

## CHAPTER SIXTY SIX

# GNOSIS AND THE ARTS: MUSIC

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The present book's definition of gnosis as "deep knowledge in which the mysteries of the cosmos are unveiled" expresses a perennial claim on behalf of music. Beethoven's famous dictum that "music is a higher revelation than all their wisdom and philosophy" (Godwin 1986: 199), even if he did not say it himself, finds echoes in almost every epoch.

One rationale for this claim lies in the immaterial and non-referential nature of music. Although often joined to words or gestures, as in song and dance, music in itself has no imagery, no verbal content, and no tangible presence. It is invisible, yet comes into being when it enters consciousness, usually through the ears. Yet it does not even need an exterior voice or instrument to be heard. The aural imagination can make music, ranging in intensity from the casual tunes that everyone hears in their head to what Beethoven himself must have experienced, composing the most complex works in a state of total deafness.

The ancient Indian scriptures, the Vedas and the Brahmanas, depict the creation of the manifested worlds as a praise-song of the gods that summons all things into being: the song itself is the substance and primordial matter out of which the worlds are formed (Godwin 1989: 41). Its rhythms are the cycles within cycles of Hindu chronology, but the song is outside time, thus perpetually accessible if one is attuned to it. One response to this belief is the discipline of Shabda Yoga, the yoga of the sound-current, especially cultivated in the modern Radha Soami Satsang. The method, briefly summarized, is concentration on the "third eye" with the intention first of hearing, then becoming absorbed in the primordial sound. This must be the highest ambition of musical gnosis, leapfrogging over the entire phenomenon of music as we know it in order to contemplate its unchanging source. A similar idea underlies the advice given by some yoga teachers: that when listening to a musical performance, one should not attend to the voice or the instrumental melody, but to the single tone that persists throughout. Of course this only works in musical traditions based on a drone, rather than on changing harmonies, such as Western music has used since the Middle Ages. Some would see in this difference a symptom of the metaphysical distance between cultures.

Islam also has a strong tradition of musically based gnosis. The tenth-century encyclopedia of the Brethren of Purity has the earliest treatise on the subject, analyzing the various degrees of response to music. At the summit is the experience reported, or imagined, of Moses, “who when he heard the discourse of his Lord ... was in transports hearing this serene melody and thereafter considered all rhythms, all melodies and all songs as insignificant” (Godwin 1986: 72–3). With this principle in mind, the Sufis developed the practice of *samā* (“audition”) as a graded meditative practice, beginning with the simple emotional response to a song or flute melody and rising by stages to ecstatic union with the divine (Godwin 1986: 80–1).

Karlheinz Stockhausen (1928–2007), one of the most avowedly gnostic of modern composers, has said “I’m not communicating anything personally. I’m just making music which makes it possible to make contact with this supra-natural world” (Stockhausen 1989: 4). Critics have sneered at Stockhausen’s claim that he was a being from the star system of Sirius who incarnated in order to bring a new music to earthlings. But the claim had a respectable context in traditional cosmology, and specifically in the myth of the “harmony of the spheres.” This presupposes a geocentric cosmos in which the earth is surrounded by the seven planetary spheres, the eighth sphere that carries the fixed stars, the Primum Mobile that gives motion to the whole, and thereafter an infinitude filled with gods, angels, etc., according to the relevant religion. The “Myth of Er” at the end of Plato’s *Republic*, reporting what we would call a near-death experience, is the earliest written source of the tradition that these spheres are somehow musical: Er witnesses singing Sirens perched on each one. Cicero and Plutarch wrote similar accounts of initiates who ascended through the spheres in spirit and returned to report on the music they heard there. Philo of Alexandria (ca. 30 BC–AD 45), who reconciled Judaic doctrines with Platonic philosophy, writes that Moses on Mount Sinai heard it, but only because he “laid aside his body” and neither ate nor drank for 40 days and nights (Godwin 1986: 57). The Hermetic writings, compiled in the early centuries of the Christian era, contain the description of how the virtuous soul, upon leaving the body at death, ascends through the planetary spheres until it enters the eighth sphere: that of the stars, presumably including Sirius. There it joins the beings who are already there, hymning the Father, and it even hears the Powers beyond the eighth sphere singing their own hymns (Copenhaver (ed.) 1992: 6).

From the Classical period onwards, the planetary harmony was firmly established in the Western imagination. No one claimed to hear it any longer, but it furnished ample material to poets. A different strain derived, as did Plato himself, from the tradition of Pythagoras (sixth cent. BC). While his biographer Porphyry stated that Pythagoras could hear the music of the spheres, he was writing in hagiographic mode centuries after the master’s death. More certain is that Pythagoras either discovered empirically, or transmitted from the Babylonians, the connection of music with mathematics, and demonstrated it using the monochord. The remarkable fact is that the intervals which the ear perceives as harmonious correspond with simple, superparticular ratios of string-lengths: the octave as 1:2, the fifth as 2:3, the fourth as 3:4, the major third as 4:5, the minor third as 5:6, the whole-tone as 8:9 or 9:10, and the semitone as 15:16. With this discovery, harmony was recognized as a quantifiable science, leading to its inclusion in the Quadrivium, the mathematical part of the Seven Liberal Arts – again

anticipated by Plato when he recommended for his Republic the study of Arithmetic, Geometry, Stereometry (solid geometry), Harmony, and Astronomy. One of the obvious challenges was to apply this principle to the other Pythagorean topos, that of the harmony of the spheres. Various theories of how tones or intervals correspond to each planet were already circulating in the ancient world. The music treatises of Ptolemy (fl. 127–148) and especially Boethius (ca. 480–524/5) ensured their transmission to the Western and Muslim Middle Ages, and such theories continued to be proposed, adapting to developments in astronomy, right up to the twentieth century.

The attempt to comprehend the planetary motions in harmonic terms involves all of the quadrivial arts, as Johannes Kepler (1571–1630) was to demonstrate. He first tried to explain the rationale for the arrangement of planetary orbits through Stereometry, inserting the Platonic solids between the orbits, then later found an answer in Harmony, incidentally discovering that those orbits are not circular but elliptical. To Kepler, this densely mathematical investigation was “gnostic,” in the sense that it gave humans insight into the mind of God. Thoroughly progressive in his outlook, he addressed his contemporaries:

Follow me, you musicians of today, and judge the matter by your arts, unknown to antiquity. In these last centuries, after two thousand years in the womb, ever-prodigious nature has finally produced you to give the first true image of the universe. Through your counterpoints of many voices and through your ears she has suggested what exists in her innermost bosom to the human intellect, most beloved child of God the Creator.

(Godwin 1989: 244)

Gnosis here is not mysticism, but *knowledge* of things as they truly are. Kepler held that the invention of polyphonic music, unknown to the ancients, has allowed us to take a step further into God’s mind.

The same idea permeates the subdiscipline of “speculative music,” which uses music and cosmology as keys to understanding each other. The most recent, poly-mathic synthesis was that of Hans Kayser (1891–1964). His expositions of what he called *Harmonik* identify the presence of the harmonic series and its unheard counterpart, the subharmonic series, in the morphology of plants, the history of architecture, Behmenist theology, and many other disciplines. For Kayser, the harmonic series was not only the basis for the manifested world, in conformity with Pythagorean doctrine, but included the key to the unmanifested Absolute: Brahma, the Tao, the *deus absconditus* of Gnosticism, Boehme’s *Ungrund*, etc. (Kayser 2005: 185). Kayser gives no practical instruction, but implies that to replace the modern, materialistic worldview with that of universal harmony, still empirically based, is an essential prelude to higher knowledge.

Another modern polymath, Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925), gave a more occult explanation, based on the Theosophical system of higher worlds. He writes about how great artists, in sleep, experience the Astral world and its colors, and are able to bring something of those colors back to earth in their paintings. He continues:

The musician, on the other hand, conjures up a still higher world. In the physical world he conjures up the Devachanic world. Indeed, the melodies and harmonies

that speak to us from the works of our great masters are faithful copies of the Devachanic world .... Man's original home is in Devachan, and the echoes from this homeland, this spiritual world, resound in him in the harmonies and melodies of the physical world.

(Godwin 1987: 82)

For all the differences in language, this resembles the Hermetic ascent through the levels of being, first those of the planets (the Astral world), then the higher spheres where the gods (devas, in Hinduism) reside. Steiner values music as a foretaste of what everyone can expect to experience during the period between incarnations, or exceptionally (as in his own case) through perceiving higher worlds while still embodied. He invented the discipline or art of eurhythm (not to be confused with Dalcroze's eurhythmics) in order to cultivate this ability, through coordinating bodily movements with sounds, both verbal and musical.

Another use of tone to help one enter higher states of consciousness employs the aspirant's own voice. Various methods emerged towards the end of the twentieth century, some with a traditional basis, such as Tibetan overtone singing, Gregorian chant, and Kabbalistic prayers expressed as vowels (Godwin 1991: 83–6). Others were invented within the New Age movement, simple enough that they could be used without any prior musical training or knowledge; we would include here pseudo-shamanic practices and elementary forms of drumming, imitating African music.

Obviously there is a wide philosophical gap between methods of this kind and those that respect the work of a composer or improviser who has mastered a complex tradition. In the latter case, details matter, and the more subtle they are, the richer the musical substance offered for contemplation, but there another gap appears. Alain Daniélou (1907–1994), who became adept in Hindu music, writes of the great deficiency of Western music due to its adoption of equal temperament (Daniélou 1995: 131–4). Jean Thamar, another traditionally minded musical philosopher and follower of René Guénon, condemns Western post-Medieval music altogether for sacrificing the rich possibilities of seven or more modes and of untempered intervals – in short, sacrificing melody for the sake of harmony (Godwin 1995: 216). On the other side we find another Traditionalist, Marco Pallis (1895–1989, traveler to Tibet, translator of Guénon), devoting himself to the playing of viola da gamba consorts. He writes: “Like every genuine art, music provides an image of the Universe, at the level of ‘the Lesser Mysteries’; when practiced with this truth in mind, it will serve as a support of contemplation and the joy it incidentally evokes will be seen as a reflection of the Divine Bliss” (Pallis 1980: 125). Pallis was also a passionate admirer of Richard Wagner's operas. How different he was from another musical Buddhist, John Cage (1912–1992)! In Cage's aesthetic, which has had a tremendous influence on all the arts, any sound, any noise, or even (and particularly) silence, is equally acceptable as “music.”

In the end, the choice of methods for musical gnosis depends on one's goal. Music, uniquely among the arts, can serve both the positive approach, which desires realization of higher states of being, knowledge of metaphysical realities, the cosmological vision, etc., and the negative, in which the ego is extinguished in the ineffable, or replaced by the “natural state” in which nirvana is co-present with samsara.

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