

The Influence of Sufism on Traditional Persian Music ¹

by
Seyyed Hossein Nasr

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TRADITIONAL Persian music, like all art of a spiritual nature, arises from Silence. Its peace and calm manifest the eternal Truth in the framework of sounds belonging to the world of forms and appearances, although that Truth itself transcends every kind of form, determination and particularization. The quiet and serenity of this music is the seal of the world of the Spirit impressed upon the countenance of the world of form. The root of every melodious sound takes shape within the depths of this vast world of Silence, a world which transcends every kind of sound although all sounds draw their existence from its life-giving power.

Man himself is situated between two worlds of silence, which in a certain respect are ambiguous and unknown for him. The first is the period before birth and the second that after death. Between them human life is an instant which like a sudden cry shatters the infinite silence for a brief moment, only to become united with it. But a deeper study shows that what appears to man as nothingness, that is, the stage beyond the life of this world, is pure Being, and what is apparently being, that is, the fleeting instants of life in this material universe, is only the reflection and shadow of that transcendent Being: Man's life also is no more than noise and clamour in the face of that eternal Silence which in fact is the most profound of all music; and the life of this world comes to possess

¹ Translated from the Persian by William C. Chittick. The present article was originally a speech delivered in November, 1970, in Tehran. Although the English version has been slightly revised by the author, it should be borne in mind that the speech was meant for a Persian-speaking audience and that therefore certain references may seem unfamiliar or strange in English. The Persian text was published in Tehran in the magazine *Talâsh*, No. 26, and the journal *Ma' ârif-iislâmi* (Islamic Studies), No. 12.

meaning only when it joins that Silence and transforms the noise and uproar of the external world into the enchanting song of the world of man's inner dimension.

Sufism is a way which gives access to that Silence which is hidden at the center of all men's beings, that Silence which is the most beautiful form of music and the source of all meaningful activities and actions, and which itself is the origin of life and of man's existence. Sufism is a divine trust originating in the Mercy of God and placed within Islam, a religion revealed by Heaven. It is a key given to man with which he can unlock the secret of his own existence and come to possess the forgotten and neglected treasure hidden within his being. Sufism gives to man the means to know himself and thus to know God. With the help of the doctrines and methods of the spiritual path man is enabled to understand who he is and to die to what he (is) in an illusory manner in order to come alive to what he is in reality. Sufism is able to lead man to that quiet and peace which is hidden at the centre of his being and whose attainment is possible at all times and all places. It can deliver him from the crushing storm of events in this life and the uproar of the external world—without it being necessary that he abandon that world. Rather, in Sufism man is delivered by means of an inner transformation which takes place here and now, within the framework of his normal life. As a result he is enabled to hear the inward music of all beings and` above the noise of everyday life, to listen to the music of the Silence of Eternity.

In order to express its truths Sufism can make use and has made use of every legitimate means, from weaving to archery, from architecture to music, and from logic to traditional theosophy (*hikmat-i ilâhi*). The goal of Sufism is to lead man from the world of form to the world of the Spirit; but since man lives in the world of form and at the beginning of the spiritual path is not detached from it, by means of this very world of form Sufism turns his attention towards the spiritual world.

Form is the veil of the spiritual world; but at the same time it is its symbol and the ladder by means of which union with it can be attained. As the poet Awhadî Kirmânî has said:

زبان می نگرم به چشم سر در صورت زیرا که ز معنی است اثر در صورت
این عالم صورت است و ما در صوریم معنی نتوان دید مگر در صورت

"I gaze upon form (*sûrat*) with my physical eye because there is in form the trace of the Spirit (*ma`nâ*).

This is the world of form and we live in forms; the Spirit cannot be seen save by means of form."

A limited few can reach the stage of complete detachment from the material world (*tajarrud*) without need of material and formal support, but most people who possess the qualifications for the spiritual life can only reach the world of the Spirit through form, but a form which has become so polished and refined by traditional art that the darkness and opacity of multiplicity has been lifted from it so that, like a mirror, it reflects the beauty of the spiritual world. This form can be a geometrical figure in architecture, a design in painting or calligraphy, or a melody in music. For this very reason Sufism has made use of all of these possibilities and has left a profound effect upon nearly all aspects of Islamic art.

But among the traditional arts music has a special place, for it deals with material forms and shapes less than do all the other arts and is connected more directly to the world of spiritual essences (*mujarradât*). It is not without reason that the Hindus consider the first art sent from heaven for men to have been music, and that the Muslim gnostics (*urafâ*) consider music to be the best means to express the subtlest of divine mysteries. In the words of Jalâl al-Din Rûmî:

مطرب آغسازید نژد ترک مست در حجاب نغمه اسرار الست

"The musician began to play before the drunken Turk within the veil of melody the mysteries of the eternal covenant between God and man (*asrâr-i alas*)."

Although its origin is the transcendent world, man's spirit became joined to the earthly body through a talisman, whose secret is known only to God, and thus his life in

the lower world came into being. But the spirit always retains a memory of its original dwelling and first homeland, and all of man's efforts to reach perfection, even if limited to the material world, have their root in this remembrance. In the transcendent world the spirit of man listened perpetually to a never ending concert, whose harmony and beauty it benefitted from and participated in. By means of traditional music the spirit in its bodily prison once again remembers its original homeland. The talisman through which it has been joined to the body may even be broken, thus allowing the bird of the spirit, even if only for a few moments, to spread its wings and fly in the unlimited expanse of the spiritual world and to participate in the joy and ecstasy which is an essential aspect of this world. In the words of Sa'd al-Din Hamûyah:

دل وقت سماع بسوی دلدار برد جان را به سرا پرده اسرار بسربرد
این زبانه مرکبی است سر روح ترا بر دارد و خوش به عالم یاربرد

"When the heart attends the spiritual concert (sama') it perceives the Beloved and lifts the soul to the abode of the divine Mysteries.

The melody is the steed of thy soul; it raises it up and takes it joyful to the world of the Friend."

The man who has reached the state of spiritual perfection has of course no need for any kind of steed or vehicle, for he himself possesses the power of flight. But until this stage is reached, music of a spiritual nature such as the traditional music of Persia, can be one of the most powerful means for awakening the qualified person from the sleep of forgetfulness (*ghaflah*). It is a sure and dependable steed, one that is able to take man from the abyss of the material world with all its hardship and pain to the zenith of the limitless world of the Spirit, within which all pain and suffering is transformed into happiness and joy. Sufism took the music of ancient Persia and like so many other forms polished and perfected it until it became the required vehicle. That is why, from the point of view of the effect this music leaves on the soul of man, it matters little what its origin might have been, whether it is of the Bârbadi school or reaches back to the Achaemenian period. What is important is that it was able to come under the influence of Sufism and to

be transformed by it in such a way that within it an inward and spiritual dimension came into being which is able to bring the spirit of the person qualified for spiritual ascent into union with the Beloved, to free man for a moment from limitation and from the material world that encompasses him.

The relationship of traditional Persian music with Sufism is not accidental, nor is it merely historical. Rather, it is a profound reality which has left a considerable influence upon the way this music affects the soul of the listener. In order for this point to be fully understood it is necessary to take into consideration the stages of the spiritual path (*sayr wa sulûk*). Although there are various ways of describing and explaining the way toward union with God in Sufism, these can be summarized in three main stages: The first is that of contraction (*qabd*). In it a certain aspect of the human soul must die; this stage is connected with asceticism and piety and with the manifestation or theophany (*tajalli*) of the divine justice and Majesty. The second stage is expansion (*bast*), in which an aspect of the human soul is expanded so that man's existence passes beyond its own limits until it embraces the whole universe, and man can say with Sa`di:

به جهان خرم از آنم که جهان خرم از اوست

"I am joyful in the world because the world is joyful in Him". This stage is joined to happiness and ecstasy and is the manifestation of the divine Beauty and Mercy. The third stage is union with the Truth (*wisâl bi'l-haqq*) by means of reaching the stations of extinction (*fanâ'*) and permanance (*baqâ'*). At this level the gnostic has passed beyond all other states (*ahwâl*) and stations (*maqâmât*) and has attained to contemplation of the Face of the Beloved. He sees with manifest clarity that, in the words of Hâtif of Isfahan:

که یکی هست و هیچ نیست جز او وحده لا اله الا هو

"He is one and there is naught but He:

There is no God save Him alone."²

Music is concerned with the second and third stages and not with the first. That is why in Islam, while the Divine Law or *Shari'ah* forbids listening to music unless it be that highest and purest form of musical melody, the recitation of the verses of the Holy Quran—for the injunctions of the *Shari'ah* are only concerned with religious commands and prohibitions and with the divine justice-in Sufism, which is concerned with the spiritual path, music has been permitted and in some orders like the Mawlawiyyah and the Chishtiyyah has even possessed considerable importance.

The spiritual profundity of present-day traditional Persian music is not, as certain short-sighted people have imagined, in spite of the religion of Islam. Rather, its origin is the Islamic teachings themselves, which cut music off from the external aspects of life and turned it toward the world of the Spirit. For the same reason, while Western music during the past two centuries has been for the most part an attempt to reach the second of the above three stages without passing initially through the first, that is, the stage of asceticism, piety and detachment from the world—and thus it causes the soul to undergo an expansion which is not always connected with a spiritual influence—the traditional music of Persia and of the other Islamic countries has been based on the first stage. This is especially true of the music of North India, which has been composed and performed to a large extent by Sufis and many of whose greatest masters down to the present day, such as Ridâ Qulî Khân, `Alâ'uddin Khân and Bismillâh-Khân, have been Muslims. The profundity of traditional Islamic music, which pulls man away from the material world and plunges the roots of the tree of his existence into the world of the Spirit, is due to the fact that the men who have composed and performed this music have themselves reached the stage of detachment and possess spiritual states (*hâl*) in the truly gnostic (*'irfâni*) meaning of the term.

The Sufis have been completely aware of the above facts and have considered

² This verse is the "refrain" of Hâtif's celebrated tarji' band, one of the most famous poems in Sufism, which was translated by E. G. Browne in his *Literary History of Persia*, vol. 1V, Cambridge, 1924, pp. 292-297 (trans.).

listening to music and "spiritual concerts" (*mina'*) as permissible only for those who have gone beyond the first stage in the development and perfection of the soul, which is none other than the subjugation of the animal passions. Ghazzali in his book *Alchemy of Happiness (Kimiya-yi sa`âdat)* has written the following in the chapter called "On Discussions of Listening to Music (*samâ'*) and the Explanation of What is Permitted of it and What is Forbidden":

"Know that God, the Exalted, possesses a secret in the heart of man which is hidden like fire in iron. Just as the secret of fire becomes manifest and apparent when iron is struck with a stone, so listening to pleasing and harmonious music brings man's essence into movement and causes something to come into being within man without his having a choice in the matter. The reason for this is the relationship that exists between the essence of man's heart and the transcendent world, which is called the world of Spirits (*arwâh*). The transcendent world is the world of loveliness and beauty, and the source of loveliness and beauty is harmony (*tanâsub*). All that is harmonious manifests the beauty of that world, for all loveliness, beauty and harmony that is observable in this world is the result of the loveliness and beauty of that world.

Therefore the pleasing and harmonious song has a certain resemblance to the wonders of that world, and hence an awareness appears in the heart, as well as a movement (*harakat*) and a desire, and it may be that man himself does not know what it is. Now this is true of a heart that is simple, that is free of the various loves and desires which can affect it. But if it is not free of them, and it is occupied with something, that thing comes into movement and becomes influenced like a fire which is blown upon. Listening to music (*samâ'*) is important for him whose heart is dominated by the love of God, for the fire is made stronger, but for him in whose heart is love for vanity, listening to music is a deadly poison, and it is forbidden to him"³

The Sufis have only allowed participation in the spiritual concert to those individuals who are qualified, that is, those who have escaped from the abyss of the material world

³ Ghazzali, *Kimiya-yi sa`âdat*, edited by Ahmad Aram, Tehran, 1345, p. 370.

and its attractions. Thus, in the words of Sa' di:

نگویم مداع ای برادر که چیست
مگر مستمع را بدانم که کیست
گسرا از برج معنی پرد طیار او
فرشته فرو مانسد از سیر او
و گسرد سهواست و بسازی و لاغ
قویتر شود دیوش اندر دماغ

بریشان شود گل به باد سحر
نسه هیزم که نشکافدش جز تبر
جهان بر سمع است و مستی و شور
ولیکن چه بیند در آئینه کور

"I will not say, O brother, what the spiritual concert is, until I know who is listening to it.

If he begins his flight from the tower of the Spirit, the angels will not keep up with his soaring.

But if he be a man of error, vanity and play,
the devil in his brain will grow more powerful.

The rose is torn apart by the morning breeze, but not the log; for it can only be split by an axe.

The world subsists on music, intoxication
and ardour, but what does the blind man see in a mirror?"

The influence of Sufism on traditional Persian music derives more than all else from the fact that Sufism has made of music a vehicle for the ascent of the spirit to the transcendent world, but only for those who have taken upon themselves the difficulties of asceticism and spiritual discipline, the first stage of which is piety and fear of God. For the same reason those who enjoy this music without having passed through the first stage of the spiritual path will never attain to the unlimited expanse of the transcendent world, and if their soul takes to flight in that world for a few moments with the help of this celestial music, it will immediately fall back when the music ends, and they will not be able to maintain their spiritual state and ecstasy. Moreover, how many are there for whom instead of being a means to mount to the world of the Spirit, this music is like an intoxicant which frees them for a few moments from the hardships and afflictions of the world?

Then again, the musician who plays this music, precisely because it was composed by men who themselves possessed spiritual stations, who were empty of themselves and who played this music in a state of spiritual ecstasy, can only perform it well if he first forgets himself. Traditional Persian music is more profound than that a person could be continually in its intimacy and play it well without there first being some kind of spiritual transformation and forgetfulness of his ordinary, profane state. Many people ask why a group of those who perform traditional Persian music are addicted to narcotics. The probable reason is that many of them do not benefit from the grace which derives from Sufism and gnosis nor possess the means to reach spiritual states and stations through genuine Sufi and gnostic ways, and therefore they resort to the only way which they have to forget themselves for a few moments. In any case, what is certain from the point of view of Sufism is that spiritual profit from music is only possible through the polishing of the soul and the slaying of the dragon within ourselves. This alone can deliver the bird of the spirit and prepare it for the ascent which music of a spiritual nature can make possible.

The spiritual ascent which is accomplished by means of traditional Persian music is of several kinds. One kind is reached through the melody, which takes man step by step from one station to the next, that is, from one spiritual state to another, and finally to the state of spiritual joy and ecstasy. Another is attained through the rhythm and metre of the music, which changes the relationship of man with ordinary time—the most important characteristic of the life of this world. Persian music possesses extremely fast and regular rhythms, and moments in which there are no beats or any form of temporal determination. In the first instance man is united with the pulsation of cosmic life, which in the human individual is always present in the form of the beating of the heart. Man's life and the life of the cosmos become one, the microcosm is united to the macrocosm, and thus man's spirit undergoes expansion and participates in the joy and ecstasy which encompass the world and which man fails to perceive only because of his state of forgetfulness of God (*ghaflah*). In the second case, which transcends all rhythm and temporal distinction, man is suddenly cut off from the world of time; he feels himself

situated face to face with Eternity and for a moment benefits from the joy of extinction (*fana*) and permanence (*baqâ'*).

The perfect gnostic has no need of music or any other traditional art, for he and his life are themselves forms of art. Nevertheless, since his inward senses have been awakened it can be said that he is constantly in the state of listening to the spiritual concert. The whole world is for him an eternal song. He sees existence forever accompanied by harmony and beauty. In the same way that through his vision he sees this beauty in the form of the colours and shapes of the world of nature and creation, through his hearing he hears it in the form of music. His life is never separated from music and its happiness and joy. If he listens to and enjoys what is usually called a musical composition it is only because this music confirms his own inward states—if indeed it has originated in the silence of the Spirit already alluded to. And if he seeks to keep away from what some people today call music, but which is no more than noise and cacophony devoid of any meaning or spiritual value, it is because listening to it disturbs his inner spiritual state; its lack of harmony disrupts and dissipates the song at the center of his being. At the same time, if this individual is talented in the composition and performance of music, as many of the Sufis have been—and the majority of the great masters of traditional Persian music have been connected with Sufism—what he composes and performs will be a reflection of his spiritual states covered by a veil of sounds, the combination of which will result in a melody which can guide the listener towards those states.

It can also be said that the Sufi is himself an instrument in the hands of the Creator, and what he produces is a song played by the celestial Musician and heard within his being. The world itself is like a song composed of harmonious sounds, and since the gnostic has torn apart the veils of separative existence and become united with his original state and primordial nature, he also, like the world, is only an instrument on which God plays what He wills. In the words of Rûmî:

ما چو چنگیم و تو ناخن میزنی

"We are like a lyre and Thou pluckest."

What joy could be greater than that a man not only listen to the divine concert, but also be himself the means for playing its music; that man through submitting his own volition to the divine Will places himself completely in God's hands and become the source of melodies which spread joy and felicity and guide man towards his primordial home and ultimate abode?

In today's world when access to genuine spirituality becomes every day more difficult, and when that beauty which at one time was everywhere has come to be considered a luxury, traditional music possesses an extraordinary value, for it is like a refuge amidst a terrifying storm and a fresh and luxuriant oasis in the midst of a burning desert. Today many are interested in this music without themselves knowing the profound reason. In reality these people are searching for the spiritual life and that quiet and peace which is hidden in the substance of music of a spiritual nature. They are seeking "the mysteries of the eternal covenant between man and God, within the veil of melody", the beauty of which attracts them to itself; its apparent sorrowful exterior is but the preface to the indescribable joy hidden within it.

The traditional music of Persia with its gnostic and Sufi character must be preserved in all of its authenticity, and quantitative expansion must not be confused at any cost with qualitative well-being. Obviously, the best way to preserve this music is to protect and maintain the Sufi tradition which has brought it into existence, and in the domain of the music itself to avoid all groundless innovation and imitation. This holds especially true as regards imitation of the music of contemporary Western civilization, for that civilization, because of its materialistic outlook, possesses values which are diametrically opposed to the goals of traditional music. Only those can add a new chapter to this music of the Spirit who have themselves attained to union with the spiritual world and who at the same time are completely acquainted with the principles of the traditional music of Persia. Otherwise any alteration will mean transforming a ladder towards Heaven into a purely earthly and worldly means of communication lacking any transcendent dimension. Today, for Persians as well as other Muslims and traditionally oriented people in general,

traditional Persian music can be a spring full of grace for satisfying lost and thirsty souls, a place of refuge from the negative influences of the times and, for some at least, a guide from its own wondrous beauty to the beauty of the Absolute. Since this music is the song of the eternal world in the world of time and place, it undergoes no degeneration or corruption. Like the sun at dawn its message is always fresh and alive. It is for us to open our eyes and ears so that with the help of its melodies and of course with Divine succour we can be delivered from that death which is falsely called life, and attain that true life which knows no eclipse. It is for us to realize the worth of this valuable heritage, which, like the other aspects of the extremely rich culture of Islam, we are in need of now more than any other time in history.

ساقسی به نور باده بر افروز جام ما	سَطْرِبْ بَگُو کِه دَار جِهَان شَد بَه کَام مَا
مادر پیاله عکس رخ یسار دیده ایم	ای بیخبر ز لذت شرب مدام ما
هرگز نمیرد آنکه دلتش زنده شد به عشق	ثَبِتْ اَسْت دَر جَرِیدَةُ عَالَمِ دَوَامِ مَا

“O cup-bearer, brighten our goblet with the light of wine! O minstrel, tell how the world has succumbed to our desires!

We have seen in the cup the reflection of the face of the Friend, O you who know nothing of the joy of our eternal wine-drinking!

He whose heart has been made living by love never dies;
our permanence is recorded within the pages of the cosmic text ”.

(Hâfiz)

The Thought of Enlightenment has arisen within me I know not how, even as a gem might be gotten by a blind man from a dunghill; it is an elixir made to destroy death in the world, an unfailing treasure to relieve the world's poverty, a supreme balm to allay the world's sickness, a tree under which may rest all creatures wearied with wandering over life's paths, a bridge open to all wayfarers for passing over hard ways, a moon of thought arising to cool the fever of the world's sin, a great sun driving away the gloom of

the world's ignorance, a fresh butter created by the churning of the milk of the Good Law. For the caravan of beings who wander through life's paths hungering to taste of happiness this banquet of bliss is prepared, that will satisfy all creatures coming to it.

Santi-deva.