

The Role of the Arts in Spiritual Development

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Abstract

This paper documents the concert-lecture presented at the Association for Bahá'í Studies, Japan, 19—21 September 2003. The program traced the historic unfolding and development of Spirituality by examining its outward manifestation found in the music of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, Debussy, and Gershwin. Elements dating back to Pythagorus will be referenced to demonstrate African, Asian, and Middle Eastern cross-culturally held beliefs in the mystical nature of sound embodied within this rich musical tradition. Associations will also be drawn between the Arts and contemporary Religious and social movements of the 19th and 20th Century.

PROGRAM

The Role of the Arts in Spiritual Development

The Italian Concerto BWV 971
J.S. Bach
I. Allegro

Sonata C K. 330
Mozart
I. Allegro moderato
II. Andante cantabile
III. Allegretto

32 Variations on an Original Theme c minor
Beethoven

PAUSE

Etudes Op. 10
Chopin
No. 3 E Major
No. 5 G^b Major (*Black Key*)

Preludes, Book I
Debussy
VIII. La fille aux cheveux de lin *The girl with the flaxen hair*
X. La Cathédrale Engloutie *The Sunken Cathedral*

Rhapsody in Blue
Gershwin

* *Program subject to change*

In today's Post-Modern world, Music is often perceived in isolation from other disciplines. The statement, "Art for Art's sake" is also applied to Music. However, historically, the arts were seen as the fullness of life, or, that which integrates one with one's belief system, culture, and environment.

The notes of the scale being the basic building blocks of Western Music clearly demonstrate this integral nature of Music. The scale, was derived from the mono-chord of Pythagorus, who according to his biographer Iamblicus, traveled extensively throughout Egypt for over 20 years and became a member of the Egyptian priesthood which gave him access to the esoteric knowledge of African civilizations. Upon his return to Greece, this knowledge was infused into Greek culture.

With both the Persian invasion of Greece and the subsequent Greek invasion of Persia, by Alexander the Great, this esoteric knowledge from African civilizations became imbedded in Middle Eastern Culture. It was allowed to thrive and develop with the appearance of Islam in the 7th Century which also coincidentally marks the beginnings of the written Western Music tradition.

The notes of the scale reflect cosmological archetypes:

Do	Dominus	God	
Re	Regina Coeli		Queen of the Heavens
Mi	Microcosmos		World of Humanity
Fa	Fata		Fate
Sol	Sol		Son or Sun
La	Lactea		The Milky Way
Si	Sidera		The Star Systems, signs of the zodiac
Do	Dominus	God	

It was believed that listening to music composed with certain intervals would cause the listener to aspire to or reflect the attributes or archetypes associated with those intervals. In the Medieval Period, the intervals created from Do – Fa, Do – Sol, and Do – Do were considered Sacred or Perfect Intervals (the 4th, 5th and Octave) and became the basis for musical composition. An example of how this was applied can be seen in the "Amen" common to sacred music as a closing cadence. It is composed using chords based on the interval of a 4th (Fa – Do or Fate – God, Amen – So Be It).

When the esoteric knowledge of the Ancients was re-introduced to the West through the flowering of the Islamic Empire through the Middle Ages and subsequently the Crusades, the stage was set for the Renaissance or rebirth of Western Civilization.

The Music of J.S. Bach (1685-1750) embodies the culmination of the polyphonic musical style developed through composing contrapuntal melodic lines with intervallic relationships of the 4th, 5th, and Octave. Composing with these three intervals also reflected the Christian belief in the Trinity prevalent in Europe.

J.S. Bach stated about his music:

*In the Architecture of my Music
I want to demonstrate to the world the architecture
of a new and beautiful social commonwealth.*

The secret of my harmony? I alone know it.

*Each instrument in counterpoint and as many contrapuntal parts as there are
instruments. It is the enlightened self-discipline of the various parts—
each voluntarily imposing on itself the limits of its individual freedom
for the well-being of the community. That is my message.*

Not the autocracy of a single stubborn melody on the one hand nor the anarchy of unchecked noise on the other. No—a delicate balance between the two—an enlightened freedom.

The science of my art. The art of my science.

The harmony of the stars in the heavens, the yearning for brotherhood in the heart of man. This is the secret of my music.

Johann Sebastian Bach

A similar sentiment, metaphorically reflecting the harmony created from separate and different “musical lines” or “colors” can be found in Islamic Sufi poetry:

*The Essences are each a separate Glass
Through which the Sun of Being's Light is passed—
Each tinted fragment sparkles in the Sun:
A thousand colors, but the Light is One.*

Jämi (15th Century Persia)

From a Bahá'í perspective, the connection between Islam and Artistic expression from the 7th through the 19th Centuries is clear. H. M. Balyuzi in referring to the Manifestations of God (the Founders of World Religions) wrote, ‘...*history should be read in terms of Their appearance. Their teaching, Their influence, Their achievement. They are the makers of history. Without reference to Them, history shows no conscious purpose, no direction, no intrinsic meaning, no ultimate goal.*’ (Balyuzi, *Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 76-77)

In this context, Bach's reference to *yearning for brotherhood in the heart of man* could be seen as a reflection of the Islamic spirit with its emphasis on *Brotherhood*.

In the 18th Century, Mozart composed in the new homophonic style (melody and accompaniment) which is typical of the Classical Period. Mozart's accompaniments primarily consisted of a four note pattern (Do, Sol, Mi, Sol) called an *Alberti Bass*. The translation of this pattern, God—Son—Man—Son, is philosophically consistent with Post-Reformation period referred to as the Age of the Enlightenment.

Many of Mozart's compositions were in the *Sonata-Allegro* form which was a strict canon that reflected Pythagorean relationships. Mozart, however, exploited this form to its limits. When asked about his flawless ability to compose perfect scores without corrections (similar to *Revelation Writing*) he is attributed to have said, *God Speaks and I write!*. By tracing the key changes and relationships within the Sonata form, one could discover a spiritual journey exploring creation through the archetypes of the scale.

In the late 18th and early 19th Century, Beethoven was influenced by transcendentalism and felt that *Music is the mediator between the life of the senses and the life of the spirit*. Beethoven's music in a sense concretizes the intangible. Just as the music of Bach culminates the expression of polyphonic counterpoint, Beethoven's music does so with the use of rhythm. Beethoven builds on the Classic tradition of Mozart and establishes the foundation for the Romantic Period.

Chopin's music, in the mid 19th Century, captures the uncertainty of the age. It is both Classic in form yet Romantic in spirit and reflects the basic dilemma of being human, that of

being a spiritual being in a physical form. Traditionally, Classicism is regarded as intellectual, masculine, and physical, whereas Romanticism is viewed as emotional, feminine, and spiritual.

Chopin utilizes compositional techniques to create contrast and balance between these two energies. Often, Chopin composed pieces in a Classic A-B-A form yet used Romantic harmony. Within that Classic form, the "A" sections follow a strict Classical cannon, however the "B" sections utilize a more improvisational Romantic style.

Also, Chopin drew on the understanding of rhythmic patterns developed in the Middle Ages. Duple rhythmic patterns represented masculine or physical energy and triplet rhythms represented feminine or spiritual energy. Chopin often juxtaposes contrasting rhythmic patterns in his music demonstrating this basic human struggle between the physical and spiritual.

In terms of Religious history the mid 19th Century was also an age of uncertainty, searching for balance, and transition. Adventist congregations emerged within Christianity, and the Shaykhi School of Islam began searching for the 12th Iman. In the Bahá'í tradition, the Báb or *Gate* represents transition and change not only from Islam to Bahá'í but from a Prophetic Age to an Age of Fulfillment also thought as a time of *reunion* between the physical and spiritual.

The poet Rumi also speaks of this: *Hence it is that listening to music is lovers' food.*

*Because it recalls to them their primal union with God.
The inward feelings of the mind acquire strength,
Nay, are shown outwardly, under influence of music.*

Rumi

The French composer, Debussy, was greatly influenced by the Islamic inspired culture of Spain and North Africa where he traveled for inspiration. Many of his compositions are programmatic and metaphoric. Specifically in the piece *The Girl with the Flaxen Hair*, the melody flows back and forth and back and forth, as hair gently blowing in the wind. Or, the melody could also be seen as a shuttle in a loom for weaving cloth, a metaphor for civilization. The girl, a metaphor for Mother Earth, and flax the source of linen, another symbol of civilization.

Debussy, like the Impressionist painters, was profoundly influenced by Oriental Art and became preoccupied with capturing the fleeting moment common to Zen. Just as Occidental Art had been influence by the Irano-Semitic Religious Tradition, on the other hand, Oriental Art had been influenced by Buddhism and Zen philosophies.

In *The Sunken Cathedral* Debussy finds inspiration from a French folkloric tale. According to legend, there is a wicked village on the coast of Normandy that God punishes by causing their beautiful Cathedral to sink to the bottom of the sea. However, God being merciful, once every one-hundred years raises the Cathedral from the bottom of the sea to renew the life of the village. At the stroke of midnight, the Cathedral once again sinks, where it remains for another one-hundred years.

As an Impressionist, Debussy paints a tonal vision of this special day in the life of the village and Cathedral, complete with ocean waves, pealing bells, organ music, ecstatic penitents, a foreboding death bell, and closing with a sinking organ being inundated with waves.

Perhaps more importantly, Debussy does this through using the very notes and

intervals that would have been used in the music of a Cathedral (the 4th, 5th, and Octave) which also reflect the architectural proportions of the Cathedral. Further, he arranges them on the page in a such a way as to resemble flying buttresses.

In terms of Religious history, this piece also reflects the notion of Progressive Revelation and was composed close to the time when 'Abdu'l-Bahá traveled to promulgate this very religious concept. The reappearing Cathedral could be seen as a metaphor for the various World Religions that come at nearly thousand year intervals to renew civilization.

It is also significant that a Christian legend is brought to life through the integration of Oriental and Occidental approaches to Music and Spirituality.

The 20th Century composer, George Gershwin is also known for integrating diverse elements to create a new approach and understanding of music. Classical European Music, Jewish secular (klezmer) and sacred traditions, along with African American Blues and Jazz came together in his benchmark 1924 composition, *Rhapsody in Blue*.

This piece, possibly more than any other, legitimized the contributions of African-Americans to Western Culture. This is evidenced by the fact that prior to *Rhapsody in Blue*, the music of African-Americans wasn't studied by Musicologist, but rather by Anthropologists.

Throughout his career, Gershwin worked against discrimination and racism and championed the cause of Civil Rights, *America's Most Challenging Issue*, long before any mandated Federal legislation. The performance rights to the folk opera, *Porgy and Bess*, required that the cast be African-American and that the audience be integrated. Gershwin did this during the height of segregation and racism in the United States.

On a metaphysical plane, Gershwin's significance lies in the fact that, his compositions bring full circle the African roots from ancient civilizations found in Western Music with the contemporary influences of African-Americans.

Bahá'u'lláh states in a tablet translated from the Persian:

It hath been revealed and is now repeated that the true worth of artists and craftsmen should be appreciated, for they advance the affairs of mankind.

(The Compilation of Compilations vol. I, p. 3)

Gershwin is such an artist who has *advanced the affairs of mankind* and continues to be appreciated long after his death.

In closing, one may ask, what is the significance of Western Music? According to Native American prophesies, it is stated that it is the White Race, the keepers of the fire, that upon devouring all in the path of the flame, will, in the West bring all peoples together again, closing the hoop of humanity to live in peace.

Bahá'u'lláh states in the fifth *Taraz*...

"In this Day the sun of craftsmanship shineth above the horizon of the occident and the river of arts is flowing out of the sea of that region. One must speak with fairness and appreciate such bounty..." (Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed After the Kitáb-i-Aqdas" [rev, ed], Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978, pp. 38-39)

This *bounty* also has a grave responsibility attached to it.