

The House Of Song – Part 1

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During my undergraduate studies I was introduced to the music of the European Renaissance and one day while listening to a mass by the 15th century composer Josquin Despres I was struck by how the soaring intertwined voices seemed designed to lift the listener's spirits upwards. It felt as if the music was touching the soul in way that a sermon filled with liturgical rules never could. I wondered if it was the composer's intention to make his audience mindful of God simply by making beautiful music. I considered what it must have been like to received this music as part of a weekly ritual and thought "Imagine walking into a Church and hearing *that!*". My very next thought was of all the jashans, gahambars, and wedding and funeral prayers I'd ever attended and it was at this point that the question that was to lead to my graduate research popped into my head — where was the music in Zoroastrian ritual?

At first this was no more than an idle curiosity for which I assumed there was a simple explanation. However, as time went by the answer only got more elusive. Nobody that I spoke to in casual conversations had an answer. Many Zoroastrians would, when asked about music, remember folk songs but this was not what I sought. I was looking for music that was specifically intended to be used in ritual. The first conclusion that I came to was that perhaps unlike other religions Zoroastrianism had no music in worship. My first reaction as an emerging composer was to view this as a great compositional opportunity. There was no repertory so I would compose one. I recalled Stravinsky saying of Latin that it was a beautiful language, meant to be sung more than spoken and I felt that exactly the same could be said of Avestan and so I arrived at the initial intention of my graduate studies. I would first conduct a basic research of music associated with Zoroastrianism and then I would set the Gathas to music.

When I began the first phase of my graduate work and started to come to grips with music and religious history on a global scale I realised very quickly that my initial premise, that Zoroastrianism simply had no music in worship, was extremely unlikely. It very quickly became obvious that all religions had music in ritual. It was true that some sects of certain religions such as Islam had prescriptions against music in prayer but even this was a semantic issue of definition. If a singer performed a particular melody surrounded by wine, women and song this was considered "musiqi" and was forbidden within the context prayer. If however an Imam imported that exact same melody or pitch sequence into Qu'ranic cantillation as done in a Mosque at weekly prayer it was not only permitted but looked on favourably. Put another way, the sound made by the performer was the same but it's label changed according to where it was performed. As I surveyed the religions of the world from Buddhism in Asia to aboriginal animism and trance in Africa to the Inuit far up North, it became apparent that if one included atheism as a system of belief, it was easier to find a religion without God than one without music.

It followed therefore that if all religions had music in worship it would be very odd if Zoroastrianism alone did not. This became even more evident when considering the

religion's place in history. This was not the faith of an isolated culture cut off entirely from the rest of humanity. Had this been so, then it could have been possible that Zoroastrians, as a small unique tribe of people undisturbed by contact with other traditions could have evolved differently to any one else on earth. However this is the polar opposite of Zoroastrian history. This was the state religion of a series of Persian empires that spanned over 1000 years (broadly 500 BC – 637 AD) and whose reach once stretched from India to Egypt. The evolving culture of Persia during this vast period was enriched by over 1000 tribes that flowed through it. The Mesopotamian civilisations that preceded it had abundant records of music, religious as well as secular. The Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) with which Zoroastrianism had close contact all had music in worship, as did the Greeks, Egyptians and many others. The more I studied Zoroastrian history the more I realised just how closely my religion was connected to the faiths and cultures of its historic neighbours and contemporaries.

There was also some internal evidence to suggest the existence of music in our religion. To begin the word Gathas (the central texts of our liturgy whose composition is attributed to Zarathushtra) is a term usually translated as hymns. The explicitly musical nature of the word 'hymn' could itself lead to such labels as "singing" and "songs" when describing our prayers and what it is priests are supposed to do when performing them. Also of note within the Gathas themselves is the expression "the House of Song", a metaphor for heaven. "I shall try to turn Him hither to us by praises of reverence, for I have just now, knowingly through truth, seen the Wise One in a vision to be Lord of the word and deed stemming from good spirit. Yes, let us set down His glories in the House of Song." Yasna 45.8.

The verbal root *ga*, 'to sing' from which the Avestan noun Gatha is derived, is also a compelling indicator of the presence of music in the liturgy. *Ga* also reappears in *fragathra*, 'the singing of prayers', in Yasna 19.21 and 55.7.

We also have the observations of the Greek Historian Herodotus, the geographer Strabo and the traveller Pausanius who all provide first hand accounts of Zoroastrian rituals between the 5th century BC to the 2nd century AD and who all describe what they saw as singing. The fact that the original Greek and Avestan words used to describe our prayers are unambiguously rooted in words which mean "sing" (*aeidein* and *ga*) is surely significant.

Nonetheless, all that I had at this point were few linguistic clues and a historical hunch that something was not quite right with Zoroastrian history. It was at this point in my research, after having trawled back and forth through time and geography, that a picture began to emerge. If I drew a musical map of the world and stretched it out over time, a gaping hole would be revealed over Zoroastrianism from its time in Persia up to the present. There was simply no music and it was this thought that was to prove the most problematic for me until I stopped trying to get around it and really focussed on what I thought were the facts. The central point that had spurred me on from the outset upon hearing the mass of Josquin Despres was that Christians and every other faith had traditions and compositions that I could hear and easily grasp as being music, but surely the Zoroastrian sounds I had grown up with— priests droning monotone for hours, this could not be music. What I had initially thought was a leaping off point for a great set of compositions was proving to be a conceptual road block. I had started out thinking that Zoroastrians had no religious music and so I would

compose it. Now I realised that given our place in history it would have been almost impossible for us to never have had music in worship, and here was my problem: if we did once have music what happened to it? What was it like? What were its rules? Has it been preserved somewhere or has it disappeared completely?

Even more tantalizing than the unanswered questions were the occasional claims from usually reliable sources that the answers were out there. The noted ethnomusicologist Jean During wrote that for the Achaemenids (early Zoroastrian empire) music was important in worship as well as in the imperial court. His evidence, however was the bas-reliefs of Taq-e-bustan which depict court music, not ritual worship. Another false hope was raised by the distinguished author Amnon Shiloah who wrote that there was rich information about the music of the Sasanian (late Zoroastrian empire) state church at Al-Hira. Unfortunately further investigation revealed that the sources for this information were various authors of the 8th – 10th centuries AD (two to three hundred years after the Sasanian empire whose references said nothing about music in prayer).

This left me in a considerable research bind. There was no more historical research for me to progress with and yet I knew I couldn't leave these questions unanswered. As a composer and a Zoroastrian I felt that I was uniquely placed to do this work. Nonetheless as my supervisors pointed out to me (with increasing impatience) "You cannot write about what is not there!".

There was, however, something there. I just hadn't seen it yet. Neither had anybody else in recorded history. When I did find it, I was stunned to realise how close I'd been all the time.