

## The Divergent Evolution of Spirituality and Music

Today, there is more music than ever before. People easily access centuries' worth of songs recorded all across the globe. The radio, the internet, TV, movies, concerts, festivals, and travel expose people to millions of songs from different genres, eras, and cultures. Wherever and whenever they come from, however, all these songs are united by a similar purpose. Essentially, regardless of genre, era, and culture, all songs are rooted in and seek to express the universal human experience. Whether a love song, a song for dancing, a song for mourning, or a religious song, they all rise out of the human spirit. How it is received by a world drowned in music has become the main point of contention. Traditionally, the spirituality of music was a fact more easily recognized by audiences. Today, however, the massive permeation of music through society has changed the way in which music is heard and the way the spirit is felt, making the composition of what can be considered spiritual music more difficult. By comparing traditional music to modern music, the determining factor behind the ability of a piece to evoke a spiritual response may be revealed—namely, its ability to transcend the senses and free the spirit.

Traditional music, when it was originally performed, had fewer senses to transcend and more spirits to free. The qawwali, for example, emerged in the 8<sup>th</sup> century in Persia as Sufism became challenged by the growing political power of Sunnis over the region. Living within a strict theocratic society, with little connection to the outside world and few worldly disruptions of spiritual practices, traditional Sufis were naturally more open to spiritual experiences. Religion was their culture, their way of life, and spirituality was its necessary reward. Today, culture has expanded beyond religion, and spirituality has become lost within it. The variations

in the performance of qawwali are proof of this. Techno-qawwali, described as "funky music with heavy beats" has become more popular in the younger generation of Indian Sufis, and qawwals must often oblige to the funky young crowd's requests. (*The Origin and Journey of Qawwali From Sacred Ritual to Entertainment?*) Although the traditional performance of qawwali still exists, the shifting focus of young generations makes an important point about the evolution of spirituality and music. In order for traditionally spiritual music to continue to hold the same power in the modern world, it must be able reach a young audience whose senses are more accustomed to being overwhelmed, and whose spirits are lost within a deep abyss of modern pleasures.

The shakuhachi of Japan also experienced this same shift in audience since its original introduction into Buddhism in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. The instrument was valued for its ability to use the sounds of human breath to reach a state of meditation. According to shakuhachizen.com, "Players influenced by Zen are not concerned with the tone but only the path of the breath. The tone is not meant to be beautiful but to represent Zen practice." Today, however, the main role of shakuhachi as an instrument of meditation has diminished within Japanese culture, and embraced more eagerly by Western culture. According to a survey cited in *The Shakuhachi as Spiritual Tool: A Japanese Buddhist Instrument in the West*, a greater percent of Western respondents than Japanese meditated, and a greater percentage of Westerners claimed to use the shakuhachi as a tool of meditation. This surprising change in audience proves again that the spirituality of traditional music becomes harder to reach as culture evolves. Japanese people are more likely to view the shakuhachi as an instrument representative of their cultural heritage and religious roots. Western culture, however, has no such associations with the instrument, and has recently discovered within its novelty the same usefulness in meditation that Buddhist monks did

centuries ago. For westerners deafened by the jaded sounds of their own culture, the shakuhachi was a much needed exotic sound that relaxed their senses and was calmly embraced along with traditional Japanese meditation practices.

Traditionally spiritual music does not always get lost in the flurry of modern culture, however. Many audiences, however much access they have to fresh sounds and unexplored cultures of sensory pleasures, are still as captivated by traditional songs as they ever were. Mercan Dede is a Turkish composer who seeks to reach the souls of both nostalgic listeners as well as eager young people thirsty for new sounds and cultures beyond their own. He fuses the sound of a *ney*, a traditional Sufi instrument familiar to the ears and hearts of all Turks, with various modern instruments like violins and drums; and juxtaposes the Muslim call to prayer with random insights from young Americans who sound like they are high. Strangely, it still manages to retain the sacredness of the traditionally spiritual music while blending it with fresh new sounds before reintroducing it to modern culture. The reason it is so effective is because it reaches the part of the human soul rooted in its historical experiences, while at the same time breaking through the barriers of jaded and overstimulated senses.

Mixing traditional and modern music is very spiritual in the way it connects the past and the present. It offers a glimpse into a people's history, creating a link between old and new. It highlights the fact that even though culture changes, society develops, and music adapts, the human spirit remains the same. It still seeks connection and deeper meaning. For this reason, traditional music should not be dismissed as a mere reminder of an era of musical monoculturalism. At the same time, however, people should be ready to change and enrich their tradition as time goes on. Those who still listen to qawwali, meditate to the shakuhachi, and rejoice to the sounds of Mercan Dede prove that the spirituality in traditional music is not

confined to time. They evidence the fact that spirituality is timeless, that it is rooted in people, and not in the time. The ability to channel that traditional openness to spirituality into today's audience is a great feat not easily accomplished by modern artists. When it is done, however, the results are mind-blowing...and spirit enflaming.

## References

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