

ORAL TRADITION IN THE TRANSMISSION OF ANCIENT SACRED MUSIC

In eras gone by, teachers did more than just impart information. They awakened in their students the motive to dig deeply into what was being taught. They passed on their reverence for the subject matter using an energy that has been dissipating from humanity since the beginning of the modern age. It isn't the noisy zeal of ego driven emotion, it is something we call presence, the embodiment of one's knowledge. And the method for transmitting that knowledge is known as the oral tradition.

There is much more to the oral tradition than verbal explanations of the subject matter. The teacher transmits a certain vital energy along with the information imparted. A familiar model of this way of transmitting energy is: take two identical tuning forks; strike one and then hold it close to the other without actually touching and the second one will begin to vibrate. This phenomenon is called harmonic resonance as the atmosphere conducts the passage of energy from the 1st tuning fork to the 2nd.

In a way, human beings are like very complex tuning forks. By sheer proximity, the living vibrations of one person can trigger corresponding vibrations in another. The proximity of a teacher and student enables the teacher to transmit both knowledge and the energy needed to understand it. The student is eager for both knowledge and the energy necessary to understand that knowledge, and the student's eager attentiveness intensifies the teacher's desire to impart the wisdom which they embody.

The phenomenon of passing energy by "living harmonic resonance" is crucial to the transmission of ancient knowledge. This is the basis of the oral transmission in passing on the knowledge of any technique in which the intended effect is to enable the active listener to achieve transcendental states of mind. The teacher, practiced in the experience of transcendence, transmits the very states of mind generated by the tradition being passed on to the pupil along with the information and technique pertinent to that tradition.

What is transcendence? It is the transformation of the ordinary everyday mental state with its mundane concerns, into an expansive, more cosmic mind in which the sense of infinity and eternity begin to replace the preoccupation with common worldly circumstances.

Transcendence occurs in degrees, the fullest degree being the complete immersion of one's awareness in the eternal and infinite Being. There are various methods for approaching and achieving this degree of transcendence, and virtually all of them depend on the oral tradition to learn.

One such method of approach is found in the ancient art form of eastern sacred music. The intent of the master is to inculcate in the pupil not just the technique of an instrument and the repertoire of traditional melodies, but the very state of mind that the music is intended to bring; a transformation from the mundane to the transcendental. The music of ancient traditions by itself has some intrinsic power to move the listener toward transcendence, but that is usually not enough to induce the fullest transcendental

experience. It is like an airplane speeding along the runway. It may travel a certain distance, but it never takes off. For liftoff to take place, the musician must have learned from a master about transcendent states, and that can only be transmitted through oral tradition.

The power of the teacher to elevate the state of mind of the pupil is partly dependent on lineage, but it also depends on other factors. The hardships voluntarily undertaken for the sake of learning have a significant influence on the learning process. In order for the music to blossom into its most potent form, the musician must have undergone trials and tribulations for the sake of their beloved music, both in the learning and the perfecting phases.

Foremost in importance is the intent of the musician. Only a musician whose intent is to reach transcendence can approach and hope to achieve it, and a talented, practiced professional musician, without that intent, can only play the outer form beautifully. Like the airplane forever taxiing back and forth on some runway, it will never ascend to the heights.

Many of us have been exposed to a charismatic enthusiast for ideas about how we can be more, better, higher in consciousness than we currently are. And whether or not the enthusiast is really qualified to transmit accurately the essence of a real teaching is almost beside the point. Those possessed by a vivid sense of mission often exude a palpable force, an energy that almost by itself seems to make us swell with hope that we too could become as elevated as the charismatic person seems to be.

Human beings can be very sensitive to a certain energy that some people seem to possess in abundance, and find themselves drawn to those who seem to be able to transmit that energy to others at will. This is the basis for the oral tradition in the transmission of ancient teachings, be the subject a musical tradition, dance or craft.

In music, there is a real need for the oral method of teaching, especially among the ancient eastern musical traditions, in order for a master to successfully pass on knowledge of the art and craft of the tradition. Sacred music is based on the desire to experience transcendental states of mind. The various forms of sacred music surviving today evolved in cultures that were steeped in contemplative and ecstatic states of mind. The origins of this kind of music are multiform. The three major centers are the Indian subcontinent, famous for transcendental meditation and other related contemplative traditions, Central Asia with its ancient shamanistic teachings and nature worship, and ancient Egypt, where the esoteric science of achieving a form of immortality of consciousness reached unprecedented heights.

The idea that we exist in an invisible world which exists concurrently with the visible, sensorially palpable world is pervasive throughout all cultures and civilizations. Of course, the universe is just what the word used to describe it means: one world, one 'verse' (version), or one Being. Yet we carry this deep conviction that there is much more to existence than meets the eye, or any other of our physical senses. There is

something utterly mysterious about the whole idea of Being that we find ourselves beholden to the wish to experience this invisible world, the noumenal world, directly.

And the literature on this subject - esoteric, metaphysical, mystical and occult - abounds. Some of that literature describes the noumenal world in terms of visual effects. However, eyes cannot apprehend the noumenal world any more than can the nose, tongue or fingertips. The noumenal world is a world of vibrations, and if there were any ordinary sensory modality that could be rightly used to metaphorically represent that perception, it would be hearing.

The noumenal world is perceptible to the human being who wishes to perceive it. We have a kind of sense organ at our disposal - apparently generally unknown - which can be deployed to perceive the noumenal world; it is the human body as a whole. Like a large eardrum, the human body can act like a sensory organ which can perceive the noumenal world directly. In order for our consciousness to consciously participate in that perception, it needs to focus on the unique sensation of the entire physical body where all the real transactions of life take place.

After a lifetime of focusing on mental images and the emotions they trigger, it is not so easy for a seeker's consciousness to find the sensation of the whole body and thereby perceive the real world of vibrating energies. A certain preparation is necessary, and that is where transcendental states of mind come in, and with them, all the artful methods that humanity has devised over the ages to reach that rarified state of mind. Ancient music from the Eastern world that gave us meditation and other mindful practices is one such artful modality, and it is dependent on the oral tradition to learn the form as well as the content.

For music to serve as a vehicle for transmitting the effects of transcendental states of mind, the form must correspond to the content, which is the intent of the musician to experience and transmit the energy that brings us into the transcendent state. Every form of music corresponds to the intent of the composer, be it for entertainment, for military marching bands, for political and social commentary, for funeral processions, for romance, and for transcendence. Perhaps some forms will combine various fractions of various intents, but in general, the form must correspond.

Focusing on that special music which is intended to transform the ordinary everyday consciousness into cosmic consciousness, we can examine the form of certain ancient eastern musical traditions that have been transmitted down the ages by the oral (aural) tradition, directly from master to pupil, by means of demonstrations along with the living harmonic resonance which imparts that special energy to others.

There are several features of music that ancient eastern sacred music brings together to impart the sense of being affected spiritually. The first and foremost is the employment of a property of music that cannot be accounted by ordinary scientific explanation: listening to musical scales induces in us human beings the feeling of being transported.

Even the simplest rendering of any seven toned scale, that is, a series of seven relatively harmonious tones between any two tones that constitute an octave (modal scales), will unfailingly leave the listener with the distinct impression of having been taken from one 'place' to another, but not spatially, of course. Something inexplicable takes place in human beings when they listen attentively to a series of tones in a scale that begins on the tonic and proceeds to the octave above, or the octave below.

There is a difference between the sensations that occurs from listening to an ascending scale than from a descending scale, and that is the second property of music that the ancient traditions rely on for their unique effects, the sense of transport in both directions up and down. We are being taken up and down the scale of vibrations, and we instinctively feel the underlying reality, that existence consists of a scale of vibrations.

Another inexplicable phenomenon occurs from delaying the last tone in that series. Playing a sequence of seven tones in a scale, and then pausing before playing the last tone - the octave above the tonic - unfailingly induces in virtually every one of us the wish for completion. What is this world that music exists and has such a profound effect upon us human beings? Even the simplest rendition of a musical scale, with that hesitation before the sounding of the octave, has the power to make us want to hear that final tone, that closure to the sensation of having been transported.

What is that sense? It cannot be explained, nor can it be described in words; it can only be demonstrated experientially. Furthermore, by artfully altering the specific tonalities in a given scale, a wide range of different effects on states of human consciousness are obtained. In addition to the numerous minor scales – and the unique major scale – there is a world of possibilities for transcendence in the technique of playing melodies that incorporate microtones, deliberate deviations from the commonly heard harmonious intervals favored by ordinary musical forms.

The phenomenon of microtones is particularly interesting. These are tones that when played unintentionally merely sounds out of tune. Yet the very same tones, the same frequencies of vibrations, when played intentionally have the opposite effect. They take on an aura of power. It feels like one has been instantly transported to an unknown world. It is the world of dissonance, and it intensifies the listener's yearning for closure. This intense yearning for something as mysterious as closure has the power to awaken the sensation of being in the noumenal world, the world of vibrating energies, the world of the infinite and eternal.

The effect of microtones is wholly dependent on being in a state of active listening. It is a state of mind that all oral (and aural) traditions depend on. But without active listening, the effect may not be felt. Transcendent states of mind must be actively pursued; it isn't very often one just somehow finds oneself in a transcendent frame of mind. The effect of the special music that evolved during an era when human beings coveted transcendental states of mind is to beckon, but it cannot forcibly drag anyone into a state of transcendence who isn't ready and willing to be transformed by the intent that is at its core.

Another feature of sacred music from the ancient eastern world that is crucial to its intended effect is the meter free condition of the melodies. Meter free means the melody has no overt rhythm to guide the timing of the music, no repetitive beat to inform the musician when to play the next note. Learning to play music with a flexible tempo requires a special quality of listening. And just as with microtones, which must be played with great deliberateness, the moment of playing the tones in meter free music must be similarly purposefully intended.

The only way to learn the special syntax of meter free music is through oral tradition, where the intent of the music must be delivered along with the technique by a living being who embodies the knowledge of both form and content. But the syntax cannot be based on anything arbitrary. It has to match the intent of the music, which is to be transported into another realm of consciousness. The peculiar syntax of ancient eastern meter free music seems to resemble the syntax of epic storytelling, as if we are being guided on our journey inward, to the 'place' where transcendence occurs.

Another important feature of ancient eastern music is the convoluted melodic line, resembling the twists and turns, the under / over complexity of arabesque. This impression is further strengthened by the sense that the melody is not a fixed composition but is being rendered in a fresh and new way in the present moment. There is the original composition which took centuries to evolve, and there is the demand for a fresh expression of that traditional composition. The word 'improvisation' comes to mind, a word most commonly associated with jazz, and whereas ancient eastern sacred music is not jazz, it may be the only way we can describe this feature of traditional music of the ancient east.

Transmitting the heart and soul of ancient eastern sacred music is inseparable from the oral tradition. The mental convenience of written score not only does not support the improvisational aspect of this music, it also circumvents the student's struggle to 'find' the melody within. Ancient eastern sacred music embodies a legacy of knowledge that arose during an epoch when the transmission of wisdom was passed on exclusively in the oral tradition, with no coded symbols to intervene and insulate the listeners from the intent of the masters: transcendence. The true legacy of the ancient eastern traditions of sacred music can put us in touch with the current of energy that sustains life. It is a path to perceiving the noumenal world, the real world of vibrating energies.