

An introduction to the poetics of sacred sound in twentieth-century music¹

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Abstract: Along the twentieth century has occurred the beginning of a fusion between two very different horizons: Western musical composition and Hindu sonic theology. The essential content of this theology and the changes in Western musical language and aesthetics, society and culture which have allowed this fusion to take place are briefly outlined. Instrumental and vocal works by Karlheinz Stockhausen, Giacinto Scelsi, Michael Vetter and David Hykes provide specific examples and, in particular, raise the predicament between mysticism and rationalism, manifested in the dichotomy *écriture*/inspiration. The study proceeds investigating the connections between music and meditation. In this context, overtone singing appears as a musical *and* meditative practice. The incorporation of this non-European or ancient vocal technique is evaluated as a dawning horizon in Western music. Overtone singing has required a practical emphasis through improvisation, suggesting a new musical *praxis* that does not separate composition from performance.

Key words: Stockhausen, Scelsi, Vetter, Hykes, Om, overtone singing.

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Om! –This (imperishable) syllable is this whole world.
Its further explanation is:
The past, the present, the future—everything is just the word *Om*.
And whatever else that transcends threefold time—that, too, is just the word *Om*.
(Hume, 1921:391)

With this verse begins the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*, which concisely explains, in twelve verses, the meaning of *Om*, the supreme Divine seed sound from which all other sounds are said to arise. The sacred texts called Upaniṣads belong to the late Vedic period, from around 800 BCE to 200 CE, a time in which Indian thought was transforming the earlier mythological Vedic notion of sacred sound, *Vāk*, into the metaphysical seed-syllable *Om* through the concept of *Śabda-Brahman* and, later, of *Nāda-Brahman* (BECK, 1993). As a one-syllable *mantra*, *Om* has been in practical use since the times of the oldest texts of Vedic literature, the *Ṛg Veda Samhitā*, from around 1500 to 800 BCE (Holdredge, 1996). The entire *Ṛg Veda* consists of *mantra*-s, verses to be uttered during rituals. Mantras have been commonly described as “magic formulas” because they are traditionally attributed with power to change reality. However, Raimundo Panikkar provides a clearer explanation:

Mantras are not magic formulas, nor are they merely logical sentences; they connect, in a very special way, the objective and subjective aspects of reality. (...) The word “mantra” means that which has been thought or known or that which is privately—or even secretly by initiation (*dīkṣā*)—transmitted and which possesses power to liberate. It is sacred speech, sacrificial formula, efficient counsel. (Panikkar, 1977:39)

The power to liberate comes from the correct and repeated (*jaṇa*) utterance, recitation, chanting of, or meditation upon a mantra, which reinforces good *karma* and removes negative *karma*. Therefore, it is seen as a powerful psychological tool for transforming and purifying consciousness.

Another sacred text, the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* 2.2.3-4, describes the role of the mantra *Om* as a tool (here, a bow) in the quest for liberation (*mokṣa*):

Taking as a bow the great weapon of the Upanishad,
One should put upon it an arrow sharpened by meditation.
Stretching it with a thought directed to the essence of That,
Penetrate that Imperishable as the mark, my friend.
The mystic syllable *Om* (*praṇava*) is the bow. The arrow is the soul (*ātman*).
Brahma is said to be the mark (*lakṣya*).
By the undistracted man is It to be penetrated.
One should come to be in It, as the arrow (in the mark). (Hume, 1921:372)

On the other hand, “hearing and saying mantra is an act of worship that ‘tunes’ one to the basic sound or vibration of the universe.” (Coward, 1996:4) By repetitively reciting and meditating upon *Om*, the

individual reaches, or attempts to reach the seed of everything, the imperishable, eternal sound that creates the universe.

“The mystic syllable *Om*” is one aspect of Hindu mysticism of sound that has become quite popular in Europe and the Americas through Yoga. Most of our children are able to playfully assume a lotus posture and innocently intone *Om* when asked about Yoga. Many of them go to yoga classes or, at least, they probably have seen it on TV, or a parent or relative practicing it. The popularization of Hindu notions of sacred sound, however, seems to have turned sacred sound into one more secularized “thing”, with little relationship with other aspects of life that involve sound and music. In a dominantly visual and secular society, the ancient idea of sacred sound remains, predominantly, absent or, at least, confused.

However, a confluence of factors in the twentieth-century has contributed to the fusion—or the beginning of a fusion—of two rather disparate horizons: Western contemporary music composition and the theology of sacred sound, here under consideration with emphasis in its Indo-Tibetan traditions. The instances of such a fusion are many, but here, they shall be limited to a handful of representative compositions:

- Giacinto Scelsi (1905-1988) - *Konx-om-pax* (composed in 1968-69), for choir, orchestra and organ
- Karlheinz Stockhausen (1928 – 2007) - *Stimmung* (1968), for six vocalists and
- *Mantra* (1969-70), for two pianos, short-wave radio receives, ring modulation circuits, antique cymbals and Chinese woodblocks,
- David Hykes (b.1953) - *Hearing Solar Winds* (1982), for overtone choir, and
- Michael Vetter (b. 1943) *Missa Universalis (Obertonmesse)* (1985), for voice and instruments.

This fusion is a specific case within the larger cultural event commonly referred to in the 1970s and 1980s by the expression “West meets East”, as the presence of “oriental” contents had then become common or recurrent in several aspects of Western culture. The expression fell in disuse by now, the 2010s, as globalism has recently shown a much more complex socio-political scenario than that of a peaceful meeting between West and East, and has reduced all the tenants of this hemispherical meeting to a mere wishful thinking of love and peace. At the same time, cultural fragmentation has allowed the global proliferation of “sub-cultural niches” where the meeting of East and West has found places and ways to exist, be explored and experimented in a theoretical, philosophical, speculative and even scientific way, and also, but perhaps to a lesser extent, as a living, social and practical/experiential reality.

Just in the same way as the great meeting of East and West, the fusion of Western composition and the Indo-Tibetan (therefore “oriental”) sonic theologies is caught in a complex predicament. In the specific case, a common question has been: *how could it be possible that an oriental mystical idea of sacred sound would be truly integrated as a genuine, authentic value in Western music composition?* This question carries implicitly the distrustful attitude that tends to reject anything mystic or non-Western, seeing them as arbitrary nostalgic additions to a form of art, Western, in which reason and intellectualism rule its own internal laws of progressive evolution. However, the question does bring a relevant predicament, which involves the following two difficulties:

1. the dialectics between different mind-sets: rationalism and mysticism;
2. the “importation” of “oriental” philosophical concepts and musical techniques. In this case, what is being “imported” are not only the Indo-Tibetan conceptions of sacred sound, but also musical practices associated with it, especially those of overtone singing and chanting.

Furthermore, the question still resonates, in regards with mysticism, with the scientist misconception in which mysticism is rejected both as non-sense and as an ideology. As ideology, it would be forced upon music, having nothing to do with the nature of musical creation. Because it is viewed as non-sense, mysticism may be tolerated as a “programmatic idea”, but nothing more. Concerning the presence of “oriental” ideas, the question also implies that their presence constitutes “orientalism”, the arbitrary importation of exotic alien elements which are, because they are alien, harmful to the purity and integrity of the internal, necessary progressive evolutionary laws of Western musical language, harmful also to Western’s cultural identity.

At the 2010s, the above assumptions have been challenged both in theory and in practice by artists and scholars. However, even today, after contemporary science has profoundly changed Western traditional scientific cosmologies, and the very concept of what is music has been expanded and changed, these assumptions have not been completely overcome. Mysticism and the “importation” of “oriental” contents still raise the deepest antipathies and sympathies, depending on the “sub-cultural niches” one feels to belong. Attitudes range widely between two extreme stereotypical opposites: xenophobic right-wing conservatism in one side, and new age hippie/yuppie incautious all-acceptance in the other. Depending on where one fits within this range, the question of whether an “oriental” mystical idea of sacred sound could be truly integrated as a genuine, authentic value in Western composition may seem appropriate and current, or completely inappropriate and outdated.

My point is that this fusion is more than probable, and that it does occur as the result of research processes involving the practice of appropriate musical and spiritual disciplines in the creative work of

seriously committed artists. In fact, the existing achievements in the work of the above mentioned musicians demonstrate that this fusion has already happened or at least, that they indicate a valid path towards meaningful manifestations of this fusion.

This acknowledged, it is possible to investigate with a positive attitude, the relationship between sacred sound *and* contemporary music as the study of the Western artist's effort of making sacred sound his/hers own, in making it become a territory (in the Deleuzean sense), part of his/her own domain. Or, in other words, it becomes the study of the philosophy of sacred sound *in* contemporary music with "philosophy" meant as a philosophy of music: the *poetics* of sacred sound in contemporary music. A friendlier version of that question would then be *how have Indo-Tibetan sonic theologies been integrated as a genuine, authentic value in Western music composition?*

A brief historical outline would help understand this *how*, showing the confluence of factors that made possible the coming near each other of Indo-Tibetan sacred sound and twentieth-century composition. As part of this confluence, there is, in one hand, the evolution of Western musical language and the new worldview caused by the changes in art, scientific knowledge, society and culture in the twentieth-century. In the other hand, there is the old relationship between Western music and esoteric/mystic *knowledge*.

Whether esotericism and mysticism are recognized as knowledge or as speculation has been a centuries old debate. According to the prevailing Western thought since the development of the scientific method, there are no conclusive evidences to support esoteric statements, and thus they are seen as suppositions or conjectures, fantasies or lunacies. On the same grounds, the relationship between musical thought and esotericism/mysticism has been rejected, ridiculed, and concealed by the established musical knowledge. The epistemological question of whether evidentialism is applicable to the study of esotericism, mysticism or religion, since they all are systems of thought with a strong belief-component (FORREST, 2009) cannot be properly explored here, and my use of the word *knowledge* in regards to mysticism/esotericism is meant as a rejection of a too narrow understanding of the word *knowledge*.

A long tradition links Western music and esoteric knowledge, dating from the times of Pythagoras and his much laughed-at idea of music of the spheres and continuing through classical times from Plato to Boethius. Boethius distinguished *musica mundana* (music of the spheres), *musica divina* (music of the gods), and *musica instrumentalis* (music made by human beings). A list of Western thinkers ranging from Adam Scot and Jacques de Liège in the Middle Ages to Arthur Schopenhauer in the nineteenth century, including Marsilio Ficino and Robert Fludd in the Renaissance among others has been exhaustively shown by Joscelyn Godwin (1986). Indo-Tibetan contents started to appear in the West with the influence of the modern theosophic movement in the end of the nineteenth-century. In

the twentieth-century, Rudolf Steiner, Hazrat Inayat Khan, George Ivanovich Gurdieff and Marius Schneider among others provided important connections between mysticism and music.

This esoteric tradition has influenced music composition, notwithstanding the rejection this music has suffered by the artistic *establishment*. Notwithstanding the significant individual roles in twentieth-century musical innovation of composers such as Alexander Skryabin (1872-1915), Gustav Holst (1874-1934), Cyril Scott (1879-1970), or Alan Hovhaness (1911-2000), they all share the stigma of being “lesser composers” as a consequence of the modern scientific materialistic approach to composition, according to which their music lacks structure and innovation. Likewise, Giacinto Scelsi and Karlheinz Stockhausen suffered the alienation from the musical establishment due to their declared mysticism. The tendency to replace metaphysics with science became increasingly stronger also in music, since August Comte’s positivism in the early nineteenth century, with composers tending to repress their mystical tendencies except when these tendencies coincided with an official religion, as in the cases of Franz Liszt or Olivier Messiaen. Although hermeneutics and phenomenology helped the critique of positivism at the turn of the nineteenth- to twentieth-century, mysticism remained throughout the entire *novecento*, and still is, a marginal current, seen with contempt in the study of aesthetics and philosophy of music at official music institutions.

Two mutations have helped shape western music in the direction of making it become “ready” for the interaction with the Indo-Tibetan idea of sacred sound: 1) the change from a formal/melodic/harmonic-based music to a sound/texture/timbre-based music, also known by the term “sonorism”, and 2) large scale socio-cultural changes expanding Western spiritual and cosmological conceptions.

The following outline indicates some important active agents in the mutation of musical language:

1. The tonal system collapsed during the late nineteenth-century through chromaticism and constant modulation.
2. Tonal hierarchy and the difference between dissonance and consonance were abolished in free atonality and serialism.
3. Edgard Varèse (1883-1965) visualized “the liberation of sound” in 1917 as a new music without melodies and conceived as the “movement of sound-masses, of shifting planes”, differentiated by “certain acoustical arrangements” forming “zones of intensities (...) of various timbres or colors and different loudnesses” (Varèse, 1966:11).
4. *Klangfarbenmelodie* was introduced by Schoenberg in *Farben*, (Op. 16 no. 3) and further developed by Anton Webern, who created a new relationship between sound and silence

(Op. 7, 11, and 21). Post-Webernian composers took this sound/silence relationship and developed the new style of *pointillism*.

5. Since the 1940s *musique concrète* and electronic music adopted the scientific study of acoustics as a major tool for composition.
6. Textural music, whatever its method—cluster composition and micropolyphony, stochastic music, spectralism, indeterminacy and graphical notation—, composes and constructs complex sounds and their transformations into other sounds.

However, there was nothing metaphysical or mystical about this emancipation of sound. New sounds had been arrived at by strictly scientific and technological musical methods, supported by theories and philosophies such as acoustics, mathematics, information theory, and by individual poetics within the avant-garde.

The Hindu sonic theology appeared for the first time sometime during the 1950s in the work of Giacinto Scelsi. However, Scelsi was an outcast for decades until his work became accepted and influential in the 1980s, due to the French spectralists, who saw in him a precursor of their music (Murail, 2005). It was thanks to the doors opened by the powerful influence of John Cage (1912-1992) that the metaphysics of *Om* found its way in New Music during the 1960s, however indirectly this may have happened and not by means of Cage himself, but by means of other musicians. Cage's aesthetics of indeterminacy, with a peculiar justification grounded in Zen-Buddhism³, propelled with unprecedented force the attitude that "all is music", legitimizing conceptual music and new forms of artistic creation, including minimalism as well as the work of pop artists and others no longer definable by the pop/high culture dichotomy. The father of minimalism, La Monte Young (b. 1935) introduced the extreme reduction of sound components in a composition while, at the same time, explored the large limits of its duration. His *Composition 1960, Number 7*, which consists of an open 5th (B and F#) and the instruction "to be held for a long time" seems to come closest than ever to the representation of eternity in its everlastingness and stasis.

In metaphysics, eternity indicates a never ending duration (everlastingness), the lack of change (stasis) and that it is outside of time (a-temporality). Kramer (1988:210) observed that even in Young's *Composition 1960, no. 7* the listener's "mental processes are never frozen", questioning that even such a sound would not be *absolutely* static. By pushing music to such extreme limits of the concepts of time, change, or music, one eventually abandons the realm of musical composition, of art, of functional art, and enters the realm of conceptual speculation. This can easily annihilate musical *praxis*. In fact, no one

³ About this peculiarity, see Allan Watts' *Beat Zen, Square Zen and Zen* (1959:11-12).

went any further in this direction of Young's⁴. However, conceptual music of this minimalist sort did introduce in music the idea of imitating eternity. Sacred sound, *Om*, is imperishable and eternal, and musical compositions that are meant as a representation of sacred sound are, therefore, non-developmental, static, and ecstatic. Because music is a temporal art, the representation of eternity is problematic, and takes music to the limits of what is culturally understood by music.

At the same time as the world of art music was thus imploding itself, important socio-cultural changes were taking place in other spheres of society, definitely exerting their influence on the art music circles. During the 1960s, the socio-political establishment started to be questioned in several, and since then usual, fronts, including: international conflicts, environmental degradation, civil rights for minorities, and the notion of a "high culture" obviously associated with the problems of established power.

Between 1966 and the early 1970s, the counterculture movement reached its climax, rejecting the establishment's authoritarianism and traditional social norms of the 1950s, through the adoption of alternative life styles which included, among other things, an extension of the drug consumption mentality to include psychedelic drugs, sexual emancipation, political activism and the adhesion to Oriental mysticisms. Pop music as a mass culture phenomenon gave voice to these causes, reaching and undermining the authority of the intellectual *élite* of art music. By 1975, New Music (classical music avant-garde) showed signs of further fragmentation, by its intensified search for the new at all costs, and by the contamination with different orientations, some of them of countercultural origin: highly repetitive music, performance art, popular music, world music, non-European ideas.

As the counterculture movement lost momentum and some of its causes became tolerated or assimilated by, and under control of, the establishment, several countercultural manifestations found a more or less comfortable place to be. Eclectic post-modernity really seems to have offered plurality and diversity a better chance than modernity, even though a pervading cultural numbness, indifference and alienation came along with it.

"Oriental mysticisms" were an integral part of counterculture. Among the forms of Hinduism connected to sacred sound, the philosophies of Vedanta and Yoga, for example, were already well-known in more restricted circles of the Theosophical Society founded in 1875. A much greater popularization of Hinduism in the West occurred with the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), founded in 1966 in the city of New York by A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (BECK, 2004:35). The so-called "Hare-Krishna adepts" are known for their resistance against the Vietnam War and for their joyous singing of the Hare-Krishna *mahamantra* along the streets of cities around the whole world. Another example is the popularization of Hindu transcendental

⁴ The same is true of Cage's *4'33"*: it seems a dead end.

meditation in the West and, in this connection, the “affair” between The Beatles and Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in 1967. This popularization was not without equivocal associations, though. Jonathan Bellman noted that

“transcendental meditation (TM) was based on ancient Indian traditions and had nothing whatever to do with drugs—these were subtleties lost on the transgression-addled 1960s public.” (BELLMAN, 1998:299).

Zen Buddhism gained popularity in America and Europe in the late 1950s due to the beat movement, while Tibetan Buddhism gained force when His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, received the 1989 Nobel Peace Prize. The widespread global presence of Tibetan Buddhist monks, who had fled the Chinese occupation, brought not only an awareness of Tibetan throat singing and Buddhist thought about sacred sound but also a first-hand opportunity for Westerners to experience the theories and practices of meditation and mantra chanting.

A major development in popular culture, which grew out of counterculture since the 1960s has been the New Age movement. While in essence an industrial publishing phenomenon interested in marketing “spiritual goods”, New Age has engulfed within itself all previous forms of esoteric knowledge from all cultures and epochs, proposing eclectic combinations of many of them, popularizing esoteric knowledge by means of an extensive literature with a wide range of seriousness that goes from the commercial and superficial to, sometimes, the scholarly rigorous. This popularization is problematic, as it commercializes and secularizes religions and esoteric knowledge, which, by definition, is not supposed to be *exoteric*, and so is the all-inclusive umbrella, linking the trustworthy and the non-trustworthy. The same occurs with New Age seen as a musical genre.

New Age’s emphasis on healing, ascribing therapeutic value to the arts and music, is part of a larger project of healing the mind and body of the Western human being. What is in question here is not the therapeutic value of music *per se*, but the New Age emphasis on healing as a compensation for the lack of artistic competence of some mediocre New Age products. Unfortunately, these are more commonly found than those that combine healing and art successfully.

Today, composers may find a much easier and profitable way out of the pressure against esotericism found in art music circles by adhering to New Age. This, however, is frequently seen as some sort of decadence. As noted by Ryan Hibbett, a high art or culture has a status of authenticity, while the large audience scale of New Age cultural production lacks that status:

New age’s tremendous success as a commercial industry corresponds negatively to its lack of cultural prestige, and this lack of prestige may be attributed in part to a continued reliance on terms and phrases that now seem hackneyed or transparent as a stock discourse and therefore lacking in authenticity. In these respects new age fits the profile of Bourdieu’s large field of artistic or cultural production, which has a large audience and a great deal of economic capital, in contrast to a ‘restricted

field' (understood, typically, as 'high art') that produces little economic capital but gains prestige and an aura of authenticity by distinguishing itself from the other. (HIBBETT, 2010:287-8).

Notwithstanding this, New Age has effectively become the contemporary medium *par excellence* for the contemporary transmission of esoteric contents, and it is frequently by means of New Age events, websites and bookshops that one has easy access to not-valuable literature and art, but *also* to valuable and legitimate literature on ancient esoteric knowledge, the relationship between science and mysticism, music and other art forms with spiritual orientation. These contents are presented—and this is the point—in a way that not only rejects, but also fights the positivistic, scientist and Eurocentric worldviews. Just as, in the 1960s, the notion of a “high culture” was challenged because it was associated with the problems of established power, New Age does not expect established power to provide solutions to the problems it has created. Therefore, New Age created its own space, its own time, a new era, and exists like in a “parallel universe” people use to call “alternative” to “the system”.

The importance of New Age to the subject of sacred sound in twentieth-century music is, therefore, evident, since it distributes and popularizes this aspect of Indo-Tibetan mysticism both in the form of literature and in the form of original music created today.

There is an interesting overlap among musical categories in this publishing aspect: Vetter's and Hykes' recordings have been produced by New Age labels: Vetter with Amiata Records, from Italy, and Hykes with the Californian New Albion Records, which also produces New Music. Hyke's CD *Hearing Solar Winds* was produced by Ocora Records, a French world music label, and Vetter's *Missa Universalis*, by Wergo, a German New Music label. Does this reduce and identify any of these works exclusively to “new age” or “new music” only?

The question is not really “who is New Age” and “who isn't”, little doubt left about those who proclaim to be. The question could be: “who may be assimilated into New Age?” But the question of interest for this study is rather: *does the association with New Age help or jeopardize the perception of the artistic value of a work?*

I try to answer to this: raising the New Age flag probably indicates an emphasis on popularization, and even on commercialization from the artist's part, as New Age is seen here as a marketing phenomenon built on people's hopes of a better world. It probably indicates also a main concern with healing placing artistic considerations in a secondary level. However, it seems perfectly legitimate to use the New Age marketing phenomenon for survival and wider distribution of a *primarily* artistic work which also contains a therapeutic or mystic orientation. What matters is not just that the art work is produced and/or distributed by the New Age industry, but the creativity, commitment, and quality of research which uphold its artistic value. I will indulge in paraphrasing a famous quotation by Johan W. von Goethe and say that “an art work may have a healing effect, but to demand a healing

finality from the artist would make him ruin his work”⁵. Whether New Age will take notice of a specific work is a whole other matter, but one which will certainly affect people’s perceptions of it. Information and open mindedness seem to be key to those perceptions.

Turning attention now to the musical works listed in the beginning, how are these works imbued by Indo-Tibetan notions of sacred sound?

Julio Estrada (2008:237) distinguished three dividing periods in Stockhausen’s *oeuvre*: the serial, from 1950 to 1960, the aleatoric, from 1961 to 1968, and the esoteric, from 1968 to 2007. Composed in 1968, *Stimmung* is the last work in the aleatoric period and the first in the esoteric. It equally joins the elements of all three periods, although its performance’s aura of mysticism may overwhelm its other two aspects: six singers sit cross-legged around “a faint circle of light” (Stockhausen, 1969), bare feet, in meditation posture singing six tones corresponding to the second, third, fourth, fifth, seventh, and ninth harmonics of the low B flat harmonic series. Each tone becomes a fundamental for the production of each singer’s vocal overtones. They also call out eleven “magic” names from Aztec, Australian aboriginal, Ancient Greek and Hindu religions, among others, and recite erotic and intimate love poems written by the composer.

Hubert Stuppner showed that the work’s structure is based on eight or nine models with precisely determined rhythmic configurations, phonetic structures, and durations; that the roles of leading and reacting to each singer’s vocal actions alternate according to a system of controlled improvisation; that fifty-one formal schemes rule the polyphonic aspect of these vocal models and define contexts for the improvisation to take place; and how the six harmonics are treated according to serial principles, proving that Stockhausen’s constructivist approach to composition was still very much predominant in the midst of mysticism:

This Cartesian spirit—intended as ‘*ratio structuralis*’—never had, except perhaps in the first works, such an explicit and radical layout as in *Stimmung*. The whole work is constructed on a single idea; it literally derives from ‘*audio, ergo sum*’. (Stuppner, 1974:84, translation by author)

With his next composition, *Mantra*, finished in 1970, Stockhausen inaugurates a compositional process that dominates his music from then on: *Formula Composition*. The mantra, a basic formula, is a 13-note melody based on a 12-pitch series, which is expanded by means of ornamentation and other rhythmic and formal processes. It is constantly repeated and transformed, frequently superimposed with other versions of the formula. The work is fully notated, and there is no improvisation or open form associated with it.

The 1955-6 electronic composition *Gesang der Jünglinge* contained spiritual motivations which, at the time, seemed less important due to Stockhausen’s emphasis on scientific discourse about

⁵ In Goethe’s original, one reads “moral” instead of “healing”.

compositional methods, structural complexity, and acoustics. Spirituality/philosophy appeared more clearly in his discourse about music and eternity in connection with the concept of *moment-form* starting with his compositions *Kontakte* (1960) and *Momente* (1961-1972). This discourse was still compatible with the intellectual concept of music supported by the avant-garde, and can be related to Cage's and Young's conceptual music. Stockhausen wrote in 1963 that "they are forms in a state of always having already commenced, which could go on as they are for an eternity..." (Stockhausen apud KRAMER, 1988:201). A moment contains processes that complete themselves within the moment. There is a discontinuity from a moment to another: a moment may be seen as self-contained and existing on its own, independently from the other moments, or may have a connection with others, somehow relating itself with those before and after it. Moment music does not aim to arriving at a climax, it has no goal orientation and no development. Instead, it concentrates on the present moment, forming an eternity that "is present in every moment". Stasis is expressed in music by the lack of change within a set of musical conditions (the moment), or by a false movement: a movement that has no direction. For this reason, within a moment, musical time is said to be static. By remaining for a while on this given state of things, musical time is said to express eternity: eternity in a moment.

During the 1960s, Stockhausen's study of Hindu Sri Aurobindo's and Sufi Hazrat Inayat Khan's writings supported his understanding of the mysticism of sound. His discourse changed gradually and increasingly from the scientific to the mystic, shifting to the spiritual listening practice of *intuitive music*, a concept guiding collective improvisation by means of textual and poetic scores. *Stimmung* was composed during the same period of *intuitive music*.

In 1970, with *Mantra*, he returned to traditionally notated composition without improvisation, shifting the role of intuition away from collective improvisation and into that of a composition with a "very fine sensitivity to vibrations"⁶. Compared to the earlier periods, the development of *Formula Composition* methods represents a re-interpretation of serial and other methods and a simplification resulting in less complex music, although complexity has not been rejected. Robin Maconie (1990:196) saw the melodic foundation of *Formula Composition* as "a new art of melody, more accessible to the public".

Stockhausen's esoteric period is the longest and corresponds to the mature part of his *oeuvre*. In it, he values intuition more than the intellect, inspiration more than technique, although recognizing the process of construction as "fairly energetic" (Stockhausen in NEVIL (ed.), 1989:80). He conceived making music as a spiritual activity in which

⁶ Stockhausen used these words referring to Beethoven in an interview published in his *Texte zur Musik*, 1970-1977. (Stockhausen, 1978)

we create sounds so pure that they are a vessel for (...) *the* cosmic force that runs through everything. (...) Music is a vehicle which people can get tuned in to and discover their inner selves. (Stockhausen in NEVIL (ed.), 1989:4)

However, for Stockhausen, not only the music, but the composer is *also* a vessel of that cosmic force.

Rationality is something associated with our body (...) impelled by the intellect. Intuition in the narrower sense (as I mean it) is a realm beyond the human sphere, which exerts an influence by way of the vibrations constantly bombarding us. Some of these vibrations are also highly precisely constituted, leading us to carry out specific actions. (...) If you have had a great deal of practice in transposing these vibrations into actions, you can also make music from them. That, however, is only possible for a very specific category of musician. Most can't do that; it's too difficult for them." (Stockhausen in NEVIL, 1989:55)

The transposition of supra-rational vibrations to music composition also relates to Giacinto Scelsi. His interest in the music of Alban Berg and Alexander Skryabin marked his first rupture with the Italian cultural environment of the 1930s and 1940s (Cremonese, 1992). The second occurred in conjunction with an illness that culminated in a mental crisis around the years 1948 and 1952 (Reish, 2006). After resuming composition in 1952, Scelsi's style and philosophy of music changed drastically as a result of therapy. Between 1930 and 1959, Scelsi wrote only three orchestral works, and more than forty solo pieces (Zeller, 1983), which, since 1948, seem to have had the function of experimentations towards the new style based on improvisation, texture, microtonal oscillations of a same tone, and timbre variations resulting from instrumental tremolo, vibrato and other means of articulation characteristic of his landmark 1959 work *Quattro Pezzi per Orchestra, ciascuno su una nota sola* and works ever since, including *Konx-Om-Pax*.

For the first time in European music a composer made reference to sacred sound *Om*. His essays and poetry are eloquent about this. In his poem *Il sogno 101, II Parte Il ritorno*, first published in 1982, a cosmic sound/sun/thunder contains all sounds and all musics, everything, past, present and future, all "is just the word *Om*":

And suddenly appears a sound that becomes enormous, fortissimo, deafening (...) terrific like a hundred sounds together (...) like a sun, and the harmonics it emits are its rays (...) these rays seem musics, not just harmonics (...) remind me of Bach chorales (...) and Palestrina's songs and church music and Gregorian chants. And songs from opera, (...)" (SCELSI, 2010:453-4, translated by author)

Much earlier, in 1953, he revealed principles of *Nāda-Yoga*, the Yoga of Sound, in *Son et musique*:

According to the Yoga of Sound, ecstasy and illumination are effects of the 'perfect' sound. Vibrations create a form that is perfectly shaped according to affinity with its resonance vault, but it transforms it as well. (...) SOUND is at the source of all revelation inner revealed. In the Vedas, this sound is called 'Anahad', which means unlimited sound. (SCELSI, 1981: 3, translated by author)

After 1952, Scelsi no longer considered himself to be a composer, but only a medium, through whom music from higher realms of existence passed. The narrative describes that, he received these cosmic vibrations in a trance state of mind while improvising at the piano or ondiola (a keyboard instrument capable of microtones and glissandi). This improvisation was recorded on tape and later transcribed/orchestrated onto a score by musicians working under Scelsi's close orientation and hired by him for that purpose. All his music after 1948 was created by this method⁷.

The idea of "composer as vessel" deserves closer attention as it exposes the composer's intuition/intellect dilemma. The common reaction to this idea often associates the composer in question to either madness or mystification. A more positive approach to that idea recognizes that not everything in art can be explained in materialistic ways, and that some uncommon skill do exist and is present in certain individuals, such as talent, for example. How can talent and inspiration in art be denied, immaterial as they might seem? The dialectics between different mind-sets, rationalism and mysticism, takes different shapes, and differently affects the individual artist's creative processes.

Thus, while both Stockhausen and Scelsi considered themselves to be vessels through which higher vibrations were received and re-transmitted, it can be observed that Stockhausen was able to conciliate his intellectual constructivism with his intuitive reception of supra-rational vibrations. It is not known what his procedures and skills in regards to that reception were. He spoke much more about his rational compositional techniques and avoided talking in public about the supra-rational aspects of his life "because usually people laugh about this" (Stockhausen in NEVIL, 1989:18). With Scelsi, there is more information about the "mechanics" of the process by which received cosmic vibrations were turned into musical scores, although *how* this mechanics works still remains a mystery.

In Scelsi's view, the artist needed to completely avoid the thinking mind, and to be in a trance state of consciousness in order to allow the unimpeded reception of those vibrations. These were thought to be represented, fully or enough, by the instrumental sounds recorded on tape, because, in that view, they would have retained the structural integrity and energy of cosmic vibrations as much as these could possibly be retained, preserved from any single individual's form-generating constructivist activity. Consequently, the following artisanal work of transcription/orchestration, gave vibrations a *new, terrestrial, cultural sound*, like a clothing. Therefore, intellectual constructivism (the thinking mind) would have been applied to the more circumstantial level of transcription/orchestration, which are not traditionally associated to constructivism, but, in textural music, are fully invested with it. The intellect—not unaccompanied by intuition—is undeniably at work by structuring combinations of timbres and instruments, rhythmic durations, pitch and tone oscillations, degrees of intensity. There is no trance in this phase.

⁷ The controversy about Scelsi's *bottega* does not pertain to this article.

It is not known to what degree the musical flux of Scelsi's recorded improvisations has been edited to produce musical form during the transcription/orchestration phase. Furthermore, the very transference of received cosmic vibrations onto an instrumental improvisation already constitutes, in itself, a form of re-transmission as the instrument will only produce sounds within the limits of its own physicality, as well as the player's. Therefore, this is a moment in which the un-manifested sound is being *conformed* to the typical shortcomings of the world of manifestations. The recorder improvisation constitutes, then, a first *representation* of the un-struck sound, *anabata*⁸, for at the moment the sound becomes manifested by a musical instrument it strikes, it is no longer "un-struck"... In other words, *musica instrumentalis*, be it the improvisation, the recording on tape of that improvisation, or the transcribed and orchestrated version, remains a human creation, of divine inspiration or *aspiration*, but always a product of the individual's intellect, intuition, emotion and sensation.

Scelsi's and Stockhausen's belief, acknowledgment and perception of sacred sound as a cosmic reality have led both to apparently reject their roles as composers. Since none of them abdicated of actually composing and engaged in an entirely different way of making music in its place, this rejection does not seem complete, but, at least, had the purpose of inverting the relationship between rational and intuitive mind as the dominant and dominated aspects, respectively, of western composition. It is an affirmation of mysticism, by which intuition legitimates reason, and not the other way around; one's connection with sacred sound is described as an intuitive deed, in the same way as mystical experiences of union with God (*Om*) are. The idea of "composer as vessel", as radical as it may be, attempts, in Scelsi and Stockhausen, to place the traditionally Western ways of intellectual compositional processes, used by both composers, each in their own way, in a *secondary* place. The primary place, the intuitive union with cosmic vibrations, would constitute the mystical experience of the composer, a new version of the Romantic idea of inspiration. An analogy between inspiration in the creative process of the composer/medium and the act of breathing seems appropriate at this point.

The word "inspiration", commonly understood as the special moments in the creative process during which the artist's mind is suddenly illuminated about his/her motivations, goals and methods, is the same word used for taking air in, in the breathing process. The ways of intuition reside in the moment of the composer inspiring (in the sense of breathing in) the supra-rational vibrations "bombarding us". It is a moment of listening, of being in tune with cosmic vibrations. The moment may be sudden or brief, like *satori*, the experience of enlightenment in Zen Buddhism, or may be prolonged, as a trance or meditative state of mind, both capable of arresting or subduing the intellect's thinking activity. The moment of breathing out is that of creating and shaping an object, the musical piece, whether in final or intermediate stage, giving to it a determined form by means of a thinking and

⁸ *Anabata*, the un-struck sound, is one aspect of the unlimited (*anabad*) *Om*.

practical *craft* (the “craft of composition”, or the performance over an instrument). There is also the aspiration.

As it aspires to the status of *musica mundana*, or to the status of something like *musica mundana*, music composed by the artist (*musica instrumentalis*) can only satisfy this aspiration by means of imitation of what is imagined as from above, or of what is perceived as received from above because there is no other explanation to account for where it came from. Stockhausen’s music’s aspiration to *musica mundana* appears more evidently in his musical thought and verbal statements than in the actual sound of his music, which not always strikes as “hieratic”⁹. Scelsi’s music’s aspiration appears directly in the sound, like an *imitation* of what he conceived or received of the eternal, imperishable *Om*, and pervades his writings and poetry. Scelsi’s music conveys, somehow, in its sound, a sense of *mysterium tremendum*. *Konx-Om-Pax* indicates it in its subtitle: “*Tre aspetti del Suono: come primo movimento dell’Immutabile; come Forza Creatrice; come la sillaba ‘Om’*”, (“Three aspects of Sound: as first movement of the Unmovable; as Creative Force; as the syllable ‘Om’”).

Stockhausen and Scelsi are deeply immersed in the predicaments inherent to modern music composition—the expectations on complexity, structure, technology, and the originality of *écriture*¹⁰. For this reason, they should be seen, in agreement with Stockhausen’s statement, as belonging to a borderline between two great world epochs:

Around 1950 one great world age ended (it runs down gradually at first), and a new one began... I still grew out of the spirit of the passing age: I felt the great opportunities of a mental music that would be built primarily through a man’s capacity for construction—and at the same time I see the end of a music which was once, in its best moments, religious music. (Stockhausen in GODWIN, 1986:289)

Écriture’s technological advances in structural processes leading to the production of new sounds and timbres came along with the loss of other forms of musical practice, e.g., the spontaneous act of creative improvisation, or the use of unmeasured rhythm, just as any other technological advance results in the acquisition of a new power *and* the loss of some other, older power. Furthermore, the increased pitch and structural complexity in 20th-century music obtained through writing expanded the vocabulary of musical sounds (sound masses, clusters, noises, etc.) and directed hearing to a statistic mode of perception in which the overall form is the goal and details are not. György Ligeti (1965) called this aspect of music as “permeability”: he observed that Palestrina’s style was the most *permeable* polyphonic music because every interval is important and easily perceivable within the texture, while

⁹ A full discussion of this statement would require a clarification of *what* is understood by “hieratic music”, and this cannot be done at the present article. The hieratic is mentioned by Messiaen in the score of his *Gagaku*, the fourth movement of *Sept Haikai*. Concerning the musical characteristics of the hieratic and ritualistic, see my “Messiaen’s *Gagaku*”, *Perspectives of New Music*, v.48, 2012, pp. 193-207, or the Portuguese translation “*Gagaku*, de Messiaen”, *Per Musi*, v. 25, 2012, pp. 49-56.

¹⁰ For a discussion of the concept of *écriture*, see my op. cit. “Messiaen’s *Gagaku*”.

total serialism was the most *impermeable*, because the meaning of intervals had been diluted, not making that much of a difference one from the other.

Michael Vetter and David Hykes seem to belong to the new epoch mentioned by Stockhausen. Neither one had the background and training of a traditional composer, which explains why their music shows an uncomplicated relationship with mysticism, *mantra*, sacred sound, and meditation. Namely, this reason consists in the absence of *écriture* in their music, allowing them to work directly with the sound and the practice of meditation. Their work also values the permeability of sounds and a detailed mode of hearing. Their music is centered in the act of listening, quite in the opposite direction of the statistical and impermeable modes of New Music, and it turns its attention to the innermost sounds: those produced by the human voice.

David Hykes, originally an experimental film maker, studied sacred chant and the music of West and Central Asia, especially western Mongolian and Tuvan *boomi* throat-singing and Gyuto and Gyume Tibetan Buddhist overtone chanting. Michael Vetter, a self-taught musician and painter, studied theology and was a Zen monk in Japan for twelve years before returning to live in Germany in 1983. He became known as a performer and composer of experimental music for recorder in the 1960s, and also participated in Stockhausen's *intuitive music* group. Vetter's mature work is centered on his concept of *transverbal*, in which everything that happens is seen as a language communicating its poetical qualities, which are simply its natural way to be alive and to exist. The voice speaks without words, and sings a melody that invents itself from tone to tone giving great attention to vocal overtones.

Listening, a form of inspiration, in Vetter and Hykes, turns also to the inner qualities of vocal sound due to their emphasis on overtone singing, the vocal exploration of natural harmonics. The first step towards mastery of overtone singing techniques is that of listening or attunement inverting the way the singing voice hears itself. Because singing usually carries melody, with its affective expressivity and structural shape of successive tones forming phrases and sentences, we are not used to listening to the sound of each tone in terms of the natural harmonics contained in them. With Hykes and Vetter, a new listening is required that involves not only the perception of these inner components of sound, the overtones, but also their selected and individual use. For this reason, there is a great deal of technique involved in this music, which requires arduous training and mastering of techniques involving the delicate control of vocal overtones. Some examples are: sustaining a tone with one or several harmonics; moving fundamental tone and harmonic in parallel, contrary or direct motion; producing soaring melodies of harmonics over a fundamental tone in Mongolian *boomi* style; using sub-harmonics below a held fundamental; combining voices in harmonic singing. All these techniques take years to acquire and master, and have been explored by the above mentioned musicians. Research methods for

new results cannot be dissociated from practice, as these techniques have been created from a practical research.

This research has found, since the 1970s, an important place in the pioneer work of specially gifted artists: in France with Vietnamese Tran Quang Hai, in Italy with Roberto Laneri, in Germany with Michael Vetter, and in New York with David Hykes. Not only solo singing but also a new form of choral music based on overtone singing has been created by Laneri, Hykes and Vetter, as well as a living relationship with sacred sound and meditation through singing. On the other hand, traditional overtone singing from world shepherding cultures in central Asia, Sardegna, southern Italy, and Africa might be an endangered art due to social changes and modern influence upon their cultures of origin.

As a western tradition, overtone singing was practiced in the medieval Christian chant of Southern France Cistercian abbeys in Semanques and Thoronet, where both harmonic singing and an awareness of the mystical aspect of overtones existed. Laneri quotes Saint Bernard de Clairvaux (1090-1153):

for things related to faith, and for the knowledge of truth, the ear is superior to the eye (...) Why do you struggle to see? One must rather care about the ear. Only the ear can reach the truth as it perceives the Word. Therefore, it is necessary to awaken the ear and exercise it into receiving the truth. (Laneri, 2002:25, translated by the author)

Cistercian abbeys were built according to harmonic rules of architecture corresponding to musical intervals of perfect 5th, 4th, and major 3rd. The lack of inside furniture and ornamentation, the absence of glass and curved lines in the building, together with that harmonic construction, produce a linear reverberation of sounds, the purpose of which is an emphasis and focus on sound and the sacred Word (Laneri, 2002). The Cistercian tradition starts to die out just after Saint Bernard's death. With the first polyphonies of the Notre-Dame school composers (Perotinus and Leoninus), sacred Christian music took off in a different direction, that of *écriture*, developing a different relationship with religion that lost the older connections of monadic chant and sacred sound.

The contemporary overtone singers mentioned are well aware of this Western history and have a preference for resounding spaces such as the Cistercian abbeys in which to perform their music. They search not only for those spaces but also for the connection with sacred sound. This connection is defined by the act of listening in a mystical sense, that is, a listening that can transform the human being, and by the role of meditation to refine this attunement.

Listening is the sum total of our receptivity to signals, sounds, waves and impressions of every possible sort. A wish for better listening can arise either from the shock of realizing how deaf I am, or from the fortuitous reception of some signal or message which so touches me that I cannot bear to be deaf any longer. To listen better, I need to find a quieter inner state in which I actually hear the constant voice within my head, acknowledge that it contains little that is true, and open my attention to the world beyond. Listening in its pure state will be a receptivity of the whole person, of mind and body together. (Hykes, 1988)

The search for this “receptivity of mind and body together” finds it unnecessary to adopt a visual medium between sound and ear: the written symbol and the whole *écriture* may be dismissed because they become an interference in the desired wholeness, regeneration and integration of the human senses and faculties that allow the desired transformation to take place. In this respect, Vetter identifies listening with the pursuit of truth and emphasizes the role of mental concentration:

Man is a vibrating organism in the midst of vibrating organisms. The voice and the ear are the organs through which he is most directly able to imitate and become aware of his own vibrations. The overtones embody the fundamental laws of harmony for acoustical and non-acoustical vibrations. To surrender oneself to feel and hear, actively or passively, the play of overtones leads to regeneration in the broadest sense of the word. A prerequisite for the effectiveness of these vibrations and their music is of course—as with every pursuit of truth—that one give undivided attention. (Vetter, 1983)

The goal of all mysticism is to obtain a power to transform the human being. Gellman (2011) suggests that mysticism “would best be thought of as a constellation of distinctive practices, discourses, texts, institutions, traditions, and experiences aimed at human transformation, variously defined in different traditions”. In the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* meditation upon *Om* aims to transfigure the individual and also to liberate him. Therefore, soteriology and spiritual transformation become important characteristics of Western music imbued with sacred sound. However, the goal can be more modest than total liberation (*mokṣa*): in Scelsi’s *Konx-Om-Pax* the goal is expressed by these three words, which mean Peace, respectively in Assyrian, Sanskrit, and Latin. This simple juxtaposition of this word in three different ancient languages conveys the ideas of tolerance and the overcoming of national and religious boundaries. Harry Halbreich seems to agree with this idea in the following quote about this piece:

we meet with the secret forces of the universe, that can lead to transfiguration just as well as to destruction. But luckily, “Om” signifies Peace. It is music about the surpassing of self and about man’s union with the cosmos. It can therefore only shine with positive force, like all great art since the beginning of humanity, and make us One with God. (Halbreicht, 1990)

While in Scelsi the transfiguration of the individual takes place *through sound*, through listening to the “narrative” of instrumental and/or vocal music that “sounds like” sacred sound, in Hykes and Vetter, this soteriological aspect is incorporated in a musical practice, which can be individual or collective. The goal is no longer necessarily a difficult to attain liberation of *samsara*¹¹, but includes a more achievable attunement with inner and outer vibrations, through the singing of overtones. For them it is possible to meditate while making music, as well as to communicate through music while meditating. These goals, although not the highest goals in meditation traditions, are, however, to use Vetter’s words, something “to be thankful for”.

¹¹ *Samsara* is the world of manifestations in Hinduism.

With its emphasis on listening and breathing in, harmonic music's foundation is inspiration. Therefore, this is an intuitive path, but represents an intuitive knowledge that can be achieved by everyone through practice of meditation by means of music, and not just by a special genius composer. With this, Hykes and Vetter come close again to Stockhausen when he referred to the end of the "single religions" and to the secularization of music as the passing era, and the beginning of a new one in which music would have a renewed spiritual value:

Judgment should no longer rest on whether a piece of music is intelligent, refined, clever or skillfully made. This must be music where the mental aspect remains in the background and the main emphasis is on the vibrations, which mainly establish spiritual balance rather than just body equilibrium. (Stockhausen in NEVIL, 1989:59)

The cultural impact beyond the realm of music composition or music making indicated by the fusion of these two horizons, contemporary music and Indo-Tibetan sacred sound, clearly implies developing intercultural and interreligious tolerance. Stockhausen, Vetter, Scelsi and Hykes have in common the idea of a sacred music without a specific religion, grounded on the sacredness of sound itself, which each individual carry with her or himself. The universal reality of harmonics points in the direction of a common ground of all people, achievable by everyone through dedicated practice, which helps develop listening, which *is* listening, attunement, *stimmung*, a "whole receptivity of mind and body". Imbued with this principle, the music authentically incorporates a singing technique and a related musical thought that the Western mind had forgotten, but seems to be starting to remember, and starting to learn how to use in a contemporary, meaningful way.

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