

Sound Stories

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Some years back, having written a few sound stories of my own, I began collecting anecdotes from sound artists and experimental instrument builders I met with whilst travelling in the USA. Each artist would be asked to tell a yarn about a sound experience imprinted on their memory that may have influenced the direction or path they were to take as artists. A collection of these I later published as a video, titled *Sound Stories #1: Meetings with 14 U.S experimental instrument makers*.

Later after writing numerous stories of my own, I was stimulated to look wider afield at stories, myths, legends and fairy tales the world over that have their genesis in sound. This paper aims to provide a brief overview of sound stories as carriers of sound experience, memories, metaphor and universals.

So let's begin by defining just what it is that characterises a sound-story. Firstly the story or anecdote prioritizes an experience of sound over and above any other experience. This focus on sound may occur in terms of either natural or magical occurrences ranging from the breath or voice of an almighty God, (as related in many creation myths and legends), to awesome sounds experienced in life; or, as stories that feature sound in relation to people, animals or objects endowed with supernatural or seductive powers (such as musical instruments), or simply stories that obtain significance from the world of sound. Now, any story worth telling requires a quality over and above the mundane for it to be compelling. At the least one would expect it to "re-sound" with a listener or reader, and at the most to resound in a way that is either profound, magical, or unforgettable, and on a level that is either intensely personal, universal or mythic.

The net effect of my limited research to date, is that each and every one of the yarns I have discovered from a broad spectrum of world myths and legends, reinforce qualities of the mythic and magical present in an everyday world or in a supernatural one; giving rise in turn, to one hypothesis that only sound experienced or conveyed as "profound" yields a yarn worthy of repetition - which accounts for the numerous myths of creation, the many legends of sonic enchantment, (such as sirens who entice listeners to their fate, and musicians who play on magical instruments), and the various cultural fables and religious yarns that feature sound as a subject of esoteric and metaphorical significance.

Let's begin then with the Big Bang, the creation of life in the Cosmos. Not a big flash; but a big bang, proposed by physicists as the vibrational energy source of all life in the universe. Many religious sources commonly refer to this sonic power in terms of *WORD*, a primal syllable charged with the power to create.

Thoth in ancient Egyptian mythology was worshipped as a lunar deity. According to the theologians of Hermopolis, Thoth accomplished the work of creation by the sound of his voice alone. When he first awoke in the primordial "Nun" he opened his lips, and from the sound that issued forth, four gods materialised, followed by four Goddesses. These eight gods perpetuated the creation of the world through the *WORD*, and the texts tell us that they sang hymns morning and night to assure the continuity of the sun's course.(1)

Mythical stories the world over, tell about such powerful properties of the voice, or of spoken word-sounds endowed with magical or sacred purpose. In the creation chants of Polynesia, the magical properties of spoken words are cited as a principal generative force in the visible and invisible worlds. Io, the supreme being dwelt within the breathing space of immensity, and the words of his chant created life from the void.

In Genesis in the Hebrew tradition "In the beginning was the *WORD*, and the Word was with God, and the Word was *GOD*".(2). A study of ancient traditions reveals that the first divine messages were given out in song; The Psalms of David, the Song of Solomon, the Gathas of Zoroaster, The Gita of Krishna and so forth. In the Hindu tradition; the syllable *HU*, meaning God, is believed to be the beginning and the end of all

sounds.

“An Arab was running to the Mosque where the prayer of God was being offered, but before he arrived the prayers were finished. On his way he met a man coming from the mosque and asked him, ‘I can hear no prayers coming from the mosque; are they finished?’ The man replied that they were indeed finished, and the other exclaimed ‘alas!’ and made a long and deeply resounding sigh. The man asked ‘Will you give me the virtue of your sigh in exchange for the virtue of my prayers?’ and the other agreed. Next day the Arab saw the prophet in a dream, who told him he had made a bad bargain, for that one deep sigh was worth all the prayers of a lifetime, as the sound came direct from his heart.” (From Tales, by Hazrat Inayat Khan, Omega Publications).

In the Islamic based sufi world, there exists a science of language and words known as zikr. The sufi belief is that in the spoken word, fine inner vibrations act on the spoken word and are tangibly present in speech. The very breath of the speaker is charged by this inner vibration and is of itself an electrical current.

Hazrat Inayat Khan, a North Indian musician and teacher of sufism in the West discusses just this science of words and sound in volume 2 of *The Sufi Message*, a treatise on music and sound. He states, there is a Hindu belief that singing is the first art, and that song is the shortest way to attain to spiritual heights. The voice then is like a wine. It may be the best wine or the worst vinegar. It may uplift a person or make them ill. And he tells the following story.

Tansen, a great singer of India was a Yogi who had mastered sound, and it is told that he performed wonders by the art of singing. One day the Emperor asked him ‘tell me O great musician, who was your teacher?’ He replied, ‘Your majesty, my teacher is such a great musician that I cannot call him musician, I must call him *music*™’. The Emperor asked, ‘can I hear him sing?’ Tansen replied, ‘perhaps I can ask him, but you cannot think of calling him here to the court’. The Emperor said ‘can I go to where he is?’ The musician said, ‘His pride may revolt even there, thinking that he is to sing before a king’.

Akbar said, ‘shall I go as your servant?’ Tansen answered ‘eyes there is hope then’ so both of them went up high into the mountains of the Himalayas, where the sage had his temple of music in a cave, living with nature, in tune with the infinite.

When they arrived the musician was on horseback and Akbar was walking. The sage saw that the Emperor had humbled himself to come to hear his music, and he was willing to sing for the king; and when he felt in the mood for singing he sang. And the sound from his voice was great! It seemed as if all the trees and plants of the forest were vibrating in sympathy; a psychic phenomenon, a song of the universe, and nothing else. The deep impression made upon Akbar and Tansen was more than they could stand. They went into a state of trance, and deep peace. And while they were in that state the Master left the cave, and when they opened their eyes, he was not there. The emperor said ‘What an incredible phenomenon! But where has the Master gone?’

Tansen said ‘you will never see him in this cave again, for once a man has the taste of this, he will pursue it even if it costs him his life, as it is greater than anything in life’. When they were back home, the Emperor asked the musician one day, ‘Tell me, what raga did your master sing?’ Tansen told him the name and sang it for him, but the Emperor was not content, saying, ‘yes, it is the same music, but it is not the same spirit. Why?’ The musician replied, ‘the difference is that while I sing before you the Emperor of this country, my master sings before God.’

Sweet song in myth and yarn can also be a magical force for enchantment. There are instants in ancient tradition when birds and animals were charmed by the flute of Krishna, rocks were melted by the song of Orpheus; or when the Dipak Raga, sung by Tansen spontaneously lighted all the torches in the village.

But thereâ€™s also the darker side, represented by sweetly insidious sounds that have the power to cast spells.

A Teutonic myth relates a yarn about nixie women who were uncommonly beautiful and had melodious voices that charmed men, frequently to their undoing. They were by large cruel spirits who delighted in doing harm to men. Seduced by song and looks, men would be dragged down to the bottom of the water, never to be seen again.

Similarly in Greek mythology, Odysseus, the heroic traveller was warned about the seductive voices of Sirens â€“ half bird, half women â€“ who dwelt among the jagged rocks along the coast of southern Italy, and wrought havoc on passing ships and sailors, devouring any unhappy wretches who were unable to resist their enchantment.

There are numerous imaginative legends about the magical enchantment of certain instruments and their seductive power on vulnerable ears. Such is a Greek myth where Hermes, with the mellifluous sounds of his flute, puts the Giant Argus to sleep, and then kills him, or, as in the following legend from the Tucano Indians of the Amazon, the amorous deceits of a monster become the very source of a sacred instrument,

A mischievous monster once lived on the banks of the Rio Negro. His body was full of holes, and it produced wonderful sounds whenever the wind blew. And when Uakti ran across the forest floor, the wind passed through his body making such wonderful sounds. This sound was so alluring that the maidens of the tribe were drawn to Uakti, who then seduced them. In a jealous rage, the men of the tribe hunted Uakti down and killed him, and buried his body deep in the forest. From the burial place of his body, tall palm trees grew from each of the holes in his body (to keep his spirit alive), and from the wood, the tribe made musical wind instruments with holes for the fingers to control the tones, that reproduced the melodious and seductive Uakti sounds. These instruments can only be used in closed ceremonies now, away from the women, lest the charming power of Uaktiâ€™s music rises once again and has its seductive effect.

And a lesser known Hungarian folktale about the birth of the violin.

â€œA young woman was enchanted with a young man but her overtures were not returned and so she sought the help of a sorcerer. The sorcerer was in fact the Devil, who had an instant solution, but it meant the sacrifice of the girl's family, her mother, father and two brothers. The girl agreed without so much as a blink. And so the devil killed the family and from the skull of the mother forged a resonant shell, from the guts of the brothers four fine strings, and from the head of the father, the hairs for a bow, and so the first violin was created. Well, it was an instant success and the boy followed the girl around in an enchanted state, wherever she went. But, said the Devil, the other part of the bargain is that the two of you must accompany me to hell. So off they merrily went discarding the violin on a path in the woods. Soon after a gypsy came along and picked up the violin and from that day to this has made music with it that has enchanted the hearts and minds of all who listen. But few understand that it is the instrument of the Devil.â€•

Stories about an absence of sound are far less common, but perhaps more memorable because of it.

Universally known is the famous Zen yarn about the enlightenment of hearing â€“sound without soundâ€™, after numerous frustrated attempts by a pupil to fulfil his Masterâ€™s Koan and show him the sound of one hand clapping.

Sound in this, as in the next Zen story, is used metaphorically to teach truths about silence.

â€œThere was once a teacher of Zen, a very remarkable man. He cultivated an atmosphere of silence, where there was to be no chatter or noise of any kind. People came to know his temple as â€œthe Silent Templeâ€• because he even stopped the monks reciting the Sutras in it. All he asked his pupils to do was to come into the temple and just sit and meditate in silence. No talking, no sound.

When the Zen master died everyone from all around knew of his death by the loud ringing of bells and the sound of his pupils reciting the Sutras._ From Mirrors by Abdullah Dougan, P 154,Gnostic Press.

In the following pygmy story, sound is used to teach a truth about nature and a respect for it.

“A young boy one day heard such a beautiful song that he had to go and see who was singing. When he found it was a bird he brought it back to the camp to feed it. His father was annoyed at having to give food to the bird, but the son pleaded and the bird was fed. The next day the bird sang again, and sang the most beautiful song in the forest and again the boy went to listen to it, and brought it back to the camp to feed it. This time the father was even more angered, but once again he gave in and fed the Bird. The third day the same thing happened. But this time the father took the bird from the boy and told the boy to go away. When his son had left, the father killed the Bird, the Bird with the most beautiful Song in the Forest, and with the Bird he killed the Song, and with the Song he killed himself and dropped dead, completely dead, dead forever. (Pygmy legend. P.79.The Forest People. Colin Turnbull. ISBN 0.586-05940-7)

In a more common story we understand a phenomena of nature in another way. Among the mountain nymphs who followed the Goddess Hera (wife of the all powerful Zeus), there was an Oread named Echo who, every time Zeus paid court to some Nymph, would distract Hera’s attention with her chattering and singing. When Hera discovered this she deprived Echo of the gift of speech, condemning her to repeat only the last syllable of words spoken in her presence. Shortly after, Echo fell deeply in love with Narcissus, but unable to declare her love she was spurned by him and went to hide her grief in solitary caverns. She died of a broken heart, her bones turned into stone, and she faded away to a sound only. All that was left of her was the echo of her voice to imitate and repeat the endings of any sounds; word, song or noise.

More familiar to the common experience, are sounds of nature captured in ear and eye, as if in a recording or photograph.

Needing a break from Bangkok I catch a train south to Chaiya, then hike to Suan Mook, a forest retreat set into a jungle of lush humidity. Welcomed and then left to my own devices, I wander through the forest and among the buildings; exploring the lotus gardens, the Dharma boat and Meditation halls, and sample aphorisms in the Spiritual Theatre: “In the complete silence you can hear the grass”. Seeking just this I take a walk one early evening to the stone amphitheatre, an open-air forest shrine on top of a small hill, where a Buddha image presides over the stillness. I linger until dusk when a distant bell calls the monks to prayer, and hoping to hear their chanting I make my way in its direction. Nearly stumbling into lotus ponds, I suddenly engulfed in a surround-sound orchestra of frogs and toads - big ones, small ones, on the ground and in the trees - along with what I think are insects making vibrating clicking sounds like sticks do when twanged across the edge of a table. From every quarter insects click in cross rhythms, frogs in trees chirp at short intervals and toads hop about quarking low and loud. The rhythms phase and combine with a massed urgency, that abruptly stops, then as suddenly cranks up again in a cacophony of pitch and polyrhythm. A remote P.A adds its crackly accompaniment as the monks begin the evening chant. Large raindrops slap down through my broken umbrella.

Storytellers themselves have a certain power of enchantment over their audience, and it occurs to me that every told story is in a sense a sound story, by virtue of the story tellers voice weaving the yarn and enchanting the listener with the sound and quality of the voice, as much as with the craft and content of the story.

Is one as enchanted by reading the story ? . or does enchantment of a listener arise principally through the conduit of the human voice “ or through the charm of the story line? Or is it a function of the two?

And how common is story telling anyway? Our appetite for a good yarn is met mostly through films, books, radio and television . . and hearing stories in the flesh, voice to ear, is mostly a memory we share from childhood.

But while the love of a good yarn after childhood is no less, very few stories have a focus on sound.

It was a pleasant surprise then “ on requesting a story from associates and friends “ to hear anecdotes surface with such unexpected ease; stories of the profoundly personal, the remarkably novel, and the humorously memorable.

Here’s a story from Laura Kikauka, Sound and installation artist, New York 1991

“I live out on a farm in the country, and often-times when I’m driving and listening to the radio I tune into a station, especially on those windy country roads that go up and down all the time. One time I tuned into a religious station to listen to this religious music and every time I was down in the valleys the religious music would be perfectly tuned and when I hit the tops of the hills this heavy metal station would tune itself in. The station would shift back and forth depending on whether I was up or down, and I thought it was a perfect analogy : when you’re down in the valleys is when you need the religious music the most, and when you’re up on top, it’s hard core rock!

Jin Hi Kim. Composer/performer. New York / Korea.

I was born and raised in Korea, and at that time so many people used to wash big cloths, like bed sheets, and so on, and to iron them they folded them in a certain way and put them on a slab “ usually of marble “ and they would have a pair of wooden mallets, with which they hit the cloth repeatedly, and sometimes they hit the two mallets against each other, or sometimes accidentally on the marble board. The sound was very rhythmic and very percussive. When I was young, many people were doing this, one house here and another one opposite, and another one there, and the sound produced was wonderful, and fantastic music.

Wayan Sadra. Composer/performer. Solo, Java.

Even up until this moment I have an experience with sound that sometimes becomes an obsession inside myself. When I am sleeping, I find myself inside a tunnel and the tunnel is shaped as if it were a large resonator and inside it is decorated with large paintings . . .and as I walk farther into the tunnel, it comes darker and louder and at a certain point I become shocked, and from my sleep I suddenly awake and according to my parents, this is a situation where my soul is trying to leave my body . This is an experience where both visual and sound elements come together, and even till now I have never experienced anything quite like it in the waking state

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