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Genre Field of Popular Meditative Music as the European Cultural Phenomenon of Modern Time

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The article deals with the typological features of the genre field of popular meditative music. It appeared in the last decades of the 20th century, and covered instrumental (seldom vocal) plays spread in the fixed form on audio carriers and having a number of similar descriptive and informative features, as well as similar characteristics in the aspect of musical language, existence and functioning. The author reveals the typical features, which characterize the individuality of this genre field.

Keywords: meditative music, Oliver Shanti, Andreas Mock, Deva Premal, "New Age".

For each period of the history of music, interpretation of the genre system is a key issue, without which the understanding of current processes in the musical culture would be incomplete. In the last decades of the 20th century, a dynamic and controversial era, a new genre field originated in Europe and got widely spread (including America and Russia): popular meditative music. By means of their music the musicians contribute to the search for a way out of the global crisis of the humanity that has engulfed not only art, morality and religion, but also science, economics, politics, medicine, etc. (Yugay, 2012: 50).

The American scientist Fritjof Capra¹ sees its causes in the peculiarities of the Newtonian-Cartesian worldview, which is the basis of modern science². The mechanistic view of nature has spawned faith in the limitless possibilities of

the human intellect and led to the idea of man's dominion over nature, the predominance in all areas of the rational, willed "male" principle and suppression of the intuitively contemplative "female" principle.

Dissatisfaction of the Europeans with the current situation, the desire to overcome the imbalance in different spheres of life, the search for alternatives in spiritually emasculated popular culture – all this was the impetus to turn to the traditional cultures of India, Tibet, Africa, Cuba and Japan. Moreover, some of them turn in their spiritual search to the origins of their own culture – early Christianity³.

It should especially noted that the increased interest in Oriental religious and mystical teachings⁴ has led to new ideas and creative results. For example, F. Capra in his book "The Tao of Physics" finds parallels between

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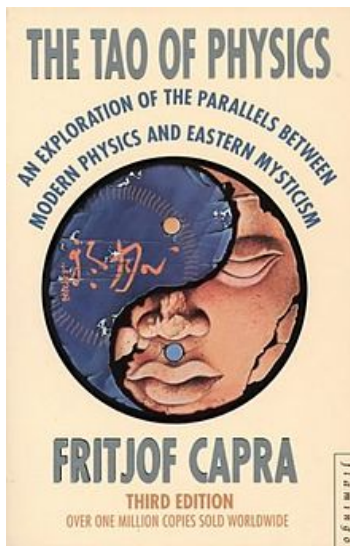


Fig. 1. The cover of the F. Capra's "The Tao of Physics"

scientific discoveries in the field of modern atomic physics and concepts of the Universe of the ancient Oriental mystics. According to the scientist, in his study, he tried to "bridge the gap between the rational, analytical thinking and meditative experience of mystical revelation" (Capra, 2008: 6).

The most important discoveries of modern physics entailed fundamental understanding of the unity of the Universe (as opposed to the mechanistic theories of the past), which largely correlates with the ideas of Buddhism, Taoism and Hinduism. "The most important feature of the Oriental world, one might say, is its essence – the awareness of the unity and interconnectedness of all things and phenomena, the perception of all natural phenomena as manifestations of an underlying unity. All things are considered as interdependent and inseparably related parts of the cosmic whole, as different manifestations of the same superior reality. In Hinduism it is called Brahman, in Buddhism it is Dharmakaya, in Taoism it is Tao. While it is beyond all concepts and categories,

Buddhists also call it Tathata or 'suchness'" (Capra, 2008:74).

According to F. Capra, the Oriental religious thought should be adapted with consideration of the best European traditions, which could result in a new ideological model that synthesizes achievements of both Western and Eastern cultures (Capra, 2013).

Some aspects of the Oriental thought were perceived by the New age movement spread during the second half of the 20th century in Europe and North America, which is a kind of "conglomerate" of different religious and philosophical ideas⁵. It is typical for its followers to have a special attitude towards all living things, the search for causal relationships of phenomena, the desire to achieve harmony with oneself and the world.

The latter feature found its refraction in music as well, resulting in the emergence of a new genre field – popular meditative music. It covers instrumental (sometimes vocal) plays released as audio records and having a number of similarities in terms of content, as well as in terms of the musical language, existence and functioning. It is known that all these factors underlie the classical definition of the genre⁶. Under the field of the genre, we mean a more generic term embracing the totality of genres and their varieties united on the basis of functioning in a certain social environment, appropriate conditions of existence and musical language settings.

The term "meditative" has emerged, apparently, spontaneously in the medium of existence. Such self-naming already suggests certain independence of the genre field. The definition "popular" that we have added, indicates the availability of compositions for a wide audience, ease of perception, a large audience, its common musical language with expressive means of popular pop music and its existence within the traditions of variety performance. On the other

hand, this music is, in some way, “elite”, while it is intended for an audience interested in their own spiritual development.

Implementation of the definition “meditative” requires some comments. In Russian reference materials “meditation” is interpreted as “a mental action which has the aim of bringing the human psyche in a state of deep concentration, as well as such a state itself” (Nechaeva, 1993:368). In the European tradition, according to M.V. Kuznetsova, the main features of immersion into a meditative state are: intense mental activity, contemplation, profound thinking, focusing on one state (Kuznetsova, 2007:9). The concept of musical dramaturgy of the meditative type common for Russian science involves “reproduction of spontaneously unfolding process of spontaneous thinking not oriented on its expression in an orderly manner (as in the case of narrative drama)”⁷ (Medushevsky, 1979:202).

Such an understanding does not coincide with the essence of the phenomenon of meditation in the Oriental culture. In the spiritual practice of yoga, the main goal of meditation is the union with the Absolute, and it is characterized by a complete absence of thinking at full consciousness⁸. Yoga masters describe meditation as “a state of being out-of-mind, getting in pure reality without worries and sorrows. In blessing and joy” (Snezhko, 2012) and it is believed to be the art of awakening the human soul from eternal sleep of illusions and intellectual slavery.

Listening to the music related to the field of popular meditative music, is not connected directly and exclusively with meditation. It may sound in any place where you want to create an atmosphere of peace and tranquility: the centers of meditation and healing, yoga studios, massage rooms, during psychotherapy sessions, or simply at home. Therefore, popular meditative music, depending on the level of spiritual experience and talent of its authors, as well as artistic merits,

may be considered, in some cases, as the means of achieving spiritual growth, purification, elevation⁹, and in other cases, as a way of detachment from worldly thoughts, quieting the mind, restoring spiritual balance, creating peaceful mood¹⁰.

In general, the compositions of this genre field fit into the culture of performance generated by the epoch of the composition music. They are consistent with the definition of E.V. Nazaikinsky, existing as “stand-alone, complete and more or less clearly recorded (in memory, in the notes, in records) art objects created by authors, composers and require adequate performance, perception and musicological interpretation” (Nazaikinsky, 2001: 13). However, it should be noted that modern computer technologies modify the process of generating the musical text, giving the authors an ability to directly operate sound elements. Therefore, in the process of creation and existence of popular meditative music, there is no need for musical notation. Thus, the note records as the result of the composer’s work are absent¹¹. On the one hand, it leads to even more rigid recording of music by means of audio recording, eliminating the possibility of other performing interpretations. On the other hand, during the concert performance there may be some degree of improvisation on the basis of the existing track.

Nevertheless, while all the features listed in E.V. Nazaikinsky’s definition manifest themselves in the works of the genre field we are interested in, the basic concepts of musicological science and traditional analysis methods are fully applicable to them.

Compositions included into the genre field may creatively present different spiritual traditions. For example, Hinduism (Deva Premal, Hein Braaten, Shiva Rea) Buddhism (Oliver Shanti, Nick Tindall, Ben Leinbach) and Christianity (Andreas Mock, Gregorian, Paul

Lawler). Moreover, the genre field of the popular meditative music covers the musical material created specifically for psychological and emotional discharge, music therapy (in particular, the works of S. Rychkov, A. Patrushev, A. Dobrovolsky, etc.), as well as “zodiac” series, “music of bells”, “sounds of nature”, etc., widespread on the Internet. The scale of this phenomenon is proved by the existence of a truly huge amount of music distributed through near-psycho-therapeutic websites developed for a wide range of users.

Most of the compositions that represent the given genre field are combined into albums, the duration of which is about one hour at average. The compositions within the album sound from five to ten minutes and are intended for consistent listening, for the better immersion in their imagery and the corresponding state of enlightened peace. Both the compositions and the albums combining them, often have software titles that are a certain “key” to understanding them. Each “cycle” has its peculiar authorial intent expressing certain aspects of religious and philosophical worldview

that provides a range of images, peculiarities of music thematism and composition.

With all the variety of the considered art phenomena, they have a number of common features, resulting from belonging to the genre field of the popular meditative music. For such compositions, the factor of typical content is especially important. We can say that the popular meditative music is the music of contemplated divine harmony that brings peace to the human soul. Buddha images, angels, beautiful nature we turn to due to the headlines of the compositions, are important as carriers and guides of the divine energy. In this regard, there are two main types of music thematism: “theme – melody” with quite a specific genre basis (song, folk tune, dance), manifesting the type of the intonation “Spiritual Us” and the state of the enlightened rest, and “theme – set of tones” embodying the aspect of the unknowable essence of the Divine through the image of a mysterious infinite space, the Emptiness as an inexhaustible source of creation. (Such thematism is found in the music by A. Mock and O. Shanti, and probably dates

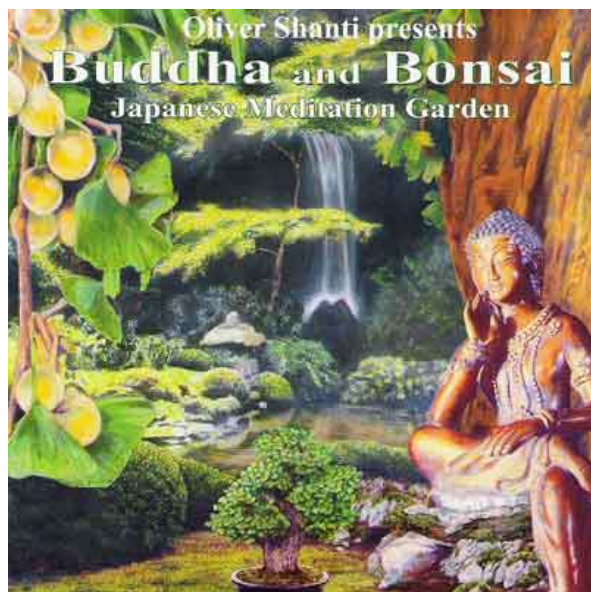


Fig. 2. The cover of Oliver Shanti’s album “Buddha and Bonsai”

back to the brief instrumental sections acting as preludes, interludes and postludes accompanying traditional mantras).

The determining role in contemplation results in the predominance of medium and slow tempos: *andante*, *adagio*, *largo*. Herewith, all the compositions are written in the imperfect meter. It can be assumed that the absence of ternary meters is also due to the nature of the meditative music: uniform alternation of strong and weak beats in a moderately slow tempo corresponds to the rhythm of human breath at rest.

The state of rest simulated by means of art corresponds to the statics that permeates all levels of musical organization and clearly manifests itself in the field of harmony, in particular. This feature is typical for modal systems with a weak center, with “fuzziness” or absence of gravitations. It is common knowledge that gravitation to the tonal center is a powerful dynamic factor in the compositions of European composers of the 18th – 19th centuries, and the authors of the meditative music give up on it, while it is not the process of consistent development-transformation of a musical thought that is important to them, but being in a certain state. Statics finds itself in repetition of harmonic turns, in the slow rhythm of the change of harmonic functions, in bringing the phonic side of harmony to the fore side.

The *ostinato* principle, which influences the structure, rhythm, syntax, methods of themes and forms development in general, creates a conciliatory, so to say, suggestive effect. It is implemented in preservation of some texture plans and functions during several sections (this applies primarily to pedal tones and harmonies typical for all cycles being analyzed, parts of drums, melodic and harmonic configurations). In the aspect of the harmonic organization the principle of *ostinato* is manifested in multiple repetitions of constant harmonic progression that forms a structure of a period type that provides

the composition with the features of variations (sometimes – *basso ostinato*). At the compositional level, it finds expression in the prevalence of variation forms (with one theme or two themes), of both the first and the second plan.

On the other hand, the forms of this kind are, of course, consistent with the genre nature of the musical material. The song and song-and-dance thematism matches the structures of the type of the period or fit. The type of intonation not gravitating to sharp qualitative transformations, defines the importance of the exact and variant repetitions, freely interpreted variability in the development of almost all the themes. Herewith, the differences between the compositional functions, especially between presentation and development, are smoothed, which deprives the process of the orientation development.

The scale of compositions grows by “stringing” simple structures one by one, like beads on a necklace. Such compositional technique can be considered an artistic refraction of the *japa* phenomenon¹². Variance and variability intertwine with the laws of the reprise forms, multiple repetition suggests a *rondo* style of many compositions. Meanwhile, the structure of all the plays, usually has the flexibility and freedom, each time proving its individuality and uniqueness.

The framing principle acting both at the level of one section or the whole cycle is also a very important compositional principle characterizing the type of time and space in the music being analyzed.

Statics that permeates all levels of the musical fabric, from rhythm and harmony to the texture, is designed to switch the listener to another space and time where it is possible to contact with the ideal divine world. This defines the specific timing characteristics: the music sounds like outside the course of time, rising above it. Time turns out to be not linearly directed, as

in the music of classicism and romanticism, but cyclical, closed (not accidental the introductory and closing sections are similar). The effect of “gyre” is achieved by freely interpreted repetition of sections, completion of the musical form by returning to the starting point or “melting out” the repeatedly recurring material: shutting down the voices, rarefying the texture, damping the dynamics and general slowing down. Closing is not a result of previous development: the openness of the form creates an artistic effect of dissolution in infinity.

Thus, the basic principal is not a process of sequential development of transformation of the musical thought, but being in a certain state: tranquility, detachment, prayer dive.

All means of expression are focused on this task, but phonism and colouring become especially important as a directly perceived feature of the sounding music. Its beauty causing profound aesthetic experiences, becomes an essential element of the artistic content, and no less important way to influence the listener. Diving into a state of enchanted contemplation is contributed by rich and refined palette of tones: the use of unusual instruments and combinations

thereof, nature sounds, electronic effects, as well as special registration and textural organization.

Along with the colour function, it is reasonable to talk about the semantic function of the tones, which particularly evident in the albums of Andreas Mock and Oliver Shanti. For example, in A. Mock’s album “Angel Helper’s” (see Fig. 3) a special role belongs to the electronic vocal. Let us presume that its “heavenly” sounding in the high register is intended to metaphorically embody the angel’s voice. The voices of songbirds, the residents of the “upper” world? The conductors into the divine reality, which are typical for some pieces of the album “Buddha and Bonsai” (composer Oliver Shanti – see Fig. 2) also approach the meaning of the symbol.

The use of bells in practically all compositions also carries a sacred meaning, since, according to Buddhist views, their ringing cleans and harmonizes the space (no wonder they are often used as an accompaniment for singing mantras). “Crystal” sounding of the bells, marimba, celesta, barchayms, vibraphone, glockenspiel is an essential element of the characteristics of the ideal image of the heavenly world. Moreover, the tone of bells often fulfills a compositional function,

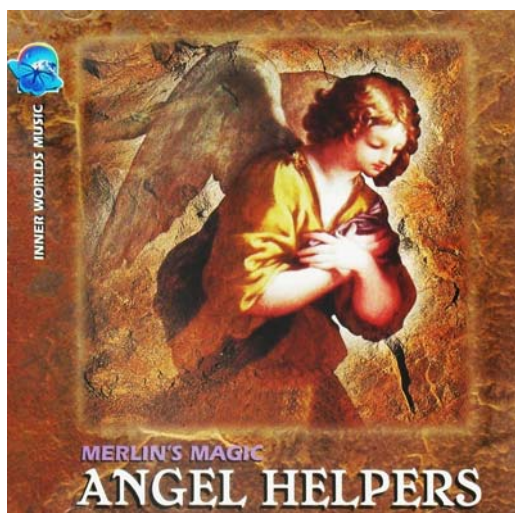


Fig. 3. The cover of the “Angel Helpers” album of the band “Merlin’s Magic”

marking the beginning and ending of sections, similar to the Buddhist religious ceremonies.

It is worth noting the importance of the stretched lines-pedals painted into a little subdued synthesized tone of strings or strings with wind, devoid of earth materiality and concreteness. This textural element exists as if in a different time dimension, as compared to other voices, creating an artistic effect of a slow motion, or even immobility of time.

“Switching off” such a natural time parameter for music focuses our attention on the perception of the space. A special expressive role is played by the texture as the musical-spatial organization of sounding or “the space filled with musical sounds”, according to E.V. Nazaikinsky (Nazaikinsky, 2001:73).

The texture organization in all the albums we have considered, reveals similarities. While maintaining the basic functions for the homophonic organization – melody, bass, harmonic filling – the texture can have a plurality of voices at the same time (6-12) performing various additional functions: short contrapuntal melodies, supporting voices, doubling, pedal points. The harmonic function is also often expressed in different ways at the same time (for example, pedal and configurations).

Together these techniques create the effect of depth, enigma, artistic multidimensional space. Herewith, the musical fabric retains transparency, even “weightlessness” due to the “discontinuity” of lines of additional voices or free variation of their number even within a single syntactic unit – a phrase or a sentence (along with the presence of stable textural components), and also due to the large distance between the voices, their tone differentiation, predominance of high registers.

In some cases the integrated melodic line presented in one voice, is missing. Conciseness and fragmentation of motives “hidden” in the texture, determine the features of the perception process. The attention of the audience constantly shifts to different elements – short melodic cells, voices of hidden polyphony, tone and harmony colours, rhythmic figures. The listener gets an impression of a kind of “flickering” relief and background.

Attention loses the focus, thus the dispersal of consciousness and its disconnection from the time coordinate is achieved. Therefore, an effect similar to the effect of meditation appears, and the priority objective of the popular meditation music is achieved: going beyond your body and mind, reaching the state of relax, harmony with oneself and the world.

¹ Fritjof Capra (born 1939 in Vienna) is a scientist, doctor of physics and philosophy (he taught at the University of Vienna, conducted research at the University of Paris, Stanford and Imperial Colleges of London). Now he works at the Lorentz Berkeley Radiation Laboratory, California. Capra has in-depth knowledge of Eastern spiritual teachings and practices. The author of popular scientific research, among which the most famous were “The Tao of Physics” and “The Turning Point”, in which he critically reflects on the Western model of development of society (Capra, 2013).

² The mechanistic view of nature was deeply connected with strict determinism. According to the views of European scientists of previous centuries, a huge spatial mechanism was guided by specific laws. Everything that happened had a reason and had led to the expected result, and, generally, having thorough knowledge of the state of the system at the moment, one could be sure to predict the future.

³ For example, the music of such bands as Enigma, Gregorian and Lesiem includes compositions based on the songs of true Gregorian chorals in modern arrangements.

⁴ One can recall the names of such writers as Edward Forster, Victor Pelevin, Jerome Salinger, German philosopher Paul Gregor, British band “The Beatles”, American trumpeter and composer Miles Davis, singer and composer Boris Grebenshikov.

⁵ The major ideologist of New Age is a sociologist Marilyn Ferguson. She wrote “The Aquarian Conspiracy”, 1980, which refers to a person’s ability to influence the power of his/her thoughts on the surrounding reality. The idea of God’s presence in every element of the Universe, the great importance of the individual beginning are also disclosed in the U.S. magazine “New age” and popular science film “The Secret” released in 2006. In general, the New age movement is a quite massive, multifaceted and colorful phenomenon often receiving a negative assessment of theologians and philosophers.

- ⁶ Genres are historically relatively stable types, classes, kinds and species of musical works differentiated by a number of criteria. The main criteria are: a) a specific mission in life (social, domestic, artistic function), b) conditions and means of performance, c) the nature of the content and the form of its implementation (Nazaikinsky, 2001: 94).
- ⁷ In particular, meditative drama is included into the typology of V. Medushevsky that he offered in his article "On Musical Universals" (Medushevsky, 1979, 176-212).
- ⁸ It is noteworthy, that the scientists of the St. Petersburg Research Institute named after Bekhterev believe that meditation is the fourth physiological state of the human brain (in addition to a "rapid eye movement" sleep, a "slow" sleep and a wakeful state). Meditation is characterized as follows: "Man is in the waking state, and the cerebral cortex appears as it is turned off, but nonetheless, the perception of information by man is bypassing the thought processes and analysis" (Radda, 2013).
- ⁹ The church music has some similarity in functions, while its aim is immersing into the state of prayerful detachment.
- ¹⁰ All this can provide a more or less pronounced healing effect. In psychotherapy, there is a whole new trend of healing with music, which is called music therapy. Detailed analysis of the literature devoted to various aspects of music therapy is presented in the works by L.S. Brusilovsky, V.Yu. Zavyalov, K. Schwabe, etc. In Europe this trend is especially popular: there is a website dedicated to the beneficial effects of the meditative music on the human body, which contains articles and interviews with doctors, psychologists and professional musicians. As follows from the short comments on the covers of the albums of the band Merlin's Magic, the artists themselves believe that their music can be used in music therapy contributing to the attainment of harmony and balance of mind.
- ¹¹ This is typical in general for the modern electronic music.
- ¹² A spiritual practice of meditative repetition of mantras or names of God in Buddhism.

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Жанровая сфера популярной медитативной музыки как феномен европейской культуры новейшего времени

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В статье рассмотрены типологические черты жанровой сферы популярной медитативной музыки, появившейся в Европе в последние десятилетия XX века. Она охватывает инструментальные (реже – вокальные) пьесы, распространенные в зафиксированном виде на аудионосителях и имеющие ряд схожих черт в образно-содержательном плане, а также в аспекте музыкального языка, бытования, функционирования. Автор выявляет характерные особенности, позволяющие говорить о самостоятельности данной жанровой сферы.

Ключевые слова: медитативная музыка, Оливер Шанти, Андреас Мок, Дэва Премал, «Новый век».
