

Music in Ancient China and The Search for the Sacred Yellow Bell Tone

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The origins of music in Ancient China are lost to us now, but at least 3,000 years before the birth of Christ they already had a complex and fascinating philosophy of music. To the ancient Chinese, the notes of all music contained an essence of transcendent power. The particular mystical influences of a piece of music depended on factors such as rhythm, melodic patterns, and the combination of instruments used. They felt that music, like nature, could be either beneficial or destructive, and that its power went beyond merely influencing man's emotions, to actually affecting the health of the physical body, and even the morality of society. Confucius said, "If one should desire to know whether a kingdom is well-governed, if its morals are good or bad, the quality of its music will furnish the answer." With this in mind, the ancient Chinese tried to ensure that only the correct music was played, and that it was all tuned to the proper Cosmic tones.

The Chinese believed in the Primal, inaudible sound as the origin of all creation (like the AUM of the Hindus), and that this primal sound was broken down into twelve lesser Cosmic Tones which were each aspects of the Primal Sound, while being closer in vibration to the tangible, physical world. Each of the twelve Tones was associated with one of the twelve signs of the zodiac. They believed that a particular tone 'sounded' more prominently in a particular month, and during a particular hour of the day (their day was divided into 12 hours as well).

In Chinese philosophy the One Primal Cosmic vibration emanated from the Great One, then became the two (yin and yang) upon which all Creation was based. And each of the twelve tones, being an aspect of divinity, had it's own unique personality. In the West we give importance to melody, or groupings of tones, whereas the ancient Chinese gave all importance to the note itself. For this reason many of their instruments were single stones, bells or metal slabs that produced one note. Stringed instruments were usually unfretted like harps, where each string produced only one tone. The same was true with wind instruments, which consisted of rows of pipes, one for each of the twelve tones. Music was considered so important that Chinese emperors employed huge orchestras. For example, during the T'ang Dynasty (AD 618-907) there were at least fourteen court orchestras, each consisting of from 500 to 700 performers. Historians have recorded that for the solstices and other important festivals the T'ang Dynasty brought together an orchestra of no less than 10,000.

The Chinese went to great lengths to align their music to the principles and proportions of cosmic order. Yin and Yang are symbolized by an broken and an unbroken line respectively. When these lines are put in groups of three, there are 8 possible combinations, known as Kua. These 8 kua then correspond with every aspect of nature: Seasons, compass points, and elements, as well as the materials for making musical instruments (Stone, metal, silk, bamboo, wood, skin, gourd and earth).

Everything in society related to music. For example, the name given to the foundation tone in Chinese music was 'huang chung'; literally translated this means 'Yellow Bell'. Yet this same phrase was also used symbolically in reference to the ruler, and to divine will.

Outwardly the tone known as 'yellow bell' set the standard pitch upon which the music of the entire nation was based. Inwardly this foundation tone was considered to be the purest and most perfect audible manifestation of Cosmic Sound possible. The believed 'as above, so below', that the Logos sounding in the realms of Spirit produced the precise pitch of the huang chung. It's counterpart in the physical world, many octaves down was the Yellow Bell tone. The color yellow was the Chinese imperial color, the color of sacred wisdom, and the emperor was a kind of priest-king. The yellow bell established the foundation pitch of all the Chinese notes, just as the Emperor set the spiritual and material laws for all his subjects.

To the sages and emperors of ancient China the alignment of earth with heaven and of man with the Supreme was literally the purpose of life. All musical tones were based on the Yellow Bell foundation tone. But that wasn't all. Their whole system of weights and measures was related as well. To produce the huang chung a pipe of specific dimensions has to be blown. Only a pipe of perfect length and perfect volume could produce the perfect yellow bell tone. So its length became the standard Chinese length of measurement, its capacity the standard of volume, and the number of grains of rice or of millet which the pipe could contain rendered a standard weight measurement. The Chinese Imperial Office of Music was associated with the Office of Weights and Measurement.

The foundation tone was considered essential to the earthly alignment with the divine will. So what would happen if it became out of tune? The Chinese believed that the whole society could go out of tune. So the search for the pure, perfect tonal reflection of the One Tone assumed idealistic, mystical proportions. It became a Chinese Holy Grail, the goal of the ultimate quest. Each new emperor had to find a new yellow bell tone, because of course if the previous tone had been correct, that dynasty could not have fallen. One legend tells of the journey of Ling Lun, a minister of the second legendary Chinese Emperor, Huang Ti. Ling Lun was sent like an ancient Knight of King Arthur to search for a special and unique set of bamboo pipes that would perfectly render the standard pitches to which all other instruments in the land could be tuned.

Music was supposed to express the harmony of heaven and earth. Since 3 is the symbolic numeral of heaven and 2 that of the earth, sounds in the ratio 3:2 will harmonize heaven and earth. To apply this concept in practice, the Chinese took the foundation tone and from it produced a second note in the 3:2 ratio – a perfect fifth. They then continued with this circle of fifths until all the twelve notes were produced.

Several Chinese texts speak of attempts that were made to achieve equal temperament instead of the geometrically perfect but slightly unequal 3:2 intervals. But apart from brief experiments, China retained the original system of the twelve tones based on a cycle of

perfect fifths. And as recently as 1712 AD, the Ch'ing Dynasty finally rejected the idea of equal temperament once and for all. This was at the same time that equal temperament was about to become accepted in the West, through the work of J.S. Bach and others, as the basis of virtually all Western music from then until now. To the ancients, the use of unequal but geometrically perfect intervals between the notes implied infinite transcendence and contact with the heavens, while the use of tempered, equal intervals meant that a slight geometrical imperfection and hence a slight cosmological disharmony resulted.

It is interesting to think of how much Chinese culture has changed. There was an amazingly stable civilization for thousands of years. Could the introduction of Western music in the last century have been an influence in its tremendous change towards our modern lifestyle? Perhaps the changes in music and culture went hand in hand.

Much of this was adapted from 'The Secret Power of Music' by David Tame.