

## CHAPTER SEVEN

# MUSIC AS MEDITATION AND THERAPY

Music can be meditation for the composer, for the performer, and for the listener; yet because not everybody is a performer and few are composers, while everybody is a listener, it is on listening to music that I will concentrate here.

Not only can music-audition become meditation through a deliberate attempt and through the use of a particular technique or another, but we may say that the best of musical listening is *already* meditation, in that it involves a putting aside of one's "worldly self," as well as an implicit intuition of spiritual content in the music and a measure of identification with it.

Perhaps music would not be as important as it has been shown to be throughout the history of humankind if it did not constitute a sort of spiritual nourishment and an occasion for states of mind that we regard as highly valuable. There are those for whom music is already a spiritual vehicle and a healing influence, and do not need further techniques. In what follows, however, I will show ways in which we may deliberately experiment with musical listening so as to actualize its spiritual possibilities, suggesting a variety of "spiritual audition" experiences.

In speaking of "music as meditation," I do not necessarily imply that we are to use music as a substitute for silent medita-

tion; since audition, unlike visualization or active ritual, may be considered as an extrinsically stimulated meditation, music has been regarded by some spiritual teachers as something that we should not abuse or give priority to in mind-training. Perhaps comparable to psychedelics in its mysticomimetic or ecstatogenic potential, music should be regarded as the “salt and pepper” of meditation rather than its “bread and butter”: a special stimulus, a sort of psycho-spiritual lubricant on which we should not become dependent. Ideally, music should be a counterpoint to the pursuit through silent meditation of that self-supportive and yet nowhere-supported condition most characteristic of meditative depth.

There are non-specific ways in which we may use music as a stimulus for meditation. We may find it to be a useful background for relaxation, for instance. The soothing content of music in this situation is enhanced by the perception of a sort of sound cocoon around the listener—a sound-filled area of space that is most conducive to self-abandon into a “fetus-like” regression, in which the action-oriented and grasping attitude of the ordinary mind is put to rest.

Perhaps a more specific music-related kind of meditation, however, is that which rests on the association of sound with the divine (in the widest sense of the word). However true it may be that light is the most frequent symbol of the divine in the codified language of the religions, we may say that hearing is of greater mystical import than seeing; and sound (and its modulation) is a more potent vehicle for the sense of the holy than sight.

Because in listening to music we may be tempted to expect that music “does it for us”—that is to say, we may be inclined to passively (psychoanalytically speaking, “orally”) expect to be filled, satisfied, and pleased by music to the point of ecstasy—and because all of this is contrary to the attitude most conducive to the deep musical contemplation, I think it is most appropriate to begin the exploration of music as a devotional vehicle through listening to sound itself rather than to musical compositions. For,

if sound be Brahman (as the old saying *shabda brahman* affirms), this is not something to which we are ordinarily attuned. The Chandogya Upanishads tells us that Brahman is to be found in the sound of fire that may be heard by closing one's ears. I propose this exercise as a beginning of this exploration: meditation on the divine by means of sharply and subtly listening to the sound in the depth of our ears.

Those who carry out this exercise will probably be interested in exploring another Indian practice that involves not only listening but utterance: the evocation of sacredness through the chanting of the syllable *om*. The most appropriate way of doing so is by singing it in the lowest possible register (evocative of the widest space), and in such a way as to generate as many harmonics as possible (evocative of experiential density).

When we apply the principle of evocation through sound to the listening of music proper, I think that the best practice to be recommended for a Westerner may be that of listening to Indian classical music, which unfolds in the ever-sustained presence of its tonic (usually sounded by the tamboura)—a musical correlate of the presence of the divine.

Aside from the suitability of Indian music for concentration on the divine by virtue of its structure, where melody and rhythm are supported by a drone, it is appropriate for another reason. For some people at least, too strong an associative relationship has been established between Western musical repertoire and states of mind that lie within the bounds of the ordinary if not the morbid. If it is true that lack of familiarity with the different music language of Indian classical music can be a limitation at the beginning, I think that the educational experience of continuing familiarization is worth its reward; for, as in the use of ecclesiastical Latin and Sanskrit, Indian music can afford a purely "liturgical" medium—i.e., one dedicated by us to evoke specifically extra-mundane experience.

Moving a step further in the direction of tapping the more specific potential of music, we can now turn our attention from

listening to the divine “in general” to listening to particular divine attributes: particular nuances of spiritual experience that are reflected in specific compositions. This aspect of music is well known in the Indian culture, where each traditional *raga* (a sound sequence that constitutes the melodic seed-structure of a composition) has relation to a particular angle of the sun above the horizon and a specific internal state, and is considered appropriate to play only within certain hours. Obviously, since music is evocative of internal states, we may employ it as a stimulus for more deliberately eliciting these states, just as in the case of mantra.

Yet our own musical heritage is rich in expressions of the highest consciousness—much beyond, I think, what Western seekers have become aware of or acknowledged. What Bach represents in the world’s musical history cannot be separated from what he represents in the history of the expression of holiness, no matter what limitations the composer may have shared with his time and society (limitations from which not even the saints are exempt). Thus, we may want to try Bach’s “*Erbarme dich*” aria in the *Passion According to St. Matthew* as a stimulus to the contemplation of Divine Compassion. Or we may seek to become absorbed in the joyousness of the “Divine Child” through the Allegro of Mozart’s Sonata K. 283 in G.

Before saying anything further about the use of Western music as a means of concentration on the divine, however, I want to emphasize how appropriate it is to consider the best of what is ostensibly “secular” music of recent centuries in the West as a treasure of spiritual content. Although *musica sacra* and *musica profana* went their different ways (the post-baroque was first addressed to the court and later to the bourgeoisie and then to all, yet stayed outside the church), it is secular music that has truly realized to the farthest the potential of music for expressing and inspiring the divine.

The discrepancy between acknowledged and real spiritual relevance has been, I think, the effect of one-sidedness in the

patriarchal Western world. Classicism and romanticism, which followed the baroque, were not a step backward but forward in the unfolding of consciousness—away from father dominance in the psyche and in society: forward toward the feminine principle, related to embodiment and the earth rather than to the “heavenly.” We may say, in agreement with Hermann Scherchen (in *The Nature of Music*<sup>1</sup>) that Beethoven was “the inventor of European music,” for he used it as language for the expression of a different realm of experience than earlier music. Music may have always expressed “experience,” yet in Bach we may say that this was the intuition of the “music of the heavenly spheres,” the “music of the macrocosm,” as Totila Albert<sup>2</sup> used to call it, in contraposition to the “music of the microcosm”: truly human music that Beethoven introduced and the romantics continued to compose.

And there is Brahms.

Hans von Bülow used to say humorously that, of the “three Bs” of music, Bach was the Father, Beethoven the Son, and Brahms the Holy Spirit. I think that his statement contained much truth, in that we find in Bach the highest expression of the sense of God as father in Western music, while Beethoven expresses the voice of the individual human or son throughout his heroic quest, and Brahms has given us a supreme musical expression of the “universal mother” and of mother love.

I think that we have tended to regard music as “mere music” and its composers as “mere musicians,” when the fact is that music is potentially a bridge between a heart that found itself and the heart of the listener.

Notwithstanding the fact that Bach has been frequently looked upon as an enlightened being and one of the “just,” the case is very different with Beethoven, the rebel who wouldn’t bow to the great of this earth or even to heaven itself (he expired pointing his fist upward to the thunder that then reached his ear). Because his music has generally been heard as “pure music”—that is to say, a music resting in an abstract aesthetic perfection, and

perhaps rarely as the voice of one near to God—it may be useful to read what Elizabeth Brentano quotes Beethoven as saying:

When I open my eyes I must sigh, for what I see is contrary to my religion, and I must despise the world which does not know that music is a higher revelation than all wisdom and philosophy, the wine which inspires one to new generative processes, and I am Bacchus who presses out this glorious wine for mankind and makes them spiritually drunken. When they are again become sober they have drawn from the sea all that they brought with them, all that they can bring with them to dry land. I have not a single friend, I must live alone. But well I know that God is nearer to me than to other artists; I associate with Him without fear; I have always recognized and understood Him and have no fear for my music—it can meet no evil fate. Those who understand it must be freed by it from all miseries which the others drag about with themselves.

Music, verily, is the mediator between intellectual and sensuous life.

Speak to Goethe about me. Tell him to hear my symphonies and he will say that I am right in saying that music is the one incorporeal entrance into the higher world of knowledge which comprehends mankind but which mankind cannot comprehend.

It is well known among musicians and music scholars that Beethoven's work can be divided into three distinct periods: in the first it resembles that of Mozart and Haydn; in the second it has been interpreted by N.W.N. Sullivan and others as the expression of a struggle with himself; in the third (from the Ninth Symphony onward) he is most original and conveys the beatific bliss and brotherly love of one who obtained liberation. Those who want to absorb something of Beethoven's consciousness in this last period may explore, for instance, the "Song of gratitude to God by one healing" from his penultimate quartet, Op. 132.

My appreciation of Brahms as a star in the musical heavens, of no lesser magnitude than Beethoven and Bach, developed from both my experience in piano playing and from the influence of Totila Albert, who regarded Brahms as an invisible saint gifted with the destiny of a spontaneous psychological balance compa-

rable to that which Beethoven achieved only after long labors. Totila Albert was one who, like Beethoven, experienced “self-birth” after many years of struggle, and as homage to Beethoven he conceived the re-creation of Beethoven’s spiritual experience in words. This led to a tapping into of what he used to call “a music dictation” that was not his interpretation but the reflection of an objective content conveyed by the music’s structure. This dictation, which began with Beethoven, led him to a similar “decoding” of those in Beethoven’s lineage, culminating in Brahms, and it was Brahms to whom he devoted most of his work from there on; for in him he saw the most developed expression of the balance between “father,” “mother” and “child” within the human psyche. While Western music itself was to him the supreme expression of drama in European culture and “the voice of Three”—i.e., the voice of our threefold essence or soul—in Brahms, Totila Albert saw an expression of an equilibrium representing an evolutionary leap away from a patriarchal imbalance, so in the same way that Beethoven reflected the French and other revolutions, we sense that again a revolution of consciousness has taken place in the transition from Beethoven to Brahms.

Just as the king-centered world of Bach reflects something of the submissive psyche under authoritarian Christianity, and just as Beethoven’s music reflects a rebellion against established authority, in Brahms, it seems to us, we hear a perfect synthesis between the classical and the romantic spirit. He is, as it were, the fruit of the tree of which Bach is the trunk; a fruit (amidst the foliage of romanticism) that was to fall and decompose as we moved into a time of creation of new musical languages.

Not only is Bach present as a hidden spinal cord in Brahms’s music, but so is the spiral pattern of Beethoven’s thinking and, at the experiential level, the emphasis on individual experience characteristic of music from Beethoven onward. Brahms’s music, like that of Beethoven, contains the heartbeat, the accelerations of the breath, that convey individual embodiment. Is this not the expression of an imminently synthetizing gift and quality of the

mind, a gift of all-embracing reconciliation? At least it is obvious that his is the ripest and healthiest expression of love in classical music—a love that is both selfless and emblematic (I might say in agreement with Totila Albert) of a harmonious interweaving of father-mother-child love.

Thinking in this manner, I naturally want to include, in this statement on music as a vehicle for psycho-spiritual unfoldment, a recommendation of exploring Brahms further. I would recommend, for instance, listening to the first movement of his early Sextet Op. 18 as a “flying carpet” for a meditation on love—a love at the same time erotic, cosmic and fraternal.

Or I would suggest becoming the two who dialogue (through the music of orchestra and piano respectively) in the second movement of his First Piano Concerto Op. 15.

More importantly, however, if you are interested in exploring Brahms as a vehicle for consciousness extension, I suggest that you seek a connection with the mind of the creator behind his creations.

Seek the presence of Brahms’s mind beyond his notes, and make Brahms your guide—opening your ears to what, without words, he is saying.