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MASSIMILIANO A. POLICHETTI

UNDERSTANDING THE INDO-TIBETAN
SACRED MUSIC. AN INTRODUCTORY NOTE¹

*Nada Brahman
ko karrh bakhan.
Yogi yeti muni
karrete dhyan.*

«Sound is God:
explain by singing.
Yogis, renunciates of the world,
renunciates of speech,
meditate on this.»
(*Rāga yaman kalian - vilampat*)²

For the devotee music is the preferred mode for paying homage to his/her deity. From the drums played by the shaman to call upon the spirits, to king David who composed the psalter to glorify and thank his God, from the Gregorian to the Tibetan chants, from the Byzantine chant to the Sufi singsongs, humanity has constantly made use of this aptitude in the course of time, and is unrelenting in using it even today.

For the penurious, music becomes a means of subsistence: for example the wandering singers that were to be found in

¹ Translated from Italian by Baljit Singh.

² Cit. in Pandit Pran Nath 1971: sleeve.

every society,³ along the pilgrim routes, in markets, just like today in the underpasses of our cities. For those driven by passion, music is the best source of pleasure for the senses, sometimes taking the shape of absolute obsession. Someone who can make good music always stands out for this praiseworthy talent, even if he/she is physically unattractive or poor.

In the Indian tradition music naturally plays an important role in the life of each individual at a social and community level and during religious functions. And it could not be otherwise, not just in view of the common notions referred to above, but more importantly because India gifted a very sophisticated musical theory which even today forms the foundation of the Indian classical music. At the heart of this theory lies the concept of *rāga*.⁴

The word *rāga* derives from the Sanskrit root *ranj*, which can be translated as “to color with emotions”. In the Indian tradition, there are six main *rāga*-s: *bhairava* (‘furious’), *mālava* (from the name of a central Indian region), *hindola* (‘swing’), *dīpaka* (‘luminous’), *śrī* (‘glorious’), *megha* (‘evanescent’). Not all the phases of the day are suitable for each *rāga*. There are those which are sung at dawn, like *rāga bhairava*; leading amongst the morning *rāga*-s is *rāga megha*; sung in the afternoon are *rāga dīpaka* and *rāga śrī*; amongst those sung at night are *rāga mālava* and *rāga hindola*. Fear is associated with *rāga bhairava*; passion of love with *rāga śrī*, *rāga hindola* and *rāga dīpaka*; joy of living with *rāga mālava*.

A *rāga* is not simply a combination of notes (*svara*) but also the melody associated with them. There are a total of twelve *svara*-s (divided in ‘delicate’, *komal*, and ‘intensive’, *tivra*) and, as per the basic rules, a *rāga* must have at least five *svara*-s in the ascending (*āroha*) or descending (*avroha*) sequence. There are various groups of *svara*-s which, through various *āroha* and *avroha* sequences, give rise to a large number of *rāga*-s. But

³ E.g. the *Baul*, mystic minstrels in Bengal.

⁴ For further readings: A. Daniélou 1949, *Volume 1*.

since the *rāga-* are not simply a mixture of notes, though high the number of *rāga-s* is limited.

There are about 500 *ragas* currently in use in Indian music. Some are defined *anvaṭ* ('not common'), some *apracalit* ('not publicized') and around 150 *rāga-s* are more commonly sung.⁵

Indian aesthetics also uses the concept of *rasa*. *Rasa*'s main aim is to arouse a particular emotion, including serenity through contemplation. In fact, to the distinct Indian quality of deep inner peace, the sacred musician adds his/her personal experience of union with the infinite. Therefore the *rāga-s* act as powerful intellectual stimulators, unique "creator of images". Therefore, music and dance are so closely interconnected that it is difficult to make a clear distinction between the two. But whereas vocal and instrumental music connects with the mind through the organs of sound reception, dance uses the visual perception to entice and lure. Music gratifies the hearing, frees the mind from worries and refreshes the soul with its sweet chords. Similarly the dance, through skillful use of rhythms and poses, inspires the heart and encourages it to face life with renewed vigor. The rhythm and the melody thus find the right path, via perception, to reach the secret recesses of the soul, and sometime even the inner self. Music, in particular, is the most useful device to cultivate our sensitivity. Conscious listening of music incorporates our personality with willpower and harmony and enables us to eliminate unrefined behavioral tendencies, thus helping us to attain happiness in a more effective manner. By allowing us to get carried away by the *rāga-s*, by their amazing combination of musical notes, the mind's ability to perceive beauty increases. Therefore, a man who cannot appreciate music will find it difficult to win the admiration of others.⁶

Important spiritual traditions have accorded human being the highest status within nature, at least on account of his abilities. This is mainly due the exclusively human ability to express

⁵ A. Daniélou 1949, *Volume 2*.

⁶ «The man that hath no music in himself, Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds, Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoil.» W. Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, V-1.

himself or, in other words, communicate with others and music is the best means to that end. It ennobles the mind and stimulates its aesthetic competence, nourishing it with apposite mathematical models of reference, like psychic crystals suspended in a primarily harmonic reality of the cosmos. Through its capacity to make contact with a wide range of human emotions, music confers gracefulness to his every righteous deed. Music is so necessary for the society that one can conclude that anyone who is able to appreciate its importance must dedicate himself/herself to this art, even if simply as a listener.

This can be better understood by going back to the concept of deity - which manifests itself through sonorous vibrations - mentioned in the citation in the beginning of this brief introductory note. A concept that brings to mind *mantra*, the 'sacred word of power' which if on one hand evokes the deity, on the other hand, in a way, constitutes an ontological process (something of fundamental importance for understanding the Indian school of thought, this concept deserves separate discussion). Like other paths of wisdom, both Brahmanism-Hinduism and Buddhism describe universe as a series or a accumulation of vibrations - from the most subtle to the coarse - which get disseminated within a 'tremulous and constantly moving space' (*ākāśa*). Music, when applied to impassioned attempt to move from less rarified to more spiritual realities, acquires attributes of a synthesis of harmonies that becomes the best instrument to obtain bliss. Expressing the deepest human emotions through music, chanting of the sacred names of deities, the psalmody of the sacred scriptures, are all valid examples of the evocative power of music. While the inaudible reality of the mind still is of the utmost importance, music acts as a preferred vehicle to fill the world of forms with the formidable presence of the invisible. For all the above reasons, and others which we will analyze in the section dedicated to the doctrine, music can undoubtedly be considered an effective support along the path towards realization of the human potential.

Music can stimulate the dormant state of spirituality, hidden in the ordinary conscience. It can also be used to soothe the maladies that afflict the mind, which in this process of self-healing is delicately guided towards more subtle awareness. Today even western science accepts that sound might have therapeutic qualities. In fact, some researchers are inclined to believe that listening to “relaxing” music can actually reduce the impact of diseases like tachycardia and anxiety, besides lowering the frequency of some brain waves that had become too sharp, when seen during the EEG test, owing to stress. Besides, vocal or instrumental sacred music helps in bringing about altered states of consciousness which can allow both the players and the listeners to experience higher states of awareness. The sacred music, reaching the skies like soft clouds of incense, becomes a very effective instrument for identifying the inner sacred space. To explain this concept in less romantic terms, it’s as if in some specific compositions (handed down by traditions such as Tibetan sacred music, Gregorian chant, shamanic rituals of Australian aborigines, etc...) sound transforms into a powerful psychic tool capable of redesigning the very molecular structure and transform the biochemical characteristics of the organism. Such modifications help every person to convey a social context in which more peaceful relations can be maintained. The usual barriers of aggressiveness and rivalry can thus finally vanish against the background of conscious harmony, because if humans beings wish to sincerely vibrate in unison they have to be “in tune” with each other.

In Buddhism *dharmakāya*, the ‘*dharma* body’, is the basis of existence and is placed above any other form or logical framework. This reality manifests itself as unconditional and omniscient beatitude. This state of beatitude is an immutable background of all that which “becomes”, or in other words the changeable mundane world. This background is filled with an all-pervading vibration made up also of, within its ontology

spectrum, sounds. This is the reason why music, starting also at the sensory level, is universally experienced as the most natural and spontaneous expression of the divine joy concealed under the dry surface of phenomenal reality. But in order to understand this “prelude to paradise”, so to speak, it is necessary to possess proper inclination, capacity to concentrate and at least an opening toward a spiritual approach to reality.

Every occurrence in the universe has a vibration frequency and it “resonates” when it reaches that frequency. When something is wrong, for example when an organism is unhealthy, a sort of counter vibration interferes with the normal, or healthy, vibration. If one can restore the correct vibration frequency of that organism, it is possible to restore health. It is as if the human body is an orchestra playing a symphony. Its each organ, its each bone and tissue is emitting a harmonic frequency, balanced with respect to all the other instruments without exception. When we are experiencing illness it is as if, in this metaphor, an oboe is playing out of tune in the large orchestra of the body. But what indeed happens during the illness is that an incompatible trait begins to superimpose itself on the normal state of physiological components, thus causing imbalance in the organism.⁷

In the ancient Egyptian, Jewish, Greek, Persian, Chinese and Indian mystery schools, the use of sound for healing and spiritual purposes was considered a highly developed sacred science. It viewed vibrations as a fundamental creative force. Use of certain tones, frequencies and whole tones was considered a refined and exact art. Relationship between the individual and the universe, and between two individuals, were compared to various sounds and analyzed as music.

Nothing or little remains of those mystery schools but the Buddhist tradition, and most importantly the *vajrayāna* Buddhism practiced in Tibet and in other Asian areas as well,

⁷ The idea of healing of diseases through music must be as old as music itself. In the beginning, music must have been conceived as a socializing activity, and then used more often for magical and therapeutic purposes. Even today man uses music not just for entertainment but also for invoke the deity, to heal and induce changes in ordinary awareness.

has preserved its contents and practice, especially with regard to sacred.

Buddhism as practiced in Tibet has since centuries developed a powerful “ritual of sound” that presents original characteristics compared to other traditions, probably including, at least in part, also the Indian tradition. To analyze the issue of Indian influence on Tibetan music we must for the moment set aside preconceptions about what is, or what is not, “Indian”.

In fact, Tibetan music does not use the *sitar* or other string instruments used in the Indian tradition. Instead it uses trumpets, oboe, cymbals and drums, instruments widely used in Indian royal courts and in other temple music traditions. But Tibetan culture would have preserved some elements of the Buddhist theory, in this case the musical theory, elements which by now have disappeared from the Indian subcontinent, especially following the Muslim invasions which brought a culture that would surely have influenced also the music.

Sacred Tibetan Buddhist music employs both instrumental and vocal sounds and it should be separated, both in terms of function and style, from the Tibetan folk music. The predominant characteristic of this sacred music undoubtedly is multiple voices, sung in unison and set to a typical bass timbre that sounds awesome even to the unacquainted.

In this tradition solo performance finds very little space: in fact the *umdze*⁸ limits himself to introducing for a brief instant the beginning of each part of the performance, which remains choral for the whole duration of the chant. Sacred Tibetan music is an extremely complex phenomenon that simultaneously involves various levels of realities which are so different from the formal European music models that our western musical language is not adequate to describe it. Music helps the monks to memorize the texts, and while they sing, often very slowly, they have time to contemplate their solemn meaning.

Even in the case of music the dual role of rituals in *vajrayāna* is re-proposed in this manner. In a way it's about

⁸ The ‘chant leader of *hum*’, the choirmaster who sets the tone and the timbre for the congregation of monks.

making an offering of sounds to the deities, but since these deities are believed to be present not just outside but also inside the mind, this irremovable component complementary to every tantric worship involves, even here, improving the prospects of attaining beatitude and omniscience that are waiting to be revealed in our heart. Being sacred music, the Tibetan chant takes place within a ritualistic context. This context suggests both the suitable dates and the rituals that will provide the content for the musical rendering.

Tibetan ritualistic music is not considered to be efficacious on its own, but is rather used as support to the larger process of introspection which the participants try to induce by using every kind of support believed to be important to augment the power of suggestion intrinsic to the ritual itself. In preparation for the meditation process music therefore becomes useful in inducing the mind to analyze with greater vigor the fields of awareness. Articulated and put in order as per sacred rules, sounds can influence the human soul and turn it into a fertile land ready to receive and enhance spiritual truths. In the Tibetan tradition, every monk is asked to meditate upon one's own personal archetypal deity of meditation,⁹ set his voice correctly, and appease the *buddhas* and the *bodhisattvas*. In this manner the sacred sound brings man closer to the gods and the gods to men. In the *mahāyāna* tradition, which is based on the principal of sympathetic compassion (*karuṇā*), playing sacred music is meant to be beneficial both for human and supernatural perception.

The monk who flawlessly, or rather with truly altruistic motivation, conducts the chant also gathers positive *karma* for the subtle support, in therapeutical-spiritual sense, rendered to laypersons. When during the assembly the monks sing or play their instruments, their aim is to add beauty and power to the sacred space where they have gathered mainly by virtue of what they are capable of invoking, through music, in their streams of consciousness.

⁹ *Iṣṭadevatā*, tib. *Yi.Dam* or, with some differences, 'Dod lHa.

Therefore music, like any other traditional art form, is an instrument of contemplation, a sensitive tool that allows a patient pursuit of the transcendent with regard to the matter which then, while spiritualizing steadily, acquires benevolent compassion. Let me repeat again this concept which is so vital for understanding this theme: more than the music, understood as a mere combination of sounds, it is the effect produced in the minds of the performers and the listeners that causes the immersion of the intangible into the tangible. In other words, music leads to sacralization of the context in which the event takes place, also when the music is not actually played. In fact, Tibetan lore says that deities, who are responsible for augmenting the potential of the human mind, can appreciate music even if played only in the mind, thus highlighting the supremacy of mind over body.

Therefore, from the likelihood that the ritual may include music not produced physically but only psychically, we can conclude that the global number of performers is always higher than those who simply listen physiologically.

In the sacred Tibetan music there are various types of vocal training as per the point of origin in the body. So there is the “sound of body cavity”, “sound of throat”, “sound of nose”. The multitude of sounds vibrating around the drone notes, delivered by the deep bass voices produced by the more expert monks, create an ambience where harmonic ensembles vary from the solemn to the rhythmic, inducing the listener to perceive internal spaces they had never visualized before. It is mainly due to this effect, which surprises anyone who comes closer, that we preferred to talk in detail about Tibetan sacred music. Naturally, there are more musical traditions within cultures that were inspired by Buddhism. In Japanese *Zen* Buddhism, for example, the use of percussions, of hand clapping, of bells and wooden instruments plays an important role, which confirms the value of the elements of nature in Buddhist spiritual practice. We feel that it is by listening to Buddhist music practiced in Tibet, compared to any other music, that one could have the opportunity to at least have an indication towards the primordial sound of the Indian *vajrayāna*. By listening to this music, Western listeners have the

precious opportunity to review their ideas about musical sensitivity by doing a comparison with something so alien to the European taste, but maybe in reality much nearer to the throbbing of the heart, to the moaning of the soul, to the terrible and heart rending symphony produced by the human mind that remains restless and does not stop inquiring.

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