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DĀRVĀ 'L-MASNĀVĪ OF THE MEVLEVİ ORDER

Introduction to the Whirling Prayer Ceremony

The Whirling Prayer Ceremony [Samâ', or "Sema" in Turkish] of the Mevlevi ("Whirling Dervish") Order begins in the traditional manner of Islamic gatherings with praises of God and the Prophet Muhammad (may God bless him and give him peace). The poetic form of this is called the "Noble Praise" or "Noble Eulogy" [Na't-i Shareef] of the Prophet. The poem used in the Ceremony is a Persian ode [ghazal] which consists of six lines and is traditionally believed to have been composed by Jalaluddin Rumi (may God be merciful to him).

For the last three centuries it has been sung according to the musical setting of Mustafa Itri. In Itri's composition, praises of Rumi have been added to the original poem. This is a feature of sufi music, in which exclamatory praises of God or of individual saints are added during pauses in vocal music. In the case here, the added exclamatory phrases do not match the meter and rhyme of the original poem and were never intended to change its meaning. This needs to be explained because it is a common misunderstanding (among non-Muslim listeners) that the Na't-i Shareef is addressed to Rumi (since the added opening line is addressed to him: "O our sublime master" [yaa Hazrat-i Mevlana])-- rather than to the Prophet, as it was intended.

Following the Na't-i Shareef, a musical section [taqseem] begins: a solo improvisation played on the reed flute [nay]. This evokes the famous opening lines of Rumi's masterpiece, "The Masnavi": "Listen to the reed flute, how it is complaining. It is telling about separations, saying, 'Ever since I was severed from the reed field, men and women have lamented in the presence of my shrill cries. But I want a heart which is torn, torn from separation, so that I may explain the pain of yearning.'"

After the reed flute solo, the dervishes slap the floor (which evokes the thunderous sound initiating the Day of Resurrection), stand up, and begin walking counter-clockwise (the direction in which pilgrims circle around the Ka'ba in Mecca). This part of the ceremony is in honor of Rumi's son, Sultan Walad, or Veled, and is called the "Sultan Veled Circling." The music for this part is the "Introductory" [Peshrev] music, which is in 56/4, or 28/4, time.

After the third circling, the dervishes take off their black cloaks (symbolizing their graves) and they appear dressed in their white grave clothes, joyously resurrected, to begin the first of four "Salams," or segments, of the Ceremony. The dervishes are simultaneously anchored to the ground and "flying," and their aspiration is "union with God" (as the sufis have called it), meaning ecstatic nearness to God, the Only Beloved. Each of the four Salams has its own tempo, musical quality, and spiritual-mystical flavor. After the vocal part of the Fourth Salam has ended, the musical composition continues with two brief instrumental sections (in 4/4 and 6/8 time, followed by a final musical solo improvisation. The dervishes continue whirling and stop when they hear the recitation of the Holy Qur'an

During special occasions, a song in Turkish is often added after the musical solo at the end of the Fourth Salam. This is called the "Supplicatory Hymn in Three-Time" [Segah Neyaz Ilahi].

Notes

1. This introduction and the subsequent translations were originally presented as a talk entitled, "The Music of the Whirling Prayer Ceremony," by Dr. Ibrahim Gamard, at a conference called "Rumi 2000: Whirling with the Cosmos," October 26-28, 2000 California State University, San Bernardino.