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Hearing Secret Harmonies

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ONE OF THE MOST BEAUTIFUL AND PERSISTENT THEMES of traditional mythology is that the Cosmos is a harmony: that the heavenly stars and spheres, the elements and seasons, and even the members of our own bodies are perpetually making music. Philosophers throughout the ages have devised ingenious systems to show how this music is supposed to sound. But whence came the idea in the first place? The only plausible answer is that people have heard it. Rare as the experience is, there is no doubt that it has happened. In this article we ascend the Great Chain of Being and listen to the reports of those who have actually heard it resonating with its secret harmonies, from the humble witness of peasants and fairy folk to the sublime heights of philosophic and mystical rapture.

Before we even leave the Earth, we must remember that we share the planet with the race of Elementals: beings made from the subtle essences of the elements, rather than from the physical matter that constitutes our own bodies. Although nowadays they usually escape our perceptions, to some individuals, and even to whole races like the Celts and Scandinavians, they are an accepted reality, being frequently felt and heard, and sometimes even seen. People call them fairies, leprechauns, elves, gnomes, trolls, and many other evocative names. This little anecdote from the Isle of Man, taken from Evans-Wentz's *The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries*, contains in a nutshell the favorite themes of musical fairy-lore:

William Cain, of Glen Helen, was going home in the evening across the mountains near Brook's Park, when he heard music down below in a glen, and saw there a great glass house like a palace, all lit up. He stopped to listen, and when he had the new tune he went home to practice it on his fiddle; and recently he played the same fairy tune at Miss Sophia Morrison's Manx entertainment in Peel.¹

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HERE ARE THE MYSTERIOUS MUSIC heard at dusk, the crystalline palace of the Otherworld, and the fairies as sources of inspiration for mortal musicians. Later we will hear of people who have actually visited this Otherworld, and of higher sources of inspiration still. But to fairy music heard on our own soil, with waking earthly consciousness, the folklore of all races attests. As one might expect, it is especially likely to be heard near megalithic structures—stone circles, barrows, etc.—and at places of ancient lineage and high magic like the hill of Tara, spiritual center of all Ireland. Here an old man told Evans-Wentz:

As sure as you are sitting down I heard the pipes there in that wood . . . I often heard it in the wood of Tara. Whenever the “good people” play, you hear their music all through the field as plain as can be; and it is the grandest kind of music. It may last half the night, but once day comes, it ends.²

Sometimes the fairies are seen as well as heard. They may appear as a busy troop of “little folk,” singing and dancing, whose effects on the human witness are not always of the best; for fairies, being soul-less and hence completely amoral, are as likely to steal away one’s babies and replace them with their own ghastly (but precociously musical) changelings³ as they are to adopt rejected stepsons and teach them the piper’s trade.⁴ And the Celtic fairies are not always so little: they can even be mistaken for humans. Many are the tales of the slightly undersized character, always with red hair, who appears unexpectedly at taverns and parties, plays music of entrancing beauty and irresistible power, and leaves without a trace, only then to be recognized, as the spell wears off, as a fairy visitant. Saint Patrick himself relates a meeting with a “wondrous elfin man” whose minstrelsy put him to sleep, saying of the music: “Good indeed it were, but for a twang of the fairy spell that infests it; barring which nothing could more nearly resemble Heaven’s harmony.”⁵ Here the borderline between the true fairy and the fairy-inspired mortal becomes blurred:

did Patrick meet a human minstrel and believe him to be a fairy? It is of the essence of fairytale that one cannot always be certain which is which: but the experience remains inviolate.

Since the time of Paracelsus, the elementals have been the subject not only of folklore but also of serious research, and present-day occultists hold a more sophisticated view of them and their activities. This does not in any way diminish their poetic qualities, as one can see from the account given to Evans-Wentz by an unnamed Irish mystic and seer (probably the poet George Russell, known as “AE”), to whom initiation into otherworldly vision came precisely by way of the fairy music:

The first time I saw them with great vividness I was lying on a hillside alone in the west of Ireland, in County Sligo: I had been listening to music in the air, and to what seemed to be the sound of bells, and was trying to understand these aerial clashings in which wind seemed to break upon wind in an ever-changing musical silvery sound. Then the space before me grew luminous, and I began to see one beautiful being after another.⁶

He describes them as tall, self-luminous, opalescent beings whose sight brought joy and ecstasy, then goes on to explain their ontological status, different classes, and astral anatomy, in terms which only serve to demonstrate the fundamental agreement between all accounts of this kind.

How does one get to this other world, this other state of being? The alchemist Thomas Vaughan says that “the soul hath several ways to break up house, but her best is without a disease. This is her mystical walk, an exit only to return.”⁷ Some of the ways thither are through fantasy or active imagination in the waking state; through dreams, trances, or visions; and after death, when we can all expect to enter it. In exceptional cases, among which Pythagoras is the most famous ancient example, a person may be so gifted as to enter the state at will, even without the extinction of normal consciousness. For

those less fortunate, like the composer Robert Schumann, this irruption of another order of being into the everyday one may be a symptom, or a cause, of insanity.

The Otherworld may appear on one's own familiar soil, produced like a mirage or suddenly revealed as the encircling mists clear away.

In ancient times it seems that the door stood wider open. One reads of the many people in folklore who have strayed into the realm of Faerie through chinks in the rock or holes in the ground, or got lost in the woods like Dante himself at the beginning of the *Inferno*. Once inside, they may simply enjoy a kind of guided tour, but there is also the chance of a more serious involvement. Then all manner of difficulties and obstacles may appear to challenge the traveler: rivers and oceans to be crossed, wild animals and fierce men to be overcome; walls of fire and of ice, razor-edged bridges, steep mountains, and the very spheres themselves to be scaled. The medievalist Howard Patch, in his study of hundreds of legends concerning the Otherworld, found certain recurrent features both in the journey and in the realm itself. He notes that the latter usually contains "a garden with a fountain or several fountains, and one or more conspicuous trees laden with fruit. The perfume of the place is sometimes marked with peculiarity, and the birds are especially to be noticed for the quality of their song. Other familiar motifs include the pavilion or dwelling place, a castle or a palace, jewels in the garden or in the decoration of the palace, the music which is heard, the predominance of crystal in the building, the effect of eating

the fruit there, and a mention of the abnormal passage of time—short or long—during the visit."⁸

Faced with the plethora of literature devoted to this visionary realm, one feels like a legendary voyager, adrift in a sea of wonders so vast that he does not know whither to steer. But there is one body of imaginal writing that is most consistently and delightfully musical: that of the Medieval Celtic period; and it is to this that we will restrict our view here.

The Celtic Otherworld has a constant quality peculiar to itself, which I believe to be the result of more than a purely literary tradition. Its landmarks are as unmistakable, its atmosphere as marked, as that of the Muslim Paradise with its greenery and houris, or of the Renaissance alchemical engravings with their formal gardens and fabulous beasts. As befits an island literature, that of old Ireland teems with visions and voyages to other lands and other worlds. Some of these are to isles beyond the sea, which less imaginative scholars have tried to identify with actual islands. Of course, Irish saints may have been blown off course and ended up in the Bahamas, but this in itself is not sufficient reason for the tales they told, any more than the natural sound of whistling wind can explain away the fairy music. Other journeys are to lands in the ocean-depths, no less musical than the others, as the hero Brian found when he plunged down with a crystal diving-helmet and saw the red-haired ocean-nymphs making music like the chiming of silver bells.⁹ Perhaps it was the same sound as is heard from the submerged cathedral of Ys, the Breton town sunk beneath the waves. Then again, the Otherworld may appear on one's own familiar soil, produced like a mirage or suddenly revealed as the encircling mists clear away. It may be entered beneath the hollow hills or fairy mounds, and here it becomes inextricably confused with the Fairy Kingdom. Most typically, it is presented as a voyage to one or many islands, usually in the West, which from the point of view of Ireland represented the great unknown.

One explanation of the nature of these isles and their inhabitants is given in the Voyage of Saint Brendan (ninth century), when he and his companions visit an island called the Paradise of Birds. The birds here are white and so numerous that they entirely cover a giant tree. In response to Brendan's questioning, one flies down, "making a noise with her wings like a hand-bell," and explains that the birds are souls that were destroyed in Lucifer's rebellion, though not complicit in his sin. "We wander through various regions of the air and the firmament and the earth, just like the other spirits that travel on their missions. But on holy days and Sundays we are given bodies such as you now see so that we may stay here and praise our creator."¹⁰ And when the hour of Vespers comes, all the birds chant together the versicle *Te decet hymnus, Deus in Sion* for about an hour. Likewise, at each of the eight Canonical Hours (the services sung each day in monastic communities), they sing the appropriate psalms and other verses.

When one compares the origin claimed by St. Brendan's bird to modern Celtic fairy beliefs, it is clear that the same beings are in question, and their musicality comes as no surprise. Of all the theories put forward by the old Celtic people interviewed by Evans-Wentz in the early years of this century, the most frequent and widespread holds the fairies to be fallen angels who remained neutral in Lucifer's war.¹¹ As a Breton source puts it, "after the angels revolted, those left in paradise were divided into two parts: those who fought on the side of God and those who remained neutral. These last, already half-fallen, were sent to earth for a time, and became the *fées*."¹² Or, from a Welsh woman, "I think there must be an intermediate state between life on earth and heavenly life, and it may be in this that spirits and fairies live."¹³

From the human point of view, this intermediate state populated by fallen but not evil angels is none other than Purgatory. St. Brendan continued to wander from island to island for seven years before his ship pierced a ring of dense fog and the

voyagers suddenly found themselves at their goal, the "Promised Land of the Saints," where there is no darkness, Christ being the only light. This is the transition from Purgatory to Paradise. Here the unfallen angels still take on the guise of bird-cantors, as several other related works of Celtic Christianity bear witness. The tenth-century *Adventures of Saint Columba's Clerics* takes us to the very throne of the King of Heaven, on which are perched three birds who chant the eight Canonical Hours.¹⁴ So does the eleventh-century *Vision of Saint Adamian*, who did not go by boat but was taken up to Heaven by an angel.¹⁵ The *Voyage of the Hui Corra* (also eleventh century) is more specific: the traveler Lochan, before embarking on his voyage, has a dream in which he "beheld the Lord Himself on His throne, and a birdflock of angels making music to Him. Then I saw a bright bird, and sweeter was his singing than every melody. Now this was Michael in the form of a bird in the presence of the Creator."¹⁶

There is a characteristic passport to the Celtic Otherworld, reminiscent of the famous Golden Bough with which Aeneas descended to Hades in Book VI of Virgil's *Aeneid*. It is a silver branch with golden fruits, three or nine in number, which—and here is the typical Celtic touch—strike together to make an enchanting melody.¹⁷ The branch itself doubtless comes from that same magical tree on which the eloquent birds were perched in Brendan's story. In *The Sickbed of Cuchulain* we meet the tree again in the island palace of Labra, actually giving off its music:

From a tree in the forecourt
Sweet harmony streams;
It stands silver, yet sunlit
With gold's glitter gleams.¹⁸

Before Bran even found the branch, he had been lulled to sleep by sweet music, coming from he knew not where. When he awoke—or, perhaps more accurately, when he entered a lucid dream-state—he discovered this musical branch by his side. Going home with it to his palace, he met there a strange

woman who sang him a long song of the wondrous isle whence the branch had come: an island of perpetual youth, health, pleasure, laughter, feasting, and of course "sweet music striking on the ear."¹⁹ Another legendary king of Ireland, Cormac MacAirt, came upon the selfsame branch in the hands of an unknown man: its music seduced him so that he sold his own wife and children in exchange for it.²⁰ It was his quest, Orpheus-like, to retrieve them that led him through the mist to a Paradise teeming with white birds and watered by a fountain with five streams "more melodious than mortal music."²¹

The Celtic legends leave an unforgettable impression of a dreamlike existence suffused with music.

These and other musical themes recur in the Celtic stories like leitmotifs in some great opera. There are musical stones, like the "conspicuous stone" in Bran's voyage, "from which come a hundred strains,"²² and the "three precious stones with a soft melodious sound, with the sweetness of music at every two choirs" (in *The Adventures of Saint Columba's Clerics*).²³ Sometimes one cannot be sure exactly what the poet has in mind, though the last quotation seems to resonate with another mysterious episode in St. Brendan's Voyage.²⁴ One of the islands visited by his party is extraordinarily flat, spacious, treeless, but covered with white and purple fruit. There they see three choirs of boys, separated by a slingshot's distance from one another but continuously moving. Singing both antiphonally and in unison, they chant the eight Canonical Hours, just like the birds, but unlike those fallen spirits they also celebrate the Mass. Lastly, there is the impressive vision of the Crystal Pillar. In

Brendan's Voyage it rises out of the sea: a vast column, each of its four sides seven hundred yards long, the whole thing draped in a silvery net with meshes big enough for the boat to pass through. In the Voyage of *Maelduin*²⁵ (early ninth century), the pillar and its net are encountered again, and a voice speaks from the top of it. In the Voyage of the *Hui Corra*²⁶ (eleventh century), the net is a brazen one, spread on a brazen palisade surrounding another island, and the wind makes music on it which puts the voyagers to sleep for three days and three nights.

The Celtic legends leave an unforgettable impression of a dreamlike existence suffused with music: an Elysium of musical trees, fruits, fountains, stones, nets, choirs, and birds upon birds. Taken as discrete symbols, one could analyze and explain them, but this would be to lose the environing atmosphere of a world with its own nature and its own inner consistency. To ask what the crystal pillar "means" is as pointless as for a visitor in Paris to ask the meaning of the Eiffel Tower: it is just what one finds there, and the striking image is its own meaning.

But where exactly are all those worlds and planes situated? Certainly there was a time when it made sense to place them somewhere on the Earth, underground, or in the visible heavens: hence the legends of subterranean kingdoms (still in vogue among the "hollow-earthers"), of Lost Eden, the Fortunate Isles, Shangri-La, Shambhala, and other places that the medieval cartographers confidently marked on their maps. Hence, too, the situation of Purgatory on a mountain, as by Dante, or in the spheres of the seven planets that circle the Earth in the Ptolemaic system. But these have become an anomaly since the voyages of exploration and the revolution in cosmology, and it is pointless to pretend any longer that the images presented to the Soul are anywhere in the physical universe.

An important distinction must now be drawn between fantasy or reverie that one invents for oneself, and the objective but

nonmaterial world that is presented as images to the inner organ of imaginative perception. These latter images have their own independent source, existence, and meaning. A Jungian would distinguish the two types as coming respectively from the personal and the collective unconscious, while occultists would tend to identify the latter as an Astral World of many planes. Since my concern here is ultimately with the hearing of music, I will follow the approach of the French savant (and passionate musical amateur) Henry Corbin and call it simply the Imaginal World.²⁷ Corbin's approach, while very far from being a skeptical one, was phenomenological and scholarly rather than vatic or theoretical. His personal experience apart, a vast knowledge of sources ranging over the whole Western and Near Eastern tradition gave him abundant evidence for the existence of a world where "autonomous archetypal Images are infinitely realized, forming a hierarchy of degrees varying according to their relative subtlety or density."²⁸ Those are the words of Qutbuddin Shirazi, a commentator on the *Oriental Theosophy* of the twelfth-century Iranian sage Sohrawardi. Now let us hear that master himself, speaking from his own experience:

On each of these levels species exist analogous to those in our world, but they are infinite. Some are peopled by Angels and the human Elect. Others are peopled by Angels and genii, others by demons. God alone knows the number of these levels and what they contain. The pilgrim rising from one degree to another discovers on each higher level a subtler state, a more entrancing beauty, a more intense spirituality, a more overflowing delight. The highest of these degrees borders on that of the intelligible pure entities of light and very closely resembles it.²⁹

The Imaginal World has its elements, its cities, and its heavenly spheres. Although they do not have a material substratum, they are objective and entirely real. Among the marvels there is the immense "city" Hurqalya, which contains in exemplary form both Heavens and Earth: here are the Archetypal

Images of all individuals and corporeal things in the sensory world, as well as of the heavenly spheres. Shirazi says that it was in these celestial spheres of the Imaginal World that Pythagoras heard the Music of the Spheres. "Afterwards he returned to his material body. As a result of what he had heard he determined the musical relationships and perfected the science of music."³⁰

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Armed with the concept of the Imaginal World, we can at last make an intelligent approach to the age-old myth of the Ascent through the Spheres and the music that is heard there. While most of the Celtic adventures take place on the Celestial Earth, the accounts of ascent must refer to what we may call the "Celestial Heavens." In the classic version of the ascent, the soul rises above the Earth (which it may even look down upon from a distance, as did C. G. Jung in the visions of his old age³¹) and finds itself in the region of the planetary spheres. The Pamphylian soldier in Plato's "Myth of Er"³² saw the system of the seven planets and the fixed stars with a Siren standing on each sphere, "uttering one tone varied by diverse modulations; and the whole eight of them together composed a single harmony."³³ Following in Plato's footsteps, Cicero also ended his *Republic* with a cosmic vision, though this time presented as a dream. Scipio Africanus, the Roman hero, saw nine spheres (including the Earth), making a "grand and pleasing sound."³⁴ His deceased

grandfather, who acted as Scipio's psychopomp, explained that it came from the rapid motion of the spheres themselves, which although they are nine, produce only seven different tones, "this number being, one might almost say, the key to the universe." Plutarch's Timarchus, who voluntarily entered the oracular Crypt of Trophonius in order to find out about the mysterious Sign of Socrates, lost consciousness of his body and, as he seemed to exit through the top of his skull, "faintly caught the whirr of something revolving overhead with a pleasant sound."³⁵ When he saw the glorious spectacle of the revolving spheres, he "fancied that their circular movement made a musical whirring in the aether, for the gentleness of the sound resulting from the harmony of all the separate sounds corresponded to the evenness of their motion."

There is plenty of evidence that it is music itself that can set us on this journey.

All these voyagers returned to Earth for the edification of their fellows: they did not pass beyond the spheres of the Imaginal World which resounded so marvelously in their ears. For an account of the journey's ultimate goal and meaning, we cannot do better than to read the Hermetic book *Poimandres, the Shepherd of Men*.³⁶ In this dialogue, Poimandres, the World-Mind, explains to Hermes that when a person dies, the physical body is first surrendered to its natural fate of decomposition. Next the "ethos," the instinctive or habitual nature, is given back to the Daimon, and the senses, passions and desires return to their sources in irrational Nature. What is left of the person—the only immortal part—now enters what Poimandres calls the Harmony, a term that emphasizes the musical nature of the planetary spheres. At each one it is disburdened

of the power which that planet rules. At the sphere of the Moon it leaves behind the power of growth and waning; at Mercury, the power of devising evils; at Venus, the illusion of desire; at the Sun, the arrogance of domination; at Mars, impious boldness and rashness; at Jupiter, striving for wealth by evil means; at Saturn, falsehood.

And then, with all the energies of the Harmony stripped from it, clothed only in its proper Power, it enters that Nature which belongs to the Eighth Sphere, and with the beings there it sings hymns to the Father, and all who are there rejoice at its coming.³⁷

Perhaps St. Brendan's seven-year voyage to the Promised Land of the Saints should be seen as analogous to this journey through the seven spheres. Certainly the Hermetic ascent corresponds to the purgatorial process in Christian pneumatology. But in its own context, the purification described in *Poimandres* is not from sins committed on Earth, but rather from the very fact of having been incarnated. The ascent through the spheres presumes a prior descent through them in order for the soul to have acquired these contaminating planetary powers. As in every gnostic doctrine, it is assumed that the soul once enjoyed a pristine state in Heaven from which, for one reason or another, it descended to take up its abode in an earthly body. The actual manner of realization of each planetary power is shown forth in the natal horoscope cast for the moment of incarnation: here each planet occupies a definite zodiacal degree and is in certain relationships with the others. In C. G. Jung's words, "The ascent through the planetary spheres therefore meant something like a shedding of the characterological qualities indicated by the horoscope, a retrogressive liberation from the character imprinted by the archons"³⁸ (planetary rulers). And again, in more psychological terms: "The journey through the planetary houses, like the crossing of the great halls in the Egyptian underworld, therefore signifies the overcoming of a psychic obstacle, or of an auton-

omous complex, suitably represented by a planetary god or demon. Anyone who has passed through all the spheres is free from compulsion: he has won the crown of victory and become like a god.”

In other words, the journey is an initiation, or a series of initiations, taking place in the Imaginal World, either while still associated with one’s earthly body or after one has discarded it. The music that is heard there and whose supernatural beauty is always remarked upon is none other than the knowledge gained in these initiations by those who have attained the requisite stage of psychic growth, being exempt from desires and vices to which nearly everyone on earth is subject. As the late Neoplatonist Simplicius puts it:

If anyone, like Pythagoras, who is reported to have heard this harmony, should have had his terrestrial body exempt from him, and his luminous and celestial vehicle, and the senses which it contains, purified, either through a good allotment, or through purity of life, or through a perfection arising from sacred operations, such a one will perceive things invisible to others, and will hear things inaudible to others.³⁹

In this dense passage, Simplicius sets out the three conditions under which the secret harmonies may be heard. The “good allotment” is the grace or genius with which exceptional people are born, apparently free from the vices that beset others and already endowed with superhuman powers. “Purity of life” is gained by asceticism and persistent self-denial: the vices are fought and conquered in this life. “Sacred operations” are theurgic or magical practices that aid the soul’s ascent through sacramental means. The reward of all of these is knowledge or Gnosis, of a sort inaccessible to the uninitiated.

There is plenty of evidence that it is music itself that can set us on this journey. That is how the Irish hero Bran began his quest. The seventeenth century Jesuit savant, Athanasius Kircher relates how one evening, after listening to a particularly beautiful concert by

three lute players, he fell into a deep trance in which he ascended through the seven planetary spheres and even glimpsed the Divine Light beyond.⁴⁰ Blessed Angela of Foligno (thirteenth century) rose to the Un-created Light as the organ played the *Sanctus* in the Church of St. Francis.⁴¹ And in our own day, Warner Allen⁴² writes of the Timeless Moment which he experienced during a concert in the Queen’s Hall, London, between two consecutive notes of Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony. Or again, the music may musicologist and therapist who has collected many hundreds of musical dreams, writes that:

There are dreams in which music acts as a kind of leader of the soul into the life after death. The music to be heard in such cases is mostly of indescribable beauty and leaves behind a feeling of consolation and of a certainty of the existence of timeless forces which exist beyond death and transcend human experience.⁴³

Both inner and outer music can serve as psychopomp—as leader of the Soul to realms more real than Earth. In some of the examples already given it would even be difficult to say whether the music heard was objective or subjective. Music can start one off on the journey, it can accompany one on the way, and it may even be there at the journey’s end. All the religious traditions have known this, and put this knowledge to use in their different ways. In the remainder of this article we will see some of these applications.

The Christian tradition, while recognizing the great psychological value of music, has seldom used it for esoteric or initiatic purposes. The reason lies in the situation under which early Christianity, both esoteric and exoteric, developed. Under the Roman Empire music was associated with all the things the Christians shunned: the ecstatic worship of pagan divinities, frivolous entertainments by virtuosi, sexual license, and the horrors of the circuses. The Church Fathers allowed the singing of hymns, but could not conceive of anyone actually listening to

music except for mere sensual enjoyment. Not for many centuries did the organ, the instrument of the circus, become a fixture in Christian churches, and other instruments were never completely at home there. The fears of the Fathers were justified in post-Reformation times, when the High Mass and major Offices tended to degenerate into concerts, the congregation into an audience—a degeneration in the liturgical sense, even if the music was a cantata by Bach or a Mass by Haydn. The reader may judge whether the situation has improved since Vatican II, (1962) with the modern tendency in both Catholic and Protestant churches being to use music, and language, to which no one could possibly respond aesthetically, thus forcing a retreat into religious or at least communal aspiration.

The seven notes of the modes can be heard as the notes of the planets, the wandering of the melody through them felt as a journey around the spheres.

In point of fact, the only music Christian worship actually needs is plainchant. Plainchant is the perfect devotional music for singer and listener alike. It does not demand the complications of professionalism; it bears the stamp of no personality; it avoids emotionalism. Its resonances, especially when enhanced by the Romanesque and Gothic buildings in which it is at home, have a beneficent effect on the body and psyche. It calms, it awes, it uplifts. But there is more. It is a vehicle which can take one as high as one is capable of going, whether on the path of identification with the inner tone, as for the singer, or, for the listener, on that of entry into “those temples in the high spheres that can be opened through song only.”⁴⁴ For

the seven notes of the modes can be heard as the notes of the planets, the wandering of the melody through them felt as a journey around the spheres. Or even their differences can be transcended, and the whole entered as a pleroma, like the soul in the *Poimandres*, breaking through to the Eighth Sphere. Plainsong, like the mystery of the Mass, offers to each what he or she is able to receive.

Not so the music of Protestant sects, which specifically emotional. It is here that we find certain manifestations that might on first sight be confused with the musical mysticism of Judaism and Islam, to which the Christian churches offer no parallel. Protestantism has periodically given a home to the more Dionysian impulses, and to a cruder type of congregational participation in the service. There was an eighteenth century Methodist sect called the “Jumpers” from dancing and leaping during their services: a far cry from modern Methodism, but probably little different from those present-day Pentecostal and Revivalist sects, especially in the American South, which combine repetitive music with rhythmical movement to induce a sort of ecstatic trance in which visions, glossolalia (speaking with tongues) and healing may occur. However, this has nothing to do with the use of music as an initiatic means, for the practices are open to all, not controlled by a Master, and the ecstatic states not accompanied by any metaphysical understanding. It is intoxication without knowledge. Apart from the experiences of individual mystics, music is missing from Christian esotericism except in the speculative form favored by the Platonists as an intelligible image of cosmic and metaphysical realities. For a deliberate application of *musica instrumentalis* for higher ends we must look to the mystical schools of the other branches of Abrahamic monotheism, first Judaism, then Islam.

The Kabbalists share the classical and early Christian vision of a harmonious universe, in which “not only the angels sing: the stars, the spheres, the *merkavah* (Chariot-Throne) and the beasts, the trees in the Garden of

Eden and their perfumes, indeed the whole universe sings before God.”⁴⁵ Although this source says that only Moses and Joshua could hear such music, in later Kabbalistic schools, and especially in Hasidism, the privilege is extended to the *zaddiks* or living spiritual masters. It is their part then to pass on its benefits to their disciples for their healing and purification, either directly by singing to them some semblance of it, or indirectly through the wisdom with which it has imbued them: for we do not forget that music, on that level, is synonymous with knowledge.

The human voice is better for this purpose than any instrument, being as is said “of a noble corporeality,”⁴⁶ on the confines between spirit and body. When the *zaddik* is truly possessed by the experiences of his soul, his singing may go beyond anything of which his voice is normally capable. “Thus one *zaddik* stood in prayer . . . and sang new melodies, wonder of wonder, that he had never heard and that no human ear had ever heard, and he did not know at all what he sang and in what way he sang, for he was bound to the upper world.”⁴⁷

Such melodies are generally wordless. “For the songs of the souls—at the time they are swaying in the high regions to drink from the well of the Almighty King—consist of tones only, dismantled of burdensome words.”⁴⁸ As early as the fourteenth century the Rabbi Solomon ben Adret issued a formal decree against the use of wordless chant as practiced in Kabbalistic circles,⁴⁹ but such chant, though only admitted to the public Jewish liturgy (as to the Christian) under the guise of extended melismata on words such as “Allelujah,” re-emerged as a favorite devotional means of Hasidism. In the Hasidic communities of Eastern Europe, which by the end of the eighteenth century contained as many as a million Jews, singing and dancing were cultivated as the perfect expression of God’s people on earth. When practiced communally they tend to adopt the features of folk song and dance, both local and Near Eastern. When given forth by one inspired person, the Hasidic song is an emotional

outpouring, joyful or sad as it may be, of the soul to God, “capable of transforming the soul of the singing worshipper to such an extent that definite stages of a mystic approach to God could be reached, stages which otherwise were most difficult to attain.”⁵⁰ We must mention one further variety of song, typical of the Hasidic blend of mysticism with humor: the type with a “doodling” refrain. *Dudeln* in German means to play on the bagpipe (*Dudelsack*) or just to “tootle.” But *du* is also the familiar “thou,” and the sense of the song is an address to a God who is found everywhere: wherever the singer looks, it is *du-du-du*, “Thou, Thou, Thou.”⁵¹

In the public worship of Islam, music has no place beyond the monosyllabic chanting of the Quran. As if in compensation, the Muslim esoteric orders—the Sufis—have made music one of the strongest features of their own religious practices. The general term for it, *sama*, “audition,” stresses the passive nature of this musical way: whereas the Hasidim are transported by their own song, the Sufis’ is the more inward path of the concentrated listener. Perhaps in this one can see a reflection of the earth-embracing mysticism of the Jew vis-a-vis the earth-forsaking flight of the Oriental mystic. At first the *sama* referred simply to the hearing of the Quran being recited or sung. Devout listeners would be transported into ecstasy by certain passages: some would pass into unconsciousness, or even, if we credit the many reports, die. Others would moan, move about, wave their arms, arise and begin dancing. From these spontaneous beginnings grew an institutionalized *sama* with strict rules of conduct and decorum, allowing as the musical vehicle of these ecstasies not only the Quranic text but also devotional songs and instrumental pieces.

Everyone knows of one such development: the “Whirling Dervishes” of the Near East. Properly called the Mevlevi Order, and founded in Konya, Turkey, by the Persian poet Rumi (1207–73), these still practice a *sama* of whirling dance accompanied by the

music of the *nay* or reed flute. They dress in tall felt hats like truncated cones, and white gowns with broad skirts that stand out as they whirl. Their hats are said to be tilted at the same angle as the Earth's axis, and their dance to symbolize the movements of the planetary spheres as they circle in perfect order and love for their Lord. Rumi, in one of his poems, explains the purpose of this devotion:

We all have been parts of Adam, we have
heard those melodies in Paradise.

Although the water and earth of our bodies
have caused a doubt to fall upon us,
something of those melodies comes
back to our memory.

(Mathnawi, IV, 736–7)

Not all Sufis were as disciplined and elegant in their *sama* as the Mevlevi. In books of instruction dating from the eleventh century there are sections on what is to be done when an auditor or dancer begins to tear off his clothes, what someone should do who catches a torn garment, etc. If deriving from someone in a high spiritual state, such rags could become relics. But there were abuses, especially with regard to attractive women looking on (they never seem to have participated) and to attractive boys gradually divesting themselves of their clothing. So one finds, just as in Christian and Jewish medieval writings, pages of dreary polemics both for and against the admissibility of music in religious devotions. Both sides tirelessly quote the few applicable passages in the Quran, and the numerous Hadith or stories of the Prophet's life, in which his every yawn or smile is interpreted as an absolute principle to prove the heresy of, and probably to execute, one's opponent. From the Sufi's point of view, they were indeed fighting for their lives against a centralized, legalistic Islam such as again threatens today. Taking up a previous theme of whether words or music are closer to God, one can at least say in favor of music that tones can never be twisted and interpreted, as words can, to condemn one's fellow man out of God's mouth.

What happens to the Sufi during the *sama*? I will summarize the accounts of the philosopher brothers Al-Ghazali: Abu Hamid (1058–1111) and Majd al-Din (d. 1126), who both wrote treatises on Sufi music and dance.⁵² Both agree that *sama* can bring one to states that are otherwise very difficult to attain. Above all, it arouses one's love and longing for God—just as for the ordinary fellow, love songs arouse his sexual longing—and from this single-minded devotion comes a purification of the heart. Following purification come visions and revelations that surpass all other ambitions: a hundred thousand states in a world of lights and spirits otherwise undiscoverable even through the most perfect religious observances. In truth, these states are incapable of expression through words, or of imagination by those who have not experienced them. But a parallel is given us by the two types of music, vocal and instrumental. In the first, the poetry tells us what we are to feel, fear, grief, joy, etc., and we can put our feelings into words. But instrumental music gives us feelings, no less powerful, which we cannot describe, and longings which are felt most powerfully, even by common people, without knowing what it is that they long for.

Sohrawardi, who has already explained to us the ontology of the spheres, is more able to find words for the inexpressible.

The suprasensory realities encountered by the prophets, the Initiates, and others appear to them sometimes in the form of lines of writing, sometimes in the hearing of a voice which may be gentle and sweet and which can also be terrifying. Sometimes they see human forms of extreme beauty who speak to them in most beautiful words and converse with them intimately about the invisible world; at other times these forms appear to them like those delicate figures proceeding from the most refined art of the painters. On occasion they are shown as if in an enclosure; at other times the forms and figures appear suspended.⁵³

Sohrawardi's own other-worldly experiences, as one can tell from his writings in

general, were mainly visual, that is to say perceived with the inner eye. Nevertheless, he does not discount the music that is heard with the inner ear, for he says: "Thus it is conceivable that there are sounds and melodies in the celestial spheres which are not conditioned by the air nor by a vibratory disturbance. And one cannot imagine that there could be melodies more delightful than theirs . . ." ⁵⁴ During *sama*, he says elsewhere, "the soul deprives the ear of its auditory function and listens directly herself," ⁵⁵ meaning that what is heard in the state no longer bears the slightest resemblance to the music that is going on.

There is a respect in which tone is superior to image or to any mixture of the two, and capable of raising one to states limited not by space, color or form.

As one looks further East, the use of music for the attainment of higher states merges into a whole science of sound of which the practical application is the mantram. Neither the theory of sacred sound nor the power and metaphysics of the spoken word enters into my intended scope, still less into my competency. Nevertheless, a few words must be said in conclusion about those yoga-systems that concentrate on sound, so I will outline briefly their underlying principles.

The major distinction to be made is between Mantra-yoga and Shabda-yoga. Mantra-yoga uses as a focus of concentration, syllables, words or sentences which may be spoken or intoned out loud or may be pronounced with one's inner voice. The sounds used (e.g. OM MANI PADME HUM) always have a symbolic meaning, but whether one's practice involves knowledge or consideration of that, or combines the mantram

with visualization, or concentrates exclusively on the sound, is a matter for schools and individuals to decide. So is the degree of repetition, and so is the extent to which mantra in general are invested with cosmic or magical significance.

When one tries to control the mind in meditation, one discovers two major adversaries: the inner ear and the inner eye. The one hears a perpetual running commentary, the other watches an endless filmstrip. To overcome them is not, for most aspirants, as easy as switching off a television. So one tries to replace them, the chatter by a mantram, the flicker of images by a deliberate visualization. One way is to try to hold steady the picture of a written mantram while simultaneously hearing it, as for instance a vividly-colored Sanskrit or English OM-syllable. Eventually a state of inner quietude may be reached by this means in which the proper work of meditation can begin. I say this advisedly, because the public image of meditation as the simple repetition of a mantram in order to induce a relaxed state, while therapeutic to hypertense people, has little to do with Yoga properly so called. Yoga means "yoking" or union, and is a state (not a practice, still less an exercise program) usually reached through one of two great ways: the *bhakti-marga* or Way of Love—in which case the work of meditation is loving concentration on one's god or goddess—and the *jnana-marga* or Way of Knowledge, whose meditative practice is the self-identification with the Real. In either case, the mantram is only an aid on the path: a stick to support one and to beat off the assailing thoughts, which one eventually discards. For the same reason, some Sufis urge one to dispense as soon as one can with the outward music and ritual of the *sama*, the goal being the capacity to enter the states at will and eventually to sustain them unbroken so that one "hears from every object in the Universe." ⁵⁶

In Shabda-yoga, on the other hand, one does not begin with tool in hand: one sets out to discover the Inner Sound and to identify oneself thereby with the universal

Sound Current. The inner ear may perceive it at first in multifarious forms. The texts mention noises as of bells and other instruments, of animal and human voices, of waters and thunders, sometimes in systematic sequence and with reference to various energy centers in the body in which they seem to occur as one's practice progresses. Some sounds are not of this world, and bring ineffable states with them. Others represent the action of vast cosmic forces into which one's little self

is absorbed. Clearly the Shabda-yogin is exploring the same worlds, or states, as the Jewish and Muslim mystics, only more particularly in aural mode. Yet perhaps there is a respect in which tone is superior to image or to any mixture of the two, and capable of raising one to states limited not by space, color or form but solely by the necessity for manifestation, namely to the very boundaries of the Imaginal World beyond which are the Archetypes in their unbreakable Silence. □

Notes

1. W. Y. Evans-Wentz, *The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries* (London: Oxford University Press, 1911; reprint, New York: Lemma, 1973), 131.
2. *Ibid.*, 31f.
3. *Ibid.*, 111.
4. *Ibid.*, 103.
5. *Ibid.*, 298. [Quoting *Silva Gadelica* ii, 142–4.]
6. *Ibid.*, 61.
7. Thomas Vaughan, *The Magical Writings of Thomas Vaughan*, ed. A. E. Waite (London, 1888; reprint, Mokelumne Hill, CA: Health Research, 1974), 5.
8. Howard Rollin Patch, *The Other World, According to Descriptions in Medieval Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950), 3.
9. T. W. Rolleston, *The High Deeds of Finn and other Bardic Romances of Ancient Ireland* (London, 1910; reprint, New York: Lemma, 1973), 47.
10. John J. O'Meara, trans., *The Voyage of Saint Brendan* ((Dublin: Dolmen, 1978), 21.
11. Evans-Wentz, *Fairy Faith*, 85, 105f, 115, 129f.
12. *Ibid.*, 205.
13. *Ibid.*, 154.
14. Patch, *Other World*, 34.
15. *Ibid.*, 107.
16. *Ibid.*, 35.
17. Lewis Spence, *The Magic Arts in Celtic Britain* (London: Rider, n.d.), 29; Patch, *Other World*, 45.
18. A. H. Leahy, *Heroic Romances of Ireland* (London, 1905–6; reprint, New York: Lemma, n.d.), 72.
19. Patch, *Other World*, 30.
20. Spence, *Magic Arts*, 29.
21. Patch, *Other World*, 45.
22. *Ibid.*, 30.
23. O'Meara, *Voyage of St. Brendan*, 43–6.
24. *Ibid.*, 50ff.
25. Patch, *Other World*, 32.
26. *Ibid.*, 35.
27. See especially Henry Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth* (Princeton University Press, 1977), 51ff.
28. *Ibid.*, 131.
29. *Loc. cit.*
30. *Loc. cit.*
31. C. G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (New York: Pantheon, 1961), 290.
32. *Republic X*, 614b–621d.
33. *Ibid.*, 617b.
34. Cicero, *Somnium Scipionis*, V, 1.
35. Plutarch, *On the Sign of Socrates*, 590.
36. Treatise No. 1 of the *Corpus Hermeticum*.
37. *Ibid.*, Sect. 26.
38. C. G. Jung, *Mysterium Conjunctionis*, vol. 14 of *Collected Works* (Princeton University Press, 1970), para. 308.
39. Commentary on Aristotle's *De Caelis*, as quoted in Thomas Taylor, *The Mystical Hymns of Orpheus*, 2nd ed. (London, 1824), note to Hymn 34.
40. In his *Itinerarium Exstaticum* of 1656.
41. See *New Oxford History of Music*, vol. III, 412.
42. Warner Allen, *The Timeless Moment* (London: Faber, 1946), 30ff.
43. Quoted in Juliette Alvin, *Music Therapy* (New

- York: Basic Books, 1975), 152.
44. V. M. Teitelbaum, *The Rabbi of Ljdai*, quoted in A. Z. Idelsohn, *Jewish Music in its Historical Development* (New York: Henry Holt, 1929), 414.
45. Amnon Shiloah, "The Symbolism of Music in the Kabbalistic Tradition," in *World of Music*, (Mainz), vol. 22 (1978), 64.
46. Aron Marko Rothmuller, *The Music of the Jews: An Historical Appreciation* (S. Brunswick, NY: Thomas Yoseloff, 1967), 175.
47. Martin Buber, *Hasidism and Modern Man* (New York: Horizon Press, 1958), 79f. [Punctuation changed.]
48. Rabbi Shneur Zalman, quoted in *New Oxford History of Music*, vol. 1, 333n.
49. Eric Werner, *The Sacred Bridge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1954), 170.
50. Eric Werner, in *New Oxford History of Music*, vol. 1, 333.
51. Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 420, 431. [The music on p. 422.]
52. Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *Ihya Ulum ad-Din* (The Revival of the Religious Sciences), trans. Duncan B. Macdonald in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 22 (1901): 1-28; Majd al-Din al-Ghazali, *Bawariq al-Ilma* (Treatise on Sufi Music and Dance), trans. in James Robson, *Tracts on Listening to Music* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1938), 97-104.
53. Corbin, *Spiritual Body*, 132.
54. *Ibid.*, 133.
55. Sohrawardi, *Epistle on the State of Childhood*, trans. S. H. Nasr, in *TEMENOS*, no. 4 (1984), 72.
56. Ali ibn Usman Hujviri, *Kashf al-Mahjub* (The Unveiling of the Veiled), trans. R. A. Nicholson (London, 1911), 405.

The Eye of Man a little narrow orb, clos'd up & dark,
Scarcely beholding the great light, conversing with the Void;
The Ear a little shell, in small volutions shutting out
All melodies & comprehending only Discord and Harmony;
Can such an Eye judge of the stars? & looking thro' its tubes
Measure the sunny rays that point their spears on Udanadan?
Can such an Ear, fill'd with the vapours of the yawning pit,
Judge of the pure melodious harp struck by a hand divine?
Can such clos'd nostrils feel a joy? or tell of autumn fruits
When grapes & figs burst their coverings to the joyful air?

The Writings of William Blake
Oxford Standard Edition,
(Ed. Keynes, pp. 484-5)