

THE SEVEN SOUNDS IN THE 'VOICE OF THE SILENCE'

By Cynthia Trasi

At the birth of the universe the Absolute had an Idea; it then willed and there was an interaction, a friction, which produced Sound, followed immediately by Light. The first step towards manifestation was audible (the Word) and the next visible. This primordial Sound reverberates throughout all existence and vibrates in every atom.

Hazrat Inayat Khan wrote that there are two aspects of vibration, fine and gross, in varying degrees. The inward and essential part of each and every being is composed of fine vibrations, which we name spirit. The external part is formed of gross ones; this is matter. It is now known that space is filled with sounds; the whole universe is vibrating musically, harmonising the movements and activities of all within it.

Theosophist George Arundale described sound as the "slow motion of silence", because the vibrations are slow enough for us to hear with our physical ears. He added that the very word 'silence' is a word we use in order to indicate that we have reached a vibratory condition infinitely beyond our comprehension. Perhaps there is no silence anywhere, and Silence is pregnant with Sound.

Hazrat Inayat Khan suggests that the Soundless Sound is audible without the help of the ears, and indeed when, in 9th C. China, a Zen student asked his teacher: "how should I hear correctly?" the master replied: "Not with your ears." There is a yogic practice whereby the yogi closes the ears with the thumbs, the eyes with the index fingers, the nostrils with the middle fingers and the lips with the remaining four fingers. After some time the yogi will begin to hear the mystic sounds. The first will be like the hum of a bee, next the flute and then the vina (Indian stringed instrument); later comes the sound of bells, and afterwards thunder. (The Mysticism of Sound and Music')

According to HP Blavatsky's [hereafter HPB] little gem, 'The Voice of the Silence', we will become the Light and the Sound. She gives us Seven Sounds by which we may attain the One Sound. I am not the only one to be fascinated, yet puzzled, by these Seven Sounds. I think it is important to remember that each sound is an attempt to describe the sound heard and not the actual sound. Various Theosophists have written about the Sounds over the years from different perspectives. I like to look at them as marking the milestones from our Source, through involution to evolution, and finally back to the Source.

HPB writes: "Before thou set'st thy foot upon the ladder's upper rung, the ladder of the mystic sounds, thou hast to hear the voice of thy inner GOD (the Higher Self) in seven manners." Note that the ladder of the mystic sounds is the last rung of the ladder. It is a ladder within a ladder.

Sound 1: "The first is like the nightingale's sweet voice chanting a song of parting to its mate."

I see the bird as representing the soul, the song of parting being the apparent parting of the soul from its source. I was reminded of the song 'Morning has broken', in which the blackbird has spoken like 'the first word', so is linked with the beginning of a new manvantara. In Fragment 3 of 'The Voice of the Silence' HPB writes of the nightingale of hope, which would fit in well with the birth of a new universe.

Sound 2: “The second comes as the sound of a silver cymbal of the Dhyanis, awakening the twinkling stars.”

This sound appears to tell of the birth of the Cosmos. Brahma played Nada (potential vibration) on his cymbals; it was from this that the universe arose. The cymbal also stresses duality as there have to be two parts brought together to make the sound, whether it be a large orchestral cymbal or a small Indian one; but at least the Indian cymbal has two parts joined permanently together!

The term Dhyanis, or Dhyani-Chohans means literally ‘Lords of Meditation’ and they correspond with the higher angels and archangels. Geoffrey Barborika, in ‘The Divine Plan’, writes that the term signifies the state of lofty beings devoted to the contemplation of the Divine Plan and to the means of unfolding and fulfilling it. As well as directing intelligent forces and administering Divine Laws including Karma, they endow us with our seven principles. HPB tells us that there are seven groups of Dhyanis and they are the Seven Rays. They make us what we are as individuals. So perhaps the twinkling stars that the Dhyanis awaken are the divine sparks.

Sound 3: “The next is as the plaint melodious of the ocean-sprite imprisoned in its shell.”

This suggests very much the imprisonment of spirit in matter; it is a sad song because not only is it imprisoned, but no-one seems to know it is there. The ocean could be the sea of thought that surrounds us. The shell suggests our spiral outward growth from the centre out to the most material; now we need to take the return journey back to the centre.

Sound 4: “And this is followed by the chant of the Vina.”

In Fragment 3 of ‘The Voice of the Silence’ HPB tells us that “disciples may be likened to the strings of the soul-echoing vina; mankind to its sounding board.” This suggests that the chant of the vina would be a joint effort between the higher and the lower self, which could be seen as representing the antahkarana, the rainbow bridge. We are also reminded of the duality of mankind, as the sounding board is actually two separate gourd-like resonators. The vina is linked with Brahma’s consort Saraswati, the Goddess of all Knowledge. She plays the vina to show that intellectual learning needs to be tempered by higher feelings. It will be of no surprise to learn that most vinas have seven strings, four of which are played, the other three kept for rhythm and drone accompaniment. This is reminiscent of the four lower principles, where it could be said all the action is played out, and the three higher, which are, drone-like, the eternal foundation of our existence. Elsewhere HPB describes the body as an Aeolian harp, chorded with two sets of strings, one made of pure silver, the other of catgut, linked respectively to the manasic (mental) and kamic (desire) aspects of the body.

Sound 5: “The fifth like sound of bamboo-flute shrills in thine ear.”

The shrill melody of the flute is surely a wake-up call. Here may be a reference to our Inner, non-physical ear, whereby we receive intimations of what we should be striving towards. In India the bamboo-flute, the bansari, is the poor man’s instrument as it is so simple; the message is simple. The preserver of the world, Vishnu, in his incarnation as Krishna, plays the flute whose melody symbolises self-realisation.

Sound 6: “It changes next into a trumpet-blast.”

This trumpet blast is a glorious, brilliant fanfare, announcing the imminent arrival of the liberated soul. This is like listening to ‘The trumpet shall sound’ from ‘Messiah’ after hearing James Galway playing a lilting folk-song on his flute!

Sound 7: “The last vibrates like the dull rumbling of a thunder-cloud.”

The seventh swallows all the other sounds. They die, and then are heard no more. The dull, rumbling vibration suggests the continuous process of creation, preservation and destruction symbolised by the Nataraja, the dance of Shiva. All the other sounds are reliant on vibration. If the thunder ended that would be the end of manifestation. Buddha likened the eternal laws of the universe to the rhythm of the drum; he spoke of the ‘drum of immortality’.

C W Leadbeater was reminded of the Tibetan ritual music, which is built upon the deepest vibrations imaginable, like rolling thunder, symbolising the creative vibrations of the universe, the origin of all things.

George Arundale also sees the drum rolls as never ceasing through an age of evolution. He wrote, in his dramatic style, “Richer and richer in tone and colour become their cadences, more thundering and compelling, almost cataclysmic, often catastrophic, stormy, peaceful, but ever moving onwards to their divinely appointed end.” And then the King is crowned, there is self-realisation, and he becomes a god, God. The drums cease. And in the aftermath of their cessation, in that Silence which indeed is more than Sound, infinitely more, the King-god enters that Samadhi of No-Number, No-Sound, No-Form, No-Colour, No-Radiance, of which there can be no adequate description. (‘The Lotus Fire’)

In HPB’s story ‘An Isle of Mystery’, in her book ‘From the Caves and Jungles of Hindostan’, is a marvellous description of how the evening winds blow through the bamboos and grasses, creating a ‘wild unceasing symphony’. Amongst the sounds heard are the song of a nightingale, the sound of hundreds of ringing silver bells, the heart-rending howl of a wolf deprived of her young, the separate notes of a flute, hundreds of Aeolian harps and the thundering strains of an organ.

I would like to close with some words from Ernest Wood’s book, ‘The Intuition of the Will,’ which I find rather beautiful and encouraging. He writes of the mystic sounds: “All this is metaphorical and symbolical. As time goes on, and the aspirant pursues his unchanging purpose, the voice from within, which at first was so delicate that he had to stand on the tiptoe of breathless expectancy in order to catch its divine message, becomes constant and ever-present. His day is full of its sound, which fills every valley and echoes from every hill. There is then not one small event in his life, not the picking up of a pin, nor the tying of a shoelace, which is not lighted with spiritual significance. Every incident in the newspaper becomes an epic; every dusty corner in a slum is a world filled with wonders. Every small thing, every small action has become divine, far-reaching, universe-shaking. All things have become new, and filled with light. It is as though all the universe were within yourself.”