
MUSIC, MEDITATION AND DEPRESSION

by

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I started to write this article for the issue of *Self and Society* on depression and found that events overtook me. But the more I thought about the subject of depression and some of the ways I work with it and with music, the more I began to see depression as an extended meditation at the deepest level on the ambivalence of being born.

Depression forces us to stop and face the music, and in the process of descending to Hell, there seems to be also a simultaneous process, sometimes not as tangibly felt as the descent, of preparation for letting Light into the Soul. It is as if the movement of these two processes is inextricably linked, and the process of exploring music is one way of moving from one pole to the other and back again. I hope you will feel what I mean as you make your way through this paper.

If we view depression as a gift to our current consciousness from our Soul, we may be more willing to search for its meaning rather than to see it as an illness, an indulgence, or a reaction to some triggering event. We may become more in

tune with its message, with its intention to communicate something of new/old importance, and to listen to its song.

In my opinion, depression is a meditation on our feelings of merging and separation. Both meditation and depression are ways of connecting to our changing perspectives on Death's realms. The words of Mahler's song, '*Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen*', express this:

"I have become lost to the world, on which I formerly wasted much time; It has heard nothing for so long from me, it may well believe that I have died!

"I do not care at all, if it considers me as dead. I also cannot contradict it, for really I have died, died to the world.

"I have died to the world's turmoil and rest in a silent domain. I live alone in my love, in my love, in my song."

Music is one means of practical ritual for making a connection with an underworld perspective as well as with the other realms of physical activity and with that of the spirit. Music can cross decisive frontiers, pierce the boundaries and lead

to transcendence in many directions. We need to heed its multidimensional structure in order not to become stuck in any one area. We need to practice on many levels.

We do practice on the deepest level by going to the underworld every night when we sleep. So what might we meet musically in these underworld dreams?

From my own experience and that of my clients, music here 'breaks the rules'. It may be quite discordant, uncanny. For example, I had a dream in which I played the piano. The music was like a combination of, say, Schubert's tune, *Die Florelle*, (theme of the Trout Quintet), continually interrupted by and merging with Stockhausen's *Singspiel*; Stockhausen's *Hymnen* is almost a better example - where one no sooner begins to recognise old familiar tunes than they are translated into something entirely unfamiliar, but not quite! The music was both melodious and entertaining but with bits within it which completely challenged the structure, which annihilated the expected harmony, which disturbed the movement and melody. Its overall quality could be characterised by the word, revelry, riotous rebellion, even when quiet.

Often the music in dreams is not quiet. In *The Dream and the Underworld* James Hillman writes of the music most closely connected with the underworld. Pounding drums, clanging chimes and bells, shrill fifes may rouse the dead within us through a craziness of sound. It is as if a rite were in process, a journey to put together parts which do not fit, a gathering together of the deformed and outcast elements of the psyche for assembling them into the process of soul-making.¹

Although at times it may be, riotous rebellion is not necessarily fun or jolly. It is appropriate that we lose confidence as we approach this level, that we are no longer sure of our sense of value or know in what our self worth is rooted. The sounds of the breaking down of false structures, defences, and all the ways we have learned which are not from the heart to get worth from the outside might correspond to the *nigredo* of alchemy where all is decaying, blackening. The visual imagery of this process includes such delicacies as rotting corpses and mucky black/green oily water with decaying debris suspended in it. This 'decomposition' makes valuable fertilizer to nourish new life.

Even simple songs in dreams may have a deeper sense. The Toda tribe in India believe that only the dead sing in dreams.² We may listen to dream music of any sort with an ear for psychic tones, an ear for death. Whenever music does sound in a dream, the dream says that it can be heard and it wants to be listened to. These dreams allow us to see and hear through the standards of daily life. They can release radically different insights from what is usually expected. They facilitate the initiation of our consciousness into other viewpoints. We might learn from the Orphics. To their mystic consciousness, Night was a depth of love (Eros) and light (Phanes).

Hillman says that dreaming is the psyche itself doing soul-work. Before the dayworld begins factually and developmentally, the dream is at its work. Psyche precedes its manifestations in the life of external and social experience. Only such changes that are

changes in soul can affect the psychic aspect of one's actions and relations.⁴

This process can be seen in the myths of Orpheus. We tend to think of Orpheus plucking the civilised lyre and charming the souls and gods of the underworld. But in some versions of the legend he was also the priest of Dionysus. When Dionysus entered Thebes there was a kind of terror and excitement. Identities became uncertain. Young women left their family attachments and personal relationships to take to the streets and hills. In the Dionysian rites, Orpheus played the rustic alder-pipe, which produces a very raucous sound, and was seen to be Dionysus and thus suffered the same fate. Dionysus/Orpheus was murdered and then dismembered by the Maenads who were sometimes seen as an aspect of the Muses.⁵

I think it is valuable to notice the kind of experiences and feeling tones that the sounds described above can generate. When Orpheus plays the lyre, he is a light in the underworld, able to charm and sooth. When he plays the alder-pipe, he is rent asunder. We need to heed the power of sound, to honour it as it has a profound and subtle effect on our whole being and on the experiences to which we resonate.

As I mentioned earlier, music crosses a frontier, in a process similar to that of the dream. Tone penetrates, overflows the barrier between inner and outer; it makes one conscious of communication and of participation. When we encounter something non-physical, as in the case of the origins of musical

tones, then both inner and outer are transformed. Our classification of inner world and outer world arises from the needs of practical life, our encounter with the physical world.

Perhaps a distinction needs to be made here between sound and tone. Sound can imply chaos, which is not used here in a negative sense. It means that there is total flow, of particular direction, no pattern. But tone, which can be used as a building block within music, implies a pattern, a fixed nodal point, and it extends this over a certain length of time. A nodal point is a fixed harmonic point. For example, if you have a monochord (a string which is fixed at either end) and you then divide the string in half, you produce a tone in the numerical ratio of 1:2, the octave. If you divide the string in thirds, you produce the interval in the ratio of 3:2, the fifth. If you continue to do this, you produce the harmonic overtone series and the circle of fifths which generates new sounds on to infinity like an internal spiral.

Plato suggests in his *Timaeus* that the world starts by the interaction between the ratios of the octave, 1:2 and the fifth, 3:2. He stressed the importance of the use of equal temperament as the ideal state. What is interesting about this is that equal temperament as used in Western music demands that all the intervals of a fifth must be flattened slightly in order that all the tones should fit within the space of an octave. This might suggest that a little disharmony is a good thing, that it is necessary, but that it needs to be contained within certain boundaries.

When we move from the random sounds to the tone we create our own music. This music allows us to say subtle things where no words are necessary. By changing the tone very slightly through the dynamics, pitch, overtones etc., we can express the state of being, of the soul. You may hear yourself saying (or is it the voice of your internal parents saying) "but you can't sing, you can't make music."

I believe that all of us can sing, that all of us can create music. For the moment, we need to suspend our internal critic who would judge our creations inadequate to be termed 'great art'. We are not aiming, just at the moment, to be musical geniuses. But we can discover that something different is possible from what we usually experience in our world of sound. It is possible to retrieve the dream sounds and to incorporate them into a new consciousness through our own unique vocal sound.

Kerenyi says in *The Heroes of the Greeks* "Sacrifice to the deities of the dead was made with averted face; no looking, only the voice was allowed in the realm of the departed. That could work miracles."

The physical process of singing literally 'embodies' the sounds that we have heard elsewhere. It brings these sounds to earth while simultaneously releasing blocks to their expression. However, it is difficult to sing when depressed or to remain depressed while singing. An act of will and faith is required. It may not be appropriate to sing before the dream would indicate that the time and our

soul are ready. But when we are ready to sing or to contact various levels within us, one of the ways to do this is to explore the vocal production of vowel sounds.

The subtle changing of the vowel sounds allows for an expression that goes beyond any language. Language, for all its complexities, is rather primitive in this area. But we can move from language to music by singing the vowel sound of a given word in a hundred different ways.

This process is actually used a great deal in the preparation for performance of vocal music. For example, if you wish to sing the word "heard" as in 'I heard a lark singing', you might need to experiment first with saying the words head and heart before you could find the midpoint which would produce "heard". The principal factor in determining the nature of a vowel is the part of the tongue which is raised and the height to which it is raised. If you say the vowel sounds of ee and ah, you may feel the tongue move. Each vowel has a separate position. These are like the nodal points which give rise to the harmonic overtone series I mentioned earlier. They have discrete patterns of sound. But if we slide from one vowel to another, then we return to the world of total flow and infinite possibilities.

Perhaps you noticed in the example above that I used the words head and heart in order to arrive at the word 'heard'. We need to connect with both in order to hear and be heard. Many people believe that our voice is produced just from our throat, and they use it as the

interchange between the head and heart. Often the heart does not get much say!

But we produce vocal sound from our entire being. By working with sound and dream we attend

to our soul-making. We need to become aware of how we create sound, and how in turn, sound creates us. In the process of moving from one position to another, we may discover and experience many worlds.

1 James Hillman (1979) *The Dream and the Underworld* Harper & Row p175
2 W.B. Emeneau (1965) *Toda Dream Songs J. Amer. Oriental Soc.* p39-44
3 Hillman, *Op cit* 34, 175. 4 *Ibid.* 196, 123. 5 *Ibid.* 177.
6 E. Herenyl (1962) *The Heroes of the Greeks* p283

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