

The Process of Transformation in Iranian Traditional Music.

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THE PROCESS OF TRANSFORMATION IN IRANIAN TRADITIONAL MUSIC

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Iranian mystics believe existence is of two natures: the earthly and the divine. The transition between these two states is represented by an arch, which acts as a gate or doorway. Found in a variety of forms in Persian culture, the arch shape symbolizes the process by which the earthly is converted into the spiritual. The arch appears in the curve of the eyebrow, the arc of the crescent moon, and the bow of the *kamanche*, and can also be heard in the melodic contour of a *dasgah* performance as the pitch level gradually rises like the sun to its zenith in the sky and then descends again to the earth.

Mystics view Persian traditional music as one of the most powerful means of spiritual transformation. The traditional Persian musician is similar to the Central Asian shaman whose horsehair fiddle was the steed on which the shaman rode to the divine realm. Through a systematic process in which poetry is combined with music, a gradual intensification and then release of emotion accompanies the overall rise and fall of pitch. The fire of music burns away mundane qualities until the listener is completely purified, a final condition in which no earthly quality remains. Each musical listening releases a portion of the earthbound self and brings the listener closer to his goal of oneness with the divine.

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Approach

The approach used in this paper followed Johannes Wilbert's method of holistic or naturalistic inquiry, which is based on the premise that in culture as in a hologram, one part is a paradigm of the whole. The purpose of this type of inquiry is to discover underlying patterns and the interpretations coded in those patterns, which are connotative, that is, known only to the insider and beyond the outsider's matrix of thought. The researcher attempts to discover the symbolic level of culture, and particularly a summarizing symbol, and to make that intelligible to the outsider.

This method draws connotations from the phenomena itself. The data collection is based on the participant/observation method and is organized according to nine categories:

- | | | | |
|-------------------------------|------------|---------|-------------|
| I telluric | a artifact | b event | c knowledge |
| 1 physical | | | |
| 2 botanical | | | |
| 3 zoological | | | |
| II cultural | | | |
| 1 material culture-technology | | | |
| 2 socioeconomic | | | |
| 3 values | | | |
| III cosmic | | | |
| 1 macrocosmic | | | |
| 2 microcosmic | | | |
| 3 world view | | | |

A question eliciting information from one of these categories might be worded as follows: How on a telluric level is artifact related to physical environment?

In this inquiry, I tried to discover some of the underlying meaning in Persian music in conjunction with Mr. Morteza Varzi, respected master

performer on kamanche and teacher of traditional Persian music. Although I had known Mr. Varzi for ten years, together we discovered new material and ideas based on asking simple but previously overlooked questions, such as, "What is the top of the kamanche called? Does it have another name? What does it mean?" We sought answers to the following general questions:

How does a Persian experience this music?

What is the relationship of sound to meaning?

What is Sufi (Islamic mystic) about this music?

Data Collection

I looked at familiar phenomena in new ways. Examples of new insights discovered for each of the three levels of the data collection categories are as follows:

Physical Level:

Bla3: horsehair tail, must be white horse, Turkish horse

The kamanche is associated with symbols of hunting, the bow and arrow. The instrument is the bow and the bow is the arrow. The arrow produces the sound only when it is in motion, by drawing the bow.

The parts of the kamanche are parts of the body: leg and foot, hair, skin, neck and head.

KAMANCHE DEMO: Parts of the Kamanche

There may be some connotations of the kamanche as a horse's body; for example, some Central Asian spiked fiddles used horse hair strings and horse hair in the bow, and in one example a horse head at the top. The spiked fiddle is associated with shamanism as this instrument acts as the shaman's winged horse on which he rides to the spiritual realms.

The Persian kamanche uses mulberry wood for the sound box and once used silk for the strings, which has implications in the use of the symbol of the silkworm process of metamorphosis.

Performance Method:

The human body in its symmetry is a symbol of the duality between human and divine conditions, with the right side of the body, the human side, separated from the left, or divine, side by the bridge of the nose. The performer searches for the notes with his left hand and produces the sound with his right.

Performance Context:

AIIB3: Nature is very important. Certain events had to be outdoors, especially in late spring or summer if given the choice, and especially on the roof close to the moon and stars.

The open sky symbolizes the spiritual realm with the moon representing the face of the beloved and the first guiding light on the journey to deeper spiritual realms. Indoor performances are in imitation of the outdoor, with candles and low lights simulating the dark sky and the stars.

Philosophical Background

AIIIc2: You create union with God by creating in yourself the attributes of God, by acting like God, in adopting the characteristics of God.

Music is used as a training tool for perfection. In Sufi philosophy, it is a means to an end, not an end in itself. Through listening to music, you eliminate what is not of God. For example, in digging a well, the more dirt removed, the greater capacity of the well to hold water (spirit).

Separation from God is what causes us to suffer and that suffering causes us to ask questions about the meaning of life. In life lessons are not given in a simple manner. One must have to penetrate the material covering to get the real value of what lies hidden inside, much as one must crack the shell of the almond to find the kernel. For the Sufi, the secret of life lies in pursuing a spiritual path rather than a material one:

Go forth from the world and seek not bread
For within the dark cup is a deadly poison
To all whose future is to be dust
What use is it to build a tower to the sky? (Hafez)

Purpose of Music

For the Sufi, the purpose of music is to make the person a better human being, i.e., to increase his capacity for empathy and compassion and bring him closer to God. Through music, the individual is also cleansed and healed. Listening to music is considered a transformational process, bringing the individual incrementally closer to God through each listening and providing him during the process with a glimpse of perfect communion.

Process:

In the process of a musical performance, the musician senses the mood and capacity of the audience and chooses an appropriate mode. The process of performance is interactional, based on the rapport and interest of the audience. The musician, if inspired, acts as a medium for his music and he may not really be aware of what he is actually playing.

The overall melodic contour is of a great arc, sometimes compared to the path of the sun as it rises to the zenith of the sky and sets at the end of the day. The music and poetry provide release after the music rises in pitch and intensity. The poetry, particularly in the second half, brings philosophical resolution to human suffering. The listener is soothed and given a new approach and then is gently returned and released.

KAMANCHE DEMO: Kereshme

Not all Persian music is for this purpose and contemporary debate about musical style in traditional music is partly over this issue of the philosophical dimensions of music.

Summarizing Symbol

An important symbol in music is the arc, which appears on a number of different levels:

SLIDES: mosque in Esfahan

kamanche: bow, bowl, dome, bridge

Kereshme: eyebrow

dastgah: arch-shaped contour

performance context: arc of moon and sun, shape of crescent moon, shape of sky, shape of rainbow

The arc or arch represents the process of transformation, going from one state to another. The process of transformation is embodied in a number of metaphors that exist in poetry: drinking wine and falling in love. The kamanche itself in relation to the Central Asian tradition has shamanistic connotations of a spiritual journey and in the silkworm process the distinct stages of metamorphosis. The music itself and the surroundings of the performance induce an altered state, the hal, which releases impurities and provides a glimpse of perfection and closeness to God.

MR. VARZI: Kham, Pokhte, Sukhte

Sufis have labelled the three stages in this process as Kham, Pokhte, and Sukhte, following a line from the mystical poet Rumi: "Kham budam, Pokhte Shodam, Sukhtam". The process of transformation includes a sense of heat or fire, for example, as that found in the process of cooking. There is also the implication of sacrifice as the sun sacrifices itself at the end of the day, the worm sacrifices itself to become the moth, and the moth sacrifices itself to the flame. The initial stage is the state of becoming ready, the middle stage that of a several-stepped process of transformation, and the last stage that of release of all earthly qualities.