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A Magical and Mystical Harmony

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The Rhythm of Music
A Magical and Mystical Harmony

Article of the Month - September 2003

The great god Shiva once chanced upon his wife Parvati reposing most gracefully. Her breathing was like soft music; the exquisite bosom rising and falling in rhythm. Her arms and wrists laden with bangles caused music by their motion. Shiva was intoxicated by this ravishing vision, and watched her for a long time in silence. Such was the impression created in his mind that he found no peace until he discovered a way of making a permanent record of the beauty observed. The result was the veena, a musical instrument, whose long neck represents the straight lithe form of Parvati, and the two supporting gourds her breasts, the metal frets her bracelets, and the most expressive of all, the sound generated by this instrument is said to recreate Parvati's own, rhythmic breathing.

Arched harp with six plant-fibre strings and a wooden soundbox.

The flexed legs correspond to a dance position often represented in African statues. The expressive face is surmounted by a hairstyle with centre parting. Ngbaka people of the Lua basin, Democratic Republic of Congo.

Indeed, this tale but echoes the belief inherent in all ancient traditions, that the first musical instrument was the human body itself, and the first created music, the human voice. Most stringed and wind instruments, which evolved with the human civilization, recall some quality or aspect of this voice.

From the music of his inherent voice, man graduated next to musical rhythms generated from his body externally. The age-old human yearning for adorning the physical form including the head, ears, arms, ankles etc is but a manifestation of the same. Ornamented in this way, the body is transformed into a musical instrument. The tinkling of the ornaments is not pre-planned; rather it arises spontaneously from the natural movements of the person. This is especially highlighted in classical Indian dance performances, where the elaborate jewelry adorning the dancer emphasizes her graceful movements, and also the rhythm that is laid down by the accompanying musical instruments.

Apart from the acoustic ornaments and jewelry worn to

As the dancer stamps on the ground with his feet, the bells on his ankles to tinkle in time with his movements.

accentuate the rhythm of the dance, a whole range of tinkling accessories are used in conjunction with the apparel. These include small spherical bells sewn onto garments, charms, sequins, ornaments for the forehead and hair, acoustic rings, shards of glass, clinking chains for the arms or ankles to emphasize the movement of the body, not to mention the clacking of heels or sandals while walking. The last is reminiscent of the most primitive form of music, namely stamping on the ground. The deeply symbolic ritual act of treading the earth affirms the relationship of human beings to their native soil. In this act, man for the first time, shows himself capable of expressing and externalising the regular rhythm of his heart beat, utilizing his feet for a dynamic movement that is essentially an expression of joy translated into rhythm. Without the use of any type of instrument to mediate between him and the ground, the dancer thus communicates directly with mother earth, rooting his inner rhythms within her depths.

Over time, the ancients realized that a greater amplification was achieved by hollowing out the surface of the ground being stamped upon, and covering the space created with a floor. This was the natural precursor to the first drum. The drum is unique in the sense that though almost all musical instruments have their origin in the practice of ritual magic, it is the only instrument that has retained these associations even to the present day.

From a hollow ground covered with a floor, the drum progressed to a hollowed tree and then as the musical instinct of man evolved, developed into a cylinder or bowl made of wood, covered at both ends with a stretched membrane (like the 'floor' above).

It is not an exaggeration to say that of all implements capable of generating rhythmic music, the drum is the one imbued with the most mystery and potency. Not only the music it generates, but its entire structure and form is soaked in rich symbolism. Take for example its shape. The curvaceous form is representative of a woman, and the hollowness inside has a likewise similar significance. It is a receptive void, to be entered as a woman is, protective, cavernous, a shelter and hence a symbol of the womb. In contrast, its music is essentially thought to be masculine in nature. This ambivalence expresses a dualism that is inherent in human nature, and also signifies that the drum combines all the virtues of yin and yang in a harmonious whole.

Also, a drum is most often made of wood. In addition to enriching its acoustic abilities, the choice of this material has a metaphysical and indeed primordial significance. Wood is a metaphor for ascension to higher domains, which are experienced in the ecstatic states of psychic trance. There is a physical reason underlying this too. The tree, whose wood is used to construct the drum, is in itself a symbol of the Cosmic Tree, which connects the earth to heaven, and of which the earthly tree is but a microcosm. In primitive thought it was believed that a spiritually evolved person could climb the cosmic tree and journey back and forth from heaven. Such people were known as shamans. Indeed, the drum

serves as a bridge between the two realms, terrestrial and heavenly, in more than one ways. Firstly is its round, outer form, suggesting the celestial spheres, while simultaneously the emptiness inside speaks of the inner void within each of us, and reiterates that they are both one and the same.

Shaman from Siberia, photographed with his drum in 1882.

In his role as intermediary between the earthly world and the realm of the spirits, the shaman derives his powers from playing his frame drum, the vehicle by which he enters a state of trance.

According to scholar Mircea Eliade, a shaman is a man or woman who "journeys" in an ecstatic trance, usually induced by rhythmic drumming. In its widest sense, a shaman is someone who has the specialist techniques for communicating with the higher reality by entering into an alternative state of consciousness, and drumming is one of the most common means through which the shaman enters this state.

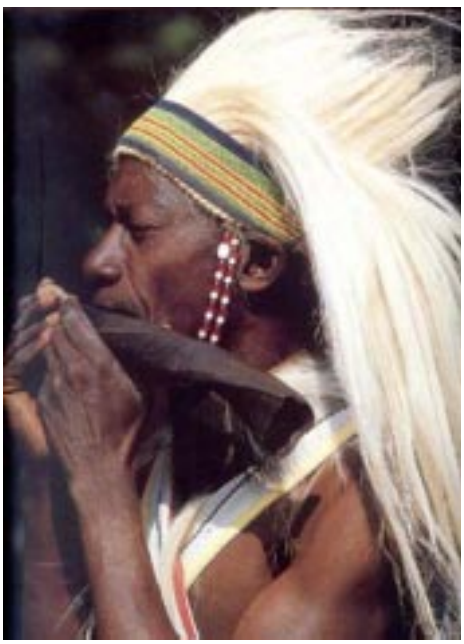
In ancient times, it was said to be the shaman's job to make sure that the relationship between the human and divine world was kept harmonious and balanced. His essential role was to search for the unifying connections between the two realms. This is the quest of the mystic too. In mysticism, everything is vibration. Not only are all material forms made up of vibrations; we as humans also live and move in vibrations - they surround us as the fish is surrounded by water, and we contain them within ourselves, as the pond contains water. The drum, through its rhythms, replicates these vibrations, and it is not surprising that when we move to the rhythms of a drum we feel as though we're being carried along by the beat - a feeling of effortlessness and harmony that defies synchrony. This is why that the rhythm of the drum seems to lift time out of the realm of the ordinary as we know it, and transmutes it into timelessness. Truly, one of the properties of instrumental or sung music is that it can make time appear to stand still, lulling the sense of the listener, or even literally inducing sleep. That indeed is the principle of the lullaby, whose slow rhythm and repeated words and phrases promote a state of soothing and calming drowsiness.

Another archetypal and natural human activity that gave rise to a musical instrument is the simple act of clapping. All over the world, this quasi-spontaneous gesture, the sound of which varies according to the position of the hands, provides the most common rhythmic accompaniment to the voice, and is also used to show enthusiasm in the form of applause. Clapping is an instinctive action that has an invigorating effect on the whole body by stimulating nerves residing on the palms of the hands. Due to this attribute, it is often a part of yogic therapy too. Truly, after or during a musical performance, this idiophonic beating brings the listener's body into the experience and helps to release the pent-up energy aroused by the music and the rhythm.

From clapping with his own hands, man graduated next to crafted clappers, which were held in both hands and were clashed together to produce sounds greater in intensity than those generated by the mere hands.

Such a pair of instruments, known as cymbals, continues to find use in religious rituals, including those of Hinduism and Buddhism.

These cymbals are used to punctuate sacred texts, whether read aloud, sung or chanted. In metaphysical terms, the beating together of cymbals is said to signify the symbolic union of opposites, wherein the naturally occurring male and female polar energies are combined, an activity which is necessary to maintain the harmony of the dynamic universe. Thus says an ancient Tibetan proverb: *'With only one wing, a bird cannot fly.'*



As expressed in the example of the cymbals above, after deriving music from his own body, the next natural step for man was to devise instruments that were an extension of himself. Clearly, such implements had to be in close physical proximity to the musician. It is possible to imagine a variety of different such instrumental extensions. The breath, for example, is extended into pipes (flutes), and transformed into music when these are raised to the lips. Similarly, the tongue and its vibratory capability is extended by the means of the primitive reed that consists of a leaf or a blade of grass held by the fingers in front of the lips.

Fundamental to man's attempts to dominate, or at the very least placate the forces of nature, is the need to establish an analogy between nature and instrument, based on their common origin. Once the concept that all things are interrelated is acknowledged, and that each one affects the rest at every level in the relationship of cause and effect, then the magical principle is established which states that it is only necessary to influence one part of the whole in order to extend that influence to the totality. Thus a harmonious relationship existed, and continues to do so, between the human body and the musical instrument, for the one cannot operate without the other. Without his or her instrument, a musician may be likened to an amputee or a rider without his horse. Both are made up of body and soul, and together they become like two human beings, whose identities merge (as in the case of the cymbals mentioned above), in the playing of the instrument, giving rise to a higher reality. One only has to observe a sitar player in action to note the loving and energetic tenderness with which he or she seems to caress the instrument, speak to it, coax sounds out of it, making it vibrate and respond with sweet melodies and eloquent phrases.

In Tibet, the human cranium is used in making the damaru, a drum with whirling balls, here two skulls are combined and, according to the holy texts, it is preferable for these to be taken respectively from a boy of sixteen and a girl of twelve. Monkey skins are stretched over the skulls, and one end is decorated with an eight-petalled lotus smeared with a girl's menstrual blood, and the other end with a mandala. Sixteen pierced holes allow the skin to be attached using human hair. The whirling balls are made of bones taken from a waterbird's foot and encased in wax and cloth.

True to its character, Tantric philosophy takes this identification of man with instrument to its physical extreme, even to the extent of fashioning instruments out of different parts of the human body. For example, the Tibetan ritual trumpet 'rkang-gling' utilizes the male femur, the name itself means 'made of a man's leg.' This ideal is further expressed in the hourglass shaped drum with whirling balls, known in Sanskrit as 'damaru,' its shape echoing the inexorable passage of time. This drum is fashioned out of the human cranium, and is comprised of two skulls, taken respectively from a boy of sixteen and a girl of twelve. To consecrate it, and metaphorically infuse it with a magical life, the male side is smeared with sperm and female half with menstrual blood.

Essentially, the damaru is composed of two inverted triangles with their apexes meeting at the center. The upward triangle suggests the fiery linga of Shiva, and the lower pointing triangle represents the female yoni. The point where they meet is of course once again the higher, transcendent reality, where all dualities merge giving rise to a refreshing oneness. This point is the primordial bindu, or the dimensionless entity that gives rise to all creation.

Damaru drum with whirling balls

In the shape of an hourglass, it is also called a skull drum when made from human crania. Here the body is made of wood (carved in imitation of two skullcaps) and is decorated overall with paintings of religious scenes. The damaru is used in a variety of ceremonies, often in association with the rkang-gling. It is normally played inside Tibetan monasteries or by Bon monks.

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The damaru is considered so sacred in Indian thought that rules are suggested even for the correct positioning of this drum when it is not being played. It is canonized that it should never be put down on its end, but positioned so that the male skull is to the musician's right, while the female skull is to his left. This arrangement follows the traditional established order of father/mother, right/left, and masculine/feminine.

The use of materials taken from human bodies has magical implications, linking the human, animal, vegetable and mineral worlds in an indissociable whole. By taking possession of these elements and controlling them in this way, man expresses his all embracing mystical and harmonious vision of the world.

Indeed, music has since time immemorial been the universal vehicle for man's attempts to reach out to a higher dimension of reality. The Upanishads state that this supreme domain is not a physical state of being, but is intangible and unsubstantial. Therefore, to gauge this supernormal state, man requires a symbolic medium that is similarly abstract, yet spiritually potent enough to withhold its essence, and is at the same time

discernable to one or more of his sense organs. Music is the means by which he makes this leap into the unknown. To communicate with the intangible other world that lies just beyond our reach, it is necessary to transcend the material universe, so that no physical obstacle stands in the way of divine influence. Apprehending the material world solely in terms of its sounds has the effect of rendering it insubstantial, so that it becomes no more than a vibration in the air, intangible, yet graspable to a sense organ (ears). Hence does man fulfill his mystical destiny.

If any instrument retains its primal simplicity, it is the flute. Even today it is still the mere hollow stick through which Lord Krishna expressed himself with minimum adulteration.

It is not subject to complicated sets of rules, and anyone who wants to make music can fashion his own instrument. The flute is light in weight and easily transported. It is thus essentially nomadic, and hence naturally associated with Krishna, who is visualized as the divine cowherd. Krishna is said to have charmed his stock of cows with the music he composed with his flute.

Charming animals by means of sound is a common theme in world mythology, from Orpheus playing his lyre and attracting wild beasts to seat themselves at his feet to the snake charmers of India.

Orpheus charming the animals
Roman mosaic discovered at Blanzy-les-Fismes (Aisne),
4th century

Orpheus provides a link between the human, animal and supernatural worlds, through the magic of his music. Animals, being supremely sensitive to sounds, becoming his willing slaves. The purpose of the cult of Orpheus is to liberate the soul by the grace of music, acknowledging in doing so the influence that each has on the other.

Indeed, in a fantastic flight of imagination, a lady singing in a particular musical mode is believed to have the power to tame even ferocious tigers. Visually, she is shown caressing two tigers on their heads (Ragini Sehuti).

According to Indian thought, each animal species is affected by a different musical mood, thus for example the gentle deer requires a concert in the mode known as Ragini Todi.

Coming back to the flute, it gives forth a clear, pure and simple sound, which can be both intensely melancholy and entrancingly sprightly. In either mood, its haunting notes sound as if they come from a world beyond the din of the ordinary. The sacredness and reverence for the flute can be gauged form the fact that it is often deified as an extension of Krishna's own beauty. In a poetic vision of mystical harmony, the ancient Indian texts known as the Puranas state that when Krishna played his flute, even the river, in which grew the reeds from which was later fashioned the flute, wept tears of delight. Numerous legends describe the flute as having a seductive (and by implication feminine) voice, but at the same time, within certain traditional societies, it is played almost exclusively by men, presumably because of its phallic form - in the same way as the rounded shape of the drum is associated with a woman's belly. The flute too thus encompasses within itself both yin and yang.

Conclusion:

Mysticism is the inherent desire to seek oneness with the ultimate reality, which transcends the human limitation of sensual perception. But for ordinary mortals like us, in the absence of a trained mind, the sense organs provide the only window to perceive this supreme state of being where the essential unity underlying all elements of the universe shines through. This state is non-material, just like music is. The latter has the distinction of being graspable by our sense organs (ears), and can then seep through our beings, gently resonating our inner chords with the same melody that characterizes the rhythm of the universe.

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