HARMONIES OF HEAVEN AND EARTH

Jocelyn Godwin

Reviewed by:

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Harmonies of Heaven and Earth by Jocelyn Godwin. Rochester, Vermont, Inner Traditions International, 1995, 200 pages. $ 12.95.

The Subtitle of this book is: *Mysticism in Music from Antiquity to the Avant-Garde*. On the 181 pages of its text nearly 200 works are cited, and ideas of nearly 150 artists and thinkers collected, idea relating to music and mysticism.

The author is a Professor of Music at Colgate University, in Hamilton, a little town near New York City. This University is known for its Ecumenical Chapel House and its interest in exotic cultures.

There is no clue in the book as to whether the author himself is a mystic or not. It is quite possible to be a historian of mysticism without being a mystic. The author has cerebrated a lot about mysticism in this book.

He seems to have knowledge in depth only of Western classical music. And from all evidence in the book he really feels at home only when listening to operas, sonatas, concertos and symphonies. His acquaintance with non-western music is casual. His interest in it seems only academic.

Let us be realistic: a book on music should be a manual accompanied by a series of recordings to bring alive the observations offered by it. In such a book a discography would have been more of an aid than a bibliography.

Somewhere in India, on one occasion, a musicologist pundit sat in the audience, listening to the singing of *Ustād* (Maestro) Fayyāî Khān. He interrupted the singing, telling the Maestro, "You are singing wrong. Your rendition of the *rāg* is not according to the specifications written in the *Granth*." The maestro said. "Let me have a look at it", said the Maestro. Grabbing the *Granth* he pressed it first against his right ear and then his left ear, and said, "I hear no sound coming from this *Granth*."

A critique of this book, if it is to be of any benefit, should be attempted in a classroom situation, equipped with a sound system and illustrative

recordings. Reading it in solitude, without the help of recordings, will be as eventless and tasteless as the reading of a cook-book far away from a kitchen and a pantry.

In this book there is much alternation between discourses on mysticism (Yoga, Sufism, Kabbala), and discourses on music. It gives the reader a jolty experience of ongoing digressions between mysticism and music.

The message of the book is that listening to, and performing, any kind of vocal or instrumental music, is a mystical happening. Who will take exception to this message? What is left unexplored by the author is the variety of mystical experience offered by this or that system of music.

Even though any musical event is unique, the performers necessarily belong to a particular tradition of folk music or classical music. When we talk about Sufi music, we must first talk about Sufism in some depth. When we talk about the *rāg* music of India, we must first talk about the culture of its Hindu performers and its Muslim performers. When we talk about the songs sung by the Hasidim, we should keep in mind the Kabbalistic psyche, conditioned by the collective of the Jewish history.

It is observed in this book (p. 95) that writing down of music became necessary toward the beginning of the Seventeenth century when Opera was born, bringing together poetry, music, song and instrumental accompaniment. Within a century after this, Professor Godwin tells us, instrumental music " gained complete independence from vocal models, dance and background usage". (p. 96). With due elation he declares that the invention of polyphony in "its classical expression deserves to be placed among the very greatest achievements of European civilisation". (p. 94). Elsewhere the Professor says that symphonies represent the musical counterpart of Gothic architecture. But he stops short of asking the question: How comes it that polyphonic music and Gothic architecture materialised only in Christian Europe. The question is very much worth asking. Isn't there something Trinitarian about these forms of art?

More often than not operatic singing ends on high C, the note registering distance from home. Biblical nomadism seems in evidence here. From the story-based operas symphonies acquired the trait of journey. These are conjectures by the writer of this review who is able to look at Western music from without, being devoted to the classical music of India and

Pakistan.

The music of symphony, bound by the principle of perfect pitch, is sheet-music, performed by way of rigid adherence. Its utter meticulousness and precision match the efficiency and precision of sophisticated machinery of superior quality, reminding one of Rolls Royce. Europeans to whom this music is native, are slow to admit the militancy of its format: all its performers dressed in tuxedo uniform, kept from transgression by the sheet in front of them, and by the commanding superintendence of the conductor. Piano being the father of symphony orchestra, slides between notes are alien to symphonies. The upright piano is the most Christian of musical instruments; like Christian belief it is inflexible and unbending. The spirit of the *New Testament* seems at work in the symphonies also in that they have plenty of rhythm but minimal percussion.

The boom of symphonies owes itself to the Industrial Revolution, along with expansionism of the nations of Europe.

It is fascinating to realise that the experience of Sufi music offers the Muslim listener a very different kind of transport. Flute solo performed by the flutists at the shrine of Rumi in Qonya takes us on a exotic trip to a spiritual space far removed from what is familiar to lovers of symphonies.

In India flute music has graduated to the status of chamber-music. It is now performed to the accompaniment of the drone-instrument (*tambūrā*) and the *Çablah*-drums. In that setting it is no more the haunting outdoor instrument of the solitary shepherd.

The Sufi music of the *qawwāls* of Turkey is performed unaccompanied by drums. The *qawwalī* of India and Pakistan is accompanied by *Çablah*-drums, the harmonium, and clapping. Turkish *qawwalī* is solemn. Indo-Pakistani *qawwalī* is saucy. Both are Sufi music but the spiritual trips offered by them are different.

Professor Godwin does not display awareness of the following elemental features of the Classical music of India and Pakistan:

1. It is not bound by the principle of perfect pitch.
2. Countless classical songs sung in the *rāgās* contain girl-talk (-milk-maid talk-), derived from sacred Hindu folk-lore, sing alike by Hindu and Muslim singers, both male and female.

3. All classical vocal and instrumental music of India and Pakistan is performed accompanied, from beginning to end, by the inevitable drone instrument called *tambūrā*. It is tuned as follows:

   1st string (made of copper) – tuned to the 4th or the 5th.

   2nd string (made of steel) – tuned to high tonic.

   3rd string (made of steel) – tuned to high tonic.

   4th string (made of copper) --- tuned to low tonic.

4. All forms of Indo-Pakistani classical music are set to strong and sophisticated rhythms, delicately played on the *Çablah*-drums or the two-sided *mridang*-drum. This music is music of strong percussion. The drums in it are to be tuned to the tonic. Melody in it gets bejewelled by delicate drumming, using hands, not sticks.

5. The performance of *rāgās* in any form is a stroll around one's home and not a take-off to some distant place. It is music of the stay-put inhabitants of India who perform seated bare-footed on the floor.

6. Last, but not least, is the liquid character of melodic activity in it, sustained by incessant slides between notes.

Professor Godwin has this comment on the Muslim and Jewish experience of music:

> "In the public worship of Islam, music has no place beyond the simple chanting of the Qur'an. As if in compensation, the Muslim esoteric orders – the Sufis – have made music one of the strongest features of their own religious practices. The general term for it (*samā'*), 'audition', stresses the passive nature of this musical way: whereas the Hasidim are transported by their own song, the Sufis' is the more inward path of the concentrated listener. Perhaps in this one can see a reflection of the earth--embracing mysticism of the Jew *vis-à-vis* the earth—forsaking flight of the oriental mystic". (p. 75)

Professor Godwin has jumped to a conclusion from the literal meaning of the word *samā'*, getting the impression that only the listeners at a session of *samā'* are transported by music, and not the performers. He has conveyed

this impression to us without getting it verified by Muslim musicians.

He finds evidence of "the earth-forsaking flight" of Sufi mystics in the dance of the Whirling Dervishes of the Mevlevi Order. This conclusion is hasty too. The dance of these Dervishes is not the only genre of Sufi music. Who can fail to feel the very down-to-earth quality of *qawwali* singing?

Thorough enquiry into Muslim music would have made Professor Godwin acquainted with the Arabic word of singing: *ghinā'*, the literal meaning of which is 'producing nasal voice'. Nasal voice is hypnotic voice. It is in service of Oriental tranquilism. Operatic voice is not nasal. It comes straight from the thorax. It serves the Christian value of vigilance, like coffee.

The forte of Professor Godwin is his grasp of the character and history of Western Classical music. He points out (pp. 92-102) four stages of its evolution:

1. The polyphonic era (9^{th} century to 6^{th} century). Polyphony, he tells us, was born and bred in service of the church and its Brahmins, reflecting their values.

   (The Professor does not spell out those values. We have to attempt our own guesses in this matter).

2. The operatic era (9^{th} and 18^{th} centuries). Opera, which combined drama and music, came with reformation and the rise of Secularism. It was not only for nobility but still it was the royal and titled patrons who first owned the theatres and dictated the style. Socially speaking, Operatic singing asserted and promoted the voice of the individual in society.

3. The boom of symphonies. It happened after the French Revolution (1789). The great symphonies were composed in a world of collective evolution, rising above caste. In them is experienced the holiness of the priest, the bravery and mercy of the warrior, the honesty and generosity of the merchant, and diligence of the peasant.

4. The present Age of Rock & Roll. Rock & Roll, the author tells us, is music of the fourth caste, the labourers.

This book is packed with such a host of ideas and quotations that

we can go on forever with comments on them, sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph, and page by page. For critique in this review only a few of the ideas were picked up.