

Aspects of Sufism as they Relate to Persian Music

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Overview of the relationship of mysticism to Persian music

IV.A. Aspects of Sufism as they Relate to Persian Music

It should be mentioned briefly that Sufism, the mystical movement particularly important in Iranian Islam, appears to play a considerable role in musical life and thought today. (Nettl: 187)

The importance of Sufism for understanding Persian music has been stressed by a number of Persian musicians in its relation to the Persian poetry used for dastgāh performance, to the emotional effects of Persian music, and to the attitudes and customs surrounding the teaching and performance of the dastgāh. This influence is in addition to other influences from tazieh (religious theatre), folk music, and motrebi (entertainment music). In this brief section, a number of areas of consideration can be mentioned, but much work remains for future investigators.

Sufism, Islamic mysticism, is a philosophy that has developed over a number of centuries and has taken various forms and emphases. A central concept is the ability to have direct intuitive cognition of and substantial unity with God (Rypka: 229). Man's true home is considered to be in union with the Divine. His essential condition or predicament in this world is like that of a wild bird taken from his native forest and caged (Mole: 211). Before he was born, man lived in essential union with God. At the time of birth, he experienced a profound sense of separation and at the same time both a forgetfulness and a longing to return to that essential union. The tariqa, or way, of the Sufi is a specified method of spiritual development which leads to that union. It is most commonly spoken of in terms of stations (maqām) and states (ḥāl).

Maqams are attained by individual effort, while hāls are conferred states of grace. The number of maqāms may vary from 7 to 40 depending on the philosopher consulted. The maqams prescribed by the mystic Faridu'd-Din 'Aṭṭar (D. 1193 A.D.) are seven: search, love, knowledge, independence, unification, amazement, and destitution and annihilation. In terms of Persian traditional music, prior to the nineteenth century the system of modal organization was based on 12 maqams and that of the present time on 7 dastgahs. The pitch progression within a dastgah is ascending step-wise to a high point and then a return to the original pitch. In addition, the hal (state of Inspiration) is of primary importance in the expression of traditional music, with both musicians and audience recognizing its presence or absence. Some musicians make a distinction between the hal of a pure, spiritual musician and that of one who either uses artificial means (drugs, alcohol) or whose character does not inspire the condition of a spiritual-hal. To what extent the maqam and hal of Sufism can be correlated to that in Persian dastgah performance is a matter for further investigation.

An important aspect of certain Sufi fraternities is samā', or audition, which refers to a gathering specifically for listening to music and may include prayers, zehr (invocation), religious readings and lectures, song and accompaniment, and dance. The origin of this tradition is attributed to the time of the Prophet Mohammed (Zarinkub: 94). The term "whirling dervish" has come to mean the samā' practices of the Mevlevi Order, founded by Jalāl al-din Rumi (d. 1273 A.D.) in Konya, Turkey. It is important to remember that the orthodox Moslems,

for the most part, considered music to be forbidden and that it was certain Sufi theologians who wrote treatises in the defense of sama'. It was the Sufi concept that music was like a ladder to heaven, a way to achieve this union with God (Nasr: 231, Schimmel: 105, UHJ: 3). One of the symbolic explanations used to describe the function of sama' is the following: in pre-existence man listened to the angels singing hymns of praise. When God put man onto this earth he induced a forgetfulness so that man would not be so filled with longing that he cause himself to die. Sama' again brings to man's consciousness those hymns of praise and he can thus momentarily achieve a state of reunion, to the extent of the maqam he has reached and the state conferred upon him at that moment (Mole: 211). It was Rumi himself who gave to music such an important role in spiritual transformation as seen in the opening of his long mystic poem, the Masnavi:

Beshno in Nai Chun Hekāyat Mikonad,
Az Joda'ihā Shekāyat Mikonad.

Listen: This reed is telling its story,
It is complaining of separation. [from the reedbed]

Instruments are used in the Mevlevi Order, particularly the nai (flute) and drums.

Bawariq (Mole: 205) states that the flute indicates the human essence and the breath of the musician the breath of God which sets man in motion and gives him existence. In dervish orders today in Iran the daf (circular single-headed frame drum) is used during the zekr. During an evening of Mevlevi sama' instrumental pieces may be performed before the dancing begins.

The following is a description of some of the sequences of a Mevlevi sama' meeting: (*File: 229-232, 247-248*)

The seance takes place in a room with an octagonal balustrade reserved for the dervishes. The orchestra sits in a gallery over the door or entry.

The room of the sama' symbolizes the circle of existence. The place of the shaikh is that of Absolute Being; the place of man is situated facing him. The Equator, which reunites them, separates at the same time the two halves of the circle. The mystic traveller turns along the circle and returns thus to the Absolute Being. In the different stations of his ascension, he is hailed by God himself who comes to meet him and signify to him the degree he has attained.

The seance begins with a prayer ritual. After the prayer, the dervishes who have completed the novitiate seat themselves to the right of the small gate in the balustrade, the novices to the left; their heads inclined to the front, they plunge into contemplation. One recites several verses of the Quran and dedicates the merit of this recitation to the Prophet. After that another recites a passage from the Masnavi, after which all recite a prayer for the Prophet, the four Caliphs, the family of the Prophet, etc., the founders of the order, its chiefs, and the sovereign.

One of the musicians rises and sings a song to the praise of the Prophet (na'at-icharif). The chief flutists plays then an improvisation (taqsim), of which the tune varies according to the days. After the taqsim, all the flutists, accompanied with *drums*, begin the first prelude (pechraw), while the

dervishes rise and execute the (daur-i waladi) which consists of making three turns around the room, counterclockwise. The shaikh represents the pole, the dervishes the fixed stars.

After the daur-i waladi is completed and there is chanting by the singers, accompanied by the tambours, the dervishes, with the exception of the shaikh and the samā'zan (samā' leader) cast off their cloak. The cloak of the dervish is his tomb, according to the classical explanation, and his hat is his tomb stone. The first part of the ceremony, when the dervishes are seated, represents the actual paradise. The dervishes are dead in their tombs. At the sound of the flute, which represents the trumpet of resurrection, they rise: the daur-i-waladi is the resurrection, or symbolically the wake from the sleep of indifference.

After the dance is completed, the dervishes return to their places and put their cloak on again. One reads a passage of the Quran, after which the Sama'zan recites a prayer for the Prophet, the Companions, the founder and the chiefs of the order, the sovereign, and the Moslem armies. Under the direction of the shaikh someone recites the prayer for the dead. Then the shaikh greets the dervishes who respond to him, and he also greets the orchestra after which he advances slowly towards the door.

The moods or states associated with each of the dastgahs are, to a great extent, variations on the theme of sadness. The mystically oriented musician claims that this sadness does not exist in and of itself but is an association that some listeners have made and that if one is really moved, the music will produce a state of euphoria (During: 137). One of the associations that

has been made regarding sama' is that those who are going to hell will become sad upon hearing the music, which makes them remember their real condition, and those going to heaven will experience joy (Molé: 210). In any case, if the condition of man is perceived to be that of a lover separated from his Beloved, the music seems often to express this for him, particularly when coupled with poetry that expresses this theme. Some moods associated with dastgahs are melancholy, tenderness, serenity, force, and majesty (Caron and Safvate: 62-95).

Another aspect of the relationship between music and Sufism is seen in the existence of the Islamic craft-guilds, notably from the tenth century to their decline in the nineteenth century (Lewis: 20-27). The life of an Islamic city was organized around craft association which included guilds of musical groups, of singers, of musicians, and of instrument makers¹. These guilds were organized along semi-spiritual lines, according to the Sufi brotherhood model (Lewis: 27-29). Each guild had a shaikh or ostad as the head of the order and who would determine the admittance, time of study, and discipline of a murid (seeker) or shagerd (student) (Lewis: 30-31). And, according to Lewis (37) the guilds "have always had a deep-rooted ideology, a moral and ethical code, which was taught to all novices at the same time as the craft itself." In Sufi brotherhoods there must be a special connection between the shaikh and murid for the murid to be considered as admitted into novice status. Many times this seeker might be rejected or treated rudely or subject to a number of rigorous disciplines or tests before he is admitted into the service of that shaikh (Schimmel: 101-2). From the time of

¹ In a survey of guilds made by Sultan Murad IV in Constantinople in 1638, there were 135 musical guilds of various types (Efendi: 225-240).

admittance the shaikh is in total control of that murid's life. That murid is obliged to exact obedience, even if the shaikh be fallible. So it was to a similar extent with the guilds (Taeschner: 323, Efendi: 93, Lewis: 30-31). The master (ostād) had a similar power over his student and could indeed exact tests and obedience from him.

The practice of music, particularly in Iranian society, was frowned upon at the least and was generally practiced in private or in secret. The Sufi orders were subject to continuous criticism and examination as to their orthodoxy, i.e., observance of the laws of Islam. Sufi orders attempted to achieve a certain outer conformity to orthodox laws and customs to the point where some Sufi orders, in order not to arouse the suspicion of the clergy, did not include any music other than the recital of the Masnavi. Sufis were also concerned that music had to excite spiritual sensibilities as opposed to carnal ones and were thus careful that a novice or one who had not mastered his own desires not be included in the samā'. From its associations with Sufism, music then acquired an aura both of secrecy and of sacredness.

Certain aspects of these attitudes about the master-student relationship survive in various forms among present-day musicians. Many musicians still emphasize the spirituality of the tradition and the necessity for guarding and preserving the essential character of this tradition. A distinction is often made between the entertainer and the master musician, the one playing for worldly gain such as acclaim and money and the other playing for the purpose of meditation and for achieving the true hal,

none of which he does for anyone but himself. Their ostads often made it difficult for students to study with them; imposing in some cases tests of sincerity, worthiness, and endurance; and tended on the whole, to be inaccessible except to the elect who had also achieved similar musical understanding and mastery.

Jean During (142-143) proposes that the noted reformer of Persian musical tradition, Ali Akbar Farahani (d. 1855), learned his repertoire from Sufis who began in the nineteenth century transmitting their musical knowledge to a few professional musicians. Mirza Abdollah, the son of Ali Akbar, is said to have studied with an unknown Sufi named Seyyed Ahmad Khan. Darvish Khan, another well-known master, was essentially the head musician of the dervish order of Safi Ali Shah, which During considers to be a rather free mason type of organization only loosely affiliated with ideas of Sufism and Darvish Khan himself to have violated "the tradition" which he received from his masters. It does nevertheless remain true that in the early twentieth century this Sufi brotherhood attracted many musicians not all of whom were Sufis, fostered musical concerts, and in fact held the first public concerts of traditional music. Since that time the idea of the mystical associations of music has been debated. Those who seek to preserve this attitude and tradition are thought of as reactionaries by those who believe in introducing Western music or experimenting with new ways of musical composition and in fact deny mystical associations of this music. In the mind of the orthodoxy, however, music whether classical or popular is still viewed with much mistrust.

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