

NOTES ON THE FUNCTION OF MUSIC

Contributed by Florian Messner

Has there ever been a culture without music?

To date the majority of ethnomusicologists believe that no culture exists that did not use what is commonly defined as music. But I was told that a small tribal group of (12-15) indigenous people has been encountered in South America who had no concept of music at all. However, this could also be the effect of tribal decline.

This information was given to me by one of my colleagues at UCLA in 1994/5 while I was teaching there. At the moment this person is touring the East Coast and will be back in two or three weeks. I hope to get more facts regarding the source of his information.

Are there examples of music deprivation?

Music deprivation is used during particular initiation and other mind forming rituals.

A prominent example is given by Idries Shah, quoting El Ghazali:

Shah, Idries (1984:158-9)

Ghazali next turns in his *Alchemy* to the question of music in its psychological aspects. He notes the mechanism whereby music and dancing can be used for excitatory purposes. Music can be a method of producing emotional effect. He maintains, however, that there is an innocent function of music, in which it does not produce the pseudo-religious sentiments used by indiscriminating cults.

The Sufi use of music is different from the emotional use. Before a Sufi can participate in musical activities, including listening to music, it must be established by his director as to whether he will benefit correctly from the experience.

A story is related here to show how a Sufi teacher (Sheikh Gurjani) explained that a certain disciple was not yet fitted for the audition of music in the Sufi, objective, sense. In response to his request, the Sheikh said, "Fast for a week. Have delicious food cooked for you. If you then still prefer musical movement, take part in it."

Participation in music and "dancing" under any other circumstances is, says Ghazali, not only forbidden; it is actually harmful to the aspirant. Modern psychology has not yet realized that there is a special function of sound for elevating consciousness.

The reality of the true "state" of Sufi experience is very difficult to grasp for the outsider, because he is accustomed to thinking in terms which are different from this state. "Allowances must be made for him," Ghazali says, "because he is unaware of what these states are. It is like a blind man trying to understand the experience of seeing green herbage or running water." At best the outsider can only relate the experience which is reported to him in terms of his own experiences – sensual, orgiastic, emotional. "Yet a wise man will not deny such states simply because he has not experienced them; because this form of opinion forming is disastrously foolish."

Thoughts on music deprivation of another kind are expressed by **Charles Darwin in his autobiography, quoted by Samples, B. (1976:n.p.):**

Poetry of many kinds gave me great pleasure, and even as a schoolboy I took intense delight in Shakespeare, especially in the historical plays. I have also said that formerly pictures gave me considerable, and music very great delight. But now for many years I cannot endure to read a line of poetry. I have tried lately to read Shakespeare, and found it so intolerably dull that it nauseated me. I have also lost almost any taste for pictures or music. My mind seems to have become a kind of machine for grinding general laws out of large collections of facts, but why this should have caused the atrophy of that part of the brain alone, on which the higher tastes depend, I cannot conceive. The loss of these tastes is a loss of happiness, and may possibly be injurious to the intellect, and more probably to the moral character, by enfeebling the emotional part of our nature.

I am still in the process of searching for other examples of music deprivation and will inform you about it in my next report.

The physiological effects of music and of different forms of music

In order to understand the physiological effect of music one needs to be aware of the importance that is given to hearing sound in different cultures. Here are a few selected quotes:

Avalokitesvara, a disciple of Buddha, expresses it in this way:

(From Surangama Sutra, a 7th-century AD manuscript, quoted by McClellan, Randall, 1991:166):

When one dwells in quietude,
Rolls of drums from the directions
Simultaneously are heard,
So hearing is complete and perfect.
The eyes cannot pierce a screen,
But neither can mouth or nose.
Body only feels when it is touched.
Mind's thoughts are confused and unconnected,
But voice whether near or far
At all times can be heard.
The five other organs are not perfect,
But hearing is all pervasive.
The presence or absence of sound and voice
Is registered by the ear as "is" or "is not."
Absence of sound is not the end of hearing,
And sound when present is not its beginning.
The faculty of hearing is beyond
All thought, beyond both mind and body...
Ananda and all of you who listen here
Should turn your faculty
Of hearing to hear your own nature
Which alone achieves Supreme Bodhi
That is how enlightenment is won.

Wolf, Fred Alan (1986:132-4):

Recent work by physicists William Bialek and Allan Schweitzer indicate that the ear is capable of detecting sound at a level limited only by the principle of uncertainty in quantum physics. In other words, the inner ear performs as a quantum possibility for the hearing mechanism. According to my view, this mechanism is strongly determined by what is known as the observer effect of quantum physics. Briefly put, to hear anything intelligently it is necessary to pay attention to what is being heard. For this to happen, cells in the ear must act coherently, much as atoms act inside a laser.

[...] The key insight brought forward by such quantum physical considerations is that of feedback. The hairs in the organ of Corti must exist in a nonequibratory configuration, meaning that normal temperature effects will not destroy their ability to act coherently. Together their vibrations send a coherent message to the brain, and the brain responds by sending back a feedback message to the hairs inside the cochlea. That feedback results in the actual perception of sound. Without feedback, even though sound waves would reach these hairs, no sound would be perceived.

[...] Hearing thus involves very small amplitude vibrations of the eardrum, leaving Bialek and Schweitzer to argue that if it were not for quantum mechanical coherence, the simultaneous vibration of many cells together, existing on a time scale corresponding to the frequency of sound waves, we would not be able to hear anything at all. Hearing must involve quantum processes.

Berendt, Joachim Ernst (1987:135):

No other sense can register impulses as minimal as those that the ear can register that are smaller than the wavelength of visible light and even less than the diameter of a hydrogen atom. The smallest stimuli our ear can just barely perceive, on the other hand, have to be amplified by a factor of 10^6 in order to reach the level of the highest volume perceivable, by a factor in the million range. Were we to amplify the smallest impulses our eyes can register by the same factor we would be blinded instantly.

[There is more to come under this heading]

How does music control the mind and emotions?

[This will be my next task]

Why is music associated with religion and spirituality?

Marius Schneider is a German musicologist of high repute. He wrote:

Schneider, Marius (1957:41-3):

The progressive development of the physical and metaphysical conception of the world can be clearly traced from the earliest cultures right into the Megalithic Age, and the systematic symbolism of that age underlies the religious systems of the highly developed cultures.

[...] Music is the seat of secret forces or spirits which can be evoked by song in order to give a man a power which is either higher than himself or which allows him to

rediscover his deeper self...The mystical sound-substance inherent in all things, manifesting itself now directly, now indirectly, exists everywhere, even beyond the range of the human ear.

McClellan, Randall (1991:165):

“Potentially, the experience of listening to music serves as preparation for inner hearing as we move from the world of audible vibration to the subtler work of inner vibration experienced as pure consciousness.”

The following is a comprehensive referenced quote from **McClellan, Randall (1991:1-6):**

“In the dim mists of our past, before the first civilizations, before the earliest agricultural villages, indeed before the concept of recorded time itself, lay the origins of what would be known as music. Born of a sense of communal sharing and our need to be more fully with each other, to understand the inter-connectedness of the universe and our place within it, and to mark in a ritualistic way the various events in our life’s passage, music gave expression to those thoughts and emotions too expansive and too deeply felt for our rudimentary languages.

It is doubtful that we shall ever know when or under what circumstances the first musical utterance was made, yet every culture developed some form of musical tradition and many of them possessed legends that pertain to the origin of music. (**Polin, Clair 1954; Gouldron, P. 1964**)

Almost all of these legends attribute a divine origin to music; in no case was music said to be invented by humans. In the world’s mythologies music was either discovered or was bestowed on us by supernatural beings.

The earliest physical evidence of musical activity that we possess, a clay ocarina with five holes, bespeaks an already flourishing music as early as 10000 BC, whereas our emergence as a species has been dated to at least one hundred thousand years ago. So too, our earliest civilizations have been estimated to have been established no more than 8,000 years ago, yet within them we find evidence of an already flourishing culture where music occupied a well-regulated position in the social and religious life of its people (**Farmer, Henry George “Music in Ancient Mesopotamia” 1957: 229-32**).

In the approximately 95,000 years between these two points in time, our earliest ancestors began to attribute magical powers to sound—power over the spirit world, the natural world as they perceived it, and power to create and sustain human life (**Schneider, Marius 1957:42-43**). It was this belief in the magic of sound that, in later civilizations, evolved into highly complex concepts of esoteric musical practices understood by an inner circle of the initiated (**Schneider, Marius 1957:41**). Such esoteric concepts of music served as a complement to the exoteric musical practices, which were practiced by the general public. Encompassing the categories of folk music, art music, and music intended for public religious and state ceremonies, exoteric musical practices are responsible for the incredible wealth of

diversity in musical languages and styles that we enjoy today—a diversity, however, that is built on common cross-cultural principles. By contrast, esoteric musical concepts have been less culturally confined and, in fact, are more relatively uniform throughout history—in some cultures surviving almost unchanged to the present day. Basic to these esoteric concepts is the belief that there are many levels of understanding inherent in each sound and that the listener perceives the meaning of the sound according to his level of spiritual awareness. Echoes of this belief sound throughout almost all successive civilizations and reverberate today in musical cultures where continuity of tradition is intact. In his study of Egypt, musicologist Henry Farmer concludes that music “had a two-fold influence on man in ancient Egypt: one brought about by purely physical sensation, and another created or sustained by a power known as *heka* or *hike*, which was something like, and yet different from, what we understand by ‘spell’ (Farmer, Henry George “Music in Ancient Egypt” 1957:258). He then quotes an observation made by the Greek historian, Plutarch, that “All through the history of music in ancient Egypt, modulated sound itself was an arcanum. The name for sound was *herw* (lit. voice;), and the word had an esoteric import in the cults (Farmer, Henry George “Music in Ancient Egypt” 1957:258). Likewise, musicologist Lawrence Picken states that within the ancient Chinese concepts of music, “The belief in the power of music to sustain (or if improperly used, to destroy) Universal Harmony was but a further extension of the belief in the magic power of sounds. As a manifestation of a state of the soul, a single sound had the power of influencing other souls for good or ill. By extension, it could influence objects and all the phenomena of Nature (Picken, Lawrence, 1957:87). Presumably, it was the level of understanding of the musician producing the sound that determined whether the music was properly or improperly used.

In the later Islamic cultures the same concepts are in evidence. Ibn Zaila (d. 1048) stated that “sound produces an influence in the soul in two ways: one on account of its musical structure (i.e., its aesthetic beauty), and the other because of its similarity to the soul [i.e., its spiritual meaning] (Farmer, “Music of Islam” 1957:440). According to Henry Farmer, “Sufi disciples, such as the Persian Al-Hujwiri (11th century) and Al-Ghazali (d. 1111), divided people influenced by music into two classes—those who hear material sound, and those who apprehend its spiritual meaning (Farmer, “Music of Islam” 1957:440).

At the core of all esoteric musical philosophy is the conviction that all of manifested creation is organized with and governed by one “root” sound that permeates the entire universe and everything within it. All of the energy of the universe is created from that one root sound and is in a continual state of transformation. At each succeeding moment, therefore, the manifested universe continues to be created anew in response to the continuous root sound that is the vehicle by which the manifested universe evolves from the unmanifested. Thus all of the manifested creation is in constant motion and the energy involved is never depleted (Marchie, Guy 1961: 382).

“Everything is in flux,” the ancient Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, is reported to have said, and in Indian philosophy, “everything is in motion—all matter is moving and changing its forms, and manifesting

the energy within it. Suns and worlds rush through space, their particles constantly changing and moving” (**Yogi Ramacharaka 1906:79**). The universe may be seen as an inseparable web where the inter-connections are dynamic. Any change occurring in one area ripples in waves throughout the world, whether it be the explosion of a star, the disappearance of a galaxy, a sound sent forth from a musical instrument, or a thought from a human mind. Unmanifested creation, the source from which all manifested creation emanates, is the state of absolute perfection within which there is no movement. Absolute perfection means total immersion in the source of all things; it is the state of perfect balance, perfect unity and perfect repose. Therefore, everything in the perceived universe exists as the result of having moved away from perfect equilibrium and is continuously seeking to regain its state of perfect repose. The tension produced by these forces creates a back-and-forth movement within all things. This movement is known as vibration, a state of constant unrest that seeks its own point of stillness within its center.

“All energy, all forces of the universe, are movements which emanate from one point—their own center—and radiate in circular waves in all directions, manifesting themselves as vibrations or oscillations. The manifestations cease only when the forces that have got out of balance regain their primordial state of equilibrium, the divine unity. Hence when we speak of the primordial state we mean the state in which all material phenomena have ceased to exist. In its true essence matter, too, is motion, and if this motion comes to a stop, matter must necessarily cease to exist.” (**Haich, Elisabeth 1974:212**)

All that exists in the manifested state does so because it has a complementary unmanifested state that is its source. We perceive light, therefore, in the manifested state only because there exists an unmanifested state which is total darkness. We perceive sound only because there is an unmanifested state of absolute silence; the state from which all sound originates. We hear sound only because there is silence; we experience silence only because there is sound. Therefore sound is the source of silence and silence is the source of sound. All sound dissolves into silence; silence tends to manifest into sound (**Blake, Arnold “Music of India” 1957:198**) It is because of this principle of sound and silence that esoteric musical philosophy recognized two complementary components which in Sanskrit writings are referred to as “struck sound”—which we can hear—and “unstruck sound”—which we cannot hear. Unstruck sound is the center from which all struck sound emanates: “The sound alluded to...is only the *ahatanada* (struck or manifested sound), which cannot exist without its ideal counterpart, the *anahatanada* (unstruck or unmanifested sound). It is this dual nature of sound as *ahata* and *anahata* which brings it right into the center of religious–philosophical speculations because the unmanifested state, the *anahatanada*, is identified with the creative principle of the universe in its transcendental form of Shiva himself, as well as in its immanent form as the syllable OM which is said to reside in the heart” (**Blake, Arnold “Music of India” 1957:198**). Another expression is *nada brahma* : the world/universe is sound.

Through the practice of music one may experience the state of absolute equilibrium, absolute balance, perfect unity and harmony which exists both at its center and our own, for both are identical to and inseparable from the unmanifested creative state of the entire universe. At the center lies the perfected emptiness of total union to which we, music, and all manifested things aspire: "All music is nothing more than a succession of impulses that converge toward a definite point of repose" (**Stravinsky, Igor 1947: 37-8**). "Things", in essence, are not "things" but processes in a state of continual becoming. Therefore music, as a manifestation of energy, is a force that interacts with the physical world, for music influences our thoughts, our emotions, our dense physical bodies and the electro-magnetic field that surrounds us. Because all of the physical universe is in continual movement, Lama Govinda concludes, "All things or beings produce sounds according to their own nature and to the particular state in which they find themselves. This is because these beings and things are aggregates of atoms that dance and by their movements produce sounds. When the rhythm of the dance changes, the sound it produces also changes. Each atom perpetually sings its songs and the sound creates each moment dense and subtle sound forms. Just as there exist creative sounds, there exist destructive sounds. He who is able to produce both can, at will, create or destroy (**Govinda, Lama Anagarika 1969:26-7**).

These philosophical concepts became the foundation upon which all musical practice of the ancient world was formed. The musicians, shamans, priests, prophets and philosophers held one philosophical concept in common—that music represents a microcosm of the order of the universe and follows cosmological laws, and that through the practice of music one could better understand these laws as well as the intelligence behind them. The ethereal quality of music was regarded as a miniature of the ethereal substance that filled the vast spaces of the cosmos within which the celestial bodies moved. The rhythm of music, for example, reflected the movement of galaxies, stars and planets, of the sun and moon, the cycle of seasons, days and nights, the tides of the seas and the birth and death of our own cells. Music was regarded as the force that could bring about harmony within the mind and body of Man, within the human community and ultimately with the heavenly bodies themselves—the fluidity of energy changing and merging with energy, the primordial force of the universe.

These concepts formed the basis of the practice of music as a healing force and gave birth to the many legends that recognized the power of music to effect change. Thus, among many of the world's cosmologies the universe began with a Sound. "The secret of this hidden power of sound or vibration, which forms the key to the riddles of creation and of creativeness, as it reveals the nature of things and of the phenomena of life, had been well understood by the seers of olden times: the Rishis who inhabited the slopes of the Himalayas, the Magi of Iran, the adapts of Mesopotamia and the mystics of Greece—to mention only those of whom tradition has left some traces" (**Govinda, Lama Anagarika 1969:26**).

For the Hopi people this sound was a creating song (**Waters, Frank 1977:3-8**); for the native peoples of Australia the sound was caused by beating the original seas with a reed (**Oxford History of Music**,

1957:47). The Ethiopians speak of a time when the first humans could only sing but eventually forgot the melodies and had to revert to the speaking of words (**Blair, Lawrence 1976: 116**), while in the language of the Ewe the word *to* means both 'to sing' and 'to weave' (**Oxford History of Music, 1957:47**). For the people of India the whole universe "hangs on sound" (**Reck, David 1977:7**) upon which all of human activity is dependent:

"By Sound the letter is formed, by letters the syllable, by syllables the word, by words this daily life. Hence this human world is dependent on sound" (**Sarngadeva 1978: 12,2, p 23**).

In the temples of Egypt, Greece and Rome residing priests chanted incantations as they administered medicine to the sick, while among the Ojibwa of North America the "jessakid" practitioners sat near their patients and sang songs to the accompaniment of gourd rattles (**Radin, Paul 1948:17**). On the Aleutian Islands one may hear a story of the girl who raised a man from the dead by singing (**Oxford History of Music, 1957:48**). The Greek god of healing and music, Apollo, produced harmony in the heavens through his rhythmic movement through the heavens (**Meinecke, Bruno 1948:48**) and his servant, Orpheus, applied remedies to body and soul through poetry, music, and medicine, and returned his beloved Eurydice to life with his song (**Meinecke, Bruno 1948:49**). In Hindu mythology music was originally reserved for the gods alone, but they took pity on the struggles of human beings and so brought music to them in order to relieve their suffering (**Reck, David 1977:7**).

In ancient China the new emperor called together his musicians and astrologers, both of whom were members of the Imperial Bureau of Weights and Measures, and commanded them to determine the exact length of the Imperial Pipes in order to ensure that the music played during his reign would be in accord with the heavenly bodies and therefore ensure peace throughout the empire: "A system relating musical sounds to the order of the universe had been developed by as early as the date of the compilation of the Joulii (the ceremonial of the State of Jou) third century BC. By this time the Imperial Bureau of Music had been incorporated into the Imperial Bureau of Weights and Measures" (**Picken, Lawrence 1957:87**).

In the Greek epic, *The Odyssey*, the flow of blood from the wounds of Ulysses was stopped by the singing of Autolycus. Similarly, among the Winnebago and Lakota, shamans who obtained their power from the Bear Spirits were able to heal wounds with their songs (**Radin, Paul 1948:17**). The ancient Greek scientist, Pythagoras, freed the minds of his disciples from the cares of the day by playing music which would calm their minds and produce deep sleep and prophetic dreams. In the morning he banished the lingering effects of sleep by playing stimulating melodies and rhythms (**Strunk, Oliver 1950:83**). The legendary Orpheus, son of Apollo, could soothe the beasts of the forest and influence the gods by the power of song alone.

Among the ancient Hebrews all prophets foretold the future through chanting, and Miriam, the sister of Moses, is said to have had immense

visionary powers which were conveyed through chanting (**Sendry, Alfred 1974:247**). The young American Indian of the plains and Northwest fasted and meditated for four days and nights hoping for a vision of an animal spirit who would teach him a song of protection from harm for the duration of his life. Shamans cured disease and mental anguish by coaxing the evil spirits into leaving their victims through the power of chanting (**Sendry, Alfred 1974:247**). In Bali, in Africa, in the South Sea Islands and in the Arctic, entire villages would sing and dance themselves into a state of ecstasy and obtain visions, while in Japan mendicant monks traversed the islands on foot, and played the shakuhachi in the belief that they could reach enlightenment through music (**Koizumi, Fumio [no year] record liner**).

In the ancient kingdoms of Assyria, Babylonia, Sumeria and Egypt, musicians were priests who calculated the calendar and astrological measurements of the heavenly bodies, supervised all ceremonies and cured the sick (**Oxford History of Music, 1957:231-259**). To the ancient Hebrews and early Christians the singing of psalms was believed to have healing power (**Sendry, Alfred 1974:247**). The Talmud mentions a song which when sung is reported to protect one from epidemics (**Sendry, Alfred 1974:247**), and in the Old Testament King Saul's insanity was cured overnight by the power of David's harp (**Sendry, Alfred 1974:247**).

[...]The esoteric philosophy and practice of music is our legacy and heritage—perhaps the oldest and most sacred of our musical traditions. Born of an awareness that in some way music-making helped us to feel bolder and less afraid, music was a vehicle through which we expressed the inter-connectedness of our pulsing universe and the unity of its rhythmic cycles long before we were able to give verbal expression to the concepts that were beginning to take shape in our minds. And in that experience of union is music's primary value as a healing force. Overcoming the anxiety of separateness in a world so often perceived as hostile, music is the reassurance of the harmony and purposefulness, the essential order and beneficence of our universe.

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