

Healing chants and *Singing Hospitals*

Towards an analysis of the implementation of spiritual practices as therapeutic means

Introduction

In the following approach I intend to combine two very interesting fields of research: the one concerning issues of health and well-being in ‘post-secular’ religious practices, the other one striving towards a wider recognition and comprehension of the aural or acoustic side of religions and religious practice, respectively. While research into post-secular religious practice has naturally evolved only very recently, the same can be said about researching the aural aspect of religions, although the latter is an inherent aspect of religious practice and meditation. As Udo Tworuschka points out, the study of religions joined other scientific disciplines in the so called ‘visible’, ‘pictorial’ or ‘iconic’ turn from a predominantly text-oriented research to the experience, documentation, and analysis of what can be seen by the (researcher’s) eye. It did not however satisfactorily turn to the aural and the acoustic sphere and its effects and functions on the auditorium at a time after the 1990s when these aspects were gaining greater recognition within other disciplines (Tworuschka 2009: 84). The aural and the acoustic have been widely neglected in religious studies despite of their importance, a situation which presents a vast and extensively uncharted field of study.

Specific spiritual songs, chants or mantras are known by every religious tradition. Also various forms of new religions embed chants into their ceremonies and spiritual practices. Music in general has to be understood as a highly symbolic medium. As Marilyn Walker—applying Clifford Geertz’s terminology—notes, ‘music is a “thick” experience’ (Walker 2003: 43; cf. Mastnak 1993: 78). Her findings regarding this field in shamanism among northern peoples, especially Siberian indigenous peoples, are not limited to these ethnic or regional groups, but may be observed universally:

The music of northern peoples encompasses a wide range of genres. Songs are commemorative and celebratory. They lament the passing of traditions, people, places, and ways. There are songs of hunting, songs of courtship, love songs, healing songs, and epic songs. Songs and dances convey rights to the performance of a piece and convey messages of ownership. They encode intellectual property rights, as well as concepts of proprietorship over land and resources and the associated rights and obligations. Song accompanies storytelling and many stories are told in song and dance. . . Siberian indigenous peoples say that music allows them to express things that are too important for mere speech. I have been told how music affects you 'deeply', 'deep inside,' as the speaker puts a hand over the heart. (Walker 2003: 43; cf. Mastnak 1993: 80.)

Music, songs and singing go beyond speech, through rhythm and rhyme and also, due to the feelings they evoke, they leave a deeper and lasting impression on individuals and groups. They are used in worship or in communal meetings wherein they usually function to pass on a specific world view, myths and rules, to praise the Divine or the Creation, and to mediate a feeling of bonding between the participants. The adoption of the medium of music by post-secular spiritual groups or movements is self-evident. The feeling of bonding may or may not be a deliberately utilized effect, but it surely is the most obvious quality of singing in a group. The experience of connectedness itself is beneficial to the human well-being but there are numerous additional proven salutary effects to the singing legitimating its implementation as therapeutic means.

Regarding the facts and reports about singing, the present paper draws on the findings of scientists and researchers that have a relevant specialization in the research and analysis of the impact of rhythm, sound, or music and so on (by, for example, neurobiologists, medical professionals, psychologists and psychiatrists, and of course musicologists and music therapists).

A person to highlight is Wolfgang Bossinger, a German music therapist and psychotherapist, who is involved in several important studies on the healing effect of music and who has published or co-published several books on the subject (Bossinger & Friederich 2008, Bossinger & Eckle 2010, Bossinger 2011).

As a result of their findings Bossinger and his affiliates promote the implementation of music and singing in healthcare settings as therapeutic means and/or as initiator of a state of mind and consciousness that is fostering healing. For that purpose they have formed an international network by the name of *Singing Hospitals* that will be introduced below.

Interestingly Wolfgang Bossinger, who is chairman of the steering committee of the Singing Hospitals and one of its main representatives, also performs in and initiates so called *Nights of Spiritual Songs* where people come together to sing simple songs of various spiritual traditions of the world, to 'celebrate peace, unity and the connectedness of everything' (my translation).¹ He is explicitly referring to a spiritual dimension of singing and so-called *Strong Experiences with Singing* (SES) and *Transcendent Experiences with Singing* (TES) that are part of his therapeutic approach and will be specified below.²

One of the main sources the present article draws from, Bossinger and Friederich's publication, entitled *Chanten: Eintauchen in die Welt des heilsamen Singens* (2008), provides us with essential and well-founded information on the healing impact of singing. Besides it is also a guide including lyrics and sheet music and a CD to sing along to, which allows the reader and listener, respectively, to actually immerse into the realm of chanting him/herself.

Before analyzing the healing and harmonizing impact on the human body, mind and soul that is ascribed to the chanting and singing, lined with scientific research on its effects on the human organism, some thoughts about singing in general and a definition of 'chanting' as distinguished from 'singing' will be given.

Preliminary remarks on singing

The generation of rhythmic sounds, music and singing is a natural form of human expression, it can be traced back to prehistoric times. Musical instruments date back thousands of years; the oldest instrument found being a flute made of swan's bone which was made 35,000 years ago. We certainly cannot find evidence of the actual sounds and voices of prehistoric times so there is no unquestionable evidence that people have been singing all along, but it is likely, since as soon as writing was invented hymns and mantras were noted down. Furthermore evidence of musical activity can be found worldwide in every ethnic or cultural setting; it is a universal form of expression. Some even consider music to have been established as a form of human expression even before humans began to develop language (Bossinger & Friederich 2008: 9; Walker 2003: 43; Gilliland 1944: 18).

1 <http://www.nacht-der-spirituellen-lieder.eu/>

2 <http://www.healingsongs.de/042cb89a89012d310/042cb89a89089f508/index.html>

In western societies at about the time of Hellenism there was a shift towards an idealization of sound to the detriment of rhythm (Werber 2007: 345). Music and singing became attached to terms of beauty, harmony and art. It was linked to special ideals of how it should sound and thus became performance-oriented. To successfully sing one had (and still has) to be qualified. This is a characteristically western view, unknown to other cultures. The act of singing should be a pleasure practised naturally, but due to a cultural orientation towards achievement, many people have had traumatic experiences—for example in school where they were told that they cannot sing because they failed to hit the right note—causing them to feel self-conscious when it comes to singing, especially in a group of people. Music therapists are aware that singing in a choir is not suitable for everybody—instead of being calming, which is a reputed impact of singing, it can be rather stressful (Bossinger & Friederich 2008: 9–10; Werber 2007: 347).

Chanting as distinguished from singing

In contrast to the performance-oriented approach that is common to singing, the point about chanting is to just ‘let it flow’: it is about singing without any attachment to how it sounds or should sound—detached from notions of achievement and perfection. It tends solely to evoke pleasure and joy and the beneficial qualities of singing. Wolfgang Bossinger notes that chanting is the experience of pure being. It involves the intention to express and experience oneself within one’s own being and in inter-connection with the whole world. (Bossinger & Friederich 2008: 9–10.)

The verb ‘to chant’ stems from the Latin ‘cantare’: signifying a repetitive recitation of sounds, tones, or melodies. Accordingly, ‘the chant’ is a rhythmically repeated exclamation or song originally related to a spiritual or religious tradition (for example in the form of mantras). Characteristically, the short texts and melodies a chant is composed of are catchy, easy to learn, and they inspire individuals to sing along. They can easily be sung repeatedly, to unfold a profound impression. (Bossinger & Friederich 2008: 11.) A considerable number of chants could be signified as *mantras* and mantras are chanted and utilized also in the practice of singing as therapeutic method, respectively (see below).

A mantra is a sound, syllable, word, or group of sounds or words that is considered capable of creating transformation due to an innate effective power and its musical quality. It evokes resonance within the human mind, body, and soul, using, for example, rhythms, repetitions, and inversions. Mantras originate from the Vedic tradition of India but later have become an essential

part of the Hindu traditions and have also been incorporated into the other Indian religious traditions, namely Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. Today the term has been used to name similar phenomena in other religious traditions and new religions as well. (Böttger 2008: 29–32; Bossinger & Friederich 2008: 35; Burchett 2008: 813–18, 826–9.)

In that sense, for example the Hindu *Om nama shivaya* or *Jay mata Kali* and the Tibetan Buddhist *Om mani padmi hum* or *Om tare tuttare ture soha* may be seen as original *mantras*. In a wider sense also the Islamic *Allahu akbar*, as recited repeatedly in the Sufi's *dhikr*; the *Halleluja*, *Ave Maria*, or *In manus tuas, Pater* in Christian traditions; the Jewish *Shalom Aleichem* and similar short chants in various indigenous traditions qualify as *mantras*. New religions have also made up distinct *mantras* or chants to serve the same purpose; for example, those recently written within the goddess movement. (Bossinger & Friederich 2008: 11, 35.)

Chants and *mantras* may be handed down through generations. The actual meaning of the incantation may be lost, but that is of no importance. One need not understand the actual words; it is believed that the words have power in themselves. Their innate power is intensified by their repetition with intent, meaning a specific inner attitude and focus. Considering the attributed power or energy, the emphasis of a specific attitude and the spiritual message the chants and *mantras* usually have, they can be understood as sung prayers. (Bossinger & Friederich 2008: 11–14; Burchett 2008: 813–14, 828–9; Walker 2003: 44.)

Physical and psychic impacts of singing/chanting

The act of singing involves the whole body: Not only the vocal folds that produce a sound when breath is exhaled, but also numerous muscles and resonating cavities of the body as well as the whole body itself as a resonating cavity. Furthermore it resonates with other bodies around it, at least when singing in a group. (Bossinger & Friederich 2008: 30–1.)

Besides the already mentioned effect of a feeling of belonging and bonding with the other participants, which results from the fact that every participant tunes in to the same rhythm of breathing by the utterance of the same verses, another main effect of singing is the compensation of stress and its relief. It leads to a relaxation of the whole body and mind. Dr Herbert Benson, an American researcher on stress, detected as early as the 1970s, that the repetitive singing of chants and *mantras* evokes what he calls a *relaxation*

response within the human organism. It calms down body, mind and soul. This relaxation response is reflected by an increased occurrence of slow alpha brain-waves, which characteristically indicate a meditative, relaxed condition. (Bossinger & Friederich 2008: 33; Burchett 2008: 827.)

The lowering effect of chanting on blood pressure as well as a slowing down of the heart rate has also been scientifically documented. The parasympathetic nervous system is activated, stress hormones are reduced, the bodily rhythms are brought into balance and the immune system is strengthened. Singing activates a deep and wholesome breathing that leads to an increased oxygen supply of the whole body. (Bossinger & Friederich 2008: 33-4.)

Especially the characteristic repetition of a chant or mantra calms down the process of breathing and thus leads to a beneficial rhythmization not only of the breathing, but also of the heart-rate and blood pressure. Interestingly the chanting of a mantra has been proven to induce a rhythmization and synchronization of the heart-rates of all the participants (Bossinger & Friederich 2008: 47-50; cf. Moser *et al.* 2010).

In times of stress and strain we tend to breathe fast and shallowly, or even stop breathing, which results in a high pulse rate and the release of stress hormones such as adrenalin and cortisol. These hormones have a negative effect on the immune system when released continually (Bossinger & Friederich 2008: 20). Thus the relaxation response introduced by the chanting should not be underestimated; in a large number of cases, stress and strain increase the likelihood of ailments and medical conditions such as heart attacks, strokes, high blood pressure, cardiac arrhythmia, angina pectoris, nervousness, allergic responses, anxieties, depressions; asthma bronchiale, constipation or diarrhea and stomach ulcers and so on, or even directly cause them. Furthermore all sorts of physical pain can be intensified by stress and or caused by tension. (Bossinger & Friederich 2008: 34-6.)

Not only does singing bring about relaxation and thereby reduces the release of stress hormones, at the same time it increases the release of a range of beneficial hormones and messengers such as serotonin and endorphins which cause feelings of happiness and also reduce the perception of pain. Another hormone that is released only after a few minutes of singing is oxytocin, which is usually released by women giving birth or nursing an infant and by both sexes when sharing intimacy or having sex. This hormone increases or produces feelings of bonding and love. At the same time it is evidenced to augment processes of healing.

Furthermore the hormones melatonin and DHEA (dehydroepiandrosteron) are released. Melatonin plays an important role in the control of our

biorhythms and in a healthy sleep. It supports the immune system by reducing free radicals, which abet pathological developments within the body, especially the emergence of cancerous cells. An increased level of melatonin effectuates an increased production of the cell hormones interleukin 2 and interleukin 4, which activate defence cells in the body which are able to track down cancerous cells and render them innocuous. A similar effect on cancerous cells is discussed in the case of DHEA (which is a preliminary stage of the human's sexual hormones). Both of them exhibit a proven anti-ageing-effect; therefore DHEA is also popular as a dietary supplement. (Bossinger & Friederich 2008: 18–20; cf. Gilliland 1944: 18; Mastnak 1993: 79.)

With reference to the release of the above-mentioned hormones affecting the feeling of happiness and well-being, the psychic impact of singing and chanting respectively is not strictly distinguishable from their physical impact. The physical benefits however can be further emphasized by psychological research. Based on the broad empirical data the music psychologist Dr Karl Adamek was able to attain in his research, he was able to conclude that people who sing regularly are physically and mentally healthier than those who do not. They

- have higher self-esteem,
- are more content, confident and balanced,
- are good-humoured and less depressive,
- are less fractious and have a higher frustration tolerance,
- are calmer and less violence-prone,
- are more perceptive, cooperative and charitable.

Altogether, individuals who sing on a regular basis are mentally and emotionally more resilient than those who do not. The act of singing and especially the chanting has a balancing effect. (Adamek 2010: 177–9; cf. Böttger 2008: 26–8, 39.)

This is based on the fact that the expression of feelings is extremely important for our health and well-being. In the course of their lives many people have learned to repress their feelings, which can lead to severe psychosomatic disorders, which again can result in organic affections.

Suppressed feelings such as rage, anger, grief and sorrow entail reactions of stress in the body; thereby hampering the immune system and initiating a cycle of discomfort. Unhindered emotional expression however can help to maintain a healthy balance. In that respect one should be reminded of the high potential of—for example—songs of lament and sorrow for coping with

personal tragedies. (Bossinger & Friederich 2008: 22–3.) In contrast to the act of talking, singing or chanting involves a much stronger emotional participation. The uttered words and their meanings become perceptible, thereby increasing their positive effect on physical as well as mental processes and strengthening hope and confidence. (Bossinger & Friederich 2008: 25.)

Implementation of singing/chanting as a therapeutic means or remedy

Due to their favourable qualities, singing and chanting are increasingly implemented in therapeutic programmes. On the one hand we can find self-employed or affiliated music therapists, on the other hand psychotherapists and medical or healthcare staff are increasingly getting acquainted with certain techniques and methods featuring the human voice or musical instruments and music in general.

To vitalize this, national foundations and international networks such as ‘il canto del mondo’, Musica Humana or the Singing Hospitals engage in research, fundraising, promotion, the education of instructors and so on. This is not an entirely new effort as the implementation of music as therapeutic means in hospitals and healthcare settings has been an issue since the 1940s in the United States, where the National Federation of Music Clubs and the American Red Cross engaged in a project called ‘Music in Hospitals’ (Gilliland 1944: 18–20). In the following the concept of the ‘Singing Hospitals’ shall be briefly introduced as an example of such efforts.

The Singing Hospitals

The Singing Hospitals is an international network of medical professionals, music therapists, musicologists, neurobiologists and related groups or initiatives. They aim

- to promote the beneficial effects of singing for health and healing in healthcare settings on an international level. This is accomplished by participating in conferences and organizing special congresses and through various publications by their members;
- to establish a worldwide network of singing groups for patients, former patients, patients’ relatives and healthcare staff. Practically this means the establishment of local groups, for example in hospitals and

hospices, homes for the elderly or the disabled as well as in rehabilitation facilities;

- to contribute to a positive cultural and social ethos in healthcare settings. The network perceives this as achieved or at least fostered by the bonding effect of singing in groups and also by its spiritual dimension, which leads to an experience of the interconnectedness of everything.³

At present the Singing Hospitals network includes hospitals and health centres in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, France, Romania and Sri Lanka. The network has ambassadors in the USA, Argentina, the UK, the Netherlands and many other countries.⁴

The above-mentioned bodies aim to contribute to a positive ethos which leads to the perception or anticipation of a certain set of beliefs, or a certain valuation of the contemporary age shared by the members of the network.

Spiritual impact of singing/chanting

Wolfgang Bossinger, a main representative of the Singing Hospitals, and Wolfgang Friederich indicate that nowadays many people are feeling a void. They have the impression that people are discontent and unhappy about the fast moving consumer society and the decay of moral values. They stress that everybody is a spiritual being with religious and mystical needs—even though these needs have been repressed for a long time due to the rational, technological and scientific orientation of our times. These unfulfilled needs contribute to an impaired condition of mankind that is furthermore reflected in the condition of the humans' overall health. Humans are understood as naturally spiritual beings that need to re-connect with the cosmos—they have to be in tune, unison with the cosmos and its rhythm. In line with a variety of other alternative healing approaches the representatives of the beneficial effects of chanting intend to counteract and provide auxiliary means. In the practice of chanting they detect a return to the roots, because they understand its beneficial and transcendental power to be a primordial knowledge inherent to mankind. (Bossinger & Friederich 2008: 8–9.)

They emphasize that especially chanting—as distinguished from singing in terms of the already mentioned characteristics—is not only beneficial to

3 www.singing-hospitals.com, www.singende-krankenhaeuser.de

4 www.singing-hospitals.com, www.singende-krankenhaeuser.de

the physical and mental health, but can also enable individuals to make the leap into spiritual dimensions. It helps to satisfy the human being's need for meaningfulness and fulfillment—without insistence on theoretical insights or dogmas but through allowing each and everyone to partake of and have real feelings and sensations. In that sense chanting facilitates so called 'peak experiences,' a term formed by the notable psychologist Abraham Maslow signifying phenomena of sudden mystical experiences, moments of awe and bliss or even entrancement and ecstasy. Moments in which any doubt, anxiety, restraints and frailties are overcome. Actually the ego itself is overcome and the person experiencing this situation feels united with the world and the universe or the divine, respectively. (Bossinger & Friederich 2008: 8.) This reminds us of the *unio mystica* the members of mystical traditions are striving for. Wolfgang Mastnak stresses that

the metaphysical aspect of music points to a non-verbally expressible facing of the essential questions of mankind. Sometimes quite close to alternative psychotherapeutic methods such as Rebirthing or Holotropic Integration, the arts, especially music, have opened insights which cannot be explained by scientific research or an everyday life-experience: eternity, the essence of life or the sense of delivering the spirit from the body within the process of death etc. (Mastnak 1993: 80.)

The emeritus Professor Alf Gabrielsson, a musicologist at the University of Uppsala, specialized in these kind of experiences and termed them *Strong Experiences with Music* (SEM). Apart from the already mentioned health-giving effects of singing (and music in general) on the body and the mind or psyche, he and his fellow employees detected that music can evoke open-mindedness and feelings of freedom. Music allows a new understanding and insights regarding relationships, the individual lifestyle and life in general. Music can be utilized to deliberately influence one's own emotional state. It is able to evoke a strong feeling of one's own identity, the terms and conditions of human life and the existence in general.⁵

Wolfgang Bossinger translated this to the practice of singing, where he discovered the same effects, signifying it as *Strong Experiences with Singing* (SES). Within this category he however distinguishes so called *Transcendent Experiences with Singing* (TES) as a sub-category comprising the transcendent or spiritual experiences, which can take the practitioner as far as experi-

5 <http://www.healingsongs.de/042cb89a89012d310/042cb89a89089f508/index.html>

encing the mystical unity and interconnectedness of everything. Herein the practitioner enters an altered state of mind to the point of trance.⁶ This can be conjured especially by singing chants and mantras that have been passed on and on within religious traditions for centuries and that have been held in honour and sung an inconceivable number of times (Bossinger & Friederich 2008: 59).

These chants are believed to have a special power in the sense that they are loaded by the emotions and intentions of the myriads of people who have sung them before. Bossinger and Friederich allude to Rupert Sheldrake, an English biologist and author who devised the theory of morphic resonance or morphogenetic fields within which nature (or in our case the chant) saves information that has been gathered by the by and memorized. They influence the further development or impact of the system they belong to.⁷ His hypothesis is of course very controversial because for now energetic fields like these cannot be evidenced by scientific methods. Bossinger and Friederich however accentuate this by highlighting empirical observations made in the context of circle singing. Within those participants repeatedly report on the sudden impression that there are many more voices to be heard than singers are participating. Another commonly reported experience is the overtaking of one's own voice by something else. (Bossinger & Friederich 2008: 13–14.)⁸

These experiences and perceptions point to an identification of chanting as a highly valuable instrument to evoke or permit the sensation of spirituality and transcendence.

Conclusion

The potential to experience transcendence and to be affirmed in one's own spirituality as it is ascribed to chanting accords with its beneficial effects on human health. These two aspects of the chanting, utilised in part at the same time by the same persons, movements or institutions, have to be understood as an example of the remarkable present trend towards a more holistic understanding of the world, the cosmos and the human being within it. In post-secular societies the human body, mind and psyche are increasingly

6 <http://www.healingsongs.de/042cb89a89012d310/042cb89a89089f508/index.html>

7 Cf. <http://www.sheldrake.org/Research/morphic>.

8 Observations like these support the reference to an occurrence of trance. Trance again favours spiritual experiences and furthermore has itself a scientifically documented healthful potential.

understood as being interwoven with the world and the cosmos and with other human, non-human and also divine beings. Within this world-view all is different and all is one—everything is interconnected. Consequently religion or spirituality has no specific sphere of its own that is separated from the other spheres of life; it is part of everything and as such it also concerns the human's well-being and health and mingles or goes along with alternative healing methods such as for example in the case of the presented singing or chanting, as elements of spirituality and therapeutic means. One could say that the religious or spiritual side of life is re-established within the profane—not quite like the traditional unilateral religions, but rather in the form of a very individual understanding and actual living of spirituality. Thus in a way secularism is overcome, as is implied by the term post-secular, but also the traditional religion is overcome. Thus, referring to religion the present can be characterized not only as post-secular but also as post-traditional.

This is an interesting and worthwhile challenge for the study of religion, requiring us to acknowledge a wide range of beliefs and activities that are religiously or spiritually influenced, beneficial and healthful at the same time.

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