

The Role of Music in Islamic Mysticism

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Ladies and gentlemen,¹ I cannot claim to be either a specialist in music or a musician; rather, I am simply a lover of Sufi music. Let me therefore begin with a little story about an event that happened long long ago in connection with the Mevlevi *sema*. I had joined the *İlâhiyat Fakültesi* in Ankara in the fall of 1954. In early December I received an invitation from Mehmet Önder, the director of the Mevlâna Müzesi [museum] in Konya, to participate in the celebration of Hazret-i Mevlâna's anniversary that was to be held there on December 17 and was asked to give a speech on 'Mevlâna's influence in East and West'. A few days before travelling to Konya I had a dream: the Mevlevi were turning like white butterflies as heavenly music filled the air. Apparently, there was no possibility that this dream might foretell a real event, as the dervish lodges had been closed since 1925, and no trace of the ritual remained. Nevertheless, I told my lovely dream to one of my colleagues in the Faculty, a *hafız* with a wonderful voice who - as I learned - was also to attend the celebration, and with a smile he said: "Perhaps it was a true dream!"



Hazret-i Mevlâna.
Drawing based on a
miniature.

¹ Professor Schimmel as usual gave her lecture without using manuscript. The following text is a transcription made by Tord Olsson from a tape-recording, edited and corrected by Annemarie Schimmel herself.



A calligraphy from 1843 saying: Yâ Hazret-i Mevlânâ Muhammad Jalâl ad-Dîn Rûmî.
From: C. Kerametli, *Galata Mevlevihanesi*, İstanbul 1977.

My mother and I reached Konya on a cold, rainy afternoon, and after a sumptuous dinner at the home of our generous hosts, the two of us were taken to an old house in the heart of the town, where we encountered a number of elderly men with strange looking parcels. These were opened - and what should appear but dervish hats, reed flutes, tennure and whatever was required for the *sema*! My mother and I were placed in the two armchairs in the otherwise empty hall, and the music and the whirling began: it was the first time in twenty-nine years that the old dervishes performed the ritual together. They had come from Afyon Karahisar, Trabzon, Ankara, and İstanbul to celebrate Hazret-i Mevlâna. Halil Can was playing the flute while my colleague, Hafiz Sabri, recited the *na't-i şerif*. We were slowly drawn into the sea of music and of whirling and lost ourselves in the rhythm, the sound, and the spirit.

I had loved Hazret-i Mevlâna even as a teenager, and had translated some of his lyrical poems into German verse as soon as I had learned enough Persian. Not only that, I came to study the form and content of his work as well as his influence in the world of Islam and in the West. Whenever I lecture about him, I like to start with a little anecdote found in Persian hagiography (such as Jâmi's *Nafahât al-uns*) and rendered into German verse by our great orientalist-poet Friedrich Rückert (1788-1866). It reads as follows:

Once our master Jelaladdin said this:
"Music is the creaking of the gates of Paradise!"
Whereupon one of the stupid idiots remarked:
"I do not like the sound of creaking gates!"
And Mevlâna answered:
"You hear the doors when they are being closed,
but I, I hear them when they are opening!"

This anecdote shows us very clearly the importance of music in the Sufi tradition and, in particular, in the life and thought of Mevlâna.



After the dervish lodges had been closed since 1925, the first celebration of Hazret-i Mevlâna's anniversary was held in 1954. Halil Can (on right, see text) was playing the *ney* in the celebration.

Music is a means to draw the soul closer to God, and for this reason, it played an important role in Sufi life. However, it was also objected to by many of the stern, sharia-bound Muslims. We know that as early as 867 a *samakhana* was opened in Baghdad where the Sufis - at that time a small group of pious men - used to meet once in a while. It was their recreation after days and nights of intense religious exercises, a relaxation that allowed them to give themselves to the attraction of love, to forget their intellectual striving. The orthodox objected to this practice mainly because worldly love songs were recited which spoke of human love relations instead of concentrating upon the Divine Grandeur and Majesty as taught through the words of the Koran. Furthermore, it could well happen that some listeners might get up and whirl around their own axis, in a state of rapture. This again seemed to be incompatible with the rules of proper religious behaviour. An early story from the Sufi tradition points to this danger: a master who died shortly before 900, appeared after his death to someone in a dream. As usual in such stories, the dreamer asked him: "What did God do to you?" And the Sufi answered: "God scolded me and said: You have always described Me under the names of Salma and Leyla. Had I not known that at one moment you really thought of Me, I would have cast you into Hell!" That means, the mixing of worldly love as expressed in beautiful songs with Divine Love seemed to the early orthodox believers extremely dangerous, as much as it was to permeate later Sufism.

The early sources describe how often music was practiced among the Sufis of Baghdad and elsewhere, and how most of the participants would get up to whirl. Only Junayd, the master of the sober "Baghdadian" tradition (d. 910) would never move during such a concert. When one of his friends asked him the reason for his behaviour he answered with the Koranic quotation: "You see the mountains and consider them to be firm, yet they move like clouds" (Sure 27, 90). That is, the real movement happens in the heart, not in the limbs. Yet, many of Junayd's contemporaries loved to participate in the *sema*-meetings and abandon themselves to an ecsta-

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Sufi tradition

tic or pseudo-ecstatic state. And even though many great masters objected to music and whirling, such meetings became popular everywhere. In the famous handbook of Sufism by Abu Hafis Omar as-Suhrawardi (d. 1234) we find the following remark:

Music does not give rise, in the heart, to anything which is not already there. So he, whose inner self is attached to anything else than God is stirred by music to sensual desire, but the one who is inwardly attached to the love of God is moved, by hearing music, to do His will.... The common folk listen to music according to nature, and the novices listen with desire and awe, while the listening of the saints brings them a vision of the Divine gifts and graces, and these are the gnostics to whom listening means contemplation. But finally, there is the listening of the spiritually perfect to whom, through music, God reveals Himself unveiled.

For this reason some Sufis thought that the *murid* on the first stages of the path should not be allowed to participate in the *sema*. Only those who were already mature and could not be tempted into dangerous sensual desires by listening to love songs might attend such concerts. And while some *tariqas* allow the practice of music, others - the so-called sober orders - prohibit it.

Literature about music, and whether or not it is permissible to use songs in a religious context, fills hundreds of books and treatises, and *fatwas* have been issued concerning this problem, since scholars have not been able to agree on this issue. That holds true for the entire Islamic world, be it ancient Baghdad or medieval Delhi, Cairo or Bukhara. Even in Ottoman Turkey the opinions of scholars and Sufis concerning *sema* differed widely. We can understand that austere theologians objected to *sema* when they saw Auhadaddin Kirmani tearing off the frocks of young, unbearded *murids* to dance breast to breast with them; even a great mystical leader like Mevlâna's friend Shams-i Tabrizi disliked such performances. On the other hand, many lay people loved to watch the Sufis whirling about; and when they, in a state of ecstasy, tore up their frocks the spectators would collect the shreds, *tabarrukan*, "for the sake of blessing". They believed in the religious power of music which, so to speak, oozed not only into the bodies of the whirling dervishes but also into their garments. Thus, in the Persian work of Hujwiri, the saint buried in Lahore about 1072, we learn that as early as the eleventh century "people thought that Sufism consists mainly of dancing". This remark reminds us of modern trends in the West where courses in Sufi dance are being taught to people who know nothing about the spiritual roots of Sufism. Almost everyone in the medieval Muslim world was well aware of the healing powers of music. This becomes particularly evident in Turkey: Divriği and Edirne are just two places where we still find buildings in which music therapy was used - as it is still today in Turkey, as well as in Central Europe. Many centuries ago, the Şifaiya in Divriği (built 1228), the most impressive building in Anatolia, was a centre of this kind of therapy. In the central hall of the huge building you can see a large basin into which water flows, and from this basin a complicated spiral carving leads the water into a small basin, producing a sweet sound when the drops fall into the lower basin. Listening to the soft, silvery sound of the falling drops, the soul is carried step-by-step into a different world; mentally disturbed people were able to find peace, perhaps even healing, by listening quietly to the water music. The effects of the healing power of music are well known in India as well, and numerous are the stories told about the magic quality of music.

Such stories abound in Sufism, and it might well happen that some austere jurist who disliked music and disapproved of it was converted - often by means of a dream.

Among the great lovers of music and *samâ* was Abû Said-i Abû'l-Khayr (d. 1049) in Mihana, a place close to the southern border of today's Turkmenistan. One of his neighbours, who disliked his behaviour, dreamt one night that Abû Said was calling him: "Get up and dance for the sake of God!" Horrified he awoke and recited *A'udhu billâhi min ash-shaytân ar-rajîm!* for he thought he had been tempted by satanic powers. He went to sleep again, and lo, the same dream repeated itself, and he, as a good Muslim, reacted again by reciting the formula of refuge. But when the dream occurred for the third time he was disturbed (as the threefold repetition of a dream is a sign of its veracity) and got up to visit Abû Sa'id. When he reached the master's house he heard him call: "Get up and dance for the sake of God!" And he participated in the *samâ* and became a disciple of Abû Sa'id and a lover of music.

This is only one of the numerous stories told in Sufi sources about the influence of music and whirling dance on the human heart.

The greatest representative of the musical tradition is, without doubt, Mevlâna Rumi who - as we mentioned - understood that music means the opening of the gates of Paradise. When his spiritual beloved Shams-i Tabrizi disappeared, Mevlâna forgot all about his scholarly pursuits - at least for some time - and instead began to listen to music and whirl around himself while dictating poetry in a state of near unconsciousness. He probably began by saying some *rubâ'iyât*, quatrains, a genre that has been associated with the *sema* since its early days. He may also have recited not only Persian but also Arabic poetry, as he was well versed in classical Arabic poetry, especially in the work of al-Mutanabbi (d. 965); and in addition to delightful Arabic songs, we find Arabic and Persian lines intrinsically interwoven in some of his ecstatic poems. Anyone who has read his lyrical poetry, which came to him like a gift from the Unseen, will have realized that in many of those poems, the rhythm can be followed by handclapping, although all of them are written in classical *'arûz*, the Arabo-Persian quantitative meter. Many of them indeed impel the reader or listener to get up and turn around. In some of his early poems Mevlâna indeed refers to the mysterious change he experienced in his life: he, the learned theologian, was transformed into a lover who found his inspiration through music.

None who has read Mevlâna's poetry - be it only the first eighteen verses of the *Mathnavi* - can deny that music was a divine force for him. One aspect of his poetry is his clever use of musical imagery. That may sound more or less like a literary problem, but I think that this imagery shows how strong the impact of music as a life-giving force was on him. Did he not feel after the first disappearance of Shams that the breath of the Beloved made him sing as though he were a flute? Every moment, he feels that he is moved, so to speak, by the breath, by the finger of the Beloved, and is nothing but the instrument of a higher power. The story of the *ney*, the reed-flute, at the beginning of the *Mathnavi* expresses this feeling in perfect form, because the *ney* is, as all of us know, the instrument closest to the human voice. But the flute can only sing when someone breathes into it. Without the breath of the Beloved - so says Rumi - without the influx of the *nafas ar-rahmân*, the "Breath of the Merciful" human beings cannot act, speak, or think, just as the flute cannot reveal its secrets unless the musician breathes into it. This is a recurrent theme in the *Divân-i Shams* and, to a certain extent, in the *Mathnavi* as well. The *ney* is the symbol of man who is separated from his primordial roots, just as the flute is cut off from the reedbed. But - and this has to be kept in mind - only by being cut off is it able to tell the story of eternal longing; for the soul longs for home, longs for the time "when it was as it was before it was" (as Junayd put it) - that is, before the act of creation, in which the Absolute Divine Unity manifested itself through creation, and multiplicity appeared.

The story of the *ney* divulging the secret of the Beloved is, however, not Rumi's invention. In an article published in 1932, Helmut Ritter discusses the introductory poem of the *Mathnavi* and shows that the story comes from the ancient Near East: it is the story of King Midas of Gordion (incidentally, a place close to Konya). King Midas had donkey's ears, a secret which he one day told to his minister under the condition never to reveal it. But the minister, smarting under the burden of this terrible secret went to a lake to tell it to the lonely water. However, the reeds that grew in the lake listened as well, and when someone cut a reed to make it into a flute, the flute revealed the whole story... There is also an Islamic version of the tale which we find in Sana'i's *Hadiqat al-haqiqat*. It is said that Hazret Ali could not bear all the spiritual wisdom entrusted to him by the Prophet and told it to a lake in the wilderness, and again it was the flute that revealed to mankind some of the Prophet's deepest secrets. Thus, Rumi stands in an old tradition of flute stories; but it is his version of the reedflute that has become the unsurpassable expression of the soul's constant longing for its homeland in God's infinity.

Rumi's story of the reedflute has been taken over into all the areas where Persian is used, and allusions to it permeated Persian, Urdu, and even Bengali poetry. An interesting case is that of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai, the great mystical poet of Sind (d. 1752). He used the motif of the *ney* in the story of Marui. Marui, a village girl kidnapped by the ruler of Amarkot, refused to have anything to do with him, regardless of the presents he showered upon her, for she constantly longed for her village, for her friends. She is the symbol of the soul that longs for home, for the First Beloved, and cannot be seduced by any worldly goods or gifts offered to her. When Shah Latif tells her story, he translates into Sindhi the beginning of Rumi's *Mathnavi*, for Marui is the human representative of the flute that is cut off from its roots.

Again, in the Indian subcontinent we find the towering figure of Muhammad Iqbal, the spiritual father of Pakistan, who used the motif of the complaining flute in his early Persian *mathnavi*, *Asrâr-i khudî* (1915). His emphasis, however, is on the necessity of separation, for separation is the secret of creativity - could the reedflute sing if it were not cut from the reed bed? Longing, that is longing in love, enables the human being to speak and thus to become creative.

Rumi's reedflute appears in various forms in the poetry of the countries between Turkey and India. In Bengal, this imagery is sometimes blended with the lovely flute played by Lord Krishna in the Hindu tradition - for his mysterious flute captivates the human heart and draws it to the Divine Beloved.

But it is not only the flute that serves as a fitting symbol of human beings in Rumi's work, the drum or the tambourin as well can represent the lover, for without the touch of the beloved's fingers the drum would be silent. Still, the poet may ask the beloved not to hit him too hard lest his body may be torn to pieces.... Or else, the human being resembles a *rabâb* which was, besides the *ney*, Mevlânâ's favorite instrument. Again, the *rabâb* can sing only when it is "caressed" by the fingers or the plectrum of the musician. Is not the lover like a *rabâb*, his nerves being the strings which react when the beloved's fingers touch them? I think we should understand an anecdote told about Mevlânâ in this context. One day, he was watching his students studying Ibn Arabi's *Futûhât al-makkiyya* when Zaki the *rabâb*-player entered the room and began to play. And Mevlânâ said - so it is told: "Don't you think that Zaki's *futuhât* are better than the *Futûhât al-makkiyya*?" For in music he found the movement of love, the divine attraction, without cerebral exertion.

Other instruments as well play a role in Rumi's poetical cosmos; each of them can serve as a symbol for the human heart that is moved only when the hand or the breath of the Divine Beloved moves them to express their love and longing.

Of course, musical imagery is not restricted to Mevlâna, although he is probably the most eloquent representative of this poetical device, as it was for him not merely an artistic image but the expression of his own experience. We may, in the course of Persian poetry, think of the poetry of Khaqani (d. 1119), whose musical imagery has been studied by a young Dutch orientalist, Anna Livia Beelaert. Is it not an amusing idea to compare the *barbat*, the great bulky string instrument, to a fat lazy person who will sing only when "you twist his ear", that is, tune it properly?

For Rumi, however, it is not only the song of the instruments that inspires him. Even more frequently does he allude to the *sema*, the dancing movement that permeates all of creation. And as often as Persian and Turkish poets may have used musical imagery, Rumi is probably the only one who has explained creation in terms of a musical image. That the voice of the Divine Creator is the reason for creation is an idea found in quite a few traditions, but Mevlâna goes further. Everyone knows the Divine address in Sura 7, verse 172, when God addressed the not-yet-created beings by the words: *Alastu bi-rabbikum* (Am I not your Lord?), and they answered, *balâ shahidnâ*, (Yes, surely we give witness to it), lest they can deny their pledge at the Day of Judgment. To Mevlâna, the words *alastu bi-rabbikum* are a musical sound, and listening to this primordial music, Not-Being suddenly begins to dance, to whirl around, so that out of this dance, stars and suns, atoms, animals, and flowers emerge, all of them moved by the creative Divine music.

A call reached Not-Being, Not-Being said: "Yes (*balâ*),
I shall put my foot on that side, fresh and green and joyful!"
It heard the *alast*, it came forth running and intoxicated;
It was Not-Being and became Being; [manifested in] tulips and willows and
odoriferous herbs! (*Dîvân-i Shams Nr. 1832*)

This is probably the most beautiful and ingenious myth of creation one can imagine as it translates into poetry the empowering role of music. The Divine address is understood here as the first song to which the not-yet-created beings responded and thus were endowed with existence.

From this interpretation of creation, one understands why Rumi's whole work, and especially the *Dîvân-i Shams*, is permeated with musical imagery. He sees that everything, still under the spell of the Primordial Music, is dancing: the atoms spin around their centres, the planets turn around the sun; for in listening to music, the soul leaves its normal orbit and enters higher spheres. It whirls around a spiritual sun and receives strength from it. And this spiritual sun unites all the different atoms into a pattern through which the harmony of the cosmos is revealed. Dance permeates not only the living beings - the child dances in the mother's womb as the dead dance in the shrouds when they hear the name of the Beloved. Flowers and birds, dragons and djinns dance, and the garden is involved in constant dance; the nightingale - the imam of the birds - sings, and while all flowers listen to him, they grow as though they were dancing. Perhaps the loveliest expression of that everything created is dancing is found in a *rubâ'i* where Mevlâna praises the sun-like Beloved who comes in spring, while love resembles the spring breeze that quickens the trees and branches, which seem to be dead after winter's tyrannical rule, and every twig, touched by this breeze, dons a green dancing-gown and begins to move joyfully. Only those not touched by the breeze of love are dried up. They have to be cut off and thrown into the fire - as Sura 111 refers to the firewood carried by Abu Lahab's wife.

Whatever Mevlâna sings, whatever he feels, is in some way or the other connected

with love, that is with the music of love. It is this presence of music and love that makes his poetry eternal.

Mevlâna's ideas have been taken up by later poets in the Mevlevi order, especially within the Turkish tradition. One has only to think of the poetry of Galib Dede, the sheikh of the Galata Mevlevihanesi (d. 1799). But it is little known that even Yahya Kemal composed a beautiful ghazel in honour of Hazret-i Mevlâna. The lovely poem by Asaf Halet Çelebi, *Sema-i semavi*, in which the poet has captured the secret of the whirling, of the movement that permeates everything created, once the music of love has touched it, should not be forgotten either:

The trees, donning their dancing gowns
supplicate in love

Mevlâna

The image in me:
is a different image
how many stars fall
into my interior dance!

I whirl and I whirl

the skies whirl as well

roses bloom out of my face

The trees in the garden, in sunshine

"He created Heaven and Earth"

the serpents listen to the song of the reed
in the trees donning their dancing gowns.

The meadow's children, intoxicated...

Heart

they call you

I look, smiling, at suns

which have lost their way...

I fly, I fly

the skies fly...

It would be easy to provide numberless examples from our wonderful collection of poetry from the Islamic tradition devoted to the secret of music and whirling dance. Such an anthology would prove that despite the aversion of many Muslims to these experiences, the life-giving power of music has always been recognized in Islamic lands. Whether you listen to Sufi music in Morocco, where traditional Andalusian tunes are still alive, or hear the recitation of the *dalâ' il al-khayrât* at Jazûlî's tomb in Marrakesh, or attend the *dhikr* of the Sufis in Khartoum or the song of the devotees at Bhit Shah in Sind - the tradition is very much alive. It is a power that permeates our lives. Yet, we should also understand the criticism voiced by the orthodox, because music, as we have seen, is something that takes the human being out of himself, brings him into another sphere, and thus may divert him from the responsibilities of daily life and the ritual duties of the believer. The tension between Sufism, with its love of music, and the sharia-minded people, with their aversion to, and perhaps fear of, music, can be explained in technical terms as the tension between the religion of *nomos*, the religious

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order, and reglementing law of orthodox circles (this also holds true to a certain extent in Christian history), and the religion of *eros*, Love. Goethe once spoke of the "Doppelglück der Töne und der Liebe", the twofold happiness growing out of the combination of music and love. This combination was something admired and longed for by many seekers, as it was regarded as dangerous and disturbing by others. These attitudes have continued among the pious throughout the centuries.

As we shall see in our conference, different aspects of music and the multiple aspects of Sufism have developed during the ages, sometimes increasing, sometimes diminishing. Moreover, it cannot be denied that in many modern manifestations of Sufism in the West, the emphasis lies much more on the ecstasy induced by music than on the religious, Islamic aspects of Sufism. This is a problem that produces much confusion.

But before I end my brief survey of music and the Sufis, let me read some lines from one of my favorite poems by Rumi, in which he calls his beloved to lead him to the *sema* and thus to the sphere of love:

O come, o come! you are the soul
of the soul of the soul of whirling!
O come! You are the cypress tall
in the blooming garden of whirling!
O come! For there has never been
and will never be one like you!
O come! Such one has never seen
the longing eye of whirling!
O come! The fountain of the sun
is hidden under your shadow!
You own a thousand Venus stars
in the circling heavens of whirling!
The whirling sings your praise and thanks
with a hundred eloquent tongues:
I'll try to say just one, two points
translating the language of whirling.
For when you enter in the dance
you then leave both these worlds.
For outside these two worlds there lies
the universe, endless, of whirling.
The roof is high, the lofty roof
which is in the seventh sphere,
but far beyond this roof has reached
the ladder, the ladder of whirling!
Whatever there appears but He,
you tread on that in dancing:
The whirling, see, belongs to you
and you belong to the whirling.
What can I do when Love appears
and puts its claw round my neck?
I grasp it, take it to my breast
and drag it into the whirling.
And when the bosom of the notes
is filled with the glow of the sun:
They enter all the dance, the dance
and do not complain in the whirling!

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Kātib Ṣelebi, 1608 m.
THE BALANCE
OF TRUTH

by
KĀTIB CHELEBI

كاتب خلیبی

Author of Kāshf-al-Zunūn
کاشف الظنون

Translated with an Introduction
and Notes
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LONDON
GEORGE ALLEN AND UNWIN LTD

(1957)