

MUSICAL CONNECTIONS BETWEEN ASIA AND EUROPE

Prof. Bence Szabolcsi

The history of music as well as ethnomusicology teaches us that the earliest centres of human musical culture came into being on the soil of Asia in the millennia before our era. To the best of our present knowledge these centres coincide with the early "irrigation cultures" of the earth, where mankind first became master of natural conditions and so first organized social life into an organic and conscious cultural and economic structure by means of water supply. These cultures occurred in Babylon in ancient Mesopotamia, in early China and in India. It is in these territories that the traces of the earliest musical cultures too were found. Historiographers of music learned then, that the life of music—just as anywhere else — was not an isolated phenomenon here either, but presented itself in close connection with the environment, and with all the activities of human society. That is why it did not create any particular surprise when, a few years ago, we succeeded in proving that the early centres of the so-called pentatonic styles almost exactly coincide with the earliest centres of cultivated plants. Not that there is any special connection existing between plants and melodies, but simply the fact that early melody-cultures and early plant-cultivations referred to the same birth-places of human civilization, namely, to the ancient Central - and South-Asiatic, the Mediterranean and partly, the ancient Central-American and African centres. The earliest world map of musical history began to "become peopled" this way; the main directions, the main seats, became enlightened. What however remained undiscovered area up to now was how far and with what effectiveness, and in what directions these centres worked — in other words: how were they placed and what functions did they perform in influencing each

other; how far did they entangle ancient Asia; and how and when did they come in contact with European culture?

The first phenomenon to strike the eye on the map here is that the line of the earliest cultural zones runs through the continents as a contiguous streak, by-passing, right and left, in the North and South those territories whose musical life did not evolve so high, but remained in a more primitive stage, or took over the results of the higher cultures. We may call these territories — for example Siberia or the Indonesian Archipelago — “bridging territories”. From an historical point of view these territories, in comparison with the high-culture regions, are “prologues”, or “epilogues”, “yesterdays” or “tomorrows”. And here emerges a possibility which we still consider but a hypothesis : it might have been just this rise of the “mountain-ranges” of high culture that turned the neighbouring territories into scenes of primitive or “bridging cultures”, or to put it more properly, determined the situation in this sense and in this direction. It left them behind.

The musical culture of the Mongolian-Turkish peoples — Huns, Turks, Avars — learned from China, after the Chinese had emerged from the background of their common ancient culture to become a leading state ; a leading culture. In the same manner Indonesia may have learnt from India, so may have Mesopotamia, Iran and the Caucasus-region who continued the Phoenician, Syrian, Hebrew and Arabian cultures which handed them a series of achievements, which they in turn, carried towards the Mediterranean, Europe and Africa. We must assume that in Europe itself the developed musical cultures spread in this way, that is, in the form of a continuous line, starting from Greece and Italy, proceeding towards the Iberian peninsula, France and England in the Middle Ages, then reaching Germany and bending back to Eastern Europe in modern times.

The fact remains that these ancient high-cultures had, so to say, a “personally” special mission in furthering musical civilization. Chinese culture for example, first systematized the Mongolian-Turkish music-language of Central-Asia — the pentatonic idiom — traces of which could be demonstrated in every ancient culture of the earth in connection with various music-forms and dialects; besides — as was proved by Hornbostel and Sachs — it already established in “prehistoric times” a tuning-system instrumental measurement which, spreading from China across Melanesia, Eastern Africa and South-America, became everywhere the basis of instrument - making and tuning, especially for metallophones and pan-pipes.

Hindu musical culture became a model for vast territories by the establishment of cosmic connections of its music, by the fine complicated

system of the basic-melodies — *rāgas* — and the refined division of the scale; besides, like the Arabian, it produced a perfect model for a music which though fixed in basic schemes, yet is free and always changing in its real nature.

We have but some faint idea of the Assyrian and Babylonian cultures by depictions of instruments, types of harps and psalteriums, but we know that it was just these instruments that spread through immense territories, starting from this region, round the turn of the third and second millenium B.C. Of the ancient Hebrew melodies we have an approximately clear idea from the Oriental Jewish tunes, recorded by Idelsohn in the first decades of our century from comparatively closed Jewish communities; hence we know that this psalmodizing-recitative-like melody-world served doubtless as a basis for the liturgical chant of Eastern and Western Christianity in the surroundings of the Mediterranean.

The Arabian-Perisian music through Arabian conquest, created a musical language called *maqām*-style, prevailing from Western Africa to Central Asia. In a theoretical respect however, it became a follower of the ancient Greek tradition. All these cultures more or less deviate in practice from their theoretical systems; they may partly surpass it or partly not realise it. Polyphony for example, where not systematized by theories appears nearly everywhere in the form of the so-called heterophony — simultaneous, but different ornamentation of the parts; the Chinese system kept pentatonism in practice and built from it intricate forms, although theoretically it included the whole cycle of the fifths since ancient times and dealt with the twelve-tone range too; classical Arabian poetics retain their pure metres only in the drum-rhythms, whereas the melodies themselves take shape by the endless series of ornamentations.

At what date did these cultures come into contact with the West? We may surmise that this occurred since the very beginning in one form or the other and in every direction. Scholars, like Hornbostel and Sachs assumed an archaic Central-Asiatic centre which long before the beginning of our era, influenced the tuning of pipes and xylophones in Australia, South America and Africa. We have seen the vast distance the ancient Mesopotamian string instruments covered; harp and organ started probably from Egypt towards Europe; India's bowed strings presumably preceded the European bowed instruments and we can say with the utmost certainty, the same of the Arabian kemenge which very likely directly inspired the Spanish and French bowed instruments of the Middle Ages. The Arabian 'ud became the European lute;

the Persian-Arabian trumpet-type the Hungarian turkish-pipe, the so-called tarogato. The immediate inter-action between Greek, Egyptian and Western-Asiatic cultures may be represented by the relationship of the Greek barbitos with the Persian barbat, the Greek kithara with the Western-Asian kitar; Central-Asian kobuz possesses a whole flourishing family in Europe even now, and the cymbalum appeared in China earlier than in Hungary.

But even more interesting may be the wanderings of the tonal systems and melody-styles from East to West. Pentatonism in its Asian form — for this means a fixed, special style — was imported into Eastern Europe probably by nomadic tribes of the Great Migration, and these Mongolian-Turkish tribes — Huns, Avars, Turks — may have passed it on to the Magyars, who preserve it up to now, in their earliest folk music.

Besides the Asiatic pentatonism it was the so-called *maqām*-style from among the oriental initiatives, that influenced most effectively Europe's musical history. Starting probably from Western Asia, it seems to have been spread, together with Islam, in Eastern and South Europe from the Caucasus Spain. The music of the Turkish peoples however is divided into two cardinal regions; while Southern Turks — Turkomans, Usbegs, Kigisir', Osman-Turks — partly took over with Islam the Persian-Arabian *maqām*-style evolving it differently and independently, those from the Northern part — Siberian and Kasan Tartars, Bashkeers, Tchuwashes, together with the Mongols — preserved their ancient pentatonic language; as we have already said, the early folk music of the Magyars also is a Western link in this chain. *Maqām*-music reached Europe in another way; it was the Gypsies who spread one form of it, crossing the Indo-Persian borderline towards the West and reaching Hungary through the Balkan peninsula in the first half of the 15th century. Following other routes they got equally as far in Spain and South Russia too. All these countries owe much to the Gypsies in developing their musical performance.

In historical respect however we may go back much farther in the past as regards East-West musical connections. We have already mentioned the Gregorian chant. This rich treasure of the early Christian period, is deeply rooted in Palestinian and Syrian territories, branching off as far as India. In the 4th century historical sources report St. Ambrosius to have had psalms sung in Milan *more Orientalium* — "after Oriental (that is Syrian) manner". Byzantium's connections with the East were strong from beginning to end. The Byzantine Church set likewise, the traces of Syrian hymnology, and mediated them into the Old Slav liturgy. The Spanish and French polyphony of the 12th and 13th century, mainly

the contemporaneous melismatic-ornamental solistic chant, takes after Arabic models, in Santiago da Compostela, and Limoges alike. Thus the East approaches, encircles and inspires Medieval Europe from the South, too. Even the Spanish-Italian musical ornamentation of the 16th-17th century is rightfully supposed to have been inspired by the ornaments of the Near-East, through Spain, Sicily, Naples and Venice.

Then the great Eastern European composers of the 19th-20th century started a new movement in the history of music. Up to that time in the 18th century, it was considered merely an exotic fashion, a curiosity, when Arabian, Turkish, Hindu, or Chinese fragments emerged in Europe, in the frame of romantic-orientalistic music-plays, operas or instrumental pieces. Now these "orientalisms" obtain a continuation in a changed, modern sense. Not only Weber, Spohr, Delibes, Verdi, Puccini turned with interest towards the music of the East, Glinka, Mussorgski, Liszt, Rimski-Korsakow opened a true highway towards the Orient for the West occasionally through the Russian, or through the Hungarian or through Gipsy music; we may add to them Debussy and Ravel, too.

They are followed by such new composers as Bela Bartok, who draws on nearly all the sources, all the folkloristic treasures of the five continents; or those new African and Asian composers who weld together the melodic traditions of their country with the classical models of European music, preparing in this way, the great meeting of the peoples of our planet in the new music of our world; and this shall be really the music of the future.

Prof. Bence Szabolcsi, musicologist, academician and Kossuth Prize-winner, has held the position of Professor at the Ferenc Liszt Academy of Music, in Budapest, since 1945. He has conducted scientific research on the history of old Hungarian music, folk music and musical historiography and edited the Hungarian Encyclopaedia in 1950. His main works are, "History of Music", "Handbook of the History of Hungarian Music", "Beethoven", "Centuries of Hungarian Music", as well as essays on Bartok. He is one of the editors of the series, "Scientific Studies in Music".