

THE MYSTIC'S LIVING TONE

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THE true mystic is a man who reaches ardently, often passionately, toward the world of pure Energy, the formless world, because he has become thoroughly dissatisfied with the realm where conscious little egos which have, as the Hindu says, "name and form" (*nama* and *rupa*), relate themselves, bind and enslave each other, worship forms and bodies and the vitality therein.

The mystic would leap flame-like beyond this world which is thickly covered with the weeds of passion, of lust, of craving for embodied existence, sensory excitement and desires of the form of personality. The moment consciousness reaches beyond that form, it ascends into the bliss of unconditioned being which, at its apex, has been called Nirvana, not the annihilation of being, but life as formless, universal Energy or Breath.

The mystic in his attempt to lead others to that realization of transcendent freedom (freedom from attachment to form) which he has experienced, or for which at any rate he yearns, is confronted with a terrible difficulty. For any communication through words implies conditioning by form. All the words we use relate more or less definitely to objects, to sense-experiences, to relations between forms and thus to personalities. The mystic poet, hemmed in by the multifarious expression of this world of form, has recourse to a subterfuge. He uses forms and names, but in such a manner that they become mere symbols of transparent inner meaning, born of subjective form-free experience.

Thus the Sufi poet will speak of "wine," "beloved," "feast," etc., but in doing so he uses code words which bring even to the half-initiated a sense, at least, of formless realities beyond. The feelings with which ordinary men connect these terms are at best foreshadowings of a supernatural realization of "free" life. From the shadow to the image and then to the Reality; this is the path

followed fervently by the true mystic, in whom dwells no passive sentimentality or vague religious feeling but a forceful, positive will for freedom, a terrific urge to burn up all forms, all limitations and escape into the beyond through the very flame of the conflagration.

Verbal symbols are adequate only when the reader is himself already on the path to freedom. The ordinary man reading Hafiz will say that he was devoted to sensual enjoyment, a fatal misunderstanding indeed! The mystic therefore needs a language beyond language, a wordless speech not marred by references to sensory impression or objects. Of these languages there are essentially two kinds: algebra and music.

Algebra deals with pure relationship. The entities to be related are not considered. The mind soars free in a world without objects. But this is not a world of life. It is an objectless realm, and at the same time one in which there resides the very quintessence of form; abstract relationship. This point is of the utmost importance to the musician, for music partakes to a large extent of the character of algebra. In fact it is often regarded by the Western musician as but a kind of applied algebra, viz. whenever it is thought that the musical score *is* the music, whether or not it is ever to be manifested as sound.

However when music is considered in actuality, that is as an organism of tones, it is evident that besides the algebraic substratum another element is involved: sound. In other words music is dual. It is algebra and sound or, we should rather say, algebra and tone; and while the algebraic element has been primarily developed by European musicians, following the general formalistic and nominalistic trend of European culture (which never really developed beyond medieval scholasticism, but only transferred it to other subject-matters), the tone element has constituted the foundation of Asiatic Aryan music, in fact more or less of all non-European music.

Mystical music, then, from the objective standpoint, is that music in which the element of tone predominates. For tone is the essence of life-power which is pure, formless Energy; while algebra deals with the formative principle of the intellect which is the cause of all particular objective formations.

The greatest musical mystics were the Buddhist or probably pre-Buddhist musicians who began the making of the marvelous gongs of Burma, Java, Thibet, etc., the original source of which seems to have been the inland portion of Indo-China, cradle of the mysterious Khmers. In these gongs we find the greatest instrumental perfection of tone yet reached by man. They are the foundation of a music of pure mysticism, in which the algebraic or formal element has been put in what the writer thinks its proper place, that is, in the formula of manufacture of the gong. This means that the form element is present *within* every tone; not outside in the sequence of abstract entities called musical notes, black dots on paper, edges of intervals, having no meaning in themselves, therefore no life-principle.

For a musician who is a mystic a Single Tone is the foundation of music. Any tone which is not sufficient in itself as a musical expression is lifeless. Whenever the element of musical meaning and the major emphasis are shifted from the single tone to the sequence of intervals constituted by abstract pitch-values, then the mystic claims form has overpowered life, that the music has become intellectual and has thus fallen into the world of the formative mind, which, as the Buddhist puts it, "is the slayer of the Real." Orientalists usually say that there is no typical Buddhistic music, but this is an error. The gongs and bells *are* in themselves the whole of that music.

The same thing may be said of the true mystical Christian music. It is hidden in the great bells of the cathedrals, the bells which gave to Joan of Arc her Voices, the bells which were the soul of the medieval community during the age of true mysticism, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Let us go further. Take the short motets of Vittoria, Palestrina, even the chorals of Bach. What are they if not vast and long-throbbing bell-tones, synthetically reconstituted by human voices each of which carries, as it were, one overtone component of the bell-chord? For each tone of a gong or bell is really a complex chord, determined by the particular chemical formula of the alloy and the shape of the bell. And in that lies the formal or algebraic element of gong or bell music; in the chemical formula, in the shape of the metallic mass. The tone of the bell oscillates,

vibrates, dies out. So do the finest motets of Palestrina. They begin with one tone or chord and it is this very tone that undergoes ritualistic changes as the vocal parts move on toward the end which repeats the initial tone. The motet undulates from unity to unity through multiplicity. It does so without tonal modulation, usually with an imperceptible and slow motion, the very image of the quiet flow of life itself, of what Chinese mystics call Tao. Such music is a meditation on the innermost reality of life. It does not rely upon diversity or the paraphernalia of formalistic development. It says but a few things, yet for the mystic these alone are worth saying.

But let us come to the moderns. Scriabin's works, after he came to America (a significant point indeed) and first was haunted by the great gong-tone (usually referred to as the "mystic chord of Prometheus"), have been nothing but vast gong-combinations, modulations of some one throbbing, living Tone which is the soul and source of energy of the composition. There are but few who have understood the mystical foundation of his works, how they must be played and pedalled, the formation on the basis of fourths of his tone-chords, their characteristic spiral-shapes which in the pattern of their vibration suggest the bells or sacred shapes of Buddhism. Very few musicians grasp the difference between the inner form of a tone-chord and the outer form created by the sequence of such tones. Fewer still, probably, realize that there is as fundamental a relation between the form in space of the tones (basic chords or even timbre of instruments) and the form in time of the composition, as there is between the inner structure of the seed of an organism and the organism fully matured.

To recognize this, the strictly intellectual approach to the idea of form must be abandoned for an attitude more vital, more mystic. Today, music, after the Romantic and post-Romantic attempt to escape into a world of soul-energy (spiritual super-conscious soul with Scriabin, psychic and sub-conscious soul with the Schönberg of the pre-war period), has again fallen back to formalism and so-called neo-classicism. Therefore the door to the realization of the purely mystic and even vital elements in music is closed to most musicians.

But a few have escaped and may be the foundation of a musical renaissance in America, possibly in Hungary and Russia. The outstanding figures in America so far are Carl Ruggles and Edgar Varese. Though the former seems to use a very intellectual technic and the latter might even object to being called a mystic, yet both, of entirely different temperaments and backgrounds, base their music on the energetic power of vast synthetic tones. Ruggles' polyphony (as also that of Wallingford Riegger) must not confuse. It leads to the same synthesis of the shifting twelve tones (or rather twelve vibrating centers of the one great cosmic Tone) as do Varese's huge and strident sonorous masses of atonal (or rather syntonic) substance. Ruggles' melodic and polyphonic regulations and Varese's instrumental technic are form-elements, of course; but elements exactly comparable to the chemical formula of metallic alloy and the specific shape of the bells.

We are at the beginning of twentieth century music. Just as 1830 marked the dawn of romantic music, whose seed can be found in Beethoven, the seed of the future can be found today in Scriabin and Schönberg. Then Berlioz, Chopin, Liszt, later Wagner, were beginning to express the typical soul of the nineteenth century. Today we are at the threshold of a renaissance of musical mysticism, in spite of all the reactionary fervor of composers clinging to the ideals of Stravinsky and the French schools. This new music needs a new public. It has one already; but it is not likely to grow among those with musical education in the European sense. What it demands is a larger response to the rhythm and freedom of an inner life.