

THE SEVEN MYSTERIES IN MUSIC AND *MUGHAM*

There is a great mystery in music, the interval known as the octave. The octave interval is made of two notes that are both the same yet different. How is that paradox possible? The octave calls attention to itself in a very mysterious way: what is this universe that the phenomenon of the octave is a permanent and ubiquitous reality? The mystery of the octave reveals the mystery of music in general, which is the mystery of vibrations, the mystery of scale and the mystery of intervals. And the octave is unique among all the intervals. The octave is the king of consonance. Compared to the octave, all the other intervals are dissonant to some extent. Among all the possible intervals in music, only the octave generates no third note.

Sounding the octave interval evokes a unique feeling in us. Listening to the other intervals, we enter into the second mystery, which is the awareness that each and every musical interval evokes a unique feeling in us. Our language does not have the vocabulary to help us isolate and identify these unique feelings – more like sensations – other than the familiar Do Re Mi Fa Sol La Ti Do. But these seven syllables are insufficient to help us isolate and identify the unique feeling / sensations evoked by the corresponding musical intervals the syllables represent. For that we would just need to listen to them while remaining very sensitive to what takes place within, in response.

Also, there are five other intervals on the (familiar) tempered scale of the piano and guitar but they do not have familiar syllables to represent them. With or without syllables to represent the interval, all the 12 notes make intervals with the 'Do' also known as the tonic. Each interval evokes a unique feeling / sensations. The mystery is how all 12 musical intervals have the power to evoke unique feeling / sensations in all of us.

The third mystery is the feeling sensation evoked by the sounding of the above mentioned seven tone scale. It is the feeling sensation of transport. Any melody can be beautiful, intriguing, emotionally evocative, and enchanting, but only melodies made of staircase compositions evoke the mysterious sense of transport.

This leads us to the fourth mystery, a strange effect when the last note in the scale is delayed. Any delay induces the wish to hear that last note, and when it finally sounds, there is a sense of relief along with the sense of arrival. Why music should have this power is a complete mystery, yet it is that mystery, along with the other six mysteries, that enables mugham and similar forms of staircase music to have its unique effect.

There are more musical intervals that we can hear but which are not on the piano. In fact, the untrained human ear can discern up to 84 divisions of the octave. This leads us to the fifth mystery, that beyond the 12 familiar intervals are potentially 72 more intervals not used in western, tempered scale based music. Known in music as microtones, this vast range of potential intervals can be tapped for unique musical effects. The effect is to deepen one's desire to hear the harmonious interval that is proximal to that microtone.

Perhaps the first time one hears a microtone, that is, an interval that has been deliberately and noticeably flattened or sharpened, it may just seem out of tune. But by the second sounding, it is beginning to convey the musician's intention to play that note on purpose. By the third sounding, the musician's intent has fully entered the field, mysteriously, and has changed the way we listen to that microtone. Now we want to hear the microtone. We want to hear it again and again, and this sets up the tension between our desire to hear the microtone and our desire to hear the harmonious note near it.

That tension must be carefully handled which introduces the sixth mystery, the way the notes in mugham melodies are clustered. They are clustered in a way that evokes the distinct feeling that a story is being told. What could that story be about, but the very intervals the notes make with the tonic that appear as the melody unfolds, and all the mysterious feelings and sensations they evoke in us. The method for evoking this storytelling effect is to dispense with a regular beat. The clustering of the notes in mugham melodies is meter free, and very flexible. This means the timing of the notes must be just as intentional as playing the microtones. The added dimension of intended timing further increases the power of the other mysterious effects of mugham melodies.

The seventh mystery is the power of the silences between the bursts of notes. There is no way to evoke that unique feeling sensation from mere words. The closest I can come to describing the effect of the silences in the context of this most mysterious music, is to say that they seem to fill the room with some kind of invisible solidity that is dead silent, and very present.

The ornamentation embellishing the melodies of mugham is not a mystery. The sounds are meant to evoke the sounds of nature. One can hear birds chirping and warbling. One can hear horses whinnying and neighing, brooks burbling, cats meowing, cows bellowing, and breezes whispering through the leaves. No mystery there, that mesmerizing flourish comes from an ancient belief system anthropologists call animism. The belief is that there is an animating spirit which courses through the forms of all life, and which renders the sounds of nature sacred.

In sum, the great mysteries of the octave, the intervals, staircase melodies evoking the sense of transport, desire for the sense of arrival, the mysterious effects of intentional microtones, of being told an ancient story, of the silences, and the enchanting effect from evoking the sounds of nature all fold together into a complete mystery, the power of mugham to take us away to another place altogether. And that is what the word means. Mugham is the Azerbaijani way of saying – and playing – the ancient makam or maqqam of the Middle East. The word means a place, a station, a state of mind. That's what mugham does; it is otherworldly music that takes us to another place, another state of mind.