

The House Of Song – Part 3

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The first two instalments of this article began with wondering why of all the world's religions, Zoroastrianism had no music in ritual worship, and then reached up to the point at which I discovered ancient musical structures within the contemporary performance of prayers. My comparative research between Iranian and Parsi priests identified six common musical building blocks which I termed musical DNA. Interviews and historical data suggested strongly that these building blocks which link the sounds of Iranian and Parsi priests who otherwise had no contact are very likely to have been preserved since the last time Zoroastrians were a single community, 936 AD., the year many Zoroastrians fled Iran and split the community in two. The final questions facing me were:

- 1). How did these performance features get preserved?
- 2). Were they all the music we ever had in prayers or were they the only survivors of an ancient practice that was once more complex and developed?
- 3). If so, what happened to that tradition?

The answer to how performance features could have been preserved down through hundreds of years by two separate groups of men who had little if any contact lay in the training of priests and in the priestly culture in which young Mobeds are educated.

The training method can vary to the extent that some students receive a deeper education such as those of the Dadar Madressa and Cama Athornan in Bombay where the Avestan language is taught. However, the fundamental process of absorbing the prayers remains the same for all priestly students whether they are taught at home or in an institution. They are apprentices. They sit with a teacher for years and learn prayers, line by line, verse by verse, imitating the teacher who reads first and corrects the student who repeats immediately after.

The important point revealed here is that students are only ever corrected on memorisation and pronunciation. The sound of the prayers, pitch, melodic lines, dynamics, any musical considerations at all are never discussed. At best, students receive an encouragement to pray in a full voice.

This also brings us to the issue of the priestly culture in which young Mobeds are made. It is an unquestioning, accepting milieu. The authority of the teacher and the specifics of received wisdom are never contemplated. This is partly due to Eastern deference for age and tradition and also because the sheer volume of prayers that need to be learned, dictate that over the years only so much information can be crammed into a young student's head. Especially if that student is learning a body of prayers in a dead language that he will never speak conversationally.

Be all that as it may, studying the education of a new priest showed that as a young boy sits next to a teacher for seven years repeating line after line, he absorbs the things he hears as

much as the things he is told. Interviews and recordings revealed that young boys throughout the years were unconsciously picking up inflections, melodic lines and in short, the six performance features I had discovered and called musical DNA. In the same way that a father and son will look different from each other although they share the same genetic building blocks, so too will a student priest sound different from his teacher although his prayers are shaped by same underlying musical structures.

Therefore we can conclude that the performance features were passed down through centuries by boys who absorbed them from their teachers and then in turn when they grew up passed them on to other boys, and all without discussion, without ever looking at the thing they were passing on. Usually without even knowing anything was being passed on. This last point was important in establishing the integrity of the information transferring from generation to generation and it can be summed it up with one key thought. There is a good chance that the six performance features were being preserved faithfully because a messenger who doesn't know he is carrying a message cannot alter it. The unquestioning culture of the Zoroastrian priesthood has acted as a protective layer around the music we hear when prayers are performed.

If one accepts that these few musical building blocks are over 1000 years old, the inquisitive gaze is then pushed further back into their origins and we must wonder, where did they come from? Did they originate from the Sasanians (0-600AD), The Parthians (300 – 0 BC) from the Achaemenids (500-300 BC), maybe even from time of the prophet (1000 – 1,500 BC)? Unfortunately here the trail runs cold. As mentioned in the first part of this article, there are some ancient clues such as the term Gatha, itself meaning hymn, but nothing substantial enough to make a definitive claim.

There still remains, nonetheless, another question. Even if we don't know exactly when and where the performance features came from, is it possible to know if they are all the music we ever had in worship or are they perhaps, as stated at the beginning of this segment, the cellular remains of what might have been a more fully developed tradition?

The answer was surprisingly found, not within Zoroastrianism, but in a sister religion. Hinduism. It may at first sound preposterous that the world's first monotheistic religion could have anything in common with what appears to be it's largest polytheistic opposite. Again I am indebted to Almut Hintze who guided me at a crucial point in my research and suggested I explore the commonalities between the origins of Hinduism and Zoroastrianism.

At first the only connection was linguistic. Indians and ancient Persians stem from the same tribe and so Avestan and Sanskrit both spring from a common proto Indo-Iranian language. The sample below shows that they are virtually identical in some cases.

Avestan	Surəm daamohu sāvistəm
Old Indic	Suram dhamasu savistham
Proto-Indo-Iranian	curam dhamasu ćávistham
English	strong, among the living the strongest

Avestan	mithrəm yazaai zaotraabyo
Old Indic	mitrám yajaai hótraabhya
Proto-Indo-Iranian	mitrám yajaai jháutraabhyas
	Mithra, I honour with libations

Further investigation highlighted some striking similarities. The Gathas of Zoroastrianism are hymns. The Vedas (divided into four parts) also have a body of hymns, the Rgveda. Many of the Vedic hymns are addressed to deities such as Indra or Agni. Zoroastrian Yashts, too are hymns dedicated to individual deities. To be a Zoroastrian priest is a hereditary position belonging to boys of an Osti family. The Vedic tradition is exclusively in the hands of boys born into the Brahmin caste. Young Zoroastrian boys are trained to be priests in an ostensibly oral tradition for seven years roughly between the ages of seven and fourteen. Young Brahmins learn their texts by heart during several years between the ages of five and twelve. Zoroastrians wear a sacred protective woven cord called a kustī. Brahmins wear a sacred thread called a krsnājinam as well as a sacred rope, the mekhalaa. The Gathic and Vedic traditions also share a common word for priest, athravan/atharvan.

The list goes on extensively but one feature in the Vedic tradition is of particular interest, the Samaveda. The Samaveda is essentially the singing of the text of the Rgveda using a large number of musical notes. Most significantly, the Samaveda is specifically to be chanted by a special class of singer priest, the Udgatr.

Perhaps originally, Zoroastrianism also had singer priests and a version of the Gathas which was more elaborately sung than what we hear today and this brings us to the final question. If an elaborate tradition of music in worship had existed, what happened to it? Perhaps, in one word, Alexander. His invasion of Persia was notable for its tremendous slaughter of priests, particularly at temples. If a special class of Zoroastrian singer priests ever existed, it would be normal for them to mostly be found in temples and during an invasion that would have made them exceptionally vulnerable. It is likely that when they died, an entire body of knowledge and a musical tradition died as well. It could very well be that in the Samaveda and its singer priests, the Udgatrs, we have the modern, evolved, Vedic counterparts to what was lost in Zoroastrianism.

However, the abiding thought that my research left me with was not so much sadness at what was lost but rather the thrilling knowledge that something had been found and it had been right in front of us for centuries. The main accomplishment of my thesis was to place Zoroastrianism on the musical map of the world. Perhaps others can take up the work and make further discoveries.

Ultimately, leaving aside speculations of the distant past and possible future, it is sufficiently rewarding to know that when Zoroastrian priests pray and they manifest the musical DNA, they are making music, ancient music and when we hear it we connect to our ancestors, possibly to our prophet, and always, to God.