

Tibetan Music: Sacred and Secular

by
Lobsang Ph. Lhalungpa

Studies in Comparative Religion, Vol. 3, No. 2. (Spring, 1969) © World Wisdom, Inc.

www.studiesincomparativereligion.com

The present article was first offered as a paper to a conference held in the United States in 1968 and to which the author was invited. Its interest for our readers largely consists in the fact that it illustrates a normal characteristic of all traditional civilizations, namely the dependence of their arts (and sciences) on the religious principle. Thus those who practice an art and those who use its products participate thereby in the religious influence and are constantly being reminded of the message the religion in question is intended to communicate. In this respect the civilizations of Tibet and the Christian civilization of medieval Europe are alike.

The Editor.

GEOGRAPHY and history have moulded Tibet's destiny in many ways, a destiny unfortunately now fading into mere memory as a result of recent events. One of the most important of these factors was Tibet's position at the intersection of the great civilizations of India and China and the Great Steppe Complex. Tibet, in fact, served as a "preserving center", a cultural repository, for the adjacent traditions. She showed great fervour in borrowing beliefs and practices from her neighbours and blending them into a total spiritual tradition. She adapted them to suit her own conditions and genius while at the same time incorporating much of her own more ancient tradition as an integral part of her new culture. Thus, the new religion was not only a way of life; it was music, art and science as well.

Tibet lies at the highest point of the world, surrounded by the majestic Himalaya and Kunlun Mountains, the source of the mighty rivers that flow down into the plains of India and China. For centuries, Tibetans lived close to the grandeur of nature in self-imposed isolation. Gay in spirit, they devoted themselves to a splendidly quiet life in which music, both sacred and secular, was vital for their sustenance and inspiration.

Since a scientific assessment and analysis of Tibetan music has yet to be organized, this paper is limited to presenting an elementary description of Tibetan music. Just as sacred music was for the Tibetans an essential part of their spiritual endeavour, so also secular music gave solace to individuals in their struggle for life and social coherence.

With the banning of Bön, the native religion prior to the 8th Century, the first attempts at transplanting a non-theistic and exoteric Buddhism met with a good deal of popular resentment. The result was that the ritualistic and esoteric Buddhism of the Vajrayana was brought in to strengthen the position. The tradition of native music in its formal aspect found ready acceptance in the hands of the nascent Tibetan mystic circles and their followers. Music, like other arts, was given a richer meaning and endowed with a higher content. The beginning of this new phase was at Samye where the first Buddhist

monastic university was inaugurated with a display of sacred dance by the Indian teacher now popularly known as the Guru Padma Sambhava. This was followed by secular dances in which even royal personages took part. Historical accounts written by Buddhists, however, largely ignored the adaptation of the indigenous music to the new cultural changes.

Bön music was used as an accompaniment to ritual chanting, a means to communicate with supernatural forces. The rituals were techniques of invoking good spirits and exorcising evil ones.

Buddhists further developed music in its conception and scope; they diversified instrumentation and incorporated foreign elements from India, China and Central Asia. All these borrowings were made in harmony with tradition resulting in a sacred music which possesses a character that is quite distinctive. Secular music, too, shows a native genius with its varying forms and structures.

Although a number of commentaries on various aspects of music were written by Buddhists, only a few are available to us and these give scanty historical references. None of them is comprehensive enough to throw light on all the various aspects of music.

One such work, attributed to Padma Sambhava himself, was a part of the transmission of his mystic teachings to a select few and was re-recorded by his Tibetan consort, Khadro Yeshe Tshogyal. Subsequent teachers, both Tibetan and Indian, communicated various mystical traditions which were gradually transformed into the various sects of Tibetan Buddhism that we see today. Each sect adapted music and dance to suit its own temperamental and formal distinctions. Since the unifying factors of metaphysics and the liturgical purpose of music were shared by all of the sects, formal aspects do not differ very much from sect to sect.

I find it necessary here to deal a little more extensively with the function of music in the Tibetan religious tradition. The role of sacred music lies primarily in the process of inner transformation towards an ever higher and purer state technically known as "Enlightenment". Music means different things at different times even to the same initiate. It means one thing when he is at the beginning stage and another when he is at a more advanced stage of practice and experience. He is trained to see in and through the quintessence of all things, that is, the unity of absolute reality and the supreme bliss, of wisdom and compassion. Truth can be discovered through traversing many paths; music definitely is one such avenue in the life of Tibetan initiates. But it is always a means to an end, not an end in itself.

The esoteric metaphysics defines all sounds as music and all music as *mantras*, sacred formulae, as far as the awakening mind is concerned. The sacred formulae denote the condensation of infinite truth as non-substantive purity. *Mantra* ultimately is the eternal state which dissolves the subject-object distinction rendering empirical assertions and intellectual definitions meaningless. It is the highest form of beauty, not merely in appearance but in actuality, an actuality that is pure, perfect and infinite, wherein all concepts of good and bad disappear.

There is also a rational and intellectual approach to music. All sounds and music are the effects of cause and conditions, that is, the principle of interdependence, inter-

relationship and interaction functions throughout the art. All events are compound, nothing is independent, everything is subject to the dynamic law of causation and effect. Dynamism implies an ever-unending change, the process of evolution and devolution. Here music becomes a symbol of the true state of nature. The ever changing sound in its subtle form signifies this transitoriness which, despite appearances, is indivisible from the underlying reality, the Absolute, the Unmanifesting.

Sacred music, insofar as its symbolic and functional aspects are concerned, plays a vital role in the life of initiates as a process of subjective transformation which brings peace, harmony and awareness of truth in its totality. The truly beneficial approach, we believe, is the subjective assessment of music in its true nature. It must be admitted that all these profound concepts make no mention of encouraging "creative endeavour" as a means of exercising individual ingenuity and imagination. This absence of emphasis on individual innovation and creativity also characterizes our whole approach to art, pictorial and plastic as well as musical. Here too what is all-important is the referent, the metaphysical message which is symbolized by the art, through the canonical forms.

The nature of sacred music can be considered under two aspects; namely, the devotional aspect and the symbolic aspect. Devotional music is functional insofar as it features actually in any performance of temple liturgy or mystical dance. These two aspects are, however, complementary to each other and in fact inseparable.

The symbolic aspect embraces the widest possible range of musical concept because its scope goes beyond empirical views and definitions. Every conceivable sound, whether originating from animate or inanimate things, is source material for music and is at the same time symbolic. For there is no difference whatsoever in the nature of the message each conveys to a spiritual aspirant or to one who is awakening to reality. Even the essence of functional music lies in its symbolic value. The symbolism, it must be clearly stated, will be utterly meaningless and useless unless there is intense understanding of its true meaning coupled with a deeply felt urge to follow the path.

Generally speaking functional sacred music is constituted by temple liturgy, including devotional songs and ritual music both vocal and instrumental. All these enter into the training of monks and nuns, and each will specialize according to the particular traditions to which he or she is attached. There are a few simple chants and recitations common to all. Besides the common temple liturgy, certain types of ritual are performed jointly by monks, nuns and initiated laymen. In some cases non-initiates join in as well.

It is no exaggeration to say that as a spiritual exercise the purpose here is to seek elimination of suffering and the cause of suffering through contemplation and transcendental awareness. If the true purpose of music is considered in its proper perspective, any misconception about Tibetan sacred music and dance will naturally be dispelled.

If the true significance of sacred music is to be found, it must be viewed, not so much as an expression of aesthetic perception or creative ingenuity and achievement, as in its true nature, which is related to the Absolute. This does not mean, however, that sacred music has no contribution to make in the field of appreciation of beauty, as I shall now try to explain.

We Tibetans believe, as stated earlier, that beauty as form or sound, physical or spiritual, must needs contain some higher content and purpose, a transcendental overtone. This assumption is the basic of all aesthetic judgment. With total attention and awakening, one observes the object of beauty and first analyses it as it appears to oneself, according to one's own perception of beauty. After that one reflects more deeply on this perception and discovers its relationship to beauty itself. Having thus penetrated into the actuality by identifying beauty as imagination or idealistic creation, one is bound to face a situation where-in all subject-object distinctions disappear and the unity of things as infinite awareness and awakening is achieved. Such a state of mind is full of joy, harmony and peace. It has often been pointed out by spiritual teachers that merely psychological or sensual appreciation is only too likely to create attachment which in its turn will breed lust and other passions.

It should be pointed out that Tibet claims to have inherited both the orthodox forms of the Buddhist tradition, respectively known as Theravada and Mahayana. Monasteries following the older monastic pattern do not employ any music except chanting in their congregational service; the only instruments admitted there are the conch shell and the gong for calling the monks to assemble. Since all Tibetan monasteries, however, practise some forms derived from Mahayana, individual monks are always allowed to use a small hand-bell in association with the *vajra* or symbolic sceptre, as well as a little drum, in their private devotions provided no one around is disturbed thereby.

Those monasteries that follow Mahayana esotericism perform various rituals requiring music. In fact each such monastery has a well-trained orchestra comprised of monks and also a dance troupe including both senior and junior members, with the chief abbot often acting as master dancer.

Each monastic band requires a pair of long, straight brass instruments to provide a foundation tone in the form of sustained bass drones, while cymbals of two sizes together with drums give rhythmic variety. The melodic element is provided by a kind of shawm called *gyaling*, a powerful double-reed instrument not unlike a bagpipe chanter. To this collection may be added on occasion a type of flute hollowed out of a human thigh-bone which contributes a note of indeterminate pitch to the general symphony. This instrument carries important mystical properties as a sonorous symbol of mortality and impermanence.

The size of the instruments, their range, as well as their symbolic nature, determine their employment for specific purposes. For instance, big brasses are used for open air performances because of their very powerful tone. As a means to communicate with higher forces, four monk-musicians play them on the eve of festivals from the roof of their temple overlooking the village below the mountain on which the monastery is usually situated. This is precisely an invitation to the deities and guardian spirits to attend and partake of the ritual performance and feast. At the same time, the people living below or around, far or near, also consider this as an invitation to attend the festival. The combination of brasses and shawms with their differing tonal range and pitch fills the air with music and produces on the mind an almost magical effect.

The Liturgy

Something needs to be said about the strictly vocal portions of the temple liturgy which hover, as it were, on the frontier between plain speech and what would nowadays be regarded as music: both a strongly marked rhythmical element and a stylised voice-production confers on the choral office even at its plainest an unmistakably musical character. Normally the temple services will include recitation of Scriptures as well as poetical eulogies in honour of the Buddha and his chief disciples; to which must be added appeals to the guardian divinities who watch over the Doctrine and hymns of various kinds. Every monastery has its own syllabus of chantings and readings which are regularly performed at congregational services held in the assembly hall. All these chantings are carried out from memory; young novices receive a most rigorous training in this respect during their first few years at the monastery. In certain special cases, scriptural readings are carried out at a very fast tempo which to outsiders might seem rather disconcerting. This happens when some pious layman commissions a reading of a whole sacred book which might run into several volumes for the purpose of gathering merit, which can then be shared with other beings "even down to the smallest blade of grass"; such a reading can even last for several weeks at a stretch.

Whatever the nature of a liturgical reading or chanting, this is the responsibility of the Lama-preceptor whose office it is to supervise both its efficiency and quality.

Monasteries that follow an esoteric tradition have special forms of ritual other than those just mentioned. In the latter case instrumental symphonies are associated with the temple chanting, as also with the sacred dances. Ritual, as known to the Lamas, has assumed multiple meanings. As a preliminary to meditative practice by an initiate, it serves to heighten his consciousness. Musical sounds, canonically ordered, affect a man's psychic condition in such a way as to render him more receptive to the truth. The same applies in the visual arts; a painted icon, in which every detail corresponds to some aspect of enlightenment, is a powerful instrument in promoting the contemplative spirit and so is a *sonorous icon*—the nature of all truly sacred music is such; it pertains to method, its aim being to awaken a corresponding wisdom in the soul.

At a more emotional level, ritual becomes an exercise in devotion as also a means of communion with supernatural influences. At a psychological level, the same ritual will help to foster analytical insight. At a transcendental level, it becomes a meditative trance by means of which a total spiritual transformation can be brought about. Sacred music is relevant to all these aims.

In Tibet rituals are classified under three types : firstly, meditation, itself consisting of two stages; secondly, worship and inward transformation; thirdly, specialised types of ritual such as those aiming at the elimination of evil influences, the stimulation of intellectual power and so on. The nature and purpose of each ritual will determine the corresponding music and chanting, the composition, the tonal range and the ensemble of instruments to be called into play.

The Sacred Dance

Throughout the world music and dance have been closely associated as elements in worship and as spiritual stimulants. In Tibet specially initiated monks and Lamas take the principal parts in the danced mystery-plays, but minor parts such as those of the spirit-

retinues in attendance on the chief divinities can be taken by laymen. Sacred dancing forms the concluding part of a long period of training incumbent on initiates. The great dances have been a regular annual feature in various parts of the Tibetan world and these were always performed publicly in an atmosphere of extreme reverence and attention with the primary aim that all phenomenal things, both animate and inanimate, might be blessed by the presiding deities in the course of their illustration and invocation by the meditating dancers.

The earliest form of the Buddhist dance was perhaps that of *Trak-tung Heruka*, the Supremely Wrathful One, with his Consort and retinue. This was later adapted to form another dance called *Dorfe Phurpa* or Eternal Dagger; this forms part of a very early esoteric practice collectively known as "the Eight Sections of Meditation Tradition". This dance still survives in Sikkim where Lamas of the Nyingmapa or Order of the Ancients give an annual public performance at the conclusion of their period of intense meditative practice.

Another form of the dance called *Ts'hechu-Chham* was the creation of an ancient Tibetan teacher as a result of a vision in which Guru Padma Sambhava, the Apostle of Tibet, appeared to him with his saintly attendants. Variants of this dance gradually spread throughout Tibet and were adopted by monasteries belonging to different traditions and teachers. To mention only a few examples, a whole series of such dances are dedicated to guardian deities such as Mahakala "the Great Dark One", Kali, Yama the King of Death etc. Both solo and group performances are associated with each presiding deity, and similarly each class of retinue is represented by dancers clad in special colours and holding different implements in their hands. Sometimes the dancers will recite sacred formule while performing their various figures to the accompaniment of a whole orchestra of instruments. The mask that each dancer wears symbolises a supernatural force which it represents both "formally" and inwardly; in an ultimate sense, however, all these forms also signify the illusory nature of phenomena which mask (though they also reveal) the true Reality.

Solo dances are often performed by eminent esoteric teachers in connection with certain rituals. Oracles also engage in such dances immediately after passing into the oracular trance; some carry out quite elaborate dance movements in spite of the weight of a metal helmet and other heavy accoutrements. It is noteworthy that the men themselves claim entire ignorance of the steps they dance; they are never trained to do them, the knowledge just comes to them in the course of possession by the oracular influence itself. One such oracle used to give a spine-chilling display of physical agility during an annual festival. Draped in ample ceremonial robes and wearing iron-bound shoes with spiked soles the Oracle during his trance first danced and blessed the people around and then, as a climax, mounted to the top-most storey of the Temple and then ran round the edge of the parapet at top speed, high above the heads of the people!

The highest meditative and ritual dances, however, are not performed in public. These dances generally start at a slow pace and gradually gain momentum as figure succeeds figure. Every movement, both hand gesture and step, symbolises some divine aspect or attribute or the same moral or spiritual perfection which the dancing initiate is seeking to develop.

As regards the symbolism of musical instruments used during meditation or worship, only the small bell associated with the thunderbolt-sceptre or *dorje* (*vajra* in Sanskrit) and one small species of drum carry an all-encompassing meaning; other instruments have an accessory character, as aids to concentration through their sound.

Finally, something must be said about Tibetan musical notation: this is of two types, the one for vocal and the other for instrumental music. It does not provide a complete and standardised means of reading any piece of music, as with Western notation. Rather is it a means of giving precision to the interpretation of music that is already known as regards its basic elements. For instance, it will indicate how words and music are to fit, and where and how the melodic line is to be ornamented. Each different tradition of ritual music has evolved its own notation, within the general pattern of a "musical graph". This subject deserves to be studied more systematically by someone competent to do so.

Secular Music

The secular music of Tibet falls under two headings, namely, "folk music" and "minstrel music". There is a vast variety of folk songs belonging to different sections of the population and different regions and dialects; some of these songs have a ceremonial purpose, for use at weddings and for other social occasions, while other songs have an occupational purpose, being associated with such and such a kind of work; others again are simply emotive in character. In a stably traditional society like that of Tibet prior to the Chinese Communist invasion life did not vary much from day to day, though in another sense it was full of variety; under these circumstances folk-songs provided self-entertainment for everyone who knew them. They provided a feeling of company for those engaged in lonely journeys across the great plateau; they also brought consolation to those in sorrow and helped to lighten the burdens of a working life. Apart from songs, two types of stringed instruments, flute, drums and small cymbals were used to accompany certain types of singing.

Occupational songs, which are very striking, are never accompanied with instruments. Their tone and rhythm is determined by the nature of the job in hand, its speed and the tools used, as well as the physical movements associated with it. At harvest time, for instance, one particular song was to be heard echoing joyfully from all directions at once, with the tune overlapping as different groups took it up each in their own time. Even women washing clothes in the same tub had their characteristic song, in time with which they all moved. Work was never a sad affair, with these tunes to liven it!

Marriage songs belong to the secular category because in Tibet a wedding is treated as a social event, rather than as a religious one. Nevertheless these songs contain religious allusions in the form of invocation of various Divinities. Each stage of a wedding has its own songs and certain singers were experts in this kind of singing. This applies especially to the people at large; in the upper strata of society verses were often specially composed by poets for reciting at weddings.

There was yet another type of music, exclusively for a Court dance, performed by the Royal Troupe called *Gartukpa*. The dancers were all young men and boys who were trained from their childhood for various dances requiring a high degree of gymnastic skill. The instruments are drums—more akin to Indian *tabla*, reed instruments, flutes and

metal balls fixed in a wooden frame.

The street songs of Lhasa fall into a class of their own, both from the standpoint of musical style, and also as regards their content. They are the anonymous creations of lay men and women and often reflect public opinion concerning prominent politicians or officials: in fact the Lhasa lampoon, in Tibet, was an accepted (and very effective) means of popular criticism aimed at persons considered to have abused their official position ; these songs are full of pungent humour and as soon as one of them had been composed, it would be taken up by all and sundry in a way that did not leave the offending official in any doubt as to what people thought of him: a truly "democratic" weapon this was!

"Minstrel Music" belongs to the profession of wandering musician and is closely allied to various forms of popular dance, though solo players also have their place, performing on the flute or else on a lute-like plucked instrument with a soft but most eloquent sound. Time does not allow of describing all the many types of popular music separately. One example will have to suffice on this occasion: the one I have chosen is that of the *Relpa* dancers from Kham, which is the name given to the most easterly part of the Tibetan lands.

A *Relpa* troupe includes both men and women. In plying its art, the party will be constantly on the move, living in tents and doing a petty trade on the side rather like the gypsies of Europe. Often the men and women in the party start off by dancing separately, joining later after the performance has gone on for some time. A light drum struck with a semi-circular stick and a small fiddle strung with twisted horse-hair are the principal instruments used in accompanying this dance.

The dance itself is a mixture of vigorous movements of the "cartwheel" type and gymnastic display supplemented by all kinds of amazing tricks. I can recall one truly astonishing conjuring-trick that involved a per-former sticking a sword through his own stomach from which blood was seen to ooze out!

In conclusion, the music of the classical dramas calls for mention: as in the *Relpa* music and dancing both men and women take part together. These plays employ a small orchestra of instruments, in which a large drum is especially prominent. Most remarkable is the style of the choruses occurring in these dramas, in which different voices join together suddenly in a manner that produces an acute and soul-stirring clash that is quite indescribable to anyone who has not heard it. Tibetan drama has both a sacred and a popular aspect, with its characteristic alternation of serious scenes in verse and comic ones in prose which are largely improvised on the spur of the moment, with satirical allusions of a topical kind such as taking off some official person in his own presence. The entire population is familiar with these dramas and follows every move with keen appreciation, weeping at some of the most pathetic episodes and laughing at the all-too-transparent "gags". Such a drama can last all day, ending at sundown with a ritual that confirms its basically sacred character, despite all the light-hearted features I have just described.

Sharing in all these things, the whole population derived at one and the same time entertainment and instruction.

Such is the art of a traditional society: its music, its literature, its painting and its

various crafts reflect, directly or indirectly, a basically religious message. Nothing is so slight but it can serve as a reminder of Enlightenment in some way or other. All is reducible to this one purpose: the ultimate harmony lies there.

(Original editorial inclusions that followed the essay:)

If any one in seeing God conceives something in his mind, this is not God, but one of God's effects.

St. Thomas Aquinas