BOŻENA MUSZKALSKA (Poznań, Wrocław)

Faces of Eros in Traditional Musical Cultures

The notion of erotics in traditional musical cultures has yet to be properly addressed by ethnomusicologists. It has been examined only as a subject of monographic works on regional musical traditions, in ethnographic and linguistic studies focussing primarily on the verbal layer of some sung texts, and in instrumentological works. The situation changed slightly when ethnomusicologists began to examine the topic of 'music and sex' and became interested in the relations among social ideology, ways of thinking about music and musical activity in the cultures of the world. Sex is conceived here as a cultural category and has more in common with the social roles that males and females play in a population than with biological characteristics. In considering these phenomena, researchers focussed mainly on females. According to many sources, defining the social status of a woman in a given society is essential to research into the erotic aspect of the given culture.[1]

Erotics may be understood in various ways. Some authors see it as being connected solely with the quenching of biological needs. Others maintain that homo eroticus is a man who experiences sexual excitement in diverse forms but does not necessarily end up having sex. He gives his life an exciting quality in order to constantly fuel the lust of his senses. There is agreement that music simultaneously affects the mind, the body and the emotions and is an exquisite medium for erotics. It generally accompanies the behaviours driven by basic instinct and can also serve to reinforce the erotic sense of behaviours aimed at the fulfilment of higher values.

What I would like to present here is a kind of typology arranging musical behaviours in traditional cultures according to the source of eroti-

[1] See Ellen Koskoff, 'An Introduction to Women, Music, and Culture', in *Women and Music in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, ed. Ellen Koskoff (New York, 1987); Marcia Herndon, 'Biology and Culture: Music, Gender, Power, and Ambiguity', in *Music, Gender, and Culture*, eds. Marcia Herndon and Susanne Ziegler (Wilhelmshaven, 1990); Sherry B. Ortner and Harriet Whitehead, 'Introduction: Accounting for Sexual Meanings', in *Sexual Meanings. The Cultural Construction of Gender and Sexuality*, ed. Sherry B. Ortner and Harriet Whitehead (Cambridge 1992), 1–27.

cism appearing in those behaviours or in their effects. The source may be found in (1) interpersonal relationships, (2) concepts oriented towards some extraterrestrial beings and imagined relationships between them and humans, or (3) the performance apparatus and the music itself, without the existence of the above-mentioned, extra-musical contexts.

1.

Musical situations dominated by Eros result from the natural imperative of procreation and people's need to get together with that procreation on the near or distant horizon. It happens that first instructions relating to sexual activity are passed on to newborn babies through lullaby lyrics (Africa). This sort of education, together with musical activity, may become an element of initiation, introducing the young to the world of the adults. Instruments of clear sexual symbolics are often reserved for initiation rituals. In many cultures, for instance, playing the friction drum symbolises the sexual act, due to the specific technique of producing the sound. In the South African Ba-ila tribe, a girl's aunt teaches her what sex is all about during the 'lesson' of initiation: she places a large, leather-covered clay pot between the girl's thighs with a piece of reed resting vertically against the pot and then moves her moistened hand up and down the reed.[2] In the Makua tribe of East Africa, a trough zither is played during the initiation of young women,[3] as primitive cultures associate round hollows with a woman's round belly. In the boys' initiation rituals in the Moruba tribe, on the other hand, phallic movements are symbolised by the sound of *mbya* trumpets, made of antelope horns.[4]

Instruments used in ritual contexts by men are sometimes so strongly ascribed to the male sex that women who see them, even by chance, must receive severe punishment, including death. These are usually wind instruments, associated with the male because of their shape. This is not, however, the case everywhere. For the Kalapalo of Brazil, the big *kagutu* flute, played exclusively by men, represents a woman's organ. During the part of the year when the instrument is not being used, it is said to be undergoing menstruation. A woman seeing such instrument risks being gang-raped.[5]

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[2] Curt Sachs, *Historia instrumentów muzycznych* trans. Stanisław Olędzki (Kraków, 1989) [Eng. orig., *The History of Musical Instruments* (New York, 1940)], 25.

[3] Ibid., 41.

[4] Recording annotation *Musiques Banda. Republique Centrafricaine.* Collection Musée de l'Homme.VG 404 LD 765.

[5] Ellen B. Basso, 'Musical Expression and Gender Identity in the Myth and Ritual of the Kalapalo of Central Brazil', in *Women and Music in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, ed. Ellen Koskoff (New York, 1987), 170 ff.

In some cultures, playing music is an important means of communication between people emotionally committed and/or sexually attracted to one another. Particularly musical are the forms of courtship found in the tribal cultures of the Far East, e.g. China, Japan and some of the Pacific islands. In the ethnomusicology literature these phenomena are sometimes referred to as 'erotic musical activity', signifying the vocal or instrumental performance of music ultimately aimed towards love-making, though not necessarily leading to marriage.[6] In China, this kind of behaviour is quite common among young people who, on reaching adolescence, are made to move into a separate house with their male peers. Boys are allowed to visit girls from another kinship group and spend a night with one of them, yet in relationships of this sort, as well as in potential future marriages, the traditional principles of choosing a partner are patrilinear exogamy and matrilinear exogamy between parallel cousins. People do not necessarily wed a partner met in the youth houses. After the wedding ceremony, the bride may return to her village, with the groom remaining in his. They both continue their pre-marriage life and 'erotic musical activity' until the wife gets pregnant or gives birth to her first child. Only then do they start their life together in the husband's village. An essential element of the 'getting a partner' procedure are love songs and/or instrumental music, through which they express their feelings towards each other. Writing lyrics and/or composing melodies, and practising and performing the love songs, is the main occupation in the youth houses. Success with a potential lover depends not only on appearance, but more on the quality and performance of the presented song. This method of attracting a sexual partner through singing is also used among older individuals, in any convenient situation, as long as it takes place outside the living area of a village.[7]

The love, joy, sadness and longing of lovers are familiar topics in lyric and erotic songs – in varying proportion to other musical genres in musical repertoires – all over the world. Polish musical folklore is also extremely rich with songs of this type. Songs of courtship, love, parting, etc.

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[6] See Mu Yang, 'Erotic Musical Activity in Multiethnic China', *Ethnomusicology* 42/2 (1998).

[7] Apart from the everyday opportunities for 'erotic musical activities', young people can also use such activities to find a sexual partner during wedding ceremonies, funerals, religious celebrations, and festivals organized specially for that purpose. In the 1950s, the character of these customs began to change. Communist ideology forbade 'immoral' practices. Tribes underwent special education, and professional music and dance groups were sent from the towns to the villages in order to present, during the above-mentioned festivals, 'pure', as well as politically and morally 'appropriate', repertoire; ibid., 207.

are found in *Lud* [The people] by Oskar Kolberg. Similar motifs appear in songs and couplets sung during wedding services, as well as in songs connected with the rituals of some annual festivals. Among the latter, Midsummer songs, echoing the custom of matching couples and the ritual initiation of girls, are predominant. The lyrics of Polish folk erotic songs speak of 'pure' love as well as sexual desire and behaviours forbidden by the Catholic Church. Physical love – in accordance with natural laws – is not necessarily regarded in folk mentality as being an offence against God. The straightforward expression of feelings is softened by the language of symbols. In the example song about a girl's successful wooing of a boy, utterances such as 'she broke the guelder rose', 'I'll water the horse' and 'I'll put down hay and oats' foretell the sexual act. A horse is the most powerful symbol of biological male potency.[8]

Another group of erotically rich actions in the context of interpersonal relationships is connected with the profession of courtesans – characteristic of the high cultures of central and eastern Asia. The profession has many different names depending on the time and place where it functioned. The more commonly used designations are *devadasi* and *bajaderas* in India, *kisaeng* in Korea, *chi-nü* in China and *geishas* in Japan. The origins of courtesans' activity date back to ancient times and are rooted in shamanism. Courtesans were professional musicians, artists, who, because of their dependency on rich patrons, lived in sexual relationships with them. Their social status changed along with changes among the ruling classes.

In Japan, the 'golden age' of courtesans came in the Heian period (794–1185), when a courtesan was regarded as a personification of the goddess of love, and all courts were at her disposal. The *asobi* courtesans lured men by singing on boats, accompanying the songs on the *tsuzumi* drum. An admirer of the talents of one of them wrote: 'Her singing sounds like bird nymph from paradise, her silhouette – the appearance of the heaven's fairies... What man would not feel embarrassed? Whose senses would not soften?'[9] Over subsequent periods, the courtesans' status gradually declined, and their musical art increasingly led in the direction of pleasure houses and prostitution. One has to bear in mind, though, that a considerable part of preserved Japanese traditional music and dances, including the national anthem of Japan, originates from

[8] Jerzy Bartmiński, '"Jaś koniki poił" (Uwagi o stylu erotyku ludowego)' ['Johnny watered the horses' (Comments on the style of folk erotics)], *Teksty* 3/2 (1974), 11–24.

[9] Michael Stein, *Japans Kurtisanen. Eine Kulturgeschichte der japanischen Meisterinen der Unterhaltungskunst und Erotik auf zwölf Jahrhunderten* (Munich, 1997), 105.

their repertoire. At the turn of the Edo period (1603–1868), the *kabuki* theatre came into being in courtesan circles – the result of a search for an artistic form to meet the bourgeois audience's expectations. Ordinary citizens and monks squandered fortunes on *kabuki*. Yet Samurai warriors considered this form of entertainment as insulting, and in 1629 women were forbidden to act *kabuki*, as were, thirty years later, the handsome boys who had continued the women's art. As a result, *kabuki* lost its originally erotic quality.[10] The biggest crisis for courtesans came when, under the influence of neo-Confucian ideas, they were even forbidden to act in the 'pleasure quarters'. They decided then to disguise themselves as wandering nuns, and thus an illegal underground began to develop.[11] Today, singing and playing *shamisen geishas* belong to the regular stock of legal and illegal 'pleasure quarters'. They are the guardians of the old traditions and partners for men who can afford them.

The regular repertoire of tea-houses and hotels in particular quarters of all Japanese cities includes the 'Song and Dance of the Butterfly', which *geishas* perform to lure men. Here is an account of a meeting between a singing and dancing *geisha* and a European client[12]:

> "Come, butterfly! Come and sit on the rape flowers!" sings the diminutive Chonkina-Onna with her constant, penetrating voice, moving her hips, bending her hands and feet in a particular manner and wavering like a reed in the wind. She gives a paralysing scream and undoes the button of her gold-laced sash. Her marvellous scarlet brocade kimono, embroidered with silver and pink cherry blossom, falls to the floor. The girl stands there in a pale blue gown, similar to a kimono, made of smooth light silk. Again, she starts singing and dancing: "Chon, chon, kina, kina! Come, come, butterfly!" Once more she gives that scream and undresses down to a white, flannel kimono. She is very young. Her natural complexion ends at the line of her neck and back. The rest of her neck and face are covered as if with a white glaze. [...] Her body swayed again, her sweet voice grew hotter [...] her facial expression imitated excitement, her little fingers crossed in unambiguous gestures. "Come, butterfly! Come and sit on the rape flowers!" Then she started dancing, moving back to the bed, waving to the guest, and when her singing stopped, she sank onto the bed and pulled the man to her, to unite with him in an amorous embrace.[13]

Compared to the *geishas* for their abilities and social status are the *qiyan* [singing slaves] of Arabic countries, who brought entertainment to the courts of sultans and the homes of aristocrats and civil servants. They were either slaves imported from centres of musical culture abroad,

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[10] Ibid., 335 ff.

[11] Ibid., 418.

[12] The butterfly in the song stands for the guest, whereas the repeated refrain *chon, chon, kina, kina* symbolises the movements during sexual intercourse.

[13] Ursula Richter, *Bräute der Nacht. Die spirituelle Erotik des alten Japan* (Bergisch Gladbach, 1998), 18 f.

or else Arabian women especially trained by famous musicians to sing and play the *ud* lute. The *Qiyan* also performed in taverns and public amusement houses. Those not protected by a patron had to endure the insults of the Orthodoxes.[14]

If one was to follow the relationships between courtesans and men, the boundary between them and prostitutes might seem rather fluid. They both used music to arouse the listeners' senses. Yet their motivation for such musical activities differs. Courtesans are essentially artists, who have mastered the musical art, whereas for prostitutes music – if they play it at all – is just one element that helps to make their sexual services more attractive. This does not mean that the music composed or performed by prostitutes cannot be of high artistic quality. One example of such fine artistry among prostitutes, and at the same time of their social advancement, is that of *fado* – a genre cultivated in the brothels of nineteenth-century Lisbon which rose to become the national symbol of Portugal.[15] In the districts of Lisbon where *fado* is performed, one still feels a strong erotic atmosphere, intensified by the presence of prostitutes crowding around the streets and taverns where the concerts are played.

2.

The contexts mentioned thus far in which music is at the service of Eros were associated – as already stressed – with emotional and sexual relationships between people. In traditional cultures, founded on a religious worldview, human emotions and biological needs are also projected onto beings from the extraterrestrial spheres of the universe. The rhetoric of sex is sometimes used to describe cosmic energy and the sexual activity assigned to it. The gods love, crave, experience the quandaries of earthly lovers and marry. Their partners come both from the environment which people imagine them inhabiting and from amongst ordinary mortals. In many religions, marriages between a human and a deity are a metaphor of initiation. One such example are the Haitian *voodu*, in the rituals of which music and dance are important media through which the features of the metaphysical *loas*, as well as the relationships between them and humans, are expressed. Humans haunted by

[14] L. JaFran Jones, 'A Sociohistorical Perspective on Tunisian Women as Professional Musicians', in *Women and Music in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, ed. Ellen Koskoff (New York, 1987), 70 ff.

[15] Petra Held de Sousa, 'Fado - das portugiesische „cançao nacional"?', *Jahrbuch für musikalische Volks- und Völkerkunde* 13 (1988), 76 ff.

loas lose their identity and take on the behaviour of the deity. Therefore, if the divine being is a god of the eternal and inescapable eroticism residing in every human being, such as the provocative Ghede, the dancers' movements that are linked to him, together with the stimulating music, must be erotic in character.[16]

The Hindu people express their idea of the relationships between the worlds of humans and deities in a particularly sophisticated way. They created a system of male *ragas*, with *raginis* (their wives) and children. To simplify somewhat, the *ragas* are the melodic models that form the basis of vocal and instrumental works. They are allocated to different times of the day or seasons of the year, and their role is to attune the listener's senses and soul through a suitable colouring of his feelings. *Ragas* are often expressed by means of poetic verse and miniature paintings, usually intensely erotic in character, in the spirit of Hindu mythology. So, for instance, in the case of the springtime *raga hindol* the main extramusical motif is life-giving humidity. In the picture representing the *raga*, a peacock, as the bird of love, foretells the approaching monsoon rain. It is soaring over a standing woman and the love god Kama or Krishna sitting on a swing. The rain stands for the (male) semen, the swing for the connection between Heaven and Earth. The verses under the picture, which date from 1610, read: 'Delighting in the flowery joy on a swing gently pushed by round-hipped girls, little, of pigeon-bright silhouette, here he is, called in the oldest legends *raga hindol*.'[17]

Signs of erotic love can be observed in the love for God in some monotheistic religions. This phenomenon is manifest particularly strongly in Islam. The division between the sexes in everyday life, dictated by the religion, certainly contributes to the eroticisation of human relationships with God. The most splendid example of religious erotic poetry is the *ghazal*, a song genre adopted by Sufism from feudal courts and courtesans' salons. The prayer of the *qawwali* fraternity active in Afghanistan and Pakistan comprises a laudatory hymn to the Prophet, a love song in honour of God or the Prophet, a section called the *fana'*, described as the entry into God and unification with the Absolute, and a conclusion, which brings 'a return to brightness'.[18] A mystical ecstasy is also the climax of the phase of the Sufic *dhikr* ceremony in which the individual strives for personal unification with God, this state being

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[16] See Maya Deren, *Bogowie haitańskiego wudu* [The gods of Haitian voodoo] (Kraków, 2000); also the film *Boscy jeźdźcy* [Divine riders] based on this book.

[17] *The Raga Guide*, ed. Joep Bor (Wayastone Leys, Monmouth, 1999), 82, 168.

[18] Malek Chebel, *Die Welt der Liebe im Islam. Eine Enzyklopädie* (Darmstadt, 1995), 338.

prepared by musical means such as the multiple repetition of words and the assigning to them of melo-rhytmical utterances, an acceleration of tempo and a rise in register.[19]

3.

The perception of a musical performance as erotic need not necessarily be justified by the presence of an extra-musical context. In many cultures, a singing woman's voice is regarded as erotic in character regardless of the repertoire. Orthodox Jews do not allow women to sing during prayers; their singing is perceived to make them sexually attractive, which disturbs pious men in their studying of Jewish Law and their contacts with God.[20] In the Tiv tribe of northern Cameroon, a woman's voice, which has there a sharp and piercing tone, is compared directly to a penis.[21]

Music itself can be a source of erotic sensations too. It is not that the feelings aroused when listening to a particular work remind one of some experiences from the past, but rather one delights in the music for its purely aesthetic properties. Chants performed in the Balkans, in which the main vertical interval is that of a second, give the listeners a sort of satisfaction comparable to sexual climax. In Herzegovina, the *ganga* is a genre performed with the explicit intention of experiencing sensual satisfaction. A well played *ganga* brings the singers and the audience to tears, makes their bodies tremble and gives them a feeling of happiness.[22]

The typology of musical behaviours in traditional cultures proposed here, with the eroticism-generating element as a criterion, naturally leads to considerable generalisations and simplifications. On the other hand, it allows us to perceive the scale of a phenomenon that can affect almost all spheres of human life, and also to systematize our knowledge of it. What might seem surprising is the great diversity of musical sounds that arouse erotic associations within a given culture – by no means a musical universal.

Translated by Monika Niewiadomska

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[19] CD notes: *Dikr und Madih. Gesänge und Zeremonien. Islamisches Brauchtum im Sudan*. Museum Collection Berlin (West) MC 10.

[20] Ellen Koskoff, 'The Sound of a Woman's Voice: Gender and Music in a New York Hasidic Community', in *Women and Music in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, ed. Ellen Koskoff (New York, 1987), 218.

[21] Barbara Schmidt-Wrenger, 'Zur Rolle der Frau in der traditionellen Musik Afrikas', *Weltmusik* 2 (Cologne, 1982), 32.

[22] Barbara Krader, 'Slavic Folk Music: Forms of Singing and Self-Identity', *Ethnomusicology* 31 (1987), 15.