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*At the Foundations  
of Musical Metaphor:  
Models of Nature  
or Abstractly Presented Symbols*

In the 1950s and 1960s, particular interest was directed towards metaphor. This literary instrument, employed for centuries, found itself at the centre of the research of linguists in general, and of semioticians in particular, due to its important role in the transmission of meaning. Definitions of metaphor were worded in a formalised way, and in relation to another tool with similar functions, namely metonymy, it was ascribed a secondary role, being confined to semantic transmission, devoid of the function of synthesis and the principle of representation (*pars pro toto*).<sup>1</sup>

It is worth remembering that the fifties and sixties were a period of intense interest in the features distinguishing *Homo sapiens*, in particular man's capacity for abstract thinking and the transmission of symbols. This played a fundamental role in the redefining of culture, described around that time as a complex of notions and ideas lying deep in the mind of man. As a consequence, the humanities were subordinated during this period to the methods of linguistic research, and the leading trend in anthropology was termed symbolic anthropology.

Ethnomusicology provided several very interesting contributions to discussions orientated along these lines, and excellent studies from that period had considerable importance for our understanding of indigenous theoretical thinking among many distant cultures in both Africa and, above all, Asia and Oceania. The starting point for these studies was the

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<sup>1</sup> See Jerzy Kuryłowicz, 'Metaphor and Metonymy', in *Sign*, ed. Algirdas Greimas, Roman Jakobson and Renata Mayenova (Mouton, 1970).

terminology used by those being researched, as well as the analysed conceptions of indigenous peoples, the comparisons they used and the myths they cultivated, thanks to which we perceived the great significance of metaphor for communication and ways of thinking. One feature that distinguished research into musical metaphor was the attention that was drawn to the specific nature of the perception of sound and its importance for the fundamentals of cognition.

No less interesting proved to be comparisons of the transmission of sound with transmission through dance; attention was also drawn to the mutual relations and differing functions of these two kinds of communication.

## Metaphor in selected cultures

In the present text, we will point to a number of examples of metaphor as an instrument of varying degrees of complexity, proper to cultures at different stages of development; these are examples from India, Indonesia, Central Asia, Siberia and Melanesia, relatively the most fully described in the subject literature, and also Africa. In addition, this survey will reveal the range of functions discharged by metaphor, indicating both differences in culturally-conditioned perception and also the common references of a universally-orientated transmission.

The most abstract are Hindu metaphors transmitted through dance, relatively familiar thanks to studies by Ananda Coomaraswamy,<sup>2</sup> Kapila Vatsyayan<sup>3</sup> and Giuseppe Tucci.<sup>4</sup> This transmission is based on references to geometric figures and colours. The above-mentioned authors have drawn attention to the distinguished position of the circle, signifying continuity, to the square, seen as a symbol of reconciliation, and to the triangle, indicating the three deities, Shiva, Brahma and Vishnu, and also often regarded as a symbol of a human, and so periodic, perception of time, in the sense that humans should aspire to eternity.

This kind of communication refers primarily to the classic *mandala* diagram (see Fig. 1), presenting a vision of the world and the universe as the process of the disintegration of unity into multiplicity and its reintegration; in other words, the idea that underpins Indian beliefs, in Hindu-

<sup>2</sup> See Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *The Dance of Shiva, Fourteen Indian Essays* (New Delhi, 1981).

<sup>3</sup> Kapila Vatsyayan, *Classical Indian Dance in Literature and the Arts* (New Delhi, 1977).

<sup>4</sup> Giuseppe Tucci, *Mandala* (Kraków, 2002).

ism and Buddhism alike. The *mandala* is known above all from iconographies, most prominently from the symbolic depictions of the god Shiva Nataraja dancing (see Fig. 2). It is also documented by numerous written sources (Sanskrit and Tamil) and oral transmission (recounted myths). In the case of dance, the *mandala* is transmitted by the gestures of a male or female dancer performed within the framework of a fixed spatial projection, since the task of the performer is to present particular symbols and their position on distinct axes referring to the human body (see Fig. 3). *Mandala* symbolises the five stages in the cognitive process and is an instrument of meditation.

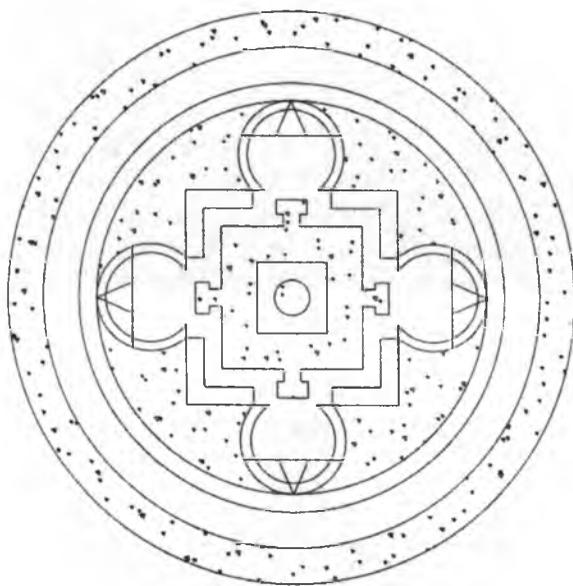


Fig. 1

It is demonstrated by five concentric circles inscribed within a square (see above, Fig. 1). The circles are as follows:

- the first, called the ring of fire, signifies the burning of ignorance,
- the second, called the ring of diamonds, symbolises illumination,
- the third indicates the eight aspects of self-knowledge,
- the fourth is associated with the lotus flower, symbolising rebirth,
- the fifth, the centre of the *mandala*, indicates the achievement of fulfilment.



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

We shall analyse this projection on the basis of a drawing documented by the above-mentioned Kapila Vatsyayan.<sup>5</sup> According to this author's account, the three parallel lines dividing the circle, or wheel, horizontally delineate the zones of the space which it encloses (top, middle and bottom). The vertical axis, like the line of the spine, marks the division into the left and right sides. The two main lines dividing the circle on these planes cross in the middle, marking the central point – the navel. Further horizontal lines traverse the shoulders of raised arms and the knee. Vatsyayan draws particular attention to the significance of the triangles, used as symbols of the above-mentioned deities. Two triangles are inscribed within the silhouette of the dancer and within the circle. The first triangle is based on the shoulders, and its tip is the extreme point of the central vertical axis. The lines linking the foot that tramples on the demon with the hands holding a flame and with the *damaru* drum and the line linking the two hands form an inverse triangle, symbolising the god Vishnu. This figure corresponds to the concept of the unification of the trinity in the person of Shiva. It is also very important that the knee be within this extended triangle, as a figure thus projected ensures balance (of the cosmos).<sup>6</sup>

Under these principles, dance is a ritual act of the creation of the *mandala*. Dance presentations portray not only the realm of the conscious, but also that of the subconscious, as the correct perception of this vision appeals to three states: awakening (the sensitisation of the senses), dormant dreams and true trance, in which it is possible to see God.

Particularly striking is the popularity and vitality of this symbolic conception. Apart from dance gestures and the aforementioned written texts and iconography, the *mandala* is also reflected in urban planning and in the patterns of the 'path' taken by devotional processions, such as those described recently by Richard Widdess in Nepal.<sup>7</sup>

However, not in all cultures is the transmission so complex, and it does not necessarily refer so unequivocally to abstraction. Much more common are simple iconographic representations referring directly to models from nature, including the body (human or animal), or to the rhythm of the generations (e.g. the relationships between parents, chil-

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<sup>5</sup> In Poland, this interpretation is more familiar thanks to Jolanta Kowalska's study *Taniec Drzewa Życia* [The dance of the tree of life] (Warsaw, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> A more exact description of the *mandala* is contained in Anna Czekanowska, 'Indie – jedna czy wiele cywilizacji?' [India – one civilisation or many?], in *Kultury tradycyjne wobec współczesności* [Traditional cultures and the contemporary world] (Warsaw, 2008), 71–95.

<sup>7</sup> See Richard Widdess, 'Musical Structure, Performance and Meaning', *Ethnomusicology Forum* 15/2 (2006).

dren and grandchildren).<sup>8</sup> A marked role in the shaping of these ideograms is played by music, since the musical portraits produced are sequences of the particular parts of a musical cycle/suite representing successive episodes. If this ideogram refers to a musical instrument (more on this below), isolated registers of the chosen instrument (for example the lute – *dombra*) are indicated (see Fig. 4).

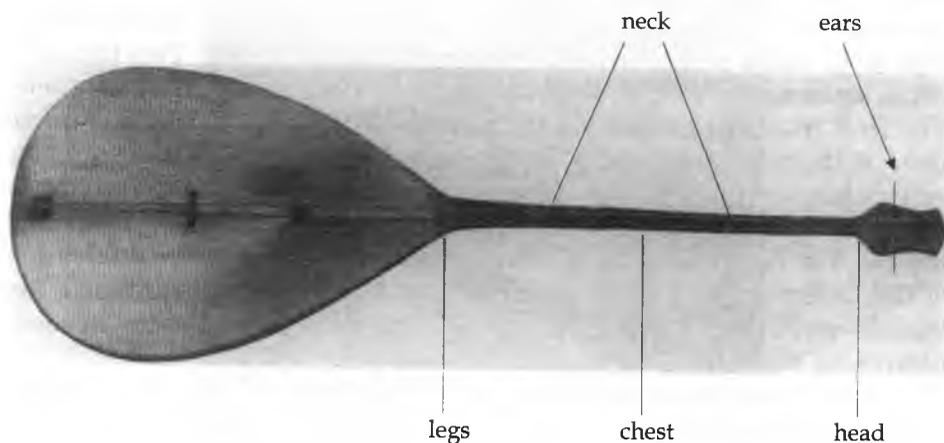


Fig. 4

For many cultures of Asia, the idea of a journey to the peak of a holy mountain is a fundamental ideogram, evidence of which can also be discerned among the followers of other religions, and even in the Stations of the Cross practised in the Roman Catholic Church during Easter. Whilst this devotion is based on references to historical facts documented by the Gospels and preserved historical buildings and artefacts in Jerusalem, thus transmitting historical, rather than legendary, information, one can discern elements in common with other religions. The compared examples show the similar ways in which representatives of different religions think and reflect.

The 'journey to the summit' is represented in a classical way by a projection of the Asian *makam*.<sup>9</sup> This journey is indicated, not only by the

<sup>8</sup> These are particularly frequent in Africa; see Paul Berliner, *Soul of Mbirra* (Chicago, 1974).

<sup>9</sup> See Sławomira Żerańska-Kominek, 'Koncepcja drogi (yol) w turkmeńskiej tradycji muzycznej' [The concept of the path (yol) in Turkmen musical tradition], *Muzyka* 42/2 (1997).

gradual movement to higher registers of the scale, but also by the spiral principle, symbolising transformation, since all the successive sections of a work modify the basic material. A narrative shaped in this way should make the listeners aware that the 'traveller' returns to his basic tenets, yet as a result of his life experiences he looks upon them from a different perspective. A formally elaborate cycle should provide material for reflection on the world and on oneself.

A very simple example of a 'path' is the Kazakh *kjuı*, confined to emphasising the crucial points of the narrative, that is, to the different registers of the scale. The movement along these registers and the change in pitch obtained during this process entails the need to retune the instrument while playing. By contrast to the projection of the *makam*, expressed here are references to the structure of the body. As we learn from interviews,<sup>10</sup> the initial section, in which the main principles of the musical structure are outlined, is termed the 'head' (in Turkish *baş*), the emotionally charged middle section the 'chest' (*keude*) or 'heart', and the highly animated final section the 'legs' (*ajak*). The projection of the performance is presented inversely, as the 'head' from which the 'journey' begins lies in the bottom register, and the 'legs' in the top register. Nevertheless, at the end of the work we return to the opening section located at the 'bottom'. The interpretation of this work is best illustrated by the construction of the national instrument (the *dombra*), the different registers of which are explained in relation to the body (see Fig. 4).

Compared to Indian symbols, there is no use here of geometric figures or colours, and the transmission is mediated by reference to the musical instrument, which may be understood as a portrait of the presented subject (man, animal, object of devotion or chosen situation).<sup>11</sup>

Completely different examples of metaphors are provided by primitive cultures. Among the best described is Steven Feld's interpretation of a waterfall constituting a musical metaphor among the Papuans of the eastern part of New Guinea. According to Feld's account,<sup>12</sup> this metaphor

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<sup>10</sup> See Bagdaulet Amanow, 'Muzyka na dombę. Problematyka terminologiczna' [Music for the *dombra*. Problems of terminology], *Muzyka* 31/2 (1986).

<sup>11</sup> We encounter similar interpretations of the musical work and terminology referring to the body in Indonesia. One such example is the *gending* concept of the musical composition; see Iwona Marciniak, 'Instrumenty muzyczne wyspy Bali, przekaz tradycji a przystosowanie do wymogów współczesności' [The musical instruments of the island of Bali. Transmitting tradition and adapting to the demands of the contemporary world], MA thesis, (Warsaw University, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> Steven Feld, 'Aesthetics as Iconicity of Style, or "Lift-up-over Sounding": Getting into the Kaluli Groove', *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 20 (1988).

is founded on a fascination with the sound of the flow of the water, in which the Papuans are capable of distinguishing the harmony of various levels of this flow (comparison to a polyphonic work) together with the heightened force of the prominent main current and its continual flow.

The most important achievement of this interpretation is the attention drawn to the different perceptual capacities of the subjects, who capture different sounds separately. As Feld relates, the Papuans allow children to speak simultaneously, hearing their voices separately and getting them used to doing so.

An interpretation of metaphor orientated in this way leads to an evolutionary approach to research, and in particular to the famous thesis of Charles R. Darwin,<sup>13</sup> drawing attention to the special abilities of hominids living 'in direct contact with nature' and to their mimetic skills, related to the enhanced acuity of their senses. These concepts, expanded upon over the last decade by Merlin Donald,<sup>14</sup> offer us a better understanding of the process of communication, and in particular of the transition from imitation to mimetic transmission, that is, such a transmission as is furnished with a strategy for representation.

This trend in research is supported by the results of recent studies of primitive cultures and the ways in which they communicate. Particularly interesting in this respect are examples of metaphors described by the Tuvan scholar Valentina Süzükei, collaborating with Theodore Levin.<sup>15</sup> Süzükei has compared the system of harmonics to sunrays or to snowflakes vibrating in the sun, interpreting harmonics<sup>16</sup> as 'voices', that is, sonic representations of the world of spirits and birds, which, so the subjects claim, 'are everywhere' if one is only sensitised to their presence.

A fuller understanding of this concept requires a knowledge of local vocal ('throat singing')<sup>17</sup> and instrumental (mainly playing on the Jew's harp) practices that make the maximum use of the structure of harmonics obtained thanks to the special preparation of the speech organs.

<sup>13</sup> Charles R. Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (New York, 1989), 33 [first ed. London, 1971].

<sup>14</sup> Merlin Donald, *Origin of Modern Mind, Three Stages in the Evolution of Culture and Cognition* (Harvard, 1991).

<sup>15</sup> Theodore Levin and Valentina Süzükei, *Where Rivers and Mountains Sing* (Bloomington, 2006).

<sup>16</sup> See Andrzej Rakowski, 'Kategorialna percepcja wysokości w muzyce' [The categorical perception of pitch in music] (Warsaw, 1978).

<sup>17</sup> Isao Shimomura, 'O drumli Ajnów i śpiewie gardłowym' [On the Ainu's Jew's harp and throat singing], *Muzyka* 42/2 (1997).

This consists in suitably directed breathing and its pressure on the diaphragm, enabling a deep basic tone to be obtained, then, closing the glottis by 'swallowing the tone' and 'holding' it in the oral cavity, extracting its harmonics by striking the tongue against the palate and teeth.

Such differently generated musical structures proper to a primitive stage of civilisation also point to features specific to the subjects' perception. The subjects oppose isolated 'hearing', instead capturing a tone within the context of the world around them, which is filled with the sounds referred to above. This conception helps them to manipulate the harmonics – an active approach to the reception of sounds.

Local terminology indicates unequivocally that the Jew's harp is considered to be an instrument of 'speech', and terms relating to the distinctive parts of the instrument point to the role of its 'organs' (tongue, mouth and cheeks) in the process of transmission, and also to the technique used in the production of the sound (closing the glottis, holding the breath). This is 'speech' with a different purpose, clearly directed towards a 'different' world, although we cannot exclude the use of this transmission in the conditions of everyday life.

Research in recent years has demonstrated the significance of the Jew's harp for communication among the members of cultures even very distant from one another. Itao (Isao) Shimomura, studying the Ainu on the island of Hokkaido,<sup>18</sup> indicated the possibility of members of this group communicating with the inhabitants of distant regions.<sup>19</sup> We may assume that this might also apply to the highly primitive cultures of the western part of New Guinea. Thanks to the research carried out by Anna Zarębska and Michał Urbaniak into the culture of the Korowai tribe,<sup>20</sup> we know that the inhabitants of this region play on the Jew's harp almost continuously; in my opinion, this instrument serves them, not so much for musical satisfaction, as simply for communication. The examples presented above show that we are at the foundations of sonic structure and its universal laws.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> See Isao Shimomura, 'On Speaking Jew's Harps of Ainus and Tayars, what the Piłsudski-Collected Word for Ainu Jews-harps Muhuni Meant', in *An Excellent Charter in the History of Polish-Japanese Relations*, eds. Alfred Majewicz and Tomasz Wicherkiewicz (Poznań, 1999). Erotic playing on the Jew's harp in Vietnam is referred to by Tran Quang Hai in 'Rebirth of the Hmong Jew's Harp in Viet-nam', *Abstracts of the 39<sup>th</sup> World Conference of the ICTM* (Vienna, 2007).

<sup>20</sup> Inhabitants of the western part of New Guinea, under Indonesian administration; see Anna Czekanowska, *Kultury tradycyjne wobec współczesności*.



## The elementary principles of perception, the laws of syntax, and ideology

The results of research into the laws of perception and their social consequences show how important the practices described here are for the life of communities, for which the trained capacities to adapt and imitate underlie their contacts with animals and birds, facilitating their survival. We have in mind here, not only techniques of decoy and dialogue, but also contact with a 'different' world, in which indigenous peoples seek support. Birds, quite widely regarded as the emissaries of these spirits, prove to be very helpful in these contacts. The observation and imitation of nature facilitate adaptation to it.

It is worth returning, however, to the distinguishing features of musical metaphors, to their peculiar capacity to trigger associations among individuals whose senses are much more acute. Close contact with nature undoubtedly enhances the capacity for the separate perception of both sound and movement. It also develops a greater sensitivity to the timbres of sound and the capacity to distinguish them. As we have found from the results of research carried out by Siberian acousticians, we are able to follow successive stages in the cognitive process, from the principle of mimicry, through imitation to mimetics;<sup>21</sup> we can also observe different stages in the 'impenetrability' of the division between the worlds of nature and man.

Observation of the studied phenomena also allows us to arrive at a proper assessment of the capacities of hominids, in respect to the process of syntax, the strategy of representation or the 'spinning' of narrative, and also to the ideology to which these give rise, so clearly articulated by belief systems, be it through the idea of a 'path to the summit', the process of disintegration and reintegration underpinning the *mandala*, or the metaphor of a discernible current of water.

Important for the cultural anthropologist is not so much the explanation of the principles of syntax – of fundamental importance for the linguist – as the discovery of those ideas that 'lie in the mind of man'. The task of the ethnomusicologist, meanwhile, is to indicate the specificity of the perception of sound and its hidden store of inspiration, important not only for those living in direct contact with nature, but also for 'high' cultures, for their art and their reflection on it.

*Translated by John Comber*

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<sup>21</sup> Merlin Donald, *Origin of Modern Mind*.