

# Sufi music and its therapeutic benefits

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**ABSTRACT:** This article explores the tradition of Persian and Turkish Sufi music and its benefits for mental health.

**KEY WORDS:** Rumi, mevlana, drumming

I am a psychotherapist, singer, frame drum player, and traveller on the path of mysticism. As part of my counselling studies, I began researching the tradition of Sufi music, though I don't claim any truth, and the views expressed in this article are my own. After studying Turkish classical and folk music, I fell in love, and was deeply inspired by Turkish and Persian Sufi music. Sufi Music touched my heart so beautifully that it breathed new life into it, and since that moment, I have focused all my artistic activities on Sufi music. As both an artist and a psychotherapist, I have a firm belief in the healing power of the arts, and I hope to help others heal through music.

### **Music in ancient religions**

Modern studies in the history of art point to the origin of music, and of dance, as prehistoric ceremonial practices. Drumming, chanting, and dancing were at the core of rituals in prehistoric societies, as well as in contemporary societies that practice a form of primal religion. The rhythm and the beat are the essence of the ritual and music has continued to play a central role in almost all religious traditions beyond primal religions. For example, Zoroastrians believe that Gathas, the hymns composed by Zarathustra, and believed to be the holiest part of the Zoroastrian Avesta, have to be sung with proper intonation,

rhythm, and melody for the faithful to spiritually benefit from them. The intonations and melodies of these holy songs were orally transmitted with great care, since the time of the poems' composition, c. 1500 BCE, to the time of the Sasanian Empire, which began in the third century. Over this period, they were recorded using a phonetic alphabet called Dīb Dabireh, which was dedicated solely to recording scripture.

In Christianity and Judaism, we find the Psalms, the Mizmor l'David, and Solomons' Song of Songs, all of which are at the heart of the Old Testament. Moreover, Choral singing and Gregorian chants have been central to Christian ceremonies and to the formation of the sense of community in churches.

Drumming, music, and singing are central to Sufism, the mystical traditions of Islam. Music is the key to the practice of Dhikr or zikr, which literally means remembrance and involves the invocation of the names of G-d.

*It is dried string, dried wood and dried skin,  
Where does this voice come from? From the Friend.  
- Rumi*

Sufism refers to spiritual traditions that appeared in the Middle East. It is sometimes described as the spiritual dimension of Islam. Many authors and practitioners of Sufism believe, however, that its roots run deeper into ancient religions of the Middle East. Central to the doctrine of Sufism is the experience of a spiritual journey through divine love, which can manifest among humans as a spiritual love that bonds members of a brotherhood, or between members and a teacher (Chittick, 2005).

An inherent difficulty in the study of Sufi music is the vast diversification of Sufi groups in terms of cultures and geographical locations. Sufism is practiced from central and Southeast Asia to North Africa. The practices, beliefs, and customs vary greatly, even though there is a common historical, or "authentic", Persian and Turkish origin to which various Sufi groups refer and will be the focus of this article.

### **Rumi & Sufism**

Jalalad-din Muhammad Balkhi Rumi (1207 -1273) is one of the most well-known and influential figures in Sufism. Born in Balkh, modern day Afghanistan, and a native speaker of Persian, he emigrated to Anatolia where he lived for most of his life. Rumi (also known as Mevlana in Turkey), is considered one of the greatest poets in the Persian language and one of the most influential Sufi teachers to have ever lived (Mojaddedi, 2014). Rumi's poetry has been rendered into English by various translators and has captured the popular cultural imagination in the English-speaking world.

The followers of Rumi's Sufi order in Turkey are known as Mevlevi dervishes, whose spiritual practice is famously associated with music and the signature whirling dance.

Indeed, Sufi practice is deeply intertwined with musical experience (Lewisohn, 1997). The Sufi practice of music, and medieval theories of medicine have informed Ottoman practices of music therapy. Today, there is renewed interest in this traditional mode of music therapy in Turkey (Zincir et al. 2014).

Rumi's poems contain valuable insights into the Sufi practice of sacred music. This is evidenced in the practices of the Mevlevi order, which are accompanied by music. Sufism is a spiritual path in which a spiritual mentor or teacher offers care and guidance to the followers. The way of Sufism is believed by its followers to be a way of "healing," or becoming whole in its broadest sense (Chittick, 2005). The pastoral care the mentor offers in more traditional societies, such as Southeast Asia, still retains its older practices, in which the role of the Sufi is similar to a shaman, in the sense that the Sufi would offer spiritual healing (Ewing, 1984; Crapanzano, 1973). Alongside the language, music contributes to the emotional impact of the spiritual message (Beck, 2006). It is within this context that we study the experience and doctrine of music as therapy in Sufism.

### **Song of the Reed**

A major work of poetry by Rumi, and one of the main sources of Sufi knowledge and practice, is the book of rhyming couplets known as "Masnavi". The book opens with eighteen rhyming couplets, which are traditionally known as "neyname," or, *Song of the Reed*. Allegedly, Rumi remarked that the entire Masnavi, which spans 25,000 verses, is the explanation and expansion of these eighteen verses of the *Song of the Reed*. It is often regarded as expressing the essence of Rumi's philosophy. We will analyse an extract of the poem and seek to interpret the experience of the poet to gain insight into the experience of music by Sufis.

The following is a translation by Jalal-ad Rumi of an extract from the *Song of the Reed*, (Nicholson, 1940):

- 1. Listen to this reed how it complains:  
it is telling a tale of separations.*
- 2. Saying, "Ever since I was parted from the reed-bed,  
man and woman have moaned in (unison with) my lament.*
- 3. I want a bosom torn by severance,  
that I may unfold (to such a one) the pain of love-desire.*
- 4. Everyone who is left far from his source  
wishes back the time when he was united with it.*
- 5. In every company I uttered my wailful notes,  
I consorted with the unhappy and with them that rejoice.*
- 6. Every one became my friend from his own opinion;  
none sought out my secrets from within me.*

7. *My secret is not far from my plaint,  
but ear and eye lack the light (whereby it should be apprehended).*

The *Song of the Reed* is understood by Sufis to refer to the state of separation from the divine origin, and the correspondent longing for reunion with that state. In this sense, the reed is a metaphor for the human being (Rumi, Jalal ad-Din and Chittick, 1983). The metaphor is placed at the heart of the poem and likens the experience of the poet's mind to the reed flute's music (The Turkish Ney flute). The metaphor also suggests that because the reed flute's music can only be produced by a musician, in a similar way, the poet believes that he is "inspired" by the divine love that moves his spirit to produce poetry. In this sense, the poet is a kind of instrument of G-d's will, who produces the breath to create the music.

The third and fifth couplets speak of the reed flute's desire to be heard and understood, while other couplets allude to the idea that only those who have experienced the same feelings can understand. The poem emphasizes the idea that music is both an interpretation of the state of the soul and a metaphor for the human condition. The poem also refers to the dialogue that takes place through music and laments the fact that only a few will truly understand and feel what is said. The flute's "secret is not far from my plaint, but ear and eye lack the light (whereby it should be apprehended)" (couplet 7). At its core, the poem expresses a deep yearning for community and companionship and expresses Sufi ideals of brotherhood and love between men and women, whereby each can truly understand the inner states of one another.

### **Sufi music as communal practice**

In Sufism, the practice of sacred music is often communal. Playing music, not only by professionals, but by the whole community, constitutes the main form of spiritual practice. In large dervish gatherings, called "Jam", over a hundred people may play the ancient lute, or Tanbur, which is the ancestor of modern tambourines. The Tanbur is held in high esteem by Sufis as a holy instrument and should only be touched following a purification ritual of ablution by water. Once playing is finished, the musician would venerate the instrument with a kiss.

If the Persian drum, or daf, is torn during a performance, the Sufi would refer to it as "the martyrdom of daf," and would describe the daf as having become "Shaheed." Shaheed literally means seer, or witness, and the notion that the daf has become Shaheed, or has attained "vision," indicates that the musical instruments used in ritual prayer are the locus of the external manifestation of the inner spiritual experience. In this sense, the inner experience of the musician, which is inspired by divine love and flows from the heart, is translated into music.

Such a mode of playing is inevitably spontaneous and depends on the feelings and inspirations at the moment of playing. This spontaneity manifests itself in improvisation.

Sufi music, and indeed the musical culture of the Middle East and Western Asia is based on improvisation. In “maqam,” which is the Arabic term for the modal musical system, the mode provides a blueprint of melodic behaviours, complete with set traditional melodies. The musician benefits from this repertoire as a point of departure for improvisation. The same holds true for the traditional Persian musical system, which is based on the similar concept of “radif,” which provides a framework and inspiration for improvisation (Lewisohn, 1997). Improvisation in Sufi practice in Turkish and Persian culture is based on modal systems, which provide a melodic base as a point of departure. This means that play will be very spontaneous and closely resembles the environment and method that an expressive arts therapist may use. Moreover, improvisation as the method for music-making as a means of expressing a spiritual state and a dialogue with fellow members of the group would encourage spontaneity, or the “movement of the psyche” (McNiff, 2013).

Several other poems by Rumi further illuminate the relationship of the Sufi musician to the instrument. In this poem, Rumi likens his relationship to divinity to the relation of a musical instrument to the musician:

*You pluck the strings and to heavens rise,  
My high and low notes, yearning and lamentation  
All day and night.  
He said: you are my lyre,  
You are in my arms,  
I fashioned you,  
How can I not play the lyre which is you?  
I am your harp and I am in your arms,  
Whether you pluck the strings or not,  
I am forever that joyous song.*

Here, the poet describes a spiritual experience of both separation and union, lamentation and joy using the dual metaphors of the lyre and the harp, and the fact that these instruments are held in one another’s arms. Essentially, the spiritual experience described in the poem is expressed through music. In platonic terms, that spiritual states would be the form of music and vice versa, which means that the two individuals in the poem share a single reality, and what differentiates the two is only the level of externalisation: the spiritual state remains an inner, psychological experience, while the music has an objective form in terms of the soundwaves produced in the air.

Another of Rumi’s poems emphasizes the relationship between mythology and doctrine in Sufi music:

*It is the sound of whirling heavens*

*That people create by Tanbur and by their throat  
We have all been parts of Adam  
We have all heard that music in paradise.*

In the terminology of Sufism, Adam refers to the common origin of humanity, or “humanity as a whole.” Musical experience, according to Rumi, is a reminder of that state of wholeness, a way to return to the archetypal “paradise”, and also a way to connect to the harmonies of the Universe, which is suggested by the line, “the sound of whirling heavens”.

In creation myth in the Yarsan tradition, music was conceived as the link between the physical and the spiritual. In the myth, Adam’s body was created before the soul entered it. The body of Adam remained in that state and the soul refused to join with it, which resulted in the “fall” into the material state. Angels then brought musical instruments and played music inside that body, which enticed the soul to join with it. In this myth, the experience of music operates as a kind of compromise for the soul to accept the mortal state. The myth also refers to the belief that the body remains living as long as there is music as in harmony of vibrations, which is also attested in other ancient belief systems (Wigram, Pederson and Bond, 2002).

The experience of music in Rumi’s poetry is intimately connected with the spiritual experience, and as such, the musical instrument frequently becomes a metaphor for the human soul. Likening the relationship of the human being to divinity, and the musician to the musical instrument, can be understood in terms of Garred’s (2001) dialogical perspective, whereby music is the medium and expression of this dialogue. The sacred status of musical instruments in Sufism could be interpreted as the connection one attributes between the instrument and their own highest aspirations. It involves, among other things, a sense of personal connection to the instrument, such that it is not merely an object, but deserves “to be called thou” (Buber, 1958). It is possible to envisage that in a contemporary music therapy practice the same connection could be made by establishing a close personal connection to the instrument.

### **Final thoughts**

Sufis’ path of the mentor has resonances with a person-centred approach to artistic creation and values the ideals of unconditional caring and empathy between mentor and students (Rogers, et al. 2012). As such, the practice of communal musical worship found in Sufism would have positive, therapeutic effects, given that members of the community foster a safe space in which to play music according to the inherent ideals of brotherhood and love.

Sufi music and poetry clearly link the spiritual and the human and there are strong musical themes within the poetry of Rumi. It is music, alongside the language which contributes to the emotional impact of the spiritual message (Beck, 2006). In my personal experience as a musician, Sufi music, drumbeats and sounds help us to enter

into and engage with our own consciousness, in order to connect to our inner guidance, to feel inspired, and to improve wellness, while developing intuition. Sacred sounds and music greatly increase focus, mood, and concentration, as they quieten the mind, slow us down, and take us towards an inner journey to heal and to connect with the deeper parts of ourselves. This suggests elements of such practice could inspire music as a mode of therapeutic practice in its own right. Rather than music therapy, from a Sufi perspective it could be called music as therapy.

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