

MUSIC - THE LADDER FOR THE SOUL

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**We, verily, have made music
as a ladder for your souls, a means whereby they may
be lifted up unto the realm on high; make it not,
therefore, as wings to self and passion. Truly, We are
loath to see you numbered with the foolish.**

(Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, p. 38)

Looking at this quotation in depth we see many different aspects and meanings. If music is as a ladder for the soul and is capable of lifting it up to the divine world, it must be a great art. But we are cautioned not to make it wings to self and passion. This would number us with the foolish. What does this mean? Are we not free to be involved, either by composition, by performance or by listening, to any kind of music that takes our fancy? How can there be a right and wrong way in this choice of music? How do we know whether a certain kind of music is going to be wings to self and passion or a ladder to the realm above?

I don't think there is any right or wrong answer in general to this. It depends entirely on one's reaction to the music. And this can depend on one's background. For instance, someone who has been brought up with classical music in the home will react very differently from someone who comes from, say, a rural African home. However, it is the reaction that counts. If the music brings to mind feelings which lift up the spirit, then it is a ladder upwards. If it evokes earthy feelings, carnal desires, inclinations towards immoral acts, then this is what Bahá'u'lláh tells us to avoid.

Music is one of the important arts. It has great effect upon human spirit. Musical melodies are a certain something which prove to be accidental upon etheric vibrations, for voice is nothing but the expression of vibrations, which reaching the tympanum, effect the nerves of hearing, Musical melodies are, therefore, those peculiar effects produced by, or from, vibration. However, they have the keenest effect upon the spirit. In sooth, although music is a material affair, yet its tremendous effect is spiritual, and its greatest attachment

is to the realm of the spirit.
'Abdu'l-Bahá (Compilations, Lights of Guidance)

Music is a vast subject - thousands of books have been written on the subject in all its forms - infinite compositions. Where to start? What to say? We can only scratch the surface.

Even music, art, and literature, which are to represent and inspire the noblest sentiments and highest aspirations and should be a source of comfort and tranquility for troubled souls, have strayed from the straight path and are now the mirrors of the soiled hearts of this confused, unprincipled and disordered age.

(From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the Iranian believers resident in various countries throughout the world, February 10, 1980)
(Compilations, Lights of Guidance, p. 127)

All art is a reflection of the state of the human world and music is the art which touches everyone. One of the evidences of the appearance of a new Manifestation of God on earth is the enormous upsurge of art and scientific advancement. This is most noticeable in the intellectually advanced civilisations of the world - in our time, the Western world. Not taking into account folk music which exists in all parts of the world, formal musical composition advanced from fairly rigid forms to freer expressions of the Art. With the gradual movement away from disciplines of behaviour generated by loss of faith in established religious constraints, music became more and more experimental, reflecting the moral degeneration into which the world was lapsing. Beauty of melody and harmony were replaced with the ugliness of unresolved discordant sounds. Mercifully, this stage is gradually passing away and with the emerging global realisation that God's teachings are, after all, necessary for the order of the world, music is beginning to return to more beautiful, pleasing forms.

With the ability to travel all over the world in a short time, the music of different countries and cultures is reaching the ears of all people everywhere, and so we find that there is a great deal of music which combines the sounds of east and west, north and south!

Music can evoke many different moods - it can make one feel elated, it can make one feel sad, it can make one dance, or it can make one sing.

Because of my classically trained Western type background, this music is a source of inspiration and upliftment for me but to someone who is used to modern pop music it might just be boring:

Massenet - "Meditation" from the opera "Thaïs" [played during the presentation]

But loud disco type music, "singers" screaming their heads off, thumping around the stage, making very ugly movements, all with a heavy beat that hits you in the solar plexus, and amplification that actually damages the eardrums is completely out for me. I don't even have an example to play you but I'm sure you know what it sounds like!

William Shakespeare alluded to music in two of his plays that immediately come to mind:

"Music soothes the savage breast" and "If music be the food of love, play on". Many beautiful songs have been composed using Shakespeare's poetry. 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us:

In this dispensation, music is one of the arts that is highly approved and is considered to be the cause of the exaltation of sad and desponding hearts.

('Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'í World Faith - 'Abdu'l-Bahá Section, p. 378)

To someone from Iran this music would be a source of joy and exaltation, but to Western ears, some of the notes appear to be out of tune. This is because Eastern Music uses quarter tones as well as half and whole tones:

Ahdieh (Persian song)

Another type of music is background relaxation music. I recently had some treatment after an operation for a shattered shoulder and arm called Bowen Therapy or Technique and after each gentle manipulation, the therapist left the room for a few minutes leaving me to listen to some relaxation music - something like this:

Tranquility (Reader's Digest CD)

Therefore set to music the verses and the divine words so that they may be sung with soul-stirring melody in the Assemblies and gatherings, and that the hearts of the listeners may become tumultuous and rise towards the Kingdom of Abhá in supplication and prayer.

(Compilations, Bahá'í World Faith, 'Abdu'l-Bahá Section, p. 378)

Set verses to music - - - great composers through the ages have done this. Listen to the church music, the synagogue music, the chanting in the Mosques and the religions of the far East. Listen to the oratorios and countless individual songs and song cycles which have been composed to words from the Holy Books. Handel's great composition called "The Messiah", traditionally performed at Christmas time, is supposedly about the birth and station of Jesus. The words of some of the choruses are taken from the Old Testament and actually refer to Bahá'u'lláh. The beginning of this piece could relate to Jesus - "For unto us a child is born, a son is given" but then it goes on - "And the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called - Wonderful! Counsellor! The Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace!" Listen carefully and between all the embellishments you will hear these words!

"For Unto us a Child is born." from The Messiah by Handel

Although we don't have a great deal of soul-stirring music in the Bahá'í Faith yet, much has been composed in fairly simple musical language and has become dear to the hearts of the believers. Many of these compositions were heard at the Second World Congress

in New York and they have been recorded and used at all sorts of Bahá'í gatherings. The following song - "In this day Bahá'u'lláh" - was sung in gospel style at the World Congress and is extremely effective:

"In this day Bahá'u'lláh"

We are warned by the Guardian not to fall into the habit of set forms. You will notice also that he refers to the fact that people from different cultures or countries have different ideas as to what constitutes beautiful music, a point I made at the beginning of this talk.

"Music, as one of the arts, is a natural cultural development, and the Guardian does not feel that there should be any cultivation of Bahá'í Music any more than we are trying to develop a Bahá'í school of painting or writing. The believers are free to paint, write and compose as their talents guide them. If music is written, incorporating the sacred Writings, the friends are free to make use of it, but it should never be considered a requirement at Bahá'í meetings to have such music. The further away the friends keep from any set forms, the better, for they must realize that the Cause is absolutely universal, and what might seem beautiful addition to their mode of celebrating a Feast, etc., would perhaps fall on the ears of people of another country as unpleasant sound - - and vice versa. As long as they have music for its own sake it is all right, but they should not consider it Bahá'í music."

(From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, July 20, 1946: Ibid)
(Compilations, Lights of Guidance, p. 411)

O servant of Baha! Music is regarded as a praiseworthy science at the Threshold of the Almighty ... By virtue of this, consider how much the art of music is admired and praised. Try, if thou canst, to use spiritual melodies, songs and tunes, and to bring the earthly music into harmony with the celestial melody. Then thou wilt notice what a great influence music hath and what heavenly joy and life it conferreth. Strike up such a melody and tune as to cause the nightingales of divine mysteries to be filled with joy and ecstasy."

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, from a recently translated Tablet to an individual believer; Bahá'í Writings on Music, a compilation of the Universal House of Justice)
(Compilations, Lights of Guidance, p. 411)

Some intellectual music has also been composed - for example, the oratorio by Lasse Thoresen - a Norwegian Bahá'í who is a professor of composition at the Norwegian State Academy of Music - which was performed at the Official Opening of the Terraces on 22nd May 2001. At first hearing, this music is not so easy to understand but as it becomes more familiar, it will have more meaning for many of the friends. The following is an extract from "Terraces of Light" and is based on the Tablet of Carmel - "All glory be to this Day, the Day in which the fragrances of mercy have been wafted over all created

things" It is described as a Symphonic Oratorio and in this extract you will hear the tenor solo and chorus:

"Terraces of Light"

Now, in Africa where music is a part of life for the rural people, there is a vast quantity of music using the words of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, or music in praise of the Central Figures of the Faith. The same is true of rural Bahá'ís in all parts of the world. Following are extracts from a song recorded in the Congo and one recorded by a South American group (El Viento Canta) whose performances (I quote) "pulsate with life and energy" ... and who have a "conviction about the capacity of music to break down the barriers and prejudices that separate people." (Roger White) I saw this group perform some years ago when they were in Cape Town and their performance is absolutely rivetting.

You will notice that these two very different groups of Bahá'ís produce very similar examples of energetic and lively music:

Celebration Congo and El Viento Canta (Tape recordings)

The American Indians have powerful folk-lore. A prominent Bahá'í, Kevin Locke who is an American Indian, has gathered up much of these age-old traditions and stories, and being a flautist as well as an outstanding hoop-dancer, has produced many recordings. I was privileged to meet him in Cape Town at the Parliament of the World's Religions when he performed the hoop-dance and played his flute. Here is a part of "Dream Catcher" which incorporates the sounds of nature, as do most of Kevin's pieces. I was so fascinated by this folk-lore that I purchased several of his CD's. A dream catcher is a small hoop of red willow branches, spanned by woven webs and beads. They are hung in homes. It is believed that good dreams pass through the centre hole of the hoop and bad dreams are trapped in the web woven by Iktome, the spider. In this way good dreams reach the sleeper while the bad perish in the light of dawn. The dream catchers I saw last year in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, were many different sizes and were embellished with feathers and beads:

"Dream Catcher" Kevin Locke CD

Music from Mongolia is extremely interesting. Sean Hinton, son of Phillip Hinton, the South African who became a Bahá'í in Cape Town (taught by Lowell Johnson), spent some time with one of the nomadic tribes researching their music for Cambridge University, and was interviewed on radio in Australia about this music. He related some of the folk-lore and described an unusual use of the split voice in which one hears a lower sound together with an upper melody. At the Parliament of the World's Religions there was a man who demonstrated this technique and was even able to sing popular tunes in the upper melody. I met him and he showed me how to start practising this technique! I went around making these weird noises for days afterwards but never quite managed to split my voice!

Sean Hinton's Interview - Split voice extract

As a matter of interest, Sean was later appointed by the Mongolian government as their Consul or Ambassador (I'm not quite sure which) in Australia. He now lives in London with his wife Tebbi - Lally Warren's daughter - and works at a Film Studio. They have two children.

Music can be very descriptive and there is a wealth of it on soundtracks from modern movies which have thrown their composers into great prominence. (Of course, the movie makers often use music of the classical composers as well.) When one hears this music, one is immediately reminded of the circumstances of the movie. In other words, music is evocative. The following was written by John Williams who is now very famous for music written specifically for movies:

John Williams - Schindler's List

Do you recall the name of the Movie?

But whatever kind of music you prefer, always go back to the first quotation of Bahá'u'lláh to maintain the correct balance in your choice.

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therefore, as wings to self and passion. Truly, We are
loath to see you numbered with the foolish.**

(Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, p. 38)

To end I have chosen the setting of the prayer of Bahá'u'lláh, "From the Sweet-Scented Streams" set to music by the late Charles Wolcott, Member of the Universal House of Justice, and recorded in June 2001 for the second time by Norman Bailey, accompanied by myself. (The first time was a very poor quality recording we made in Germany in 1964!) Norman Bailey declared as a Bahá'í in this very city (Port Elizabeth, South Africa) in 1956 and went on to become a world-famous opera singer:

"From the Sweet-Scented Streams" - Charles Wolcott