

"Rumi on the Sound of the Human Voice"

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The beautiful voice has long been an important consideration in Sufism, if only because of the prominence of listening to music in Sufi practice. Shaykh Ruzbihan Baqli is often credited with a remark on this topic, which ultimately goes back to Dhu al-Nun of Egypt. The singer should be beautiful, he said, since the knowers of God need three things while listening to music in order to give life to their hearts: sweet perfumes, a beautiful face, and a lovely voice.<sup>1</sup> Yet at the same time, an ugly voice can be seen as the opposite force, one that drives people away from God instead of calling them to the spiritual path. Has the Qur'an not said (31:19), "The worst of voices is the voice of the donkey"? Jalaluddin Rumi is regarded, with good reason, as the Persian Sufi poet most concerned with music and dance.<sup>2</sup> Here I would like to examine briefly the role of the human voice as the fundamental musical medium of the spirit, in several passages from the poetry of Rumi. The voice at its best commands the power of the Sufi ritual of listening to music, by which the soul ascends to

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<sup>1</sup> See my article "Ruzbihan Baqli on Love as 'Essential Desire,'" in *Gott is schön und Er liebt die Schönheit/God is Beautiful and He Loves Beauty: Festschrift für Annemarie Schimmel*, ed. Alma Giese and J. Christoph Bürgel (Bern: Peter Lang, 1994), pp. 181-89.

<sup>2</sup> Further on Rumi and music see William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), pp. 325-329; Annemarie Schimmel, *The Triumphal Sun: A Study of the Works of Jalaloddin Rumi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), pp. 210-222; Fatemeh Keshavarz, *Reading mystical lyric: The Case of Jalal al-Din Rumi* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), pp. 105-107; Franklin Lewis, *Rumi: Past and Present, East and West; The Life, Teaching and Poetry of Jalâl al-Din Rumi* (Oxford ; Boston: Oneworld, 2000), pp. 309-313.

the presence of God, and it is indeed a cosmic force that moves all of nature including the heavens. At its worst, the ugly voice is a parody that repels everyone. In Rumi's view, the voice is a fundamental expression of humanity's relationship with God.

The key terms that Rumi and other Sufis use for sound cover a range, depending on whether it is the perception or the production of music that is being emphasized.

Occasionally Rumi produces an ode to the Sufi ritual of listening to music (*sama*), such as the following remarkable ghazal (which rhymes in "*sama*"):

Come to me, for you are the soul of the soul of the soul of listening

Come -- you are the cypress striding in the garden of listening.

Come -- there has never been, nor will there be, anyone like you!

Come -- not even the eyes of listening have seen anyone like you.

Come -- the fountain of the sun lies beneath your shadow;

You hold a thousand Venuses in the heaven of listening.

Even though the roof of heaven's seventh plane is high,

The ladder of listening goes much higher than that.

Listening is thanking you, with a hundred eloquent tongues --

I will only say some brief points in the language of listening.

When atoms' embraces are filled by rays of the sun,

All enter into the dance, without the noise of listening.

When love puts his hand on my shoulder, what can I do?

I pull him in the corner, as if in the midst of listening.

Listening recites your praises, both by day and night —

The light of your face gives nobility to the place of listening.

You are beyond both worlds when you enter listening;

This world of listening is beyond both worlds.  
 Stamp your feet on anything that is not him.  
 Why? That's the condition, in the exam of love.  
 God belongs to you, and you belong to God;  
 Listening belongs to you, and you belong to listening.  
 Come — for Shams-i Tabrizi is the very form of love —  
 We all enter into dancing in the midst of listening.<sup>3</sup>

Here listening to music is the primary expression of human longing for God.

On one level, the ugly voice is opposed to the sweet voice, and beauty is normally to be preferred to ugliness as a guide to God. As the famous hadith of the Prophet states, "God is beautiful and He loves beauty." But paradoxically the ugly outer voice can also be a guide to internal voice, the voice of the heart. This point is revealed in a story from the *Masnavi*, where Rumi tells of a blind man who also had an ugly voice; but the sincerity of his appeal to the people nevertheless touched their hearts.

There was a blind man who always cried "Help! I have two blindnesses, people!  
 "So be merciful to me twice, since I have two blindnesses, and I'm in the middle."  
 Someone said, "We see you have just a single blindness; where's the other one? Show us!"  
 He said, "I have an awful voice, and a nasty tone; the ugly voice plus blindness  
 makes two separate blindnesses.

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<sup>3</sup> *Kulliyat-i Shams ya divan-i kabir*, ed. Foruzunfar, no. 1296; 3:123-4. All translations from the Persian are mine unless otherwise noted.

"My awful voice is the source of annoyance; my voice takes away people's  
compassion.

"Everywhere it goes, the ugliness of my voice creates hatred, sadness, and  
opposition.

"So have double mercy on these two blindnesses, and make me fitting for your  
hearts, not unfit."

The ugliness of his voice decreased from this lament, and the people became  
compassionate to him like a single heart.

He made his outer voice beautiful when he told his secret with the grace of his  
heart's voice.

One whose heart's voice is evil has a triple blindness of eternal alienation.

But the generous ones who give without cause covered his ugly head with their hand.

Since his voice became sweet and pitiful, their stony hearts turned to wax because of  
him.

When an infidel's voice is ugly and hoarse, it never attracts an answer.

God says "get lost" to the ugly voice, which is like a mad dog after the people's  
blood.

The cry of the bear brings mercy, but your cry is not the same if it is unpleasant.<sup>4</sup>

More frequently, however, the ugly voice will drive people away, even if the speaker is  
inviting people to something good. Nowhere is this more tellingly displayed than in the story  
of the muezzin with the horrible voice.

The muezzin with the ugly voice gave the call to prayer in infidel land.

The muezzin had a voice that was really bad, and in infidel land he sang.

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<sup>4</sup> *Masnavi*, ed. Muhammad Isti`lami, 2:1997-2011.

Some told him, "Don't give the call to prayer, for there will be long war and hatred!"

But he rebelled, and without remorse he called to prayer in infidel land.

People cringed in fear of general rioting. But then an infidel came forth with a robe.

He brought presents such as candles and sweets, with the fine robe, and he came in

like a friend.

He was asking, "Where is this person who calls to prayer? For his voice and call

bring peace!"

But what peace could come from that ugly voice? He said, "His voice was heard in

the church.

"I have a beautiful daughter, quite attractive, who longed for one of the Muslims.

"Love's melancholy never left her head, in spite of all the infidel advice she got.

"In her heart, the sun of faith had risen; this sadness was like an incense burner --

and I was the sandalwood!

"I was in suffering, pain, and weeping, for her chains continuously pulled.

"I could think of no remedy for this until this muezzin raised his voice giving the call

to prayer.

"The girl said, "What is this awful voice, scarcely a voice at all, which comes to my

ear?

"In my entire life, I have never heard such an ugly voice as this in any temple or

church!"

Her sister told her, "This call to prayer is the sign and signal of the Muslims."

She did not believe this, and asked another; the other also told her "Yes, my dear!"

When she became certain, her face turned pale, and her heart cooled to Islam.

(Her father concluded,) "I have left that confusion and suffering; and last night I slept well in a fearless sleep.

"I now have found peace from his voice; I have brought presents in gratitude -- where is that man?"

When he saw him, he said, "Please accept this gift, for you have become my refuge and rescuer.

"Because of your generous and pious action to me, I am your servant forever.

"If I had sufficient wealth and possessions, I would feel your mouth with gold!"

The notion of someone whose presentation is at variance with his message is all too familiar in human experience, and Rumi presents with delightful irony the Christian father who expresses gratitude to the terrible muezzin, whose voice drove his daughter away from Islam.

On a broader level, it is frequently observed that Rumi had a fascination with music as a cosmic phenomenon, almost like the Pythagoreans, who saw music and proportion in everything. In this way, the dance of the whirling dervishes has often been compared to the circling of the planets in the heavens. Though Rumi may certainly have been familiar with this type of thinking, which was exemplified for instance in the writings of the Brethren of Purity (Ikhwan al-Safa'), he was by no means a slavish imitator of the thought of others. As Isti'lami point out, "Mawlana, with every thought taken from philosophers or mystics, does not use it 100% in accordance with its source, but his overflowing mind endows every word with fresh life."<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere Rumi followed the example of many earlier Sufis, by linking the experience of listening to music to the divine colloquy between God and humanity before the creation, when God asked the question, "Am I not your Lord? (*a-lastu bi-rabbikum*)", to which humanity answered, "Yes! (*bala*)."<sup>5</sup> Our enchantment with music is simply because we

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<sup>5</sup> *Masnavi*, 4:229.

find in it the echo of the extraordinary sound of the divine voice. Elsewhere Rumi explains this more directly: "Do you know what listening to music is? Hearing the call of 'Yes!', cutting off yourself, and reaching Him."<sup>6</sup> But he also gives us more extended descriptions of the cosmic power of music, as in the following passage from the *Masnavi*:

But his purpose with the voice of the lute was just that of the lovers -- imagining that  
divine speech.

The wailing of the flute and the alarm of the drum rather resemble the last trumpet.  
So the sages have said that we have grasped these voices from the turning of the  
sphere.

It is the sound of heaven's turning that people sing, with tambur or with voice.

The faithful say that the influences of heaven turn every ugly voice into beauty.

We all were parts of Adam, and in paradise we heard those voices.

Though the doubt of flesh and blood saturated us, something of that memory still  
comes to us.

But since we were mixed with the dust of sorrow, how did the bass and treble give  
such delight?

Listening to music is the food of lovers, for it contains imagining of union.

Conscious imaginations become powerful, but the form that they take is from the  
voice and melody.

The fire of love becomes hot from songs, just like the fire of the walnut (in the next  
story).<sup>7</sup>

Thus our appreciation of music is linked to primordial experiences of the turning spheres of the heavens.

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<sup>6</sup> *Divan*, quoted in *Masnavi*, 4:229.

<sup>7</sup> *Masnavi*, 4:732-745.

Physical music is, however, just an external sign of a deeper music that is hidden within. Rumi illustrates this by contrasting the noise made by the outside of the nutshell with that of its inmost part.

The nutshell makes a sound when it is cracked, but where is the voice of the kernel  
and the oil?

It has a voice, but not in the ear's perception; its voice is hidden in the ear of  
intoxication.

If the kernel didn't have a good voice, how could one hear the crunching voice of  
the shell?

Interpret the crunching of this from that, so you can silently get the kernel.<sup>8</sup>

Yet listening to music is not exclusively a preoccupation of humanity. In a commentary on what might be called divine perversity, Rumi portrays God's almost aesthetic enjoyment of the cries and prayers of the faithful:

How many abundantly sincere ones cry in prayer, so that the smoke of their sincerity  
rises to heaven,

So that it reaches the top of the cosmic roof, with the smell of incense from the  
lament of sinners?

There are angels who cry out to God, "You who answer every prayer, you who are  
always near,

"The faithful worshiper abases himself; he knows nothing for certain except for you.

"You give presents to strangers, and everyone who longs for something seeks it from  
you."

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<sup>8</sup> *Masnavi*, 5:2147-8.



God says it is not from His own wish - His friendship is the essence of the delayed gift.

"Need brought man from forgetfulness towards me; it yanked him by his hair to my presence.

"If I fulfill his need, he will go back, and will become absorbed in that game again.

"But if he cries out with his soul, 'Save me,' lamenting with broken heart and injured breast,

"His voice sounds sweet to me, like his calling out 'God!' and telling his secret."

Parrots and nightingales are caged, for by sweet song they give pleasure.

But when are crows and owls caged? They never tell that story.

Thus humanity's captivity in the prison of the world, and the cries with which we lament our condition and seek release, are more closely linked than we might have suspected.

Hearing and listening comprise a sensory realm more immediate intimate than sight, but unlike the senses of direct contact, they still cross the distance between self and other. The realm of sound contains both intelligibility and beauty, but it depends on the discrimination and profundity of the listener for proper decoding and interpretation. "The tongue has no customer except the ear."<sup>9</sup> The human voice may attract or repel, and even the ugly voice may have positive or negative consequences depending on how it is heard. The voice's music may recall our pre-eternal encounter with God or the cosmic sound of the celestial spheres. Music is also hidden in silence. In the end, Rumi tells us, the musical voice is part of the human condition, and it is intimately connected to our relationship with God.

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<sup>9</sup> *Masnavi*, 1:14.