

THE MUSICIAN MYTH AND THE FAILED QUEST

Imagining new emotional/aesthetic territories for music and attempting to bring them into existence makes one susceptible to some very particular occupational hazards. The most serious can be life threatening and it is this which I will attempt to explore in the paragraphs that follow.

It is obvious that music can provide a door to imaginative and emotional spheres to which there are no more direct routes. At the simplest level, music can be a special stimulus for the recovery of distant personal memories and can thereby bring the dead back to a sort of ephemeral life, as we can see from even a casual glance at the part music plays in the lives of individuals, or as it appears in poetry and literature. And yet its efficacy is not limited to memories of a personal past, for it seems equally effective at conjuring up collective pasts as well. We can all testify to music's uncanny ability to articulate the essence of a specific time and place, providing an insight that is different from any gleaned through the written word or visual representations. Furthermore, music can face the other way too and like Mephistopheles bring us potent intimations of futures towards which we are attracted or repelled by our deepest unformulated instincts - worlds yet to come.

From here it is but one small step to those stranger inner worlds of poetry and the imagination that present limitless horizons where aesthetic and moral imperatives are part of an always fluid potential, and where qualities such as insight, dedication, enlightenment, grace, conscience, commitment and sacrifice may be intimated, even demanded, but where they nevertheless remain permeable. For here there are no inherent divisions separating past or remote worlds from our most personal and present desires; nothing that divides our immediate and pressing social concerns from more abstract constructs; or the vaguest intimations of poetry from the practical real world; or control from chaos; or even the need to protect an inviolable inner sanctuary of ascetic purity from a celebration of the abundant cornucopia of the natural world. In this arena all are continually forming and dissolving. Nothing is fixed. It is a place of constant metamorphoses where anything can in a moment become its opposite, a sea of limitless potential. In the *Mahabharata*, this primal state is shown as an epic tug of war between gods and demons in an ocean of milk. This hidden conflict beneath the ocean's surface is the power that churns the milk and produces the nectar of immortality, and ultimately all the blessings of civilisation including language and music. Saraswati, the specific goddess of music and self-knowledge, is a river, whose inherent nature is similarly fluid, and like music, the endlessly flowing source of fertility and growth.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the most frequently found symbols associated with music are intermediaries between this fluid "other" state and our own dry one, creatures who are at home in two or more different physical environments. Water birds for example like ducks, geese or herons have strong musical associations in many cultures, and it is natural that swans should embody the Greek muses, as well as being widely depicted in India at the feet of Saraswati. Amphibian reptiles like snakes, with their ease of transit through both earth and water, are similarly ubiquitous. We might cite the carved snakes that are usually crawling all over the Balinese and Javanese gamelans, or the European serpent, or the nagas of India, the latter imagined as giant serpents beneath the sea guarding a secret treasure and known for their special musical skills.

All such creatures can be seen as helpful guides through whom musicians gain their knowledge of other realms. As musical instruments they become their means of transport. One amphibious reptile, the turtle, through death and resurrection, became the original lyre according to the Egyptian/Greek story. The Indonesian *kaçapi* may be a zither but its name and form proclaim it to be a crocodile. True amphibians like frogs and salamanders, marine mammals like dolphins, fabulous creatures like the dragon (e.g. Japanese koto) are equally at home in water, earth or air, just as the phoenix (e.g. Chinese *shêng*, Japanese *shô*) easily fulfil similar symbolic roles. Demi-gods who are not too distant from our world can also act as intermediaries, and therefore they too are known to be the supreme musicians. Yakshas, gandharvas, the muses, the choirs of angels around god's throne, angels with harps, angels with trumpets, even certain bodhisattvas fall into this category, each revealing another facet of the essential but hidden nature of music itself.

The human musician becomes the fulcrum for such journeys, a mediator who by definition must be on the brink, poised precariously "in between". The critical fault line may be caused by the passing of time, creating its ever changing definitions between past and present, the living and the dead; or it may be between gods and humankind. Both are subsumed by the most important of all, which is the continuous renegotiation of the boundary between the known and the unknown. All such boundaries are points of exquisite instability and psychic danger, essentially not quite here and not quite there, in the margins, on the strand, at the door, immanent.

In folklore, travellers at such junctures require special protection, perhaps a sacred image, like the crucifix placed at crossroads in Catholic parts of Europe. Those that would be mediators between worlds, like priests or musicians, often find it necessary to wear special clothes or vestments, effective in separating their activities from the mundane world trapped by time and place; or they wear a magic ring, carry a lucky talisman, or perform within a clearly demarcated and dedicated precinct, not quite in the real world. Despite such precautions musicians are still often destroyed by the very place they seek to inhabit, the place that is the key to their efficacy.

Therefore Orpheus was sometimes portrayed as a crucified Christ-like figure unifying the powers of the cosmos by the power of harmony, but he was also a figure ultimately torn apart by the forces he had himself unleashed (the Furies).

The popular romantic portrayal of the musician as a glamorous maverick lurking on the fringes of society but always curiously transient, peripatetic, the perennial rebel, reflects some of the elements outlined so far. However, it is only a partial image, surviving numerous retellings as it is adapted and updated to fit contemporary lives. Artists sometimes collude in this but the inherent glamour of such stories masks the reality. Anxiety, loneliness, disease or even mental instability and premature death are frequent concomitants that can hardly be said to represent a fun lifestyle choice.

At the fault lines 'between categories' it is easy to confuse past and present, the living and the remembered, the concrete and the immaterial. This is an activity that requires an expanded arena and cannot readily flourish within too narrow a view of human sentience. In the rational world precise definitions are necessary to keep things apart so that discrimination can be cultivated.

The Japanese folk story of Hoichi, a blind Heike biwa player, outlines this whole situation with absolute precision. It was collected at the end of the 19th century by Lafcadio Hearn and

published by him in 1904 (1). The story was memorably filmed by Masaki Kobayashi as part of his 1964 portmanteau feature, *Kaidan*, which has the added bonus of an astonishing sound track by Toru Takemitsu (2).

Like all Heike biwa players, Hoichi recites the history of the conflict between the Heike and Taira clans but is particularly famed for his re-telling of the battle of Dan-no-ura which took place in 1185. One hot summer evening, while practising his biwa on the porch of the remote Buddhist temple where he lives, Hoichi is approached by the awesome figure of a samurai in full armour. (The story does not suggest that Hoichi's playing is responsible for summoning the samurai but in light of later events we might well suspect it.) The samurai orders the blind musician to follow him into the night in order to give a performance for certain aristocratic nobles who are visiting the area. Being blind he is unable to understand where he is being taken but eventually he finds himself before an élite gathering, and on a formal platform he recites his tale. However, what he believes to be a group of courtiers are in reality the ghosts of the historical figures from the musical epic he is presenting, and he is not seated at court but amongst their tombstones in a deserted cemetery (3). The performance continues on the subsequent night.

The Buddhist priest who presides over the temple where Hoichi lives gradually comes to know of these nightly performances and realises the immanent danger for the musician. He says to Hoichi:

“Your wonderful skill in music has indeed brought you into strange trouble...All that you have been imagining was illusion - except the calling of the dead. By once obeying them, you have placed yourself in their power. If you obey again, after what has occurred, they will tear you in pieces. But they would have destroyed you, sooner or later, in any event.”

As a magic protection the priest instructs that Hoichi's whole body be covered with the text of the Heart Sutra (Pragñā-Pāramitā-Hrdaya-Sūtra) which will make him invisible to the dead. Tragically his ears, that most significant part of a musician's body, are completely overlooked, so when the ghostly samurai next appears, all he can see of the musician are his two unprotected ears and his biwa. He rips off Hoichi's ears to take with him in order to show to his lord that he has dutifully fulfilled his task as far as he was able. In conclusion the narrator informs us Hoichi survived and this tale and it made him famous.

Obviously the desire to act as a mediatrix demands knowledge. From a carefully chosen position or demarcated precinct the musician focuses on that other world into whose dark waters his hook has already been deliberately dropped. Fishing therefore also provides a useful metaphor, and not surprisingly in folklore and mythology the two are strangely interlinked. Not merely fishing *and* music, but fishing (or influencing water creatures) *through* music. Both require unusual degrees of patience and perseverance, precise knowledge, expertise with those devices which can facilitate the transition between the two worlds. Both can easily become myopic occupations.

Here are a few more or less random examples:

The Indian musician Sagga finds himself on a sea voyage as part of his quest to find Queen Sussondi, and being a musician, the sailors insist that he entertain them. Sagga warns that his music may disturb the sea but they don't believe this to be more than an excuse. Reluctantly,

he plays his vina and indeed it causes the sea to become turbulent and a great sea monster to rise up, destroying the ship in which he is travelling and all those on board (4).

Arion, another lyre playing musician, some say a student of Orpheus himself, also had problems with the crew while travelling on board a ship. The sailors wanted to rob and kill him but he was saved from drowning by his music which attracted a helpful dolphin on whose back he rode to the shore (5).

Shêng Hsün, a 12th century Chinese master of the ch'in, built himself a playing pavilion over a stream. One day while he was performing there, a storm arose and in the middle of the downpour his ch'in changed into a huge red carp. Riding it, Shêng Hsün disappeared into the sky and was never seen again (6).

The Irishman Maurice Connor was a famous blind piper. He merely played his pipes on the sea-shore and soon every inch was miraculously covered with all kinds of fish. Amongst these fish was a mermaid. This gave poor Maurice more than he had bargained for. The mermaid, by whispering gently into his ear, enticed him and the fish to follow her back beneath the waves and he was never heard of again (7).

In the *Bhagavata Purana* we read of Krishna, a musician god, subduing the demon in the Yamuna river known to be destroying the land's fertility and killing the fish. The story says that Krishna first peered into the depths, then plunged in, and an epic underwater fight commenced. Eventually he re-appeared above the surface performing a fantastic dance of victory on the serpent's head while the music was provided by the waves against the shore keeping pace with the beat. Under this relentless pounding the demon Kaliya was overcome. Maybe his divine status allowed him to succeed where so many human musicians seemed to fail. Drowned, made mad, lost in a labyrinth, overcome by forgetfulness, such fates are ubiquitous for musicians.

Saraswati was not the only musical deity to be a river. Orpheus too had water in his veins through being the son of the river god Oigios and the muse Calliope (8). It is said that he could divert the course of a river by his music as well as being able to charm fish. His image as the archetypal musician, important as it is, is almost rivalled by his portrayal as Orpheus the Fisher. In the temples that were dedicated to his worship there were tanks of sacred fish tended by the priests (sometimes flute playing priests). (9)

Creativity in Art is nothing less than a lifetime's endeavour. It is a quest whose goals are seldom fully achieved. In this context the motif of failure plays a significant role and will repay a little more scrutiny. In a case like that of Maurice Connor, his tragic end verifies the unimpeachable authenticity of his art, distinguishing it from feebler simulacra. In other cases the acceptance of possible failure is one of the pre-conditions for entering new realms. The final disillusionment, knowing that despite every effort, important goals remain unconquered is also very real. I am reminded of Michaelangelo's words at the end of his life expressing his regret at having spent too much time pursuing the chimera of art, or Graham's Greene's quite secular remark that for a writer, success is only delayed failure.

Significant quests or searches that have ended in failure include the search for the flower of immortality, or the comparable hunt for the dragon's pearl, or that for the cave that contains the fountain of everlasting youth, the searches for Atlantis, Shangri-la, Camelot and other lost cities, the experiments to discover the philosophers stone or indeed the whole history of

alchemy insofar as gold was never actually produced even after many centuries of earnest endeavour. To these we might add the mediaeval quest for the Holy Grail with its promise of renewal and redemption, conducted by the knights of the round table in a strange world where the real and the fantastical were often impossible to disentangle. Such failure itself is precisely the subject of Robert Bresson's 1974 film, *Lancelot du Lac*.(10)

The film starts with the final return of the knights to King Arthur's court. Meeting at the end of their adventures they realise that many have died in the pursuit of the Grail, yet none of them has actually succeeded in bringing it back. Deeply disillusioned, spiritual malaise engulfs the whole of Arthur's court, further exacerbated by the effects of Lancelot and Guinevere's illicit affair. Petty squabbles break out and the knights plot against each other. The king seems lost in indecision and can only advise prayer. But the knights' quest is over, their vision spent, nothing can save them. They cling on to their past beliefs, but eventually all are killed by the ruthless emissaries of a more modern world unconcerned with their archaic visionary aspirations. The final image shows the knights dead bodies, still encased in their armour and piled up like some monstrous heap of scrap metal. This story is bleak indeed and offers no alleviating balm.

Perhaps the grail was never much more than what Hitchcock called 'a MacGuffin', something that the protagonists believe to be of crucial importance but whose actual role is merely to motivate the plot without having an intrinsic meaning itself.(11) Is this just too cynical a view? Perhaps it is but one thing is clear, sooner or later all MacGuffins, even religious ones, lose their efficacy. A reincarnation is demanded that can hook the sensibilities of new age. The products and thoughts characterising each revolution of these perennial cultural cycles are infused by the colour of whatever MacGuffin has collectively gripped the consciousness of the time.

One of the basic articles of faith in driving the arts today, that has arisen mainly in western societies during the last two centuries, is the belief that art is *in and of itself*, significant, the bearer of unique truths about life, however difficult these might be to describe. This idea, we might note, took hold during the exact period when formalised religions were beginning to lose theirs. It has been a powerful motivation for artists and those interested in the arts. As Morton Feldman remarked; "The truth is, we can do very well without art; what we can't live without is the *myth* about art (12).

A MacGuffin is something to which we aspire. It is coveted, desired, and valued for its mysterious power (however this is defined) and must be won, stolen, possessed or by some means acquired. The Golden Fleece is a good example. It was the overt goal of Jason and the Argonauts in the most famous mythological quest of all. One of Jason's band of intrepid robber-adventurers was none other than Orpheus (remember Hermes/Mercury was the god of both musicians and thieves) and at one crucial point it is his musical skills that save both him and his companions from the Sirens singing.

But let us stay with the musician. The story that makes Orpheus one of the most significant figures in Greek mythology describes how he gains access to the realm of the dead, to Hades itself, and does so through his music that softens the hearts Pluto and Persephone. They grant his plea that Eurydice, the shade of his dead wife, be allowed to follow him back to earth..

However, despite this seeming success and despite some very specific instructions, his quest too ends in failure when at the last moment he turns back and looks directly at Eurydice.

Perhaps, like Hoichi in the Japanese tale and stories of countless other musicians since, Orpheus too ultimately confused the imprinted memory brought alive through his artistry, with the mundane reality of the material world. For him the shade of the dead was real when viewed through all the complex reflecting devices, all the mirrors and echoes of art, but the beloved shade of Eurydice inevitably dissolved back into the darkness when looked at directly in the cold light of day. This is not a new thought, because as long ago as the 4th century BC, Plato recorded the opinion of Phaedrus that Eurydice on her return was indeed only an apparition.(13) This failure of Orpheus and his later fate at the hands of the Furies (which certainly underlined his wider failure) nonetheless led to his separated, but still singing head floating out to sea, and its recovery by the women of Lesbos, so that it could finally become an oracular source of knowledge. In this way Orpheus did indeed transcend the world of time, space, life and death, but in a way he himself never imagined.

Orpheus confusion is comparable to that which leads sculptors to fall in love with their own statues. It reveals the chronic inability to distinguish art from life, or to separate the proclaimed goal, the MacGuffin, from the deeper ongoing processes of art, which despite their fluid and impossibly elusive character, remain the real issue at hand. I say 'proclaimed goal' because artists do know the true quarry they stalk (unless they have forgotten) one that must remain secret and unspoken.

The work demands that failure or the possibility of failure is embraced in order to proceed, because failure is the liberating door to the unknown for which they yearn. "For art to succeed, its creator must fail" said Feldman (14). These are entrances to interior places for which there is scant vocabulary and can inevitably make the traveller prone to all manner of self-delusion.

Complete dedication to such an art will in the long run mould a very particular sensibility. It may also lead to an acute and unsustainable vulnerability, a quite fearful fragility. Arrogance, and egocentricity occasionally provide a useful carapace. Even if such armour results in ludicrous self-aggrandisement, it can partially deflect some of the arrows and anxieties that might otherwise hinder the work. Paradoxically however, it also traps the individual in a tight self-referential space, seemingly impregnable, but like the armour of the clanking knights in Bresson's film, it gradually degrades the person. Nonetheless, the knights themselves appear to be unaware that this protective shell has caused their gradual metamorphoses into dehumanised metal automatons.

If the artist survives the journey, the work itself requires a constant gaze into the depths of the pool until a line can be cast and the faint echoes of an unknown presence makes itself felt. Like Cocteau's Orphée,(15) listening to the mysterious and incomprehensible messages coming intermittently over his car radio, (in the play through a Ouija board) it is every artist's hope to pick up some such resonance.

In Greek mythology Echo was a nymph who had profound musical skills, for she had been taught by the Muses. As a supremely gifted musician, she too suffered the typical musician's fate and was finally torn apart. In her case it was at the hands of Pan, who was driven by

frustration because her beauty was so unattainable. The many parts of her body were scattered across the whole earth, but by the intervention of the Muses each part, like all great art, continued to sing, imitating whoever calls.

She had fallen in love with Narcissus and could have inspired him except that Narcissus, gazing into the pool, never noticed the mystery of its depths, so mesmerised was he by his own reflection on the surface. He escaped the dangers of the artist's pre-occupations for as the seer Teiresias foretold, he would live to a ripe old age as long as he never knew himself. Narcissus didn't so much spurn Echo's love as just fail to notice it, hearing her voice merely as a pale reflection of his own.

Unlike Narcissus, the aspiring musician, guided always by carefully honed instincts that go further than conscious knowledge allows, must look past their own image, their personal concerns, if they are to gather echoes from a more extensive past and from other hidden worlds that lie beneath. These in turn mask others still further back, each level clamouring for a voice. A certain faith is necessary for Echo has no voice of her own but merely reflects ever darker and more distant resonances from this greater mystery. She is the mirror that offers secret apertures through which we might step like Alice, or like Orphée, into that other mirror world but through which "the other" may likewise step into ours. No wonder artists often confuse the two.

It is perhaps surprising that the artist's quest, like Princess Turandot, remains alluring even when the dangers are known.

- 1 Hearn, Lafcadio; Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things
Tokyo, Charles E Tuttle Company, 1904, 9th edition 1971
- 2 Kobayashi, Masaki; Kwaidan, film 1964 dvd 2006 Eureka Entertainment
- 3 Compare with the Chinese story given by van Gulik p157: "Another evening when Hsi K'ang was playing his lute, there suddenly appeared a man more than ten feet tall, clad in black cloth and leather belt. When Hsi K'ang had given him a good look, he extinguished his lamp, saying: 'I would not venture to emulate the light of a goblin.'"
- 4 Cowell, E. B.(editor) The Jataka or Stories of the Buddha's former Births,
Delhi, Low Price Publications, 1990, orig 1895-1907
- 5 Herodotus: Histories 1. 23-24
- 6 Gulik, Robert van; Lore of the Chinese Lute,
Tokyo, Sophia University and Charles E. Tuttle Company Inc, 1940, rev 1969, pp157-8
- 7 Croker, Thomas Croften; Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland
London, J. Murray 1838
- 8 Pindar: fragment 126.9

- 9 Eisler, Robert; Orpheus the Fisher London, J.A. Watkins 1921, p18
- 10 Bresson, Robert; Lancelot du Lac, film 1974 dvd 2008 Artificial Eye
- 11 Truffaut, François; Hitchcock
New York, Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, rev. edition, 1983, p 138

Alfred Hitchcock:

“Most of Kipling’s stories, as you know, were set in India, and they dealt with the fighting between the natives and the British forces on the Afghanistan border. Many of them were spy stories, and they were concerned with the efforts to steal the secret plans out of a fortress. The theft of secret documents was the original MacGuffin. So the” MacGuffin” is the term we use to cover all that sort of thing: to steal plans or documents, or discover a secret, it doesn’t matter what it is. And the logicians are wrong in trying to figure out the truth of a MacGuffin, since it is beside the point. The only thing that really matters is that in the picture the plans, documents, or secrets must seem to be of vital importance to the characters. To me, the narrator, they’re of no importance whatever.”

- 12 Feldman, Morton “Conversations Without Stravinsky” in Morton Feldman Essays,
Cologne, Beginner Press, 1985, p.62
- 13 Plato: Symposium 179d.
- 14 Feldman, Morton “The Anxiety of Art” in Morton Feldman Essays,
Cologne, Beginner Press, 1985, p.91
- 15 Cocteau, Jean; a) The Infernal Machine and other plays by Jean Cocteau
New York, New Directions, 1963
b) Orphée, film 1950_dvd 2004 Bfi video