

Of Paramount Importance

Addressing the Paucity of Music in Bahá'í Devotional Practice

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The use of music in Bahá'í devotional practice, whether private or communal, has been of perennial concern since the Bahá'í Faith arrived in the West in the early days of the twentieth century. The Eastern believers have had a continuous practice and understanding of the use of music in devotions descending directly from the Islamic tradition of chant known as *tilawat* or *tartil*. The Western Bahá'ís on the other hand, were faced with a new Revelation that had no fixed tradition of musical rendering that would not be totally foreign to their own cultures, and this provided a challenge to the community in its search for devotional musical expression. There was some frustration with older, established forms of musical worship precisely because they were derived and not new, and this caused a certain degree of discomfort. Nonetheless, established musical forms of worship were adopted by the early Bahá'ís, including hymns, spirituals, and renderings of classical and romantic songs with new words.

From early on in the history of the Bahá'í Faith, western communities have also used music in a variety of forms mostly derived from popular culture but aimed more at community singing rather than a true devotional approach. The exception was the music used in the Houses of Worship where more formal approaches were undertaken to maintain the qualities of sacredness, dignity and universality specified by Shoghi Effendi.¹ Bahá'ís recognize the importance of music because of the prominence it is given in the Bahá'í Writings. But there is confusion in regard as to what sort of music is appropriate for where.

Nothing in the Bahá'í writings points to the exclusion of past musical

1. Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974, p.77.

forms, rather are they encouraged, especially in the light of the fact that a new Bahá'í art cannot be forthcoming until the religion has had a major impact on the world. In the Bahá'í Writings however, distinction is made regarding the use of music in community activities like the Nineteen Day Feast and the devotional practice required by the intent of the House of Worship.

Music at the Nineteen-Day Feast

Shoghi Effendi saw music as being an “important element of all Bahá'í gatherings”, but emphasized that it should lead to “spirituality”.² In many places in the Writings of both ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the Guardian, the role of music is seen as a medium for the upliftment of the hearts and that joy and attraction to God should be the outcome. The intent is to assist in creating an atmosphere of spirituality. Here, in the Feast, instruments can be used and the style of musical practice can vary. This can be seen from the guidance of Shoghi Effendi that he thought it

“advisable that the believers should make use in their meetings of hymns composed by Bahá'ís themselves, and also of such hymns, poems and chants as are based on the Holy Words.”³

The other consideration is what texts are used. From the above quotation, it is evident that individual creations are welcome as long as they reflect a basis in Scripture. Texts to be used in musical renderings must hold a balance between the above and the following statement also by the Guardian.

“During the devotional part of the Nineteen Day Feast any part of the writings of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh and the Master can be read, also from the Bible and Qur'an, and other sacred scriptures.”⁴

Music in the Mashriqul-Adkár

As is well-known amongst the Bahá'í Community, only the voice is allowed in the Houses of Worship. Texts for the readings and for the music have a different criteria from other Bahá'í devotional meetings. Only the Sacred Books of the World's revealed religions and those of the Bahá'í Faith are permitted. Also, a distinction is made between the Writings and public talks of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and his prayers. The former are omitted from devotional programs in the House of Worship whereas the latter is welcomed.

2. Shoghi Effendi quoted in *Compilation of Compilations, Music*, Maryborough: Bahá'í Publications Australia, 1991, p. 80.

3. From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, April 7, 1935, cited in Helen Hornby (compilation), *Lights of Guidance* (2nd ed.), New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988, pp. 245-246.

4. Ibid.

“Prayers revealed by Bahá'u'lláh and the Master [‘Abdu'l-Bahá], as well as the sacred writings of the Prophets, should be read or chanted...”⁵

Bahá'í texts for use in the House of Worship are defined then, as the Writings and prayers of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh and the prayers of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá (but not his public talks or letters).⁶ Fundamental to musical practice in the Bahá'í House of Worship is the clarification from the Universal House of Justice as to congregational participation in the program.

“Regarding singing in the Temple, we must bear in mind the reference made by Bahá'u'lláh in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* to the need for the person who enters the Temple to sit silent and listen to the chanting of the verses of God, as well as the statements made by the Guardian regarding “the reader” or “a number of readers” or a “choir”.⁷

This statement indicates that the “congregation” itself does not sing during the program within the House of Worship as those in attendance must sit in silence and listen to the Scriptural renderings. Listening to and understanding the texts is the extent of the participation of the congregation. Only specific readers and singers will do the rendering whether it be spoken or sung.

As to the subject of music itself, it is of interest to note that the musical style and form to be used for music in the House of Worship is left up to the artists themselves.⁸ Thus, style is of secondary importance, though undoubtedly it must meet the standard of any activity in the House of Worship which is to be characterised by the qualities of sacredness, dignity and universality.⁹ Such musical rendering of the text should also allow for the audibility and comprehensibility of the Texts being sung. Singing, like speaking is a form of recitation. The text comes first.

It appears from a consideration of the above, that the devotional practice in the Houses of Worship is of a special nature and is totally reliant on the need for the attendees to hear the Word of God read or sung. By contrast, singing by all in attendance at the Feasts and other devotional meetings would be appropriate and encouraged.¹⁰

5. From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, April 2, 1931, quoted in *Lights of Guidance*, op.cit., p. 607.

6. See Shoghi Effendi quoted in *Lights of Guidance*, op.cit., pp. 608-610.

7. From a letter of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Uganda and Central Africa, August 19, 1965, quoted in *Lights of Guidance*, op.cit., p. 609.

8. “Chanting or singing will be the only sound (aside from reading) and what forms this will take must depend on the artists who create the music itself” From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi July 3, 1949. from *Extracts on the Institution of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkar*, Haifa: Universal House of Justice, publication available from Bahá'í World Centre.

9. Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, op.cit., p. 77.

10. “Music is permitted during the spiritual part - or any part - of the 19 Day Feast.” From a letter written on behalf of the Guardian to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States, June 30, 1952, quoted in *Lights of Guidance*, op.cit., p. 245

Current music-making in Bahá'í Feasts and Bahá'í Holy Days

There is undoubtedly, much anecdotal evidence of the paucity of music in Bahá'í Feasts and Holy Days, and especially live music and group singing. To ascertain to what extent music is currently used in Bahá'í devotional gatherings, a survey was conducted via the internet. The survey establishes the paucity of live and particularly vocal music in Bahá'í community devotions, but it also demonstrates a real concern on the part of the respondents for having music in the meetings. The apparent strategy in addressing this concern was to have recorded music. However, it was encouraging to see that 19% of the respondents said that vocal music was used in the majority of their meetings. The questions aimed at discovering the extent of the use of music at meetings, whether it was live, recorded, or both, what proportion of it was vocal music, and whether there was any vocal or choral training in the community.

This survey was conducted via the internet with a brief questionnaire aimed at ascertaining the level of the use of music and particularly vocal music in Bahá'í devotional gatherings. These were defined as the Nineteen-Day Feast and the Holy Days. Respondents were mostly from Australia, but also from New Zealand, the United States, Canada, the Caribbean and the Netherlands. The results of sixty-two questionnaires are compiled below.

- Community size in population including adults and children.
 - 64.5% lived in communities of less than fifty Bahá'ís
 - 14.5% lived in communities of fifty to a hundred
 - 21% lived in larger communities of over a hundred
- Ninety-eight percent of all respondents stated that there was some music at the Feasts and Holy Days.
- Of the twenty-eight meetings in the category of Feasts and Holy Days, music was present in the following percentages.
 - 27.5% had music in up to ten meetings per annum
 - 16% had music between ten to fifteen meetings per annum
 - 16% had music between fifteen and twenty meetings per annum
 - 40.5% had music in most of the meeting i.e. twenty to twenty-eight
- Asked whether the music in these meetings consisted of live or recorded music, the following results were given.
 - 13% indicated that only live music was used
 - 36% indicated that only or mostly recorded music was used
 - 51% indicated that a combination of live and recorded music was used
- The proportion of vocal music used at these gatherings was distributed as follows.

- 27% had no vocal music
- 24% had vocal music one to five times per annum
- 17% had vocal music five to ten times per annum
- 13% had vocal music ten to twenty times per annum
- 19% had vocal music over twenty times per annum

The forms or styles of music mentioned most often were Persian chants, European music (including choral music and almost always recorded), Bahá'í songs (children's songs and folk settings), folk music, recorded music, and some ethnic styles. Original music was prepared in four of the sixty-two communities surveyed.

Of sixty-two communities surveyed only 13% (eight) had any form of musical training. This ranged from regular learning of songs in children's classes to small, organized choirs that rehearsed consistently. Seventy-five percent of respondents used music in private devotional practice, usually singing prayers and other Sacred Writings.

Ninety-eight percent of the respondents saw music as a part of their gatherings (some of these were one or two occasions out of the year), which indicates a healthy concern for its use. However, eighty-seven percent of communities surveyed have had no musical training. This indicates a lack of musical human resources to initiate training aimed at encouraging singing at such gatherings. It may also indicate a lack of will to do so. With seventy-five percent of respondents using music in their private devotions, what also may be missing is a sense of confidence to sing in a group. Training would assist in eliminating this hurdle.

Paths for Community Devotional Music Making

Two of the major contributing factors in the paucity of vocal music in Bahá'í devotions is the lack of musical training and the non-existence of a Bahá'í musical tradition. (The latter, of course, we would not really want. The aim is universality and diversity!). So, how can communities remedy this problem? Two paths are immediately available. The first is to adopt and adapt the tradition in current use within the wider community. Australians and other Western Christian societies can feel at home with such hymns and devotional songs whose words are appropriate to Bahá'í teachings. Hymns and like music can be found in bookstores and on the internet.

The second path is for communities to resolve to learn musical skills and sing new music. We live in a country that has a multitude of resources ready for use. (The reason we don't use them may well lie in the "quick fix" solution. This demands little from individuals and communities but does little for community development. With this solution one simply plays recorded music from a CD. Perhaps a few sing along with the machine.) With resources,

(perhaps one person resolving to be trained in methods of music learning, e.g. Kodaly), and a bit of enthusiasm and direction from Spiritual Assemblies, a portion of the Feast could be set aside to learn some simple musical skills and some new devotional songs that the community could sing together in unison for the spiritual part of any gathering.¹¹ The Kodaly system is fairly ubiquitous and very useful. Literature and resources can be found in libraries, schools and on the internet.

The need for vocal music in devotional gatherings needs to be steadily addressed. Communities can consult on a diverse variety of options in gaining new skills that will greatly enhance their community life. There are musicians and composers who are friends of the Bahá'ís who can prepare some music for Holy Day observances. Communities can also consider the option of hiring a choral workshop clinician to conduct a fun weekend of music learning and singing.

'Abdu'l-Bahá says that music is of paramount importance. Singing the Holy Writings is one area where this importance can be readily substantiated. "In the world of existence" 'Abdu'l-Bahá also says, "physical things have a connection with spiritual realities. One of these things is the voice, which connects itself to the spirit; and the spirit can be uplifted by this means-..."¹² The voice then, is of importance to our individual and communal worship.

Conclusion

Whatever barriers prevent Western Bahá'í communities from consistently using the medium of music in their devotional practice, a commitment will need to be made to address the problem in a systematic way. Such an undertaking can in real terms address the quality of community living and so warrants the effort. An understanding of what the Bahá'í Writings actually do say is of help, and the lack of musical skills within the community can be easily addressed over a period of time. It is essential that the will to do something about the inadequate use of music and particularly vocal music in Bahá'í devotional practices be maintained by a vision of the joy it can release in dispirited hearts, and of the social cohesion it can provide to a community.

11. The current writer has produced a volume of devotional songs entitled *The Paramount Project* intended for use at Bahá'í devotional meetings. Some of the songs would be appropriate for the Houses of Worship and the majority use texts from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. The collection is somewhat eclectic, drawing on traditions of hymns, spirituals, eastern chants, folksong, and classical approaches. It was prepared using standard notation and the Tonic Sol-fa system that is found in the Kodaly music learning method in current use in most primary schools in Australia. The volume also contains fourteen pages of information aimed at assisting the reader to gain some skill and understanding in the reading of music.

12. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Music*, op.cit., pp.78-79. See also Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1978, p. 143, where human speech is described by Bahá'u'lláh as an "essence which aspireth to exert its influence".