

The House Of Song – Part 2

Dr Raiomond Mirza

In part 1 of this article I revealed that I had been struck by the fact that Zoroastrians had no music in ritual worship. I then came to understand that all other religions did and for Zoroastrians to be the only religion in the world that didn't was highly improbable, both culturally and historically. Nonetheless, all I had was a hunch that there was a hole in Zoroastrian history but I had no proof of any religious music that might have once existed. Doing historical research is like following a trail through woods. One sees a clue here or there and follows the direction it points towards. When the clues run out, the trail ends.

I was on the verge of declaring my study finished and was ready to move on to the compositional aspect of my degree when Dr Almut Hintze, Zarthoshty Lecturer In Zoroastrianism at SOAS, suggested that perhaps I might be interested in studying current prayer practice. Her words reminded me of a remark made a year earlier by Mobed Rustom Bhedwar, a Parsi priest in London, about the sound of his prayers. He said "Iranian Mobeds told me that Parsi priests sounded like the Brahmins of India". "But" he added "To me, the Iranians sound like the Mullahs".

Dr Hintze's and Mobed Bhedwar's comments had produced the first spark of an idea. If Parsi priests sounded like Brahmins and Iranian Mobeds sounded like Mullahs, it suggested that, Zoroastrians in India and Iran had absorbed something of the majority cultures within which each lived. After more than 1000 years of co-existence this would be quite natural. However, what if a contemporary study revealed that there was something in Parsi prayer performance that was unlike the Brahmin sound and, equally, what if there was something in Iranian prayer that was different from the sound of Mullahs? Furthermore, what if these differences were something that Parsi and Iranian Mobeds shared with each other? I sensed that this would be important but I wasn't quite sure how.

It was an interesting thought but was also hugely problematic as it was still not established that Zoroastrian priests were actually doing anything musical when they prayed. What could there possibly be to compare? It was at this point that I began to differentiate between priests who only prayed in an unchanging monotone drone and those that seemed to have some kind of melodic and rhythmic elements in their praying. This was the first step forward. I would study those priests who seemed to have something musical to their prayers. I also decided that I would study priests in India and Iran as these were the two places that Zoroastrians had the longest histories and were still the places that new priests were fully trained.

I travelled to Iran and India and met and interviewed over 20 priests and students. In Bombay I was fortunate enough to record and interview the teachers and students (of various ages) of the Dadar Madressa and the Cama Athornan schools for priests. This was crucial to understanding how prayers are passed down from one generation to another.

I sought out archival recordings and Dr Hintze provided me with tapes made by Dr Hans Peter Schmidt in India in the 1950s as well as tapes made by Dr Mary Boyce in Sharifabad, Iran in the 1960s. I also located transcriptions of Mobed Shahzadi's prayers made by

Professor Sven Hartman during his visit to Iran in the 1960s. It was my good fortune during my time in Iran to meet, record and interview Mobed Shahzadi (almost 40 years after Sven Hartman).

When I recorded priests I would ask them to pray Yasna 28 and Atash Niyayesh. These prayers were among two recommended by Dastur Kotwal of India. I also asked the priests a standard set of questions about the way they prayed and about how they had learned their prayers. Their answers were always revealing, both about the men themselves and the heritage of the priesthood which had shaped them.

By the end of my field work I had recorded (and collected) more than 40 hours of prayers and interviews with priests and students from India and Iran. I transcribed all the interviews and made musical notations of all the prayers. However all the transcribing and notating did not happen at the end of my travels. The process was able to evolve as I went along and therefore I was able to ask priests about my findings and this last point was, in terms of research, the most significant. I actually had findings. This had not been guaranteed from the outset.

When I began recording and notating priests, my mind was open to all possibilities including the very real chance that there was nothing of note to find. However as I began listening repeatedly to recordings I became aware that I was hearing something that unified the sound of the prayers even though, overall, each priest sounded entirely individual and nothing like anyone else. Also no prayer had a single element like the melody to a song or rhythmic pattern that unified it. A melodic line could appear, change, disappear entirely and not be used the next time a priest performed the same prayer. A rhythm might manifest for a few lines, be changed and then re-emerge without any logic. There seemed to be no consistency either between priests or even within a priest's own performances. Nonetheless I wasn't imagining the fact that I was hearing something consistent that was defining the sound of the prayers. I became aware that, inconsistencies aside, I was mostly hearing a few things repeated and varied within a priest's own prayers and from priest to priest.

I began to isolate sections of prayers and notated them musically. The more I notated the more I began to perceive an aural substructure within the voices of priests. As I went deeper the words of the prayers began to disappear and I was left with nothing but pure sounds and patterns that although not initially apparent to the naked ear, could be perceived through the microscope of notation. Writing a sound down in notation freezes that sound in time. It allows one to see its shape and to contemplate it in stillness. It was very similar to boiling sea water. After the liquid is gone, only the salt remains. In this case, after the prayer was gone, the music remained.

Ultimately I was able to isolate six clearly identifiable musical structures that were common within the voices of priests from India and Iran. They can be named but space prevents a full musicological explanation of their details and manifestation. 1) Alternating Melodic Motion 2) Interval of A Tri-Semitone 3) Melodic Motion Outlining a Trichord 4) Subtonic As Leading Tone 5) Ornamentation and 6) Articulation Of A Melodic Contour. The important thing is to know that these structures were quite specific and their appearance was consistent enough to shape the sound of the prayers. I instinctively realised that these six structures were like building blocks of sound and I named them musical DNA.

The most striking factor about the performance features was that although one priest could sound radically different to another, the microscope of notation revealed that the prayer sound of both men had identical formative structures —the six performance features. What's more, these features had a universally underlying presence even though the Iranian and Indian groups were surrounded by two very different sound and musical cultures.

Furthermore, the Iranians in my study had, at the time of recording, never met the Indians and the personal histories of the two groups of men had nothing in common apart from being Zoroastrian priests and yet the same musical structures were shaping all their voices during prayer. I found these structures in children and in archival recordings going back almost half a century. This became even more important when considering that a recording of a 50 or 60 year old man in 1960 means that he learned his prayers as a boy, close to 1900. Furthermore, his teacher would have surely been born in the 1800s making these structures provably over 100 years old.

Pursuing this thought further brings us back to my earlier instinct. If Parsis and Iranians had something in common that was unique to them and different from their surrounding cultures, maybe this thing could be said to have survived from the last time Zoroastrians were a single community, 936 AD. — the date many Zoroastrians fled Iran. Had I just discovered music that was over 1000 years old?

The answer lay in the interviews with priests and students. I never expected to find that a Zoroastrian priest was a bit like the fly in Jurassic Park that sucked a dinosaur's blood and was then embalmed in amber sap, thus preserving dinosaur DNA intact through time. In the same way, Zoroastrian priests have preserved a treasure down through ages without knowing what it was they had inside them. I was now able to put a name to the music no one had known we were hearing.