

WILDFIRE: Reflections on Music, Drama & Dance

By Istvan Dely

Download the complete, free e-book at <http://www.istvandely.com/>

The following study modules about music are excerpts from the book, *Wildfire*, by Istvan Dely. Istvan has been a remarkable promoter of grass roots, collective music-making for decades. In 1997 the International Teaching Centre sent him as a travel teacher and resource person to West Africa to promote the use of traditional music for proclamation, teaching and consolidation of the Faith. Since then he has traveled widely interacting with indigenous music-makers in Cuba, Guinea Bissau, Hungary, Columbia, Haiti, French Guiana, Suriname, Honduras and Brazil. He has helped countless Bahá'í communities integrate music, drama and dance into core activities and community life. His book is a valuable "how to" resource for communities. It talks about the role of individuals, institutions, professionals and grass roots artists in developing the arts. It also includes nine reasons to play drums in community. The Bahá'í Chant Project (www.bahaichant.org) hopes this material will stimulate discussion on this important subject.

UNIT ONE: THE IMPORTANCE OF MUSIC

“In this Cause the art of music is of paramount importance.” Abdul'-Bahá (1)

1. For what Cause is music of paramount importance?
2. What does the expression *paramount importance* mean?
3. In your opinion, why is music so important for Bahá'ís?
4. In your community, do the friends use music? In what ways?

Abdu'l-Bahá recalled:

“The Blessed Perfection, when He first came to the barracks (Acca) repeated this statement: ‘If among the immediate followers there had been those who could have played some musical instrument, or could have sung, it would have charmed every one.’” ("Table Talk" Acca, July 1909, quoted in "Herald of the South" (January 13, 1933), p. 2-3)

Music has such a high rank in the Bahá'í Faith that Bahá'u'lláh dedicates a whole paragraph to it in His Most Holy Book, The Kitab-i-Iqan, the Book of His Laws. He defines the nature and purpose of music:

“We, verily, have made music as a ladder for your souls, a means whereby they may be lifted up unto the realm on high; make it not, therefore, as wings to self and passion.” (2)

1. Who has made music as a ladder for our souls?
2. For what part of our being is music intended?
3. In your own words, what does it mean to *be lifted up unto the realm on high*?
4. What should be lifted up unto the realms on high by means of music?
5. On a ladder we can ascend or descend, go up or go down. If we choose bad music, where will our souls descend?
6. What does the expression *wings to self and passion* mean? Think of examples related to music.
7. What kind of music can give wings to self and passion?

UNIT TWO: GOOD, NEUTRAL AND BAD MUSIC

We have learned that music is a means that can be used for good as well as evil. It is like a ladder on which our souls may go upwards into light or descend into darkness. Bahá'u'lláh expects each of us to know the difference: **“man should know his own self and recognize that which leadeth unto loftiness or lowliness, glory or abasement...”** (3)

Today, in an age of advanced technology in telecommunications and mass media, more than ever before, music of every variety is increasingly being showered upon us. It is our responsibility to be selective, to choose. To see it graphically, draw a horizontal line, which represents the floor. Then draw two ladders or two flights of stairs from that line: one going up, another going down. Let's say that the dividing line, the ground floor, is neutral: 0 The steps going upward are increasingly positive: + The steps leading downwards are increasingly negative: -- Any piece of music that we hear or perform falls within one of these areas of value: it is either good (+), that is, it uplifts our spirit, or neutral (0), it is neither harmful nor beneficial; or it is bad, harmful (-) and can seriously endanger our spiritual health.

How can we tell the difference? Can we say that some specific musical forms in themselves are good or bad? Rock music? Salsa? Reggae? Romantic music? Pop music? Blues? Jazz? Our own music or imported music? It is not the genre that defines the spiritual value of a given art form. It is rather the artistic quality of the form and above all, the nature of its contents. In other words: what does it say? And how is it said? Abdu'l-Bahá gives us a clue, a standard:

“The song we have just listened to was very beautiful in melody and words.” (4)

So we have to pay close attention when we listen to music, and watch out for the beauty or lack of beauty of the form, and the message that the lyrics convey.

Group discussion: randomly tune to any radio station in your locality that plays music, choose a song, listen carefully, then reflect and analyze together: Was the melody beautiful? What did the lyrics say? What was it about? Does it belong to the positive, the negative or the neutral range of our “musical ladder”?

Unfortunately, much of the music being poured out of the music industry and diffused by the mass media in many parts of the world today is of poor quality, both in form and message. Bahá'u'lláh made reference to this loss of people's sense of taste more than a hundred years ago:

“Methinks people's sense of taste hath, alas, been sorely affected by the fever of negligence and folly, for they are found to be wholly unconscious and deprived of the sweetness of His utterance”. (5)

1. What is our sense of taste?
2. What has happened to most people's sense of taste nowadays?
3. In Bahá'u'lláh's words, what is the cause of people's bad taste?
4. What does Bahá'u'lláh mean by the phrase *His utterance*?

In view of the prevailing bad taste and even prostitution in the arts, Shoghi Effendi warns Bahá'ís, and especially the youth, to be on guard:

“Such a chaste and holy life, with its implications of modesty, purity, temperance, decency, and clean-mindedness, involves no less than the exercise of moderation in all that pertains to dress, language, amusements, and all artistic and literary avocations. ...It condemns the prostitution of art and of literature...” (6)

The Universal House of Justice clarified that the phrase *prostitution of arts and literature* means *using the arts and literature for debased ends*.

Group Discussion: Can you give a few examples of the prostitution of arts in our society today?

In some religious communities, joy, exultation and music are considered ungodly and wayward. Bahá'u'lláh in His Book of Laws frees us from such fetters of fanaticism, but also exhorts us to moderation:

“We have made it lawful for you to listen to music and singing. Take heed, however, lest listening thereto should cause you to overstep the bounds of propriety and dignity. Let your

joy be the joy born of My Most Great Name, a Name that bringeth rapture to the heart, and filleth with ecstasy the minds of all who have drawn nigh unto God.” (7)

We should bear in mind that propriety and dignity are universal human qualities but the manner in which they are outwardly expressed varies from culture to culture.

Complete the sentences:

1. God allows us to _____ while
2. We must be careful to preserve our _____ and _____ while listening to music.
3. We should be joyous and happy out of love for _____
4. When we offer up our hearts and minds wholly to God, we are filled with _____ and _____.

UNIT THREE: BAHÁ’Í MUSIC?

Before we start this unit, answer:

Is there such a thing as Bahá’í music? Yes or No

Let us hear what Shoghi Effendi has to say about this:

“Music, as one of the arts, is a natural cultural development, and the Guardian does not feel that there should be any cultivation of ‘Bahá’í Music’ any more than we are trying to develop a Bahá’í school of painting or writing. The believers are free to paint, write and compose as their talents guide them. If music is written, incorporating the sacred writings, the friends are free to make use of it, but it should never be considered a requirement at Bahá’í meetings to have such music. The further away the friends keep from any set of forms, the better, for they must realize that the Cause is absolutely universal, and what might seem a beautiful addition to their mode of celebrating a Feast, etc., would perhaps fall on the ears of people of another country as unpleasant sounds, and vice versa. As long as they have music for its own sake it is all right, but they should not consider it Bahá’í music.” (8)

“We believe that, in the future, when the Bahá’í spirit has permeated the world and profoundly changed society, music will be affected by it; but there is no such thing as Bahá’í music.” (9)

Complete these sentences:

1. Over the centuries, the divers peoples and cultures of the world have developed a great diversity of musical forms and styles; this is the meaning of the phrase ‘music is a _____’.
2. Bahá’u’lláh has come to unite all the peoples, races, nations of the earth; this is the meaning of the phrase *the Cause is* _____.
3. We should have music for _____ in our meetings.
4. There is no such thing as _____.

Consult together: what kind of music do the friends enjoy at Bahá’í meetings in your region, community or locality? What kind of music would they consider unpleasant?

UNIT FOUR: UNITY IN DIVERSITY

Although, in Shoghi Effendi’s words, the friends are free to compose music as their talents guide them, there are also strong indications in the Writings that the starting point, the first step on the positive side of the ladder, should be each region’s own traditional music, its folklore or popular music:

“Music... has grown up as an expression of the people.” Shoghi Effendi (10)

“At the level of folk art, this possibility can be pursued in every part of the world, whether it be in villages, towns or cities.” The Universal House of Justice (11)

“It is here, at the very heart of a culture, that the process of the transformation of a people begins.” International Teaching Centre (12)

1. Make a list of the traditional and popular music forms of your region.
2. Sing together some of the folklore music of your region that you like best.
3. If you come from different regions of the country or from different countries, show and if possible, teach your traditional music one to another.

As Bahá'ís, we are called upon to appreciate and preserve our own cultural identity: **“Bahá'ís should obviously be encouraged to preserve their inherited cultural identities, as long as the activities involved do not contravene the principles of the Faith. The perpetuation of such cultural characteristics is an expression of unity in diversity.”** The Universal House of Justice (13)

1. What is meant by our *inherited cultural identity*?
2. When we become Bahá'ís, should we break with all the customs and traditions of our ancestors? Why or why not?
3. Are there some cultural practices of our ancestors that we should definitely NOT continue as Bahá'ís? Give some examples.
4. To perpetuate means to _____

When we accept Bahá'u'lláh and become Bahá'ís, we enter into an all-embracing brotherhood with all peoples, races, kindred and nations. We must learn to respect and love the culture of others as we do our own, yet we still identify with our own kindred, race or nation and even acquire a greater respect and love for our cultural identity.

“The goal of every Bahá'í community is the preservation of ethnic cultural diversity in the context of a harmonious, equal interaction.” Craig Loehle (14)

1. To preserve means to _____.
2. The great variety of music of the different peoples and races is part of _____ diversity, and must be _____.
3. Interaction is to give and receive. If we have nothing to give, how can we interact with others as equals?
4. The music of my people is better than that of another's. True ___ False _____
5. The music from abroad is superior to ours. True___ False_____

UNIT FIVE: COMMUNAL MUSIC

In regard to performing or creating music, there are two levels: Communal music in which all of us can participate without exception; and the music of specialists performed by professional or amateur artists with special musical gifts and studies. Both levels are equally important and necessary to the Bahá'í community. However, since (1) communal music is the soil out of which the artists grow, (2) universal participation is one of the principles of our Faith, and (3) we do not always have artists among us in our local communities, we will focus more on the communal level of music here.

In order to make use of music in all our Bahá'í events and gatherings, we should not be dependent upon the presence or absence of artists among us. We are all artists; we are all musicians by birthright. Music is a gift from God to every human being and God has provided each of us with a natural musical instrument: our body - our voice, our hands and feet. Not only that: our environment, wherever we live, is full of all kinds of objects that can easily be used as improvised musical instruments, from a simple laurel leaf to plastic water tanks. In his book *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, Adib Taherzadeh tells the story of Mirzá Abbás, known as Qábil, one of the outstanding believers and teachers in the times of Bahá'u'lláh. “He was a zealous and enthusiastic man, a poet of remarkable talent, a teacher of wide repute and, above all, devoted to Bahá'u'lláh. His enthusiastic spirit, coupled with his deep love for Bahá'u'lláh, cheered and

uplifted the believers whom he met on his way. They would gather to meet him and he would often request them, whenever circumstances permitted, to chant in unison certain Tablets or poems of Bahá'u'lláh which lent themselves to collective chanting, and he would teach them to sing together. ... Qábil had a certain genius for clapping his hands to accompany their songs of love and praise. Where greater freedom prevailed, a homemade drum was a welcome accompaniment to his chant of love for Bahá'u'lláh." (15)

1. In the above description of collective music, which component is the most important?
2. How did those friends accompany their collective singing?

Group Experiment:

- a. Together choose any song that everybody knows.
- b. First, play a recording of it while everybody listens, sitting in silence.
- c. Then, have one person sing it, while the rest listen in silence.
- d. Next, have everyone sing it together, but still sitting, with no accompaniment.
- e. Then, have everyone stands up, sing it together in unison, clap their hands to keep time and move with the natural rhythm of the song.
- f. Finally, do that again, but adding one or two volunteers from the group to accompany the collective song with a drum (improvised if necessary) and with some shaker (maracas or a small tambourine or a bottle or can filled with pebbles), or any other improvised percussion instrument.
- g. Now sit down and talk about the feelings you experienced in each of these ways of relating to music. Which did you enjoy the most? Why?

UNIT SIX: SACRED MUSIC

The highest step on the ladder of music is sacred music, the music of worship where we **“try to bring the earthly music into harmony with the celestial melody.”**(Abdu'l-Bahá) The focal point of this “mystical link that unites man to God” is the Sacred Word, the Word of God.

“They who recite the verses of the All-Merciful in the most melodious of tones will perceive in them that with which the sovereignty of earth and heaven can never be compared. From them they will inhale the divine fragrance of My worlds – worlds which today none can discern save those who have been endowed with vision through this sublime, this beautiful Revelation. Say: These verses draw hearts that are pure unto those spiritual worlds that can neither be expressed in words nor intimated by allusion.” Bahá'u'lláh (16)

1. What are *the verses of the All-Merciful*?
2. Is it permissible to sing the prayers revealed by Bahá'u'lláh or Abdu'l-Bahá?
3. When we do this, what will we perceive in them?
4. What will we inhale from these prayers sung in the most melodious of tones?
5. None can _____ these worlds today except those who have been _____ with vision.
7. Who are those that have been endowed with vision?
8. Do the verses of God attract every heart?
9. Singing these verses with the most melodious of tones allows us to feel the spiritual worlds better than through _____ or _____ alone.

The Word of God for today is Bahá'u'lláh. Abdu'l-Bahá encouraged the friends to set His Father's Persian poems to music:

“The day is not far distant when these poems will be set to Western music and the sweet accents of these songs will reach the Abhá Kingdom with exceeding joy and gladness.” (17)

What emotions, then, should characterize our sacred music, our music for worship? Exceeding joy and gladness, joy and ecstasy! Our soul should leap for joy!

“Strike up such a melody and tune as to cause the nightingales of divine mysteries to be filled with joy and ecstasy.” Abdu'l-Bahá (18)

“Wherefore... play and sing out the holy words of God with wondrous tones in the gatherings of the friends, that the listener may be freed from chains of care and sorrow, and his soul may leap for joy and humble itself in prayer to the realm of Glory.” Abdu'l-Bahá (19)

Discuss: How can we make our worship (devotional meetings, devotional part of the 19 Feast, etc.) conform more and more to these standards of exceeding joy, gladness and ecstasy set for us by Abdu'l-Bahá?

References

1. Tablet of Ahmad, Bahá'í prayers
2. Abdu'l-Bahá, Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 38
3. Abdu'l-Bahá in Bahá'í World Faith, p. 351
4. Selection from the Writings of Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 93
5. Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 142
6. Tablets of Abdu'l-Bahá, vol. 2, p. 320
7. Ibid., p. 361
8. Compilation by the Universal House of Justice “The Importance of the Arts in Promoting the Faith”, 1998 (henceforth UHJ), N° 42
9. UHJ, N° 25
10. UHJ, N° 66
11. Bahá'í International Community (BIC): Valuing Spirituality in Development, p.
12. UHJ, N° 66
13. The Universal House of Justice, Ridván Message 1996
14. BIC: Protection of Women's Rights
15. Shoghi Effendi, in Dawn Breakers
16. Adib Taherzadeh: Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, vol. 1, p. 220
17. UHJ, N° 63
18. Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 143