

Reconnecting Music to Spirit: the Spiritual Sound Ensemble

Gary S. Kendall, Northwestern University (g-kendall@northwestern.edu)

Abstract: The music and sound practices of Andean shamans was the original inspiration for a class devoted to reconnecting the performance of music to the spiritual domain. The body of practices and musical repertoire that developed within this class became the basis of a performing ensemble that fused meditative and spiritual healing with musical improvisations. Experiences with that class and the ensemble became pivotal for the composition of the work *Qosqo* that extends many of the practices developed within the context of sacred performance into the electroacoustic domain.

1 The Creation of the Spiritual Sound Ensemble

In the spring of 1999 I met the visual artist Tom Crockett at a workshop being led by a shaman from Peru.. The focus of the workshop was on Andean spiritual traditions, which both of us had been studying. During the workshop Tom shared with me some of his experiences teaching a high-school art class that incorporated elements of shamanism, both Andean and Native American. He was teaching art as a sacred practice [Crockett 2000]. At the time I was teaching a variety of music courses at the university level and the way in which Tom had revolutionized the context of his class was an inspiration to me. A year later I was given the opportunity to teach a class on a subject of my own choosing. I choose “musical embodiment and the spirit.” This was not to be a class ‘about’ spirituality and music. It was a class that ‘embodied’ spirituality and music---music as a spiritual practice. Over the next four years I had additional opportunities to teach this class and, as it evolved over time, the class grew and transformed into the “Spiritual Sound Ensemble.”

For me. the original inspiration for creating this class was to discover ways in which I could teach music within a spiritual context, to reconnect sound to spirit in the fashion I had experienced with shamanic teachers. I advertised the class with a course description that quickly attracted a full roster of students. From conversations with these students and from their class journals, I pulled together some of the common threads that led them to the class. A majority said that at one point in their lives, playing music had been a deep personal, and spiritual experience, but they had now lost that

connection. These students had become musicians because the joy making of music had been deeply rewarding, but now many of them contemplated leaving music. Some were very specific in saying that the conservatory-like tradition of music training was at the root of their dilemma. They said that the primary reason they were taking the class was to restore and recover a spiritual context for music making. For some students this sense of spirituality was a very personal experience and for others it connected to their religious roots.

2.1 Class as Ceremony

The three-hour meetings of the class were conducted in the evenings and organized as spiritual ceremonies. Many of the traditional steps in starting and ending ceremony were observed and, while class was in session, the classroom was treated as sacred space. Within the framework of class meetings, there were activities focused on meditative vocalization, singing sacred songs, ensemble improvisations and occasionally individual improvisation. All of this was contextualized as sacred sound.

In some ways the content of a particular day’s class would depend on the natural progression of meditative and vocal exercises from simple to more advanced. In other cases the content developed out of the unique needs of the class members at a particular moment, such as the arrival of a spring day. The lesson plans were created through divination. Sometimes I was directed to exercises I had been taught to me by spiritual teachers and other times to exercises from the books on intoning or sound healing. Then again, other exercises seemed to be born totally out of the ether. I wrote down each lesson plan one week at a time. During the

divination process I would sometimes ask simple questions like "Should the class start with a breathing exercise?" At other times I wrote down images that appeared in my mind's eye like a process for working with water. Most of the time the guidance made good sense, but I often had to confirm and reaffirm ideas that seemed to lead in unpredictable directions. It was reassuring to find each week's lessons plans picking up the threads of the previous one without any conscious effort on my part.

2.2 Simple Notes

A favorite exercise of the class was performing one note, only one note and holding it for long, complete breaths. The students practiced focusing their intent on making this tone embody "well being." If some other feeling came in, they simply brought it back to "well being." This exercise came to be called "happy notes." For me this was an exercise in the most important teaching of the class, gathering and focusing intent. For class members this was also an exercise in the nuance of tone production. We created many variations on the "happy notes" exercise. One example was for the entire class to play together and produce what sounded like only one note. As one student reported in their class journal,

"Doing this exercise was certainly a spiritual one on many levels. The main direction it took for me was making me completely aware of the connection between myself spiritually and emotionally and the music I was making. It was wonderful, because I wasn't focused on anything but the present moment beauty of what I was doing."

2.3 Intoning

An essential exercise that was powerful in helping each student experience the connection of tone to their 'energetic' or non-physical body was the intoning of pure vowels. "Oo" for the root and sacral chakras, "oh" for the solar plexis, "ah" for the heart, "eh" for the throat, and "ee" for the third eye. The sound of "m" was used for the crown chakra (although in the perception of many, it activates energy outside of the space of the physical body). First, each student had the assignment of intoning the pure vowels on a pitch that was easy to sing and simultaneously

locating each vowel in its corresponding chakra. Later, each student had the assignment of discovering the pitch they could sing which best resonated within each of their chakras. Once this foundation was established, we went on to many extensions of intoning vowels. For example, singing the sequence of pure vowels as one smooth, long glide as in "oo-oh-ah-eh-ee-mmmmm" produces a breathtaking sonic expansion of "Om." This intoning, called the "Intoning of the Seven Rays," was used to open and close our class sessions.

From these simple intoning exercises the class progressed to singing sacred music such as Gregorian chant. Singing chant is a new experience when the sound of the chant has a direct connection to the energetic body through the vowels. Could it be that this is how early chant was originally experienced? The impact of the music on the energetic body becomes the central focus of singing. Tone production becomes the vehicle for connecting to the world that is beyond the physical.

3 The Art of Spiritual Performance

Students practiced the exercises of the class as a kind of homework. It emerged over time that they needed very practical guidelines in how to approach this practice on a daily basis. We evolved a series of preparatory steps that can be summarized as follows:

- 1. Entering Sacred Time.** A demarcation is made between secular time and sacred time. Students used three slow, meditative breaths to trigger the start of sacred time.
- 2. Grounding.** Students attached an energetic grounding cord to the center of the earth. This grounding cord appeared to be a lifesaver for students who were otherwise easily overwhelmed by the emotions of other people during performance.
- 3. Holding Space.** Once well grounded, students maintained their focused spiritual intent and extended their emotional envelope into the space around themselves. They energetically engaged the larger group.
- 4. Accessing the Divine.** Students said a silent prayer in which they dedicated their work to the Divine and asked for Divine

guidance. The prayer helps place the student in proper relationship with the spiritual world.

5. Being Totally Present in the Moment.

Control is shifted to the Divine and all actions become acts of cooperation with the Divine. Attention is totally focused in the present moment in order to respond to Divine guidance.

This is the point at which the performance or practice of music would start. At the close of the performance, students said a prayer of thanks to the Divine for the opportunity to perform music.

4 Sacred Sound Repertoire

Over time the kind of class exercises described above evolved into a musical repertoire. And while the original inspiration for the class had grown out of my experiences with Andean shamanism, the repertoire grew to embrace a wide variety of spiritual traditions. The sacred songs included Gregorian, Hindu and Islamic chants, native American songs and a South African spiritual. Ensemble exercises, such as the “happy notes” technique, grew into improvisational frameworks that loosely defined a performance piece. These frameworks would be focused in a particular way, for example, on embodying the third chakra. Within that framework, there would be particular pitch patterns that would be favored as well as particular rhythms, ones thought to engage the third chakra. The rhythm of breath was always present.

This entire repertoire was built on the foundation of the meditative exercises developed in the class during which the performers sought to absolutely maintain their focus and intent. These practices were developed for the experience and benefit of those in the class. The performance was for ourselves, not for an audience. In fact, no one in the room was ever permitted to become a detached observer and only listen. In 2004, the repertoire of the ensemble became sufficiently mature that ensemble gave a public performance in a local church. The discipline of focusing intent developed in the classroom setting was extended to the performance setting. The question was how would it translate? This event provided a unique perspective on the performer/audience relationship. The sound production that originated in a personal and

group experience of sacred sound became the vehicle for the experience of others.

5 Healing Sound

And what kind of music resulted? While I have no hard evidence of the audience’s reaction, I can observe that the concert appeared to be successful on all levels. One product of sacred intent embodied in sound was healing. Sacred sound has a healing impact on those who produce it and those who hear it. The class produced healing of the relationship between musicians and their potential careers, and there was personal healing for those who sought to deepen their connection. As one student reported:

"As time progressed I was starting to realize that I really could not begin to try and produce music to and for the Divine if I wasn't cleansing myself of the hang-ups that were holding themselves in my body."

Healing is not a conventional goal of the education system, but there appears to be a great receptivity for the kind of education that genuinely engages students in their spiritual development. There may have been times at which students viewed the class exercises as only mental training, but it was exactly their engagement with spiritual and emotional challenges that they told me they valued---mental and the emotional aspects of making music became fused.

6 The Path to Electroacoustic Music

The experience of guiding the Sacred Sound Ensemble was pivotal for me as a composer. It helped me to heal and rebuild my personal relationship to composition. It was just after the start of these classes that I began to explore the application of the principles developed in the class to the making of electroacoustic music. Despite the fact that many of my friends who practice spiritual healing are technophobic, I view sound technology as an extension of the Shaman’s acoustic tools. I explored the possibilities in several sacred sound installations before I composed *Qosqo*, an electroacoustic composition included in the program of the Spark festival. *Qosqo* was composed and realized completely through divination performed in a way that is very close to the

sacred performance practices described above [Kendall 2005]. It also represents an evolution beyond those practices in numerous ways. One of those is the inclusion of a meditation for the audience that facilitates their listening with sacred intent and matching their listening to the focus of the work.

Meditation for listening: *Visualize the center of yourself as the central axis of a vortex of energy spinning clockwise. Relax and release anything that is stuck or resistant. Allow yourself to expand into the space of the sound and acknowledge your greater self.*

References

- [Crockett 2000] Crockett, Thomas W., (2000). *The Artist Inside: A Spiritual Guide to Cultivating Your Creative Self*, Random House: New York.
- [Kendall 2005] Kendall, Gary S., (2005). "Qosqo: Spirituality, Process and Structure" Proceedings of the 2005 International Computer Music Conference, Barcelona, Spain.