"SHE MUST BE A PURE VESSEL": AN EXAMINATION OF A SPIRIT MEDIUM PERSONA

ÉRICO BOMFIM

ABSTRACT

Rosemary Brown (1916–2001) is certainly a highly unusual case in music history. In the 1960s, she started to notate hundreds of musical pieces that she attributed to the spirits of several great concert music composers with whom she claimed to be in touch as a spirit medium. Brown also furnishes a promising persona case study. In order to convince the public that her music had a spiritual origin, she described herself (and was described) as a simple housewife and mother with no profound musical knowledge, therefore hardly capable of writing original musical pieces in the styles of acclaimed composers. The purpose of this paper is first, to provide an examination of Rosemary Brown's public persona; second, to relate it to the spiritualist tradition, in order to demonstrate that the constituent elements of Rosemary Brown's persona were available in the spiritualist cultural repertoire; and third, to relate this same persona to the implications of gender in the understanding of mediumship among spiritualists.

KEY WORDS

Rosemary Brown; Spiritualism; Gender; Feminism

INTRODUCTION

In the 1960s, an apparently untutored British composer or spirit medium[1] called Rosemary Brown started to write down hundreds of musical pieces in the styles of dozens of great masters of concert music, with whose spirits she claimed to be in touch. The list of composers was quite impressive, as it included Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, Chopin, Liszt, Debussy, Rachmaninov and many other historical musical personalities. Brown managed to impress some notable scholars with her compositions, some of which seemed to be quite sophisticated and accurate style reproductions. Her most celebrated piece was arguably *Grübelei*, which she began to compose in front of the cameras of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)[2] and resembled Liszt's late style. Composing *Grübelei* was quite an impressive achievement (even more so before the cameras), since Liszt's late style was not much known at the time and featured advanced harmonic idioms close to twentieth-century music. By establishing a dialogue with that very particular idiom, *Grübelei* managed to impress Humphrey Searle, one of the most notable Liszt experts of the time.[3]

As impressive as her musical achievements can seem, this paper is not concerned with the intrinsic qualities and merits of Rosemary Brown's music – something that to some extent I have explored elsewhere –[4], even less with authenticating (or falsifying, for that matter) her spiritual claims. The issue of mediumistic authenticity shall not be addressed here. Instead, this paper will provide an account of Rosemary Brown's explicit spiritual beliefs and goals, in order to examine the strategies that the British medium used to accomplish those same goals.

As will become clear throughout this article, Rosemary Brown's construction of her own public persona had an essential role in the spiritualist discourse. Although Rosemary Brown's case can seem startling and uncanny, I also aim to demonstrate that the features that constituted her persona as a spirit medium were all available not only in American and European nineteenth-century spiritualist culture, but also in contemporary Brazilian spiritism. Finally, this paper also provides a brief investigation of the relations between mediumship and gender, as spiritualists believed that traditional feminine attributes rendered women particularly suitable to mediumship, and many aspects of the female spiritualist medium persona are echoed in Rosemary Brown's persona.

As previously mentioned, this paper will not address the issue of mediumistic authenticity. But if I do not accept in this paper that Rosemary Brown's claims are "true", I also do not wish for the spirit medium persona to be taken as (necessarily) fraudulent or deceptive. It is true that the concept of persona is related to that of theatrical mask, theatrical performance and roleplaying, but this performance is not to be understood as deceitful or dishonest.[5] My purpose in this article is to examine the function of a spirit medium persona in the spiritualist discourse and among spiritualist believers. If it is not my purpose to validate Rosemary Brown's spiritual claims, it is also not my purpose to make a case for scepticism and address the issue with contempt. I believe spiritualism is a culturally relevant phenomenon that inspired (and inspires)[6] sincerely devoted communities, regardless of authenticity obstacles, alternative explanations and many known cases of fraud and charlatanism. It is my view that the proper understanding of spiritualism as a social, historical and religious phenomenon should not be obstructed by the problem of the (un)reality of spirit communication or the (un)truth behind it – as much as it would not be with any other religion, for that matter.

Even if deception does play a major role both in spiritualism and in the construction of public personas, that should not obstruct the proper understanding of spiritualism as a culturally relevant phenomenon and from a socio-cultural perspective. Indeed, Natale (2016, n.p) has recently suggested that "faith in spiritualism did not contrast but rather was embedded with the spectacular and entertaining character of séances", even though that character is commonly associated (correctly at many times) with deception and fraud. According to this approach, the traditional dichotomy that opposes piety and commerce is limiting. In fact, "spiritualists could employ strategies from show business and at the same time believe in what they were doing", (Natale 2016). By the same token, Lehman (2014) acknowledges that:

> *[f]raud has doubtless played a role in many performances of shamans, oracles and trance mediums throughout history. But the interpretation of all such phenomena as mere trickery is reductive, and a dead end to attempts to understand and derive meaning from them.*

The Public Persona of Rosemary Brown

Even though Rosemary Brown's music was able to impress musicologists for some of its intrinsic qualities, it was not composed as an end in itself, but rather as a means to a spiritual end. Indeed, the British medium described the music as part of an ambitious project planned in the spiritual realm that aimed to provide humanity with evidence of the immortality of the soul. This transcendent project had first been revealed to Rosemary Brown (1971, p. 14) when she was only seven years old, and Liszt (as she would later recognize) appeared to her, saying that he would come back and give her music when she grew up.

The idea of the spiritual music as part of a transcendental project would be later confirmed by the spirit of twentieth-century British musicologist Donald Tovey. According to

Rosemary Brown (1971, pp. 17–18), Tovey's spirit claimed that "an organised group of musicians who have departed from your world, are attempting to establish a precept for humanity, i.e, that physical death is a transition from one state of consciousness to another wherein one retains one's individuality". Tovey's spirit wanted to make it clear that those spirits were not "transmitting music to Rosemary Brown simply for the sake of offering possible pleasure in listening thereto", but it was rather "the implications relevant to this phenomenon" that they hoped would "stimulate sensible and sensitive interest and stir many who are intelligent and impartial to consider and explore the unknown regions of man's mind and psyche".

Therefore, Brown believed to be just one piece in a transcendent project organized in the spiritual world. Her (and the spirits') main goal was to draw humanity's attention to a spiritual reality. But in order to achieve this goal, she and her spirits had to convince the public that the music had indeed a spiritual origin, and, to do that, she had to weaken the sceptics' case. This meant to convince the public not only that she did not compose the musical pieces by herself, but especially that she could not have done so, because she would not be capable of it. One of Rosemary Brown's (and the spiritualists') main strategies to achieve this was to build her image as a sincere, simple and poor housewife widow and mother with very little musical training and a deficient cultural background altogether. The function of Rosemary Brown's spirit medium persona was to oppose her image as a competent and self-reliant composer.

Rosemary Brown's books provide remarkable case study opportunities for an examination of the construction of a spirit medium persona. That is especially the case of her first book, *Unfinished Symphonies*, in which Brown (1971, pp. 46–57) describes her life and her background in close detail, carefully building her image as a simple housewife from a poor family with very little musical tuition and very limited musical experience whatsoever. The British medium was born in Clapham, "which was then beginning to lose its original middle-class respectability and was becoming poorer as the residents with a little money gradually moved farther out of London".[7] Her family counted on an income from renting out a hall at the back of their house for events, but "the amount this brought was very meagre and fluctuating". Her mother catered for those events in order to make "a little extra money" and her father was an electrical engineer, "[b]ut that work was not particularly well-paid in those days either". Indeed, her life was "no bed of roses".

Brown's was a rather unmusical home, where any inclination "to go to concerts or listen to classical music" was missing. To be sure, there was only one and a very discreet musical feature in Rosemary Brown's family, as her mother "quite liked to play the piano and sing a little", but even so "she had very little time for anything so relaxing", since she would have to take care of the house, her three children and manage the assembly hall that they rented. Moreover, Rosemary Brown's mother got arthritis in her hands at some point, which stopped her from playing the piano. Brown's father "was quite unmusical", although "he had a pleasant tenor voice", but "untrained". He "sang to himself occasionally, but that was about it". Brown also mentions there was a radio in the house, but it was not meant for the children to use. Besides, the radio had to be charged, something that cost money and made Rosemary Brown's father "a bit frugal about using the radio". Moreover, the radio never transmitted classical music and if Rosemary Brown's mother noticed the radio was broadcasting any music "she called 'heavy', she would promptly switch off".

When it comes to "semi-classical music", Rosemary Brown (1971, pp. 48–9) states that all contact she had with it was at ballet classes that were held in their assembly hall. Even so, it would be misleading to think of it as any musical experience that could explain Rosemary

Brown's apparent ability to reproduce classical styles, as the ballet music "wasn't very representative of anything that one might hear at Covent Garden". They danced to music "used for ballet exercises" that never seemed "to have much of a tune; only a definite beat". Only at specific occasions once a year, "excerpts from the classics were used". But even then, those were mostly "lighter type of pieces" rather than what she "would call real classics". Brown also "had no friends who came from musical homes" and her school did not have any piano lessons available for students, except for private tuition, that "was available to those able to pay the fees", which of course would not be her case. In sum, the British medium's childhood would not have been "the sort of privileged childhood that goes with visits to concerts, and a general background of culture".

Rosemary Brown (1971, p. 50) had, however, had piano lessons. At first, her parents hired "the man who played for the ballroom dance classes" to teach her, but she was not under the impression that he "knew a great deal about music", even though he taught her "a few chords and how to vamp a bit". Besides, the piano in their house had many missing notes, "which was limiting for both" teacher and student. For all those reasons, Rosemary Brown's parents decided to hire another "obviously more qualified teacher", who gave lessons at his house, which at least meant she "was learning on a piano that actually worked". However, there was still an important obstacle keeping Rosemary Brown from dedicating as much time to her musical training as she wanted to. After all, the piano in her home was located in a room kept for rare occasions when they had visitors and the house had no electricity or heating "except by coal fire", while the room with the piano "was lit only by two gas brackets". Since her mother "would never light a fire unless it was a very special occasion", she had "to practise in this big, draughty, totally unheated room", which resulted in a quite bitter practice, according to her memories: "I can remember actually crying because I wanted so much to practice, but my fingers were so cold and stiff that I could hardly move them, let alone play scales". Therefore, even though she "really wanted to learn" and "never minded practicing", she still had to face an almost unbearable barrier, so "didn't practise all that much". Finally, there was always the financial obstacle. Since her family faced great economic adversities, the piano lessons were often cut off, being "the first economy in any emergency" and that is why the piano lessons just lasted for "a year or so".

This was not her only musical training, though. In her teens, Brown (1971, p. 51) "had two terms with a teacher who was an LRAM [Licentiate of the Royal Academy of Music]" and who seemed to be "a good teacher". This teacher would have given Rosemary Brown "a much better idea of music", teaching her "some music theory" and key and time signatures – "though not the more complicated ones". Finally, the Second World War imposed another interruption to the piano lessons, which of course "had to be dropped", only to be retaken "after the war, from 1951 to 1952", lasting "just over one year". That would have been Rosemary Brown's "entire musical education" up to the point where she started composing (or "channelling") music, and she "certainly wasn't being fed music from any other sources".

The first contact she had with actual classical music was through a friend who loved opera and wanted company to watch Mozart's *Cosi Fan Tutti*. Rosemary Brown (1971, pp. 51–52) agreed because her friend "was a nice person" and did not "want to go alone". However, Brown "didn't think much" of the opera and could not "understand why the other girl was so very enthusiastic". Only after the spiritual music started to be known, she received "a few recordings" of classical music and "a small, cheap record player" as gifts. But she seemed to have trouble concentrating, being "far too active to sit and listen" unless some "very short and interesting piece of music" was being played on the radio, she would tend to get "bored and restless".

Having a deficient musical background, she was not even capable of distinguishing great composers' styles and "tell whose music is whose". Sometimes she would switch the radio on and try to guess with her daughter: "That's Schubert. No, it's not. It's Mozart. Or could it be Beethoven?" But she was "generally wrong every time". It seems fair to assume that Rosemary Brown mentioned her trouble distinguishing the composers' styles to indicate that if she was not even able to tell their styles apart, she certainly wouldn't be able to reproduce them in the form of original musical pieces. Indeed, Brown's detailed and thorough account of her musical background provides the same function: allowing Rosemary Brown to build her spirit medium persona and make a case for the spiritualists' discourse.

Lack of musical training was not the only attribute of Rosemary Brown's public persona. If the function of the spirit medium persona was to strengthen the spiritualist discourse and weaken the sceptics', it would also make sense to picture Rosemary Brown as someone not interested in fame or money, as sceptics would often point to spurious motivations for mediumship. Contrary to sceptics' suspicions, Rosemary Brown (1974, p. 39) was not seeking fame, as she loved "quietness and peaceful surroundings", preferring "to live un-noticed, a modest, simple life". Moreover, Brown (1971, p. 42) believed fame could prove to be more a curse than a blessing:

> *Another foolish idea is that I hankered after fame. Anyone who knows me will realise the truth of the fact – that I much prefer to live quietly, and out of the public eye. So much so that I wonder why people ever covet fame, as it can be a great burden and a nuisance. I have discovered that one loses all privacy and is constantly having demands of all kinds made upon one, also having to endure the misery of hostile criticism and denigration.*

If it would not be fair to think that Brown was seeking fame, neither would it be fair to believe she was driven by pecuniary interests – and Brown (1971, 126) would take pains to make this clear. She would not use her "mediumship for money", neither she would ever "set up as a 'professional' medium", since she believed her mediumship was "a gift from God". However, she did not renounce the copyrights to the spiritual music and neither did she believe she should. After all, she worked "hard at it, and hard work does entitle one to some remuneration". Besides, the spiritual composers themselves would have "urged" her "to accept the royalties", as she had her "children to bring up". For a few years, the spiritual music gave Brown autonomy. In 1968, her closest supporters founded the Scott Fund, whose goal was to finance Brown so that she would not have to work in anything else besides the music. Although providing her with financial autonomy – so that she could dedicate herself exclusively to the music – the initiative did not work. According to Brown (1971, pp. 79–80), the fund made her feel pressured to give results, and she withdrew from it in 1970.

Even when it came to copyright royalties, the singularity of Rosemary Brown's case is quite perceptible. It would be hard to think of any other composer that would feel compelled to justify morally his or her acceptance of the royalties related to the music he or she produced. But in the case of Rosemary Brown, this was the consequence of the argument that, if the music was not created by her (but rather by spirits), then she should not be entitled to the royalties that would result from it. Moreover, Brown probably felt compelled to distance herself from the sceptical image of the charlatan spirit medium driven by pecuniary spurious interests. Therefore, if she, as any other composer, kept the royalties of the music she produced, she had, differently from anyone else, to justify this choice on moral grounds, at the same time making it clear that money was not her motivation. If she did not want to be the suspicious medium with questionable interests, she had to be the devoted mother that had to provide for her children.

Indeed, motherhood, as well as marriage, also played a role in the building of Rosemary Brown's (1971, pp. 32–37) spirit medium persona. She began composing (or "channelling") the spiritual music after her husband died and she "was left penniless" to take care of their "two children aged eight and four-and-a-half to bring up alone", it was "essential to get a job". But since she had to manage the school schedule of her children, the "only answer seemed to be some kind of school work which would fit in with the children's hours". So, she ended up working in the school kitchen's service, providing meals for children. The work with the composers' spirits properly began after she had an accident in the school, possibly breaking two ribs, and had to be "off for weeks with instructions not to do too much". On one of those days off, Brown describes that Liszt "appeared very vividly" beside her and guided her hands at the piano: "What was happening seemed natural and normal, and I thought to myself: 'That's rather lovely music', enjoying the pleasurable sensation of listening to the creation of something which I knew was not of my own creating".

The devoted mother also believed she was (and was believed to be) a healer. Rosemary Brown (1971, 167) believed she was in touch with the spirit of British soldier and surgeon Sir George Scott Robertson, who had been a distant relative and, as a spirit, would assist her healing people in need. The most interesting account of Rosemary Brown's alleged healing abilities, however, does not come from her, but rather from the prestigious cellist Julian Lloyd Weber. In his autobiography *Travels with my Cello*, Lloyd Weber (1984, pp. 66–68) writes that he was close to retirement because of terrible pains in one finger that doctors could not resolve. According to him, the British medium healed his finger as well as cured him of kidney stones on a separate occasion.

As someone who believed she had (and was believed to have) gifts related to spirituality, Rosemary Brown also believed she could be a source of spiritual revelation for humanity, something that is demonstrated in all her three books. In all of them, Brown (1971, pp. 108–127; 1974, pp. 182–189; 1986, pp. 26–41) dedicates at least one chapter to the description of the spiritual world, what it would be like and how would it work. In these chapters, the British medium addresses issues such as God, Christian beliefs, reincarnation and future happiness in the afterlife. Sexism and gender equality were also broached. According to Brown (1974, p. 106) and regarding the afterlife, the spirit of Donald Tovey stated that:

> *Those who have incarnated in feminine guise are usually happily surprised to […] find themselves in a world or sphere where they will no longer be discriminated against or deprived of various rights and opportunities on account of their sex. In the Hereafter one is estimated according to one's innate qualities and cultivated merits, and the question of sex does not enter into account. Those who incarnated in a male guise are sometimes disconcerted to find their traditional male superiority, if they so regarded it, without any continuance in the after-Life.*

Rosemary Brown and Spiritualism

A dedicated mother, a sorrowful widow, an honest, sincere and humble housewife with no pecuniary interests nor wishes for fame, a healer capable of revealing aspects of the afterlife and an untutored amateur musician incapable even of recognizing and distinguishing classical composers' styles: all those elements worked together to form the spirit medium persona of Rosemary Brown. An accurate description of the public persona of Rosemary Brown, together with the role it plays in the spiritualist discourse is provided by Mervyn Stockwood (1971), bishop of Southwark, who writes the foreword for *Unfinished Symphonies*:

> *Now if Rosemary Brown had devoted her life to music and was a brilliant pianist it might be possible to find a straightforward explanation. But that is not the case. Rosemary Brown grew up in comparatively humble circumstances which did not provide money or leisure for the pursuit of musical studies. In more recent years she has been a busy housewife and mother in her home in Balham. As Sir George Trevelyan says, she had no musical background or initial talent, almost no training, and very little experience in listening to records or concerts whether live or on the radio. Her main job, as a widow, was to make ends meet, and this she did by working five hours a day in the school meals service. In my opinion the most likely explanation of this phenomenon is a psychic one. It is to be found in Rosemary Brown's mediumship.*

Another model illustration of the spiritualist discourse, and the function of the spirit medium persona within it, is provided by the composer Ian Parrott, probably the most devoted champion of the Rosemary Brown in the musical field. Indeed, his book *The Music of Rosemary Brown* (Parrott, 1978) is dedicated to making a case for the spiritualists' side, on which he publicly admitted to being. Besides praising the spiritual music's qualities, Parrott (1978, p. 9) also accepts and emphasizes Rosemary Brown's persona; she is described by him as a "quiet, unpretentious and musically untalented South London housewife". Regarding Rosemary Brown's background, "[t]he only musical influences on a mundane plane seem to have come from some quite ordinary ballet classes and from some fairly unsatisfactory and sporadic piano lessons". Therefore, he writes, by the time she started writing down the spiritual music, she had had only "very little musical tuition".

Parrott (1978, p. 11) also emphasised that the musical training Rosemary Brown had was "only the minimum of musical rudiments necessary for writing down what came to her". He could also attest to Rosemary Brown's (lack of) musical skills first hand. "[W]hen trying to help her with score-reading, instrumentation, form, history, etc.", he learned that her skills were below those of a music student and that she remained "as far as possible a clean vessel". Therefore, Parrott (1978, p. 12) was "able to confirm the impression of Mary Firth, who, when she gave Rosemary ear tests, found a complete lack of basic music ability such as she had come to expect in any student – certainly in a student doing composition". Consequently, Rosemary Brown's musical achievements were obtained "with no training and very little harmonic knowledge of any kind".

In making his point, Parrott (1978, p. 64) also asks himself why would the composers' spirits not choose a "more qualified musician" that would presumably be able to transcribe the spiritual music easier and more accurately. According to Parrot, "[t]his would defeat the object", as "she must be a pure vessel". Parrott (1978, pp. 68–9) also quotes Robin Stone, professor at the London College of Music, regarding this matter, for who "[t]he other side, wishing to prove survival after death, used a non musician to take down music dictated by some of the world's great composers", and it "would have been a mistake to have taken a musician for obvious reasons".

Many features in Rosemary Brown's persona resonate with the history of spiritualism. To begin with, biographies were published on many nineteenth-century mediums. According to Natale (2016, n.p), "biographical accounts of spiritualist mediums […] reached a high level of standardization during the second half of the nineteenth century", to a point that "[b]iographies of mediums can be regarded as a kind of literary subgenre with recurring conventions and patterns". Indeed, some of the patterns of this subgenre described by Natale can be easily recognized in Rosemary Brown's books. Precisely as in Brown's narrative of when she first saw Liszt's spirit aged seven years, in those nineteenth-century biographies "the powers of the

medium were revealed in early childhood", even if they were not "recognized as such". And if for Rosemary Brown the loss of her husband was an important turning point in her trajectory of medium, in the biographies of nineteenth-century mediums "[t]he death of a close relative, such as the medium's father, was often the subject of particular attention, leading to his reappearance as a spirit guide after the discovery of mediumistic gifts". In Brown's case, the loss of the husband was a turning point, but it was Liszt's spirit that reappeared as a spirit guide.

Also like in Rosemary Brown's case, some of those biographies of mediums were autobiographies, as some of the "mediums authored their own personal narratives" (Natale 2016). Those autobiographies played a very similar role to that of Brown's books. After all, "[t]he publication of these memoirs was intended to demonstrate their devotion to the goal of spreading the spiritualist faith, along with their understanding of mediumship as a public role". Therefore, "autobiographies of mediums shed light on the strategies they used to represent their own identity as well as their role within the spiritualist enterprise". As we can see, the autobiographies of nineteenth-century mediums and of Rosemary Brown indicate similar perceptions of mediumship as part of a transcendental project related to the propagation of a "spiritual truth". Moreover, they also seem to provide model illustrations of the construction of a spirit medium persona and its function within spiritualist discourse.

Central to the persona template analysed in this paper is the construction of the spirit medium as someone from a culturally poor background, lacking knowledge or formal instruction. That is indeed a leitmotif in spiritualism, which is also noted by Natale (2016, n.p), according to whom "mediums often stressed their lack of education and knowledge". But that picture was not made only by the mediums themselves. In order to investigate this side of the spirit medium persona in the spiritualist discourse, I will take *The History of Spiritualism*, by British writer and spiritualist, Arthur Conan Doyle (2001a; 2001b), which provide numerous characterizations of mediums that accurately illustrate how the spirit medium persona operates within spiritualist discourse and how it participates in spiritualists' system of beliefs.

The inauguration of spiritualism is usually associated with the well-known case of the Fox sisters starting in 1848, although the origin of modern spiritualism can be traced back to Emanuel Swedenborg and the New Church foundation in the eighteenth-century. Conan Doyle's (2001a, pp. 90–91) image of the Fox sisters provides a close relation to the spirit medium persona examined here; he describes them as "little more than children, poorly educated, and quite ignorant of" spiritualism's philosophy. Similarly, Doyle quotes an alleged non-spiritualist who "was clearly intimately acquainted with" the Fox family and for whom Margaret Fox was a simple, ingenuous and shy girl, who "could not, had she been so inclined, have practised the slightest deception with any chance of success".

Indeed, the young, naïve, shy, pure and uninstructed female medium was one of the main spirit medium personas in nineteenth-century Spiritualism. A model example is Florence Cook, who was believed to materialize a spirit called Katie King, which was closely investigated by scientist and scholar William Crookes. Similar to the Fox sisters, Florence Cook was described by Crookes (in Doyle 2001a, p. 240) as an "innocent schoolgirl of fifteen" who would be incapable of carrying out a successful deception, for this would be "foreign to her nature". Moreover, Florence Cook was willing to fulfil spiritualists' expectation of transparency and investigation, as she would "submit to any test which might be imposed upon her", including "to be searched at any time".[8]

Youth played a role in the persona of many other mediums,[9] including male ones, such as the Davenport brothers, who were described by Doyle (2001a, pp. 213–214) as "mere boys, too young to have learned any elaborate means of deception". They were tested by Harvard

professors who, according to Doyle, would have failed to acknowledge the brothers' authentic mediumship, even though the brothers were willing to submit to all kinds of test conditions. Integrity and honesty were also seen to be present. According to their biographer, Dr Nichols, quoted by Doyle (2001a, p. 215), the Davenport brothers seemed "entirely honest, singularly disinterested and unmercenary – far more anxious to have people satisfied of their integrity and the reality of their manifestations than to make money". Moreover, Dr Nichols said they had been selected "as the instruments of what they believe will be some great good to mankind".

In a similar fashion, Conan Doyle (2001b, p. 34) believed British medium Madame D'Esperance to be "a young girl of average middle-class education" when her mediumship began to be noticed. "[I]n semitrance, however, she displayed to a marked degree that gift of wisdom and knowledge which St. Paul places at the head of his spiritual category", being capable of writing down very quickly – and not only in English, but also in German and Latin – answers to questions covering "every branch of science". In her turn, medium Elizabeth Blake was described by Doyle (2001b, p. 161) as "a poor, illiterate woman" who "was strongly religious". Like many other spiritualist mediums, she "was said to have been repeatedly tested by 'scientists, physicians and others,' and to have submitted willingly to all their tests". Lack of formal instruction was also linked to the Eddy brothers, who were described by Doyle (2001a, 253) as "primitive folk" that, according to another observer quoted by him, looked "more like hard-working rough farmers than prophets or priests of a new dispensation".

This description is not much different to the one of Italian medium Eusapia Palladino, depicted by Doyle (2001b, 12) as a "humble, illiterate Neapolitan woman". Doyle was certainly much more polite than Professor Ércole Chiaia (in Doyle 2001b, p, 14), who described Eusapia Palladino as "an invalid woman" who belonged "to the humblest class of society" and was "nearly thirty years old and very ignorant". To be sure, that harsh description was meant to contrast with Eusapia's alleged powers, for, according to Chiaia, she was capable of lifting furniture without touching it and could keep it "suspended in the air like Mahomet's coffin", making them to "come down again with undulatory movements, as if they were obeying to her will", even though she was either "bound to a seat or firmly held by the hands of the curious". Indeed, Palladino herself would rise "in the air, no matter what bands" would tie her down, seeming to "lie upon the empty air, as on a couch, contrary to all the laws of gravity".

The idea that the medium could achieve through mediumship results that otherwise were beyond his or her capabilities was no particularity of British and American spiritualism. French spiritualist Allan Kardec (1984, 164), who named his spiritualist system "Spiritism", also believed and emphasized that spirit mediums could produce results beyond his or her personal knowledge and not matched to his or her background:

> *A phenomenon which is very common in mediumship is the aptitude of certain mediums to write in a language which is unknown to them, – to speak or write upon subjects outside their knowledge. It is not rare to see those who write rapidly without having learned to write; others still who become poets, without ever having before composed a line of poetry; others sketch, paint, sculpt, compose music, play on an instrument, without having previously known anything of either accomplishment. Very frequently the writing-medium reproduces the writing and signature of the spirits communicating by him, although he had never known them in Earth-life.*

Finally, the spirit medium persona examined here is not confined to American and European spiritualism. The public persona of the Brazilian spiritist medium Chico Xavier demonstrated the same essential characteristics that were seen in the case of Rosemary Brown. Indeed, for the Preface of the Brazilian edition of *Unfinished Symphonies*, Elsie Dubugras (1971) called

Rosemary Brown "the Chico Xavier of music". Quite like Rosemary Brown, Chico Xavier was also believed to be capable of writing literary (instead of musical) pieces apparently beyond his literary knowledge. In a dissertation on an anthology of poems attributed to the spirits of famous poets by Xavier, called *Parnaso de Além-Túmulo*, Alexandre Caroli Rocha (2001, p. 187), besides providing a stylistic discussion of the mediumistic poems, also notes that "in order for the [mediumistic] work to become more convincing", Chico Xavier did not have a scholar profile at all.

> *[I]nstead, in 1931 (when the poems of the 1st edition of Parnaso were written) Chico Xavier was a young man of 21 years who worked as a clerk in a warehouse from 7:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. in Pedro Leopoldo, a small mining town where there was not even a public library and where he had studied until the fourth year of primary school.*

That is not the only parallel to be drawn between Chico Xavier and Rosemary Brown, for Xavier also believed he was (and was believed to be) a source of revelation of the afterlife, as some of his books – notably *Nosso Lar* – attempt to explain and describe the spiritual world, its laws and spiritual communities. Moreover, he publicly renounced all copyright royalties related to his mediumistic works, helping to shape his public image as a selfless and charitable religious leader. Being perceived by the Brazilian spiritualist community as a sincere, devoted and uninstructed religious leader who was undertaking a spiritual mission, Chico Xavier, like Rosemary Brown, illustrates the spirit medium persona of the twentieth-century.

A Feminine and Pure Vessel

In a series of lectures from the 1970s turned into a book, Edward Cone (1974) introduces the concept of the "implicit persona" or the "complete musical persona" behind a musical composition. Although for Cone (1974, p. 57) "the persona is by no means identical with the composer", it is nevertheless "a projection of his musical intelligence, constituting the mind, so to speak, of the composition in question". If we were to link Cone's concept to Rosemary Brown's and the spiritualists' perspective, the composers' persona behind spiritual compositions does not reside in the medium, but rather in the communicating spirit. Furthermore, the medium must, in the spiritualists' perception, relinquish his or her own persona in order to become a clean, neutral and pure vessel for the spirits' interference. In other words, Rosemary Brown could not be the active mind who created the composition, but rather the neutral passive channel for the spirits' will. The spirit medium persona was, in some sense, a non-persona and a clean vessel.

According to Rosemary Brown, this idea is corroborated by Liszt's spirit himself. When asked by Brown (1971, p. 54) why did the spiritual composers choose an almost untutored amateur to receive their new musical pieces instead of a trained composer, Liszt's spirit answered not only that "a full musical education would have made it much harder" for Brown to prove that she could not be composing his (and the other the spirits') music by herself, but also that "a musical background" would cause her "to acquire too many ideas and theories" of her own, something that would be "an impediment" to the spirits. The words attributed to Liszt fit well the opinion previously stated by Ian Parrott, who made it clear that Rosemary Brown must have remained a pure vessel. It is also supported by Mervyn Stockwood's (1971) preface, where he notes that the word medium, "in its strict sense, means nothing more than an intermediary, somebody who acts as a go-between".

If Rosemary Brown had to remain a clean vessel for the spirits' active mind and musical intelligence, then any influences of her own on the spiritual music would be perceived as

contamination. Indeed, that is the view of Brown (1971, p. 41) herself, who acknowledged that "not all of the music" she had written down was "superb", the justification being: "the composers are limited by *my* limitations at present – and the difficulties of transmission". Ian Parrott (1978, p. 29) also acknowledged that it "is true that much of her music is symmetrically measured both as regards numbers of bars and also individual notes and phrases". But the explanation would reside between both worlds. After all, "rhythmical peculiarities, syncopations and formal irregularities must be very much more difficult to transmit than just a succession of notes".

And he goes further. When dealing with a section from a piece attributed to Debussy that he believed to be musically unsatisfactory, Parrott (1978, 35) judged that "we may here have a glimpse of Rosemary the vessel with Debussy, as it were, breaking through. It cannot, in fact, be pure Debussy". According to him, Brown had at least once "been left unaided to write the accompaniment" of a musical piece, as the spirit would have let her complete it by herself. Consequently, "[h]er amateurish harmonies, of course, showed through" and the result could "scarcely be other than valueless". If some of Rosemary Brown's pieces showed "a conventional repeated final chord added – an almost vulgar touch in light music of the twenties", this "may have entered her mind" as a cliché inherited from her poor (light and ballet-music) cultural background. Ian Parrott's implication is clear: when it comes to spiritual music, nothing good can result from the interference of the medium. If the merits are spiritual, the flaws are mundane.

It is certainly no coincidence that not only Rosemary Brown, but so many other mediums mentioned here, were female. When it comes to American nineteenth-century spiritualism, mediumship was perceived as a passive attribute "closely identified with femininity", as acknowledges Ann Braude (2001, p. 23). Spiritualists also used electricity analogies, according to which men were positive, whilst women (and mediumship) were negative. When men were mediums, they were understood to bear feminine features where their mediumship was concerned – that is to say, mediumship was a feminine attribute even when bore by men.

Not so different from Rosemary Brown, nineteenth-century trance speakers had to relinquish their own personas in some sense to allow spirit agency. The greater the contrast between their (naïve, innocent, untutored, pure) medium persona and their (eloquent, confident, self-assured) spiritual persona, the greater the impact they would have on their audience. After all, as Braude (2001, p. 82–86) puts it, "the cult of true womanhood asserted that women's nature was characterized by purity, piety, passivity, and domesticity" and, by the same token, trance speakers "qualified by innocence, ignorance, and youth". Therefore, when a trance speaker "stood up in public and gave a lecture […] few believed a woman could do such a thing unaided", making it easy for the audience to accept spirit agency. In other words, "nineteenth-century stereotypes of femininity were used to bolster the case for female mediumship". Quite like Rosemary Brown, some of those mediums were also believed to have healing abilities, that, according to Braude (2001, p. 148), were also thought to be connected to women's "inherent nurturing qualities".

More recently, Cristopher Scheitle (2005) associated women's traditional relationship to spiritualism to women's socialization, which rendered them "more receptive to the possibility of spirit contact". According to Scheitle, there are three reasons for this: first, women are socialized as caretakers for the family, allowing personal and intimate bonds to continue after death. Second, "[w]omen are also socialized to be more open to dwelling on and expressing emotions, especially when it comes to sadness and mourning". Third, "women have been socialized to be

more willing to accept emotion and intuition as legitimate forms of knowledge. This prevents them from explaining away what they feel are communications from the dead as irrational, unscientific, or simply as a coincidence". The association between femininity and mediumship could also have particularly negative connotations, as Amy Lehman (2014, n.p) observes, "[i]t was a common assumption that women were prone to uncontrollable emotional, spiritual or erotic fits, which might be linked to occult powers or phenomena".

But if it is true that spiritualism made use of traditional and problematic feminine attributes to build its mediums' images, it is also true that those same attributes opened new avenues for female transgression. By having direct contact with spirits, women did not need formal instruction to become acceptable sources of spiritual revelation. This way, according to Braude (2001, pp. 82–91), women were capable of bypassing "the need for education, ordination, or organizational recognition, which secured the monopoly of male religious leaders", and trance speakers became historically relevant "in the emergence of women as public speakers during the 1850s". From the point when women became recognized mediums, they also incorporated the role of spiritual guides. As mediums, "women became sources of religious truth, and, as such, assumed the authority of religious leaders". In fact, in spiritualism "women's religious leadership became normative for the first time in American history".

The picture was no different in Victorian society, where, according to Alex Owen (1989, n.p), "the nineteenth-century idea of femininity was crucial to the entire enterprise of Victorian mediumship", which made women "prominent within the spiritualist movement during a period of its popularity and expansion". Precisely as in the United States, the same traditional gender stereotypes that were a constraint to women were also used to bolster their mediumship, and, from this point on, to develop their leadership and autonomy within society. In other words, "Spiritualism validated the female authoritative voice and permitted women an active professional and spiritual role largely denied them elsewhere" (Owen 1989, p. 6). Spiritualism also interacted with the cultural environment of the time. According to Lehman (2014), "the trance state, allied to the transformative possibilities of theatre, provided significant opportunities for Victorian women to speak, act, and create outside the boundaries of their normally restricted social and psychological roles".

A similar point of view is provided by Danielle Jean Drew (2017, p. 8), who wrote, "the occult revival, specifically the Modern Spiritualist Movement, provided women with physical, emotional, and spiritual autonomy in a variety of ways". One of those was professional mediumship, which suited especially middle-class women. Spiritualists had conflicting ways of dealing with this sensitive issue. According to Owen (1989, p. 56), "some spiritualists considered it almost immoral to place a price upon a blessed gift" such as mediumship. Moreover, renouncing fees was a simple, straightforward and anticipated way to respond to the accusations of charlatanism and pecuniary interest that haunted spiritualism since its beginnings. Allan Kardec (1987, pp. 247–250) was among the spiritualists who supported gratuitous mediumship. He argued precisely that this faculty was freely given by God and that the words said by a medium were not the product of her or his research and wisdom; thus mediums should not charge for communicating with the dead. Moreover, he believed pecuniary interests could not attract elevated spirits, but rather inferior ones.

For other spiritualists, however, a medium should be entitled to her or his gains. After all, she or he had spent so much time communicating with the dead and even if the resulting messages were not the product of the medium's mind, why could she or he not charge for all the amount of time dedicated to the spiritual activity? Among the apologists of professional mediumship, Emma Hardinge Brittain (in Owen 1989, p. 56) stands out. She argued: "if my

mediumistic gift is the one most in requisition, it is no less worthy of being exchanged for bread than any other". Like it or not, professional mediumship had its advantages for nineteenth-century women. According to Drew (2017, 37), "this un-professionalized profession provided women in the spiritualist movement with the means of gaining not just spiritual, but financial autonomy". The emergence of mediumship as a profession in the nineteenth-century was also acknowledged by Moore (1975), for whom mediumship was "one of the few career opportunities open to women in the nineteenth century".

My account of Rosemary Brown's relationship with her mediumship shows correlations with both views. On the one hand, like Kardec and parts of spiritualism, she did not understand mediumship as a profession, her argument being that it was a gift from God and something sacred to her. On the other hand, like Emma Hardinge Britten, she believed she was entitled to the royalties of the music, since she spent much of her time on it and had two children to provide for. As we can see, she had to justify her acceptance of the royalties on moral grounds, so that she could have the best of both worlds; that is, receiving royalties without at the same time ruining her persona of a devoted medium.

Once spiritualism had offered spiritual leadership and financial autonomy to nineteenth-century women, it did not take much time for spiritualists (female trance speakers in particular) to engage in the women's rights struggle. Indeed, the intersection between spiritualism and women's rights can hardly be overemphasized. According to Braude (2001, pp. 57, 27), as "the two movements shared many leaders and activists" and "[e]very notable progressive family of the nineteenth century had its advocate of Spiritualism". In fact, spiritualists "spread the message of women's emancipation to large audiences, lecturing tirelessly across the country" (p. 81) and spiritualism would have been "the only religious sect" to recognize the equality of women at that period (p. 2). By this means, spiritualism "became a major – if not *the* major – vehicle for the spread of woman's rights ideas in mid-Century America" (p. 81). After all, spiritualists believed that the liberation of women would mean "the world's redemption", as one spiritualist once put it (p. 57).

But spiritualism was no utopia. A contrasting perspective on the limitations of spiritualism is provided by Kathrin Trattner (2016, p. 116). Trattner believed "it is difficult to support the claim of some authors that Victorian spiritualism was actually a liberating movement for women", especially because mediumship was underpinned by (and would not challenge) traditional gender stereotypes, that, besides rendering women less active in society, also associated them with specific pathologies. It should also be noted that the progressive agenda linked to trance speakers cannot be attributed to all female mediumship. As Braude (2001, pp. 173–178) described, materialization mediums did not have the same leadership role as trance speakers, and were much less engaged in women's rights struggles. Moreover, materialization mediums were subjected to many humiliations that were justified as a means to prevent fraud. This was also observed by Featherstone (2011, pp. 142, 147) in connection to the case of Helen Duncan, the "last person in England to be prosecuted under the Witchcraft Act, her trial resulting in a nine-month prison sentence". Besides being sent to jail, she endured many "intrusive indignities […] including vaginal and rectal searches, strapping and binding, and the threatened application of X-rays", all of them made by "medical men" and pretentiously justified by research purposes. Despite admirable progressive tendencies, spiritualism could also show a dark misogynistic side.

Conclusion

It is not this article's goal to address the never-ending and perhaps insuperable problems around spiritualists' claims, but rather to investigate what role and function the spirit medium persona played in the case of Rosemary Brown and how it relates to spiritualism and gender. I have demonstrated that all constituent elements of Rosemary Brown's public persona were part of spiritualism's cultural and historical repertoire and fulfilled equivalent roles and similar expectations of the spirit medium in spiritualist discourse. Like many other spiritualist mediums, Brown described herself (and was described) as a sincere devoted believer incapable of achieving her results only by her own merits and without spiritual interference, due to her lack of knowledge. Instead of a self-reliant brilliant composer, Rosemary Brown was perceived as a sincere and devoted mother with a deficient cultural and musical background. As many nineteenth-century female mediums, Brown also obtained financial autonomy from her mediumship, even if denying pecuniary gains as a goal in itself. Precisely like some other spiritualist mediums, she also believed herself to be a source of spiritual revelation, aiming to provide humanity with spiritual enlightenment and religious guidance. As many spiritualist mediums, she was a woman who was believed to be a mere passive channel for the spirits' interference, borrowing many traditionally feminine attributes to build her capacity for mediumship. Although possibly in a much less radical way than trance speakers, Rosemary Brown also made use of her religious leadership to dispute sexist ideas. Despite the lack of consensus regarding her claims, it would be fair to say that, at least among spiritualist believers, she was surely successful.

Acknowledgement

This study was financed in part by the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior (CAPES) - finance code 001.

End Notes

[1] Of course, the free use of the word "medium" here does not imply an acceptance of the authenticity of any spirit communications, but since the word can hardly be avoided in this paper (given its subject), I took the liberty not only of using it but also of not keeping it in quotes.

[2] In fact, this was not the only occasion that the media showed its interest in Rosemary Brown, as she appeared on many talk shows, radio interviews and so on. The media interest in Brown was certainly not an isolated fact, given the close relation between the emergence of entertainment media and the rise of spiritualism (Natale 2016) and the contemporary media interest in the paranormal in general (Hill 2010). In a related fashion, Natale (2016, n.p) also proposed that celebrity was a "mechanism that contributed to spreading spiritualist claims".

[3] A detailed account of Rosemary Brown's career is provided in her book *Unfinished Symphonies* (Brown 1971). [4] For a detailed musical and analytical investigation of a sonata attributed to Schubert by Rosemary Brown, see Bomfim 2015.

[5] Indeed, the notion of persona applies to many categories, including scholars (Paul 2014), and yet addressing the issue of the scholarly persona would not mean of course to call scholars deceitful performers who just pretend to believe what they say or write.

[6] Spiritualist echoes nowadays can hardly be overestimated. Polls described by Hill (2010, n.p) find that almost half the British population believes in ghosts, while in the United States one in three had the same believe. When it comes to all the world population, more than 50% hold at least one paranormal belief.

[7] Here we could already anticipate a discreet relation between Brown and spiritualist history. As Drew (2017) thoroughly describes, London played a central role in the occult revival of the nineteenth-century. As we shall see, there are many other (and much deeper) relations between Rosemary Brown and spiritualist history.

[8] As will be mentioned later, this willingness to be searched can relate to misogynistic practices that affected specially materialization mediumship.

[9] Natale (2016, n.p) also notes that "spiritualists frequently recognized mediumistic powers in children", as possibly a means to refute the trickery and fraud hypothesis. "This link between childish innocence and mediumship can be found frequently in the history of spiritualism during the nineteenth century and beyond".

WORKS CITED

Bomfim, É 2015, '"Compondo invisivelmente para além do túmulo": investigação de uma sonata atribuída ao espírito de Schubert pela médium Rosemary Brown', Master's dissertation, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro.

Braude, A 2011, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis.

Brown, R 1971, *Unfinished Symphonies: Voices from the Beyond*, Souvenir Press, London.

— 1974, *Immortals at my Elbow*, Bachman & Turner, London.

— 1986, *Look beyond today*, Bantam Press, London.

Doyle, AC 2003a, *The History of Spiritualism. Volume I*, Fredonia Books, Amsterdam.

— 2003b, *The History of Spiritualism. Volume II*, Fredonia Books, Amsterdam.

Drew, DJ 2017, 'Fragile Spectres: How Women of Victorian Britain Used the Occult and Spiritualist Movement to Create Autonomy', PhD dissertation, Florida Gulf Coast University.

Dubugras, E 1971, 'Prefácio', in R Brown, *Sinfonias Inacabadas: Os Grandes Mestres Compõem do Além*, Edigraf, São Paulo.

Featherstone, S 2011, 'Spiritualism as popular performance in the 1930s: The dark theatre of Helen Duncan', *New Theatre Quarterly* vol. 27, no. 2, pp. 141–152.

Hill, A 2010, *Paranormal media: Audiences, spirits and magic in popular culture*, Routledge, New York.

Kardec, A 1984, *Genesis*, retrieved 10 July 2019, <http://www.oconsolador.com.br/linkfixo/bibliotecavirtual/ingles/Genesis.pdf>

— The Gospel According to Spiritism, retrieved 10 July 2019, <http://www.oconsolador.com.br/linkfixo/bibliotecavirtual/ingles/gospel.pdf>

Lehman, A 2014, *Victorian women and the theatre of trance: mediums, spiritualists and mesmerists in performance*, McFarland, Jefferson and London.

Lennox, S 2018, '"She was a brave and a busy woman": Rediscovering Florence Marryat, Victorian novelist, spiritualist, and performer', *Literature Compass* vol. 15, no. 3, p. e12439.

Moore, RL 1975, 'The spiritualist medium: a study of female professionalism in Victorian America', *American Quarterly* vol. 27, no. 2, pp. 200–221.

Natale, S 2016, *Supernatural entertainments: Victorian spiritualism and the rise of modern media culture*, Penn State Press, State College.

Parrott, I 1978, *The Music of Rosemary Brown*, Regency Press, London.

Paul, H 2016, 'Sources of the self. Scholarly personae as repertoires of scholarly selfhood', *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review*, vol. 131, no. 4, pp. 135–154.

Rocha, AC 2001, *A poesia transcendente de Parnaso de além-túmulo*, UNICAMP, Campinas.

Scheitle, CP 2005, 'Bringing out the dead: Gender and historical cycles of spiritualism', *OMEGA-Journal of Death and Dying* vol. 50, no. 3, pp. 237–253.

Stockwood, M 1971, 'Foreword', in R. Brown, *Unfinished Symphonies: Voices from the Beyond*, Souvenir Press, London.

Trattner, K 2016, 'Beyond sanity. Women in 19th century spiritualism between pathologization and liberation', *Disputatio Philosophica* vol. 17, no. 1, pp. 105–118.

Weber, JL 1984, *Travels with my cello*, Pavilion Books, London.