

The Legacy of Mediaeval Persian Sufism, ed. by Leonard Lewisohn, foreword by Dr. Javad

Nurbakhsh, Introduction by S.H. Nasr, London, 1992 (277-287) (Pagination approximative.)

What is Sufi Music ?

Jean During



The purpose of this paper is to shed light on a seemingly obvious, but actually obscure, issue in the science of Islamic musicology, namely: is there really a 'Sufi music' in the same way that a distinct genre of Sufi poetry does exist ? And if so, is this mystical music different in its specific characteristics from the secular musical genres ?

Rather than approaching this question from a purely theoretical and external perspective focusing on the history or theosophical doctrines of Persian music, I will try to concentrate here on its purely musical aspects, examined from various perspectives in order to draw a sort of holographic image. However, insofar as the entire notion of 'Sufi music' as understood in the West is quite limited and beset with many prejudices, certain distortions first need to be dissipated before our

study can begin.<sup>1</sup>

### A Few Prejudices

To the Western mind, the notion of Sufi or mystical music automatically conjures up certain features associated with:

- a subtle science of modes and intervals (inherited from Pythagoreanism),
- a science of the sound and vocal techniques (breathing, diaphonic singing, etc.),
- the priority of melody over rhythm and text, or the use of sacred texts and formulas rather than poetry,
- a predilection for singing and wind instruments,

<sup>1</sup> I have dealt with this question in my book *Musique et Mystique dans les Traditions de l'Iran*, (Paris: I. F.R.I.: Peeters, 1989). For the mystical content of Sufi musical experience (samâ' ), see my *Musique et Extase, l'audition mystique dans la tradition soufie* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1988). My recent paper 'L'autre oreille. Le pouvoir mystique de la musique au Moyen-Orient', in *Cahiers des Musique Traditionnelles* (1990, III, 57-78) discusses the general conditions of the power of music. For an introduction to mystical music in the Islamic world, see J. C. Bürgel, *The Feather of Simurgh, The 'Licit Magic' of the Arts in Medieval Islam* (New York, 1988), Chap. 4.

However, the present article makes little reference to these writings, while attempting to provide new insight into this question, with musical examples drawn from the living tradition of Sufi music (originally used to illustrate this paper during its presentation).

J. During : What is Sufi Music ? 278 278

- an individual and intellectual expression rather than a collective and emotional one,
- a slow tempo and hieratic atmosphere.

Such ideas probably arose through contact with Indian music, and Indian musicians have been careful not to correct them. Another phenomenon which probably contributes to misconceptions which Westerners have of Sufism is that of the so-called 'whirling dervishes,' whose music is typified by the ney (reedpipe)--in present-day France the most popular and widespread Sufi instrument.

The ney's preeminent position derives not only from its consecration by Mawlânâ R,mî, but also from the fact that it is an archetypal instrument--in fact, among the most archaic and the most traditional, making it even more venerable.

Furthermore, its particular sonority and the milieu in which it is usually played tends to evoke a transcendental dimension; the sound of the ney is often furnished with a natural or artificial echo which brings to mind immense spaces, providing this fragile instrument with a cosmic dimension, and thus epitomizing the human condition which oscillates between abasement and supreme dignity. More concretely, we may recall that such sonorities remind Westerners of the acoustical space of churches and the sound of the organ.

If mysticism is naturally linked to cosmic space and the harmony of the spheres, this is also the case with the whirling dancers of the Mevlevi order who, like a celestial machine and the planets, rotate on two axes, orbital and giratory. The European observer who listens to the Mevlevi samâ' can project his personal preconceptions, stemming from his Pythagorean and Christian legacy, onto the performance. It is a liturgy which evokes the melodies and the rotation of the spheres, which elevates the soul and sets the body and its mundane concerns aside, evoking inward reflection, meditation, calm and inner peace in the listener. Each person experiences it in his or her own way, for between listener and musician it is a question of communion rather than communication.

I do not wish to imply that the Mevlevi samâ' is not true Sufi music; on the contrary, it is, but it should not be considered the sole viable genre of Sufi music. In any case, is there really only one sort of Sufism or one sort of Sufi musical expression? Just as there is a world of difference between Rûmî's ghazals and Ibn 'Arabî's writings, so do Sufi musical forms vary, reflecting the creative diversity inherent in Islamic mysticism.

The truth of this is demonstrated by the fact that at the far extreme of the Mevlevi samâ' we find another form recently imported to the West which has helped to change popular misconceptions about Sufism, that is to say, Indo-Pakistani qawwâlî music. To illuminate the essential differences between the Mevlevi and qawwâlî genres, I have drawn up a comparative table, taking into account various musical levels based on performance, context and musical content.

My intention in comparing these two genres is to stress the inherent diversity of J. During : What is Sufi Music ? 279 279

Sufi musical forms, a diversity which it is not technically possible, in the confines of the present article, to illustrate more fully.

M e v l e v i M u s i c Q a w w â l î M u s i c  
limited musical specificity musical specificity

derived from samâ' fusion of samâ' and dhikr  
entirely composed partly improvised  
collective expression (except in taksim) individual and collective expression  
fixed text adaptable text  
slow tempo fast tempo  
complex, long and varied rhythms simple, short, limited rhythms  
closed repertoire open repertoire  
continuous, mandala-like structure succession of separate pieces  
traditional instruments modern instruments  
mental dhikr (by the participants) verbal dhikr (by the musicians)  
prearranged dance of one set type & figure informal dance  
discretion, moderated expression exaltation, enthusiasm  
calm, meditation extraversion, emotion  
communion communication, interchange  
symbolic space and sequences limited symbolism  
ritualization limited ritualization  
closed circuit, State-sponsoring private sponsoring, offerings and  
donations  
official performances public performances  
classical, learned, elitist semi-classical, great popular impact

Examining the above chart, one may actually wonder whether a unique genre of 'Sufi music' does exist, for between the two contrasting musical types we find a great number of forms, sometimes closely related, sometimes very remote from each other. We should also take into account some nuances within the above typology: the commercial and popular qawwâlî music differs from the traditional, Sufi type, especially from the ancient form of Chishtî samâ' (bund samâ'), the ritual space of which can be as heavily structured as the Mevlevi samâ'.

Furthermore, the Mevlevi samâ' which is performed in modern-day Konya is rather heavy, official and artificial, and on the whole, very different from the private Mevlevi samâ' (called âyin-i jam')

Let us also point out that in the Mevlevi samâ', the celestial melopoeia of the ney serves mainly as opening and conclusion, while the whirling dance performed in six fast beats is, in fact, the climax of the ceremony, even if the latter is reduced to a mere formality in official demonstrations. In any case, the central dance and rhythm of the Mevlevi samâ' are much closer in form to the sort of Sufi music typified by

1 A short sequence of such a private samâ', recorded in Konya by the author during the night following the great official ceremony, illustrates this point quite vividly.

J. During : What is Sufi Music ? 280 280

the qawwâlî. In point of fact, the samâ' performance and dhikr gatherings found in many Sufi orders start with a very soft melody and end in excitement, enthusiasm and hand-clapping. It can even happen that the vocal or instrumental melody soars above the dhikr which is scanned with force by the dervishes. In some kind of dhikr songs, such as those of the Jarrâhi-Khalvati Sufi Order from Istanbul, a synthesis of both aspects is achieved.<sup>1</sup>

Qawwâlî and Mevlevi forms merely typify two extremes of the musical domain of Sufism. Between them is spread an infinity of nuances and musical languages. For a better understanding of certain Sufi forms we have to examine the deeper structures, and probe the frontier of what is commonly meant by the word 'music'.

If the 'Sufi character' of Mevlevi compositions and improvisations (taksim) is less obvious than that of the qawwâlî genre, it is due to the fact that this musical style is not exclusively particular to Sufism or even to mystical expression in general. It is actually found in all Middle Eastern (and particularly, the Turkish) musical traditions. Qawwâlî music is, on the other hand, an original creation. Above all, as with many Sufi musical forms, it utilizes a specific technique which is both spiritual and, up to a point, 'musical' : that is to say, the technique of the dhikr.

Dhikr and Music

If 'pure' non-measured melody is one pole of the Sufi musical world, its opposite is the sacred word, the dhikr, which possesses both rhythm and pulse but lacks melody. The dhikr lies at the border between speech and music, and can be considered the Sufi mode of expression par excellence, the exclusive domain of Sufism, or the Islamic mystical experience. The structure of the dhikr is typified by:

- 1) a repetitive formula ;
- 2) a pulsed or rhythmic articulation ;
- 3) a specific vocal utterance (accentuated breathing, sound produced while breathing, low register voice, non-articulated sounds, etc.)

Although some will object that some of these features are also found in much profane music, I would argue that that there can be no disagreement about the

specifically 'Sufi intent' and therefore, mystical content, of the dhikr musical ceremony.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Cf. the record published in 1981 in the United States by the dervishes of the Jarrâhi-Khalvati order performing their samâ', entitled, 'Journey to the Lord of Power,' (USA: Inner Traditions International Ltd.), No. 1001-1002.

<sup>2</sup>I have in mind here the Indonesian kechak, a ritual originally aimed at inducing trance states and possession, superficially resembling the Sufi dhikr. Although in J. During : What is Sufi Music ? 281 281

However, before proceeding, I would like to call attention to the existence of a certain 'objective quality' in certain types of Sufi music, which, although imperceptible to the ordinary observer, is quite evident to the experienced and adept practitioner. It is a quality which can be readily detected by connoisseurs, even when listening to alien musical traditions. By way of example, I recall that once, I was listening an Anatolian Sufi minstrel (belonging to the Alevî-Bektashî order) playing a piece that we could immediately intuitively identify as a ritual tune. We asked him to listen to a Kurdish melody belonging to the repertoire of the Ahl-i °aqq Sufis, which, in turn he immediately identified as a sacred melody. (These two musical traditions are rather different, but both religious groups have many points in common). It should be emphasized that there was something within the music itself which indicated clearly its objective 'Sufic' quality; perhaps there was something even more subtle, invisibly connected to the dhikr element, about which I shall try to give some account:

The traces of dhikr in Sufi music are of two kinds : apparent and hidden, outward and inward. Let us first consider the apparent ones. First of all, it should be stated that dhikr is a multi-faceted phenomenon embodying a plurality of forms ranging from silence to speech, as well as music properly speaking, which might be itemized as follows:

--The ultimate level is that of a pure mental remembering, without any verbal support.

--This is followed by the silent or mental dhikr (called dhikr-i khafî) wherein the adept activates, by external or inward movements, an inner energy directed towards specific psychic centres of the body.

--The latter practice can lead to a form of verbal dhikr (called dhikr-i jalî), performed collectively or privately.

--In collective performances, the verbal dhikr sometimes serves as an ostinato

back- ground for a melody,<sup>1</sup>

some cultures certain practices may be found which outwardly resemble the dhikr ceremony, these practices usually have no sacred significance. Furthermore, within the framework of Islamic culture, the characteristics of the dhikr are particular to Sufi practice and to the realization of ecstatic states (aΩwâl ). It is quite certain that within the context of Islamic civilization, any practice similar in form to the dhikr ceremony, insofar as it is directed towards analogous spiritual ends, is directly derived from Sufi practice.

Despite the fact that the exponents of strict academic musicology may object that the characteristics of the dhikr do not apply directly to music, i.e., that a dhikr is not, properly speaking, musical nor artistic (in spite of its obvious majesty and beauty), I think that significant elements derived from the Sufi dhikr have impregnated and directly influenced the development of certain musical forms.

1A vivid musical example of this ostinato type of dhikr is found in the Naqshbandî dhikr from

Chinese Turkestan, a recording of which is in the author's private collection.

J. During : What is Sufi Music ? 282 282

--which can lead either to the superimposition of the verbal dhikr upon a melody

-- or to the incorporation of a dhikr in a chorus, i.e., a chanted dhikr .

--In some cases, a song gradually takes the form of a dhikr by reducing its melodic range and by repeating a verbal formula.<sup>1</sup>

--Finally there are melodies devoid of verbal support but whose rhythms suggest to the initiated listener a verbal or silent dhikr, communicating the 'objective Sufic quality' mentioned above. In such cases, the structure of both the melody and rhythm are inspired by common dhikr formulas.

**Repetition and Dhikr**

In such types of music, the most common characteristic is a kind of rhythmic ostinato borrowed from the dhikr . Thus, while the dervishes listen to this type of melody, they often start mentally reciting their personal dhikr, or any other dhikr formula adapted to the rhythm of the melody. This is one of the most natural ways of 'active listening,' even if it is not expressed by an outwardly visible manner.

According to this principle, one may imagine that any melody with an ostinato character is thereby be endowed with the quality of the dhikr and so should consequently induce a similar inward mystical state. In practice, however,

this is incorrect, mainly because repetitive Sufi music is qualitatively distinct from other types of repetitive music. Sufi music--all Sufi music--tends towards One End, starting from a given point in order to reach another point, its purpose being to elevate the soul above its ordinary condition. The initiated listener alone realizes this movement is occurring by means of messages encoded in the music itself as it undergoes stages of progressive intensification, involving mainly :

--the passage from a slow to a quick tempo, from long motifs to motifs of medium length, on to short ones (featuring, for instance, a succession of differing dhikrs, beginning in the long Shahada and culminating in the divine Names, °ayy or °aqq);

--progressive concentration of the melodic space.

Thus, the music achieves what may be termed a mandala in sound and time at the core of which vibrates the pure energy of the ineffable divine Name, reduced to a breath, a pulsation. But is this mandala form really particular to Sufism ?

Actually not; it is found in Uygur music, amongst the North-African Nuba, in Indian rāga performances, and, to a lesser extent, in Tājik-Uzbek music, as well as 1A musical example of this type of adaptation of a song to the form of a dhikr is found in a

qalandarī tune from Baluchistan in the author's private collection.

J. During : What is Sufi Music ? 283 283

in classical Persian music. In any case, there is nothing more natural and fitted to psychological laws than to begin a performance with a calm and moderate rhythm and to end in an enthusiastic and excited tempo. (Imagine a concert starting with pieces scored in allegro vivace and ending with a funeral march !). Furthermore, even if we were to assume the 'mandalic' structure of art-music performances to be precisely inspired by and derived from the rhythms of the Sufi concert, then, concretely speaking, what is the difference between them ? Two methodological problems arise at this point:

1) We cannot compare anything with everything. Comparisons must be drawn from within each culture rather than cross-culturally. Rather than seeking out absolute or universal criteria, we should limit ourselves to examining certain common polar principles within different cultures, thus exposing some of the same sacred/profane dichotomies. Although mysticism is universal in its aims, it takes many different forms, even within Islamic culture. In the same way, music as a universal science, is one and universal, but as an art, it takes its precise references

from the variegated cultural code which nourishes it.

2) The above principle of relativity leads us back from the absolute to the particular culture, and from the culture to the individual subject himself. Now, without the active participation of the subject who performs or listens to the music, no music is per se mystical. Let us remember that even the most evocative dhikr does not work 'automatically;' it is merely a technique employed during samâ' to activate the intention of the individual, to assist concentration. Separated from the spiritual life, the practice of the dhikr cannot cause any 'instantaneous enlightenment,' or lead to a 'state of grace.' Similarly, all music, even though it possess all the desired mystical qualities, will be efficient only by virtue of the intention of the listener and/or performer.

Inversely, the true Sufi may interpret the most mundane of melodies as 'music of the spheres', hearing in it the Divine summons to heed the primordial Covenant of alastu bi rabbikum (Koran VII 172); examples of this attitude are innumerable in Sufi literature.

Thus, with these principles in mind, we may present our first general and summary definition of Sufi music: Sufi music is a music made by and/or listened to by Sufis.

As previously pointed out, our Mevlevi reedpipe or ney solo differs in no way from a classical ney solo; likewise, in a Persian khâniqâh, the same poems and the same modes are sung as in a classical concert of traditional Iranian music. The musical ensemble of Moroccan Sufis, under the leadership of their Shaykh, is famous for its fine interpretation of the classical Nuba, but their performance is exactly identical with the type of musical concert found in secular festivals in Fez or Rabat.

However, this proposed union of the sacred and profane genres of music is subject to the following two restrictions:

J. During : What is Sufi Music ? 284 284

1) As suggested above, it is possible that either the classical forms were originally elaborated by the Sufis, or else these forms are in themselves versatile, so that the same tune can be interpreted in both a spiritual and a mundane manner (an axiom which holds true for much of Persian poetry, particularly that of °âfi').

2) It remains that some forms are much more suitable than others to spiritual purposes. This is the case in the form of the dhikr. However, strictly speaking, we must admit that even the forms outwardly similar to the dhikr are not necessarily

mystical per se.

In order to shed more light on this problem, I will attempt to compare two very similar performances, the first secular and the other sacred.

The first is a drum concert featuring the traditional *dâyira bazmî* (lit. drumming for entertainment) which I recorded in Pamir (Tâjikistan) following a long day spent in the company of minstrels. Setting their lutes aside, the musicians distributed frame drums (*daf* or *dâyira*) to the folk seated among them; then they started singing and drumming with great vigor. They informed us that this musical form was of extreme antiquity, in fact, the most archaic in their musical tradition, going back to remote times where the sole existing instrument to accompany the human voice was the *daf*. The performance began with rather slow melodies sung by one or two soloists and then repeated by the choir. These gradually increased in tempo, the words sung with great enthusiasm as they chanted, "O beloved, come and bring the wine" ("Ay yâr, biyâ, may dih! "). There seemed to be some evidence here, apparent from the atmosphere of the gathering, that the wine in question was the fruit of the grape rather than a metaphor for mystical ecstasy, for their kind of music is usually sung during festivals or weddings, and not in the Sufi *khâniqâh*-s. The second performance took place among the *Qâdirî* dervishes of Kurdistan, 2500 km from Pamir, and apparently without any cultural link. Two poems were recited by the dervishes: one, a ghazal of *Jâmi*, beginning, "Again I long for the fields..." ("Bâz havâ-yi chamanam âraz,..."); another, a ballad in which a beloved becomes angry with her lover: "O moon-faced beauty whose rays have set the earth

afire, why take offense at me?" (Ay mâh-i 'âlamsuz-i man, az man chirâ ranjîda'î?).

Both these poems are part of the normal *Qâdirî* repertoire. Here again, the form of the *dâyira bazmî* was found, and is repeated in in a similar fashion among the *Qâdirî* of Sanandaj, the melodies of which are different but follow the same principles.

For this performance ten people had gathered in one dervish's house. Although some participants were non-initiates and the meeting was informal, it was the wellknown

*khalîfa* *Mirzâ Ghawthî* who was singing and leading the *dhikr*. His intention was clearly to perform a *dhikr*, not to provide the guests with entertainment. The atmosphere became so warm that after a while everybody was overwhelmed and

J. During : What is Sufi Music ? 285 285

affected by the music. At the end of the singing and drumming, two young men among the non-initiated experienced a state of spiritual elevation, and so decided to

commit themselves to the Qâdirî path and being converted, recited the initiatic oath of obedience after the khalîfa.

'What is the difference between these two kinds of performance?' it may be asked. Why is the latter performance to be viewed as sacred Sufi music, and the former purely secular? Why does one produce a spiritual effect, and the other not ? Setting aside the purely musical aspects of this problem, we may formulate an adequate reply by enumerating the following reasons:

--the intention of the listeners and the musicians in each case was different.

--In the first case, the social context of the gathering inhibited emotional response, while stimulating it in the second.

--In the first case, the listeners and performers knew nothing about Sufism, being ignorant of any higher anagogic and spiritual significance in the erotic and bacchic imagery of the poetry, and being unacquainted with ecstatic states and consciousness, their attitude evinced merely emotional excitement and joie de vivre.

If the above explanation is adequate from a musical standpoint, from whence does the essential difference between the two genres come? Our answer is that the distinction between the two genres, if it does exist, is something which only connoisseurs may comprehend. Suffice it to say that trained ears are able to grasp very fine nuances of meaning which the literal 'letter' of language is unable to express, and thus, inwardly translate or transform a secular materia into a sacred spiritus.

However, before leaving this question aside as being ultimately a matter of taste (and here, by taste or dhawq, I mean direct perception [hâl] or pure intuition), I would like to examine the matter as far as possible as the use of verbal concepts (qawl) and visual images (suwar) can take us.

First of all, generally speaking, cannot we often detect a difference of melodic shape, phrasing and character between a sacred and a secular melody? It is evident,

for instance, that the tunes of the secular music of Baluchistan are more extroverted, lighter, and less obsessive, in spite of their repetitiveness, than the

'sacred' qalandarî tunes of this province. Although such aesthetic features can be proven only through a detailed analysis, we should not forget, in any case, that in respect to the oral tradition of music, melodies are not autonomous objects, but come to existence only when realized in performance. For this reason these aesthetic features are completely dependent, more so than in any other repertory, on the interpretation.

To pursue the matter further, we must leave the level of the outward and, putting musical analysis behind us, probe into the inner subtleties of musical

J. During : What is Sufi Music ? 286 286

performance. And eventually, after passing from the form to the interpretation, from the object to the subject, we return to the question of the intention and the way to signify this intention by means of messages that we assume to be encoded within the music. Since a simple phrase can have several meanings or metameanings,

according to the way it is uttered, several elements must be taken into account: context, proximity of the speaker, status and hierarchical position, culture, length of the pauses, imperceptible and uncontrolled movements, etc. All such features contribute to a large extent to the exchange of information, and the artists are very sensitive to it.

There is also another important decisive factor, which, although imperceptible, is still 'objective,' insofar as it contributes to the effect of the music. This is directly linked to the practice of the dhikr as an amplifier and harmonizer of the psychic energy of both listeners and musicians.

Many Sufi melodies, as we have noted above, are marked by the form of the dhikr. In some of them, the dhikr formula provides the basis for a distinct melody. In others, the melody runs independently, but the listener who is attuned may feel a call to the recite the dhikr inwardly. In other cases, there remains only the 'taste' of the dhikr, a recollection and an awareness. How does this happen ? It is because the musician himself mobilizes all his psychic energy in an attitude of 'remembrance' (dhikr ), uttering the words and sounds of his song with the same total concentrated consciousness which he invests in his dhikr. He is thus investing all his inner energies in the sounds and the words, and in turn, benefiting from the potential power of the musical forms. This inner energy or force takes shape in the word and the sounds, and is passed on to the listeners, who must proceed to

decipher the message and 'decode the spiritual lesson' ('ibrat) hidden in the music. It also may be possible to account for this process in terms of 'energetics,' a science which is part of Western 'New Age' psychology, whose subject is the analysis of certain realities and facts well known and well described by Sufis and mystics of various religious traditions. (Its clearest illustration is supplied by the martial arts of the Far-East). According to the Kurdish Qâdirî Sufis, the movement of breathing mobilizes a vital force (probably that which the Chinese call the qi), localized at the level of the stomach, which is released either with the vocal utterance or at the very moment the hand touches the instrument (which is in this instance, the Persian tambourine or daf). This energy is sent out through the musical sound and reaches the listener, to whom it transmits its effect. I assume that, in turn, it awakens an energy of the same nature in the listener, inducing a change in his state of consciousness. For the Sufi singer or musician, the essential thing in the art of interpretation is the circulation of this energy. There is no doubt that the Sufi minstrel derives his strength and energetic versatility from assiduous practice of the dhikr, or through similar forms of meditation.

Here we may well speculate that all traditional music found in various cultures the world over, if correctly transmitted, may have in a similar effect, even without J. During : What is Sufi Music ? 287 287

the use of the specific forms described above, or explicit reference to a spiritual content. It is true, on a less esoteric level, that all musical masters, whatever tradition they adhere to, follow these same principles more or less intuitively . There appears to be some concrete evidence that a spiritual intent, directed by inspired and enlightened men towards the edification and consciousness-raising of their audience, lies at the origin of most traditional musical forms. The ancient melodies, said Confucius, could have been created only by saints and transmitted by sages.

Given that the form is only secondary to the actual performance, the Sufi sages advise us that the technique of the dhikr, which involves the mastering and the directing of inner psycho-spiritual energies must be illuminated by purification of the heart's intent through surrender of the 'imperious self' (nafs al-ammâra), and acquisition of noble virtues (malika fâzila), if it is not to remain more than an empty and sterile technique. Such is the basic, the essential, condition of 'Sufi music' according to both the Masters of the Path and the Sufi musical masters. The rest lies in the hands of God. Only He provides the musician with talent,

inspiration and grace; and only He provides the listener with the grace of the faculty of hearing.