

The Voice of Divinity: A Review of *Opening the Portals of Heaven*

Book by Beatriz Caiuby Labate & Gustavo Pacheco (Lit Verlag, 2010)

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...and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the LORD; but the LORD was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the LORD was not in the earthquake * And after the earthquake a fire; but the LORD was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice * And it was so, when Elijah heard it... I Kings, 19:11-13

It might be true that sounds in general and harmonic sounds (music) in particular, have been considered to be more apt manifestations of the divine in Abrahamic Religions than the far Eastern religious traditions. In far Eastern traditions such as Taoism and Hinduism, the divine manifests itself through diverse phenomena of which natural and harmonic sounds are just one of many, without any particular place. We may be able to ascribe this fact to the more abstract nature of sounds in comparison with other sensual comprehensions. Judaism, as the grandmother of two other Abrahamic religions, Christianity and Islam, with its highly strong spirit of anti-idolism, inclines to 'hear' the voice of God, in a still small form, not to see or touch it in a visual, palpable way, however beautiful and desirable!¹ Then, here, by 'more abstract nature of sounds/music' we should mean simply too less capability to convert into a kind of idolatry; because any idol have had a visual and palpable feature essentially, but not auditory feature commonly.²

As far as I know, Christianity itself has been always open to various art forms, even, concerning sculpture and paintings. There was, however, a kind of obsession not to take icons as sacred things in the form of religious protest against iconography in the history of Christianity. This obsession which was obviously a heritage of anti-idolism of Jewish prophets cannot be found in respect of music at all. Music possessing an incontestable legitimacy has been always entering into churches and participating in Christian rituals, not of course as the strictly unavoidable pivotal part, but, at least, as a very important and pleasant aspect. No wonder, then, if it might be

¹ - While it seems so weird to even imagine some sort of gustatory manifestation of divinity, there is a very considerable funny 'imagination' about the manifestation of the sacred in olfactory aspect of being. Patrick Süskind, German writer, in his novel *Das Parfum*(1985), narrates indeed how olfactory objects can be potentially as much sacred as other objects (like those are brilliantly colorful: jewels) have been in the real history of humanity. On the basis of this novel, the thriller film *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer* is made by Tom Tykwer in 2006.

² - Interesting to note is that, according to Quran, in the absence of Moses, when Israelite made a golden calf, people could hear some sounds from this golden idol: *...And he [Samiri] extracted for them [the statue of] a calf which had a lowing sound, and they said, "This is your god and the god of Moses, but he forgot." (20:88)* But it was just a sound, not a speech: * Did they not see that it could not return to them any speech and that it did not possess for them any harm or benefit?* (20:89) Nothing can be inferred from Quran to know how a golden idol could make sounds, although it is clear that apostates were not satisfying any longer with a dumb god, after coming to know Moses' God.

discoverable some sects/cults in the domain of Christianity in which, music would reach at highest degree of importance, to a central place, playing the main role. Beatriz Labate and Gustavo Pacheco, two Brazilian anthropologists, have already discovered such a wonderful religious phenomenon in Amazon forests of South America. *Opening the Portals of Heaven: Brazilian Ayahuasca Music* (2011) is their research achievement on this subject matter: Santo Daime and UDV, two eclectic Brazilian religions (influenced strongly by Catholicism as well as indigenous inhabitants of Amazon) and the role of music in their rituals.

Perhaps, the most interesting fact as to these religions is that both of them, as well as another one called Barquinha (not under discussion in Beatriz & Pacheco's book) offers a very powerful botanical psychoactive drug (Ayahuasca) as the sacred brew in their own rituals. This sacred brew is not the main subject matter of *Opening the Portals of Heaven*, but, focus is on the part that music plays in constituting religious experience during the ceremonies in which participants drink Ayahuasca and are intoxicated. Ayahuasca as the focal point of research is the subject of other works of Labate and her colleagues. In the book mentioned above, authors try to notify us of how music, poetry and song, can be not only an essential part of religious rites, but also the principal vehicle by which a religion might express its own doctrine. 'Music as the Manifestation of Divinity' might be another title of this research.

Authors take into consideration the abstract nature of music, the point by which I prefer to start my discussion. It seems, however, they mean something a bit different: Music might be the most abstract art form due to its 'less representational' characteristic. Quoting from Bruno Nettl, "Unlike the other arts," authors suggest, "it [Music] rarely depicts or deals directly with what humans do or think". (Labate & Pacheco, 2011, p.93) Then, less representational characteristic or auto-referentiality is another possible meaning of being more abstract for music. When I was reading this passage, I was wondering if this idea can be taken to be still correct when formulated in an absolute way. May it be correct that Music is absolutely non-representational? More expertly speaking about the musical qualities of Santo Daime's ceremonial music, authors mention special ethos associated with major and minor modes in Western musical tradition as a 'culturally defined ethos'. "Within Santo Daime" authors point out, "the traditional association in Western music of the major mode with joy and expansiveness, and of the minor mode with sadness and seriousness is expressed in a kind of common sense that recognizes some of these qualities in each hymn". (Labate & Pacheco, 2011, p.91)

It is conceivable that in a quite different cultural domain, major and minor modes do not bear the same associations as in Western culture they do. That is to say, emotional connotations attached to the physical sounds and various arrangements of them vary, to some measure, as a function of cultural parameters. What is then difference between the language which is undoubtedly taken to be representational, with the music not taken to be so? Letters in a group of languages (for instance, European languages) are mostly the same and comparable; when they are combined in words and arranged in sentences, languages begin to differ immediately and intensively. Any definite small sound is also perceived almost the same by any human ear, however, emotional connotations begin to differ very slowly when they are combined and arranged in various modes and melodies. Language and Music should be both representational systems, with quite different 'rate of variation' growing from elementary parts to the bigger compositions, but not two quite different systems 'in essence'. That is why, a foreigner who does not understand Portuguese, (the

language of hymns in Santo Daime and Chamadas in UDV), might enjoy yet mere musical aspect of rituals, because, when the language of speech is unknown, it might be the case that the language of music is still completely familiar.

Authors do not defend any special philosophical/aesthetical theory as to the music. Then, after briefly introducing an idea, they show another side of the coin. “If the music is the most abstract of the arts,” they propose, “at the same time it can only be understood within culture, as a cultural process, and as a product of the interaction of human beings.” (Labate & Pacheco, 2011, p.93) and this is characteristic of this book that, to my mind, leads it deeper layers without being lost in the labyrinth of theoretical debates. Marc Blainey, my colleague and friend, in his own review on this book, despite his generally positive approach, complains that authors do not ponder enough over too many interesting points offered around the subject. I think, however, considering the well-defined research aims and its limitations, any more elaborating on the points, would result in unjustified digressions. Authors did not want to prepare an encyclopedic book, containing only bare data about these two Brazilian religions and their ritual music. Then, they show us theoretical perspectives like those mentioned above about the nature of music. At the same time, they are cautious not to digress, not to waste so many pages for elaborating just one point, or side with some thinkers against someone else. This strategy has made this book, to my mind, not just a boring informational, rather, insightful readable one. But nevertheless, I must confess that this book is just a very good ‘introduction’, an ‘entrance’ into the subject, every part of it deserves to be expanded and elaborated in separate essays.

When I came to a Santo Daime ceremony, by the help of Beatriz Labate (one of the two authors of the book mentioned above) as my first time, everything appeared to me as realization of a collective archetypal dream! It was the time any poetical metaphors and imageries became literally true: there was a kind of divine drink put on a desk, a clearly reminiscent of Magi’s ancient drink, as well as so many demure dancers singing enchanting songs in one of the most harmonious languages I have ever seen: Portuguese. The organizer had already sent to me a WORD file containing the texts of the songs, but, I did not take it serious unfortunately, and did not make a copy of them. The bad news was that I could not sing in company of the other guys, not only because of not having the texts, but also because of not knowing the language of hymns. The good news, however, was that the language of music was completely familiar and understandable to me and, indeed, heavenly to my ear.

As long as Entheogenic effects of Ayahuasca lasted, I was absorbed in ceremonial acts. As soon as they came to decrease in my mind, my obsessive interest to ‘observe’ and to bring everything into question began. The questions that occurred to me at that time and in the days after, were about the deep meaning of rite and ritual acts (of what kind of act they should judge to be), their capability to bring people together in sympathy with each other and possible political danger of such communities, the role archetypal imageries play in constituting the experience, what might be the characteristics of spiritual-religious music and, what is the difference between a party and a sacred festival. This latter, how surprisingly it may be, is something which Mestre Irineu (the founder of Santo Daime religion) himself, thought about too.

Thanks to *Opening the Portals of Heaven*, I became later aware of the fact that Mestre Irineu liked *Forró*, popular dances in the northeast of Brazil originating from catholic festivals in rural

areas. He was participating in parties in which people was dancing *Forró* with drinking Ayahuasca. “One day, under the influence of the drink,” authors writes, “Mestre Irineu had a *miração* [: vision] in which he saw, in place of dancers in the salon, a multitude of *fardados* [: members of his own religion] dancing to the sound of hymns. From then on, he stopped having profane meetings with the ingestion of *Daime* [: Ayahuasca] and substituted the *hinario* [: hymns] for the dances.” (p.49). In Santo Daime context nowadays, there are some little rhythmic movements as dance, (not *Forró*), then, I can conclude that Mestre Irineu made just one important change in order to transform customary parties of his time into the sacred festivals: substitution ordinary participants for spiritually observant dancers and singers! Founder of Santo Daime, as it were, believed in, not so much the sacredness of any kind of music style (or even dance), as in the sacredness of the very listeners.

Authors give the reader some clues to study further on the subject of continuity or dissociation between the sacred and profane experiences with music (in the chapter where different approaches of UDV and Santo Daime are generally discussed), as they do concerning the other subjects. I do not propose to list all titles, categories and points of the content here. Nor did I make here a faithful comprehensive report of what is going inside the book, rather, I just wanted to show some of features in order to motivate interested people. The book has six chapters containing ‘methodological and ethical notes’. It does not naturally address any question regarding Ayahuasca Religions, but, I am convinced, this should be a very useful and instructive for anyone who likes to be initiated into the Dionysian experience of the most musical religions all over the world.

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