

The Musicology of Tibetan Singing Bowls

This paper is written with three main goals in mind: First, it attempts to mainstream the use of Tibetan Singing Bowls with current musicological thought and practice. Second, various types of singing bowls are identified within the larger framework of what are called indigenous instruments. Third, although there are many techniques used in Tibetan Bowl Sound Healing, we will discuss only one which will form the basis of a collection of techniques for a future project.

Organology is the term used to describe the study of musical instruments. Within organology there are four general sub-divisions, and numerous emerging classifications which all serve to pinpoint various instruments and how they are played. It is important to recognize that certain musical instruments may be classified into more than one category. A piano, for example, may be considered a string instrument and a percussion instrument, and so falls into two categories.

If sound healing is to be accepted as a viable art and science in the future, it is important that it be mainstreamed into current thought and practices within many disciplines.

There is such a diversity of instruments that exist in the world today, that to begin to make some sense of organology, a classification system was devised, called the Sachs-Hombostel System. This uses four basic categories, although it has become necessary to add categories, as the world of music has evolved. These classifications are based on the way sound is generated.

The four categories are as follows:

- (i) **Aerophones** – These produce sounds by using air (any type of wind instrument).
- (ii) **Chordophones** – These produce sounds from a vibrating string stretched between two points – one does this by bowing, striking or plucking strings.
- (iii) **Idiophones** – These instruments produce sounds from the substance of the instrument itself, such as bells, rattles, cymbals etc. –They are percussive instruments.
- (iv) **Membranophones** – These are drum like instruments that make sounds using tightly stretched membranes. The “skin” is set into motion or vibration by striking, subbing or singing into it. (Forney & Machlis, pp. 38-39).

With the advent of electronic instruments, it became necessary to add a category called, electrophones, of which there are two sub-divisions, viz. electronic instruments, where the sound is generated by electronic means only, e.g. an electric guitar, and electro-acoustic instruments, where a mike or some other device is used to amplify the sound.

A further/additional classification into which Tibetan Singing Bowls would fit, is that of Metallophones. These are percussive instruments that are constructed by using metal.

Having shown that it is possible to mainstream sound healing/therapy by tying it to accepted musicological practice, and understanding that we can do the same with other disciplines in which we are all involved, we now move to a discussion of Singing Bowls.

Singing Bowls are instruments that form part of the very diverse field of indigenous instruments. Other examples of indigenous instruments include the Aztec Death Whistle, Berimbau, Bonpo Shang, Bullroarer etc., which date back hundreds, if not thousands of years.

Authentic bowls are made from a seven-metal alloy associated with seven planets:

- (i) Gold – associated with the Sun
- (ii) Silver – associated with the Moon
- (iii) Tin – Associated with Jupiter
- (iv) Lead – Associated with Saturn
- (v) Copper – Associated with Venus
- (vi) Iron – Associated with Mars
- (vii) Mercury – Associated with Mercury

These metals were processed by heating, then purifying, casting, reheating and then hammering them into shape and also hammering them “into tone”. In other words, their sound did not just happen by accident. Further, they also used the power of intention, mantras and chants to produce these metallophones which create altered states and have therapeutic effects upon body, mind and spirit.

Because intention plays such an important role in sound healing, it can be used to direct the specific sound and vibration of a singing bowl to specific areas of the body.

Although this paper focuses on Tibetan bowls in particular, it should be mentioned that there are other types of bowls used for therapeutic purposes, such as Bhutanese bowls and Nepalese bowls among others. Each type of bowl has characteristics that make it distinct.

The term “chime” refers to the rising portion of a bowl from the bottom or base of singing bowls. Bhutanese bowls have larger bases than the openings of bowls so the chime will have more of an edge and the sides will be straighter. Nepalese bowls on the other hand are lighter and thinner, with a smaller base, with the chime being a little more bulging. Tibetan bowls are of two basic types, viz. small bowls called Manipuri or heart bowls and medium to large bowls, called Jambati. The chime rises gently, and the base is smaller with the opening having rounded (no sharp) edges. There are some estimates that there are as many as 45 different shapes of bowls.

Different sounds may be extracted from singing bowls depending on where one plays on the bowl and also by using different size mallets, and mallet coverings. Sometimes the overtones can be clearly heard by playing higher on the bowl. To actually make the bowl “sing”, one has to learn the technique of running the mallet (wood side) around the rim of a bowl using the arm and not the wrist. (Mandle, pp.31-36)

As can be seen, this is a complex subject, however, we now have at least a cursory knowledge to help us use Tibetan Bowls in connection to the following specific healing technique.

Using Tibetan Singing Bowls To Clear Space

The following technique is summarized from a work by Diane Mandle and forms the first technique of an intended collection of Singing Bowl techniques.

We clear space because of stuck energy, just as we clear stuck energy within ourselves and others, and for many reasons, including divorce, death, places where violence has occurred etc. The following process is recommended:

- (i) Create the intention to clear the space – Know why you are clearing space, and what the result will be.
- (ii) Prepare the space – open all doors, windows, closets, ovens, microwaves etc. and turn off all appliances.
- (iii) Prepare yourself – Some drink pure water, eat pure food and wear special clothing.
- (iv) Spread a thin line of rock salt on every window sill and in each doorway – This will absorb toxic energy.
- (v) Use a tingsha (Tibetan finger symbol) – strike three times in each doorway. This will awaken energy.
- (vi) Use incense in every room.
- (vii) Use Tibetan bowls to rebalance every room and create harmony.
- (viii) Revisit each room with love and gratitude.
- (ix) Maintain high vibration in each room by keeping free of clutter, use crystals and other stones and also use essential oils.
- (x) If something disturbs the new energy of the room, clear the space again.

This and other techniques need to be refined by each practitioner – the more one practices, the more adept one will become. Working to clear other people's spaces need more skill sets than those presented above. (Mandle, pp. 9-18)

This paper has been more of a personal quest to bring sound healing into the mainstream by marrying it to some musicological principles. This can also be done within the various specialties and disciplines that sound healers bring to the table. Further, this paper has attempted to expand my personal understanding of Tibetan Singing Bowls, ending with a summarized technique for clearing spaces.

Bibliography

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