for which a growing body of empirical support may be found that issues near-fatal challenges to materialism.

While I will not deny my predilection for an integral view of consciousness, I do not argue for the categorical rejection of materialism to serve as a guiding precept for ATMA or CCSHE.

Rather, I propose a reversal of the prevailing narrative, where the onus tends to be placed on integral or other nonmaterialist viewpoints to make their case against privileged materialist assumptions. I believe the time has come to shift the onus. Why? Because when one places side-by-side the widest array of empirical, theoretical, philosophical and cultural considerations, a kind of juxtaposition that is rare in academic consciousness inquiry, increasingly challenging questions to materialism are raised, while support for the view of consciousness as primary in the broader scheme of creation—a key integral premise that is coherent with worldviews across the globe and from time immemorial—increases.

The time has come for materialism to justify itself against a critically robust integral backdrop that is coherent with culturally diverse worldviews and yet which continually interrogates its own assumptions.

Another ATMA contribution involves social justice considerations. Whereas an ever-growing social justice commitment is evident in contemplative studies, this is less evident in consciousness studies. However, a striking irony comes into view: Whereas consciousness studies more readily engages with the most far-reaching spiritual/mystical questions imaginable, which—at least in principle—yields a space which would invite highly diverse spiritual voices, contemplative studies' aversion to this kind of inquiry undermines its stated pluralistic aims. ATMA and CCSHE celebration of diverse artistic and mystical voices could help heal this dichotomy and significantly impact both contemplative and consciousness studies movements.

Finally, a further ATMA contribution to contemporary spiritual discourse involves the common threads that connect contemporary musical life and contemporary spiritual life. Prominent among these are broad slate of musical and spiritual options available and the challenges inherent in navigating the respective landscapes in meaningful and manageable ways. The self-cultural and self-transcending facets of the jazz CICP may offer important guidance.

When all is said and done, creative artists are philosophers and mystics, and it is incumbent upon music studies and music teacher training to orient their developmental models around the most far-reaching vision of artistry and personhood imaginable. I envision ATMA as a forum where engagement with the biggest questions imaginable about human creative and spiritual development coexists alongside the most detailed investigation of rigor and craft, with both ends of the spectrum continually informing and inspiring each other.

This spawns ramifications for another area that has eluded significant attention in music studies change conversations.

Gender and gender identity

Enlivenment of creativity and consciousness are the basis for gender and gender identity empowerment. If our creating comes from the innermost dimensions of consciousness, then creativity is the means for expressing the deepest dimensions of who we are.

Immediately, however, a paradox comes into view if the jazz CICP is to be held as the model. This entails the gender crisis that has long beset the jazz tradition and jazz education.

Little commentary is needed on the gross disparity in male and female participants on both levels. I believe the longstanding seminal achievements and contributions of women jazz artists, even if a minority constituency, strongly point toward socio-cultural conditioning as a major factor in this disparity. I am thinking here of research that suggests girls and women are conditioned to not take leadership roles, a prominent example of which in music would be the improvised jazz solo, as an important factor. Another factor might be the fact that prominent “jazz instruments”—e.g. saxophone, trombone, trumpet, drums, bass—tend to be selected by boys more than girls at young ages. In any case, while there is no denying the vast amount of attention this crisis warrants, the ever-increasing number of extraordinary female performers on these (and other) instruments) bodes well for the future. Moreover, unprecedented activist strides, inspired at least in part by the #me too# movement, are taking hold in the jazz world to help address this crisis.

I would like to add to the conversation an assertion that has already elicited reactions in early ATMA deliberations. That, as serious as the gender crisis in jazz is, European classical music suffers an equally serious—and ultimately even greater—crisis.

To be sure, this is contentious. After all—just place side-by-side the typical jazz big band and the typical symphony orchestra. With often no girls or women in jazz groups, classical ensembles will at times include more female than male participants. How, then, could one begin to suggest that the classical world suffers a gender crisis that comes even close to that in jazz?

The above axiom—*that the basis for gender empowerment, and thus gender equity, lies in enlivenment of creativity and consciousness*—offers a powerful reply that radically changes the narrative.

First, it shifts the focus from demographics—as important as this need always be—to also include epistemology, which is foundational. No degree of demographic gender balance will compensate for epistemological shortcomings. Therefore, the interpretive performance specialist identity that is the norm in music studies, and the marginalization if not total absence for most students of the CACP identity, are the primary impediments to gender empowerment and equity. The problem is not interpretive performance per se, nor the symphony orchestra—in which epistemic dearth is most pronounced. The problem is the extent to which these have overtaken the whole.

At which point a curious irony comes into focus. Jazz, unmatched in terms of its demographic gender crisis, is also an unmatched source of tools for gender identity empowerment. Classical music, unmatched in terms of demographic gender balance, is also unmatched in the obstacles it poses to gender identity empowerment.

When dominant gender identity taps into deeper dimensions of awareness, it opens up to the need for embrace of all identities. When marginalized gender identity taps into deeper dimensions of creativity and consciousness, it is fueled to shine forth in confident and powerful creative expressions.

No amount of demographic diversity can compensate for inadequate epistemological foundations. Demographic diversity without epistemological diversity is but a smokescreen. I hope ATMA will render any debates on this point moot by advocating for both demographic and epistemological diversity.

Closing thoughts

In a single stroke, the above commentary makes a case for the jazz CICP as source for an expanded, integrative and rigorous skill set, which in turn yields a rich epistemic circuitry through which creativity and consciousness might flow in support of an arts-based spirituality paradigm, which in turn provides a basis for gender and gender identity empowerment and new conversations on these topics.

Having in the first two installations given an overview of potential ATMA terrain, in the next and final part, I shift gears and probe some of the obstacles to change that cannot be chalked up to music studies' conservative horizons. The time has come for the reform movement to critically interrogate itself.