

THE TRANSFORMING POWER OF TONE

Dane Rudhyar

The picture that you saw on the program was taken thirty-eight years ago when I was thirty-eight, so in an interesting way it was the great divide of my life and, in many ways, the great divide for America because it was the beginning of the Roosevelt Administration, the Depression, and so on. Everything changed, has changed ever since, and I suppose I have changed too. Most of the music that I wrote, or at least that I sketched, if I did not finish it then, was written before that time. So what you saw in the picture was more or less the musician.

Now I am not coming here to interpret my music, to tell you about what it means either symbolically or technically. I am not interested in that because I feel that music is something that must be experienced, that must be lived. It is not even an esthetical product because my approach is not esthetical as much as it is what you might call magical. To me, music is a power of transformation. It has the power to change the vibration of a person — as the Old World knew very well in India, in China, in even the Greece of Plato and Pythagoras — and it is to that approach to music that my life as a musician has been dedicated.

You might even say that music is a psychedelic factor, or at least that it can be so. It can be so because it can change the vibrations of a person, of his aura or his nervous system or whatever is susceptible of changing, of being transformed. It can expand consciousness in different ways. It can bring to the audience something which that audience is not normally able to feel, to be moved by. All great virtuosos, all great performers, are emoters. They are people who should stir you, who bring to you an intensity of emotional life and of realization of deepest factors within yourself, which is often difficult for us to reach in our ordinary life.

One may in special cases affect people by single tones, but generally speaking in music what is important is the **relationship** that is established between vibrations and tones. Music is based on relationship. A chord is a relationship between a number of simultaneous tones. A melody is an evolving relationship between successive sounds. However, when you are dealing with musical relationship it is very important at first to make clear what kind of entities are being related. We will see in a moment that it applies not only to music, but also to human society or to any group relationship whatsoever. Music is a practical application of a system of group-relationship — between **what?** Well, it can be two different things, and it is essential for us to realize what the two different things are. There are such things as notes, and there are also tones. Very interestingly, the words **note** and **tone** are composed of the same letters, slightly reversed, but there is a great difference between a music of notes and a music of tones.

Our Western music is essentially a music of notes. Oriental music or archaic, primordial music — magical music — was essentially a music of tones. In our Western music notes are the edge of intervals. They are abstract entities which are related together in terms of such things as scales and tonality — major, minor — and other types of patterns. Let me stress that they are essentially abstract entities. If you study in a musical conservatory or university — or at least if you did study — it may be changed now, but in Europe,

particularly, and also in America of fifty or thirty years ago, it was commonplace — you were told that if you are a composer, you must never compose at the piano. You must never hear what you compose. Your composition has to be the product of a definite and systematized arrangement of notes, according to definite patterns and conventional regulations.

In Oriental music, everything is based on tones. A tone is a living entity. In India — and to some extent in China, but very specifically in India — a musical tone is the body of a god. Tones and special groups of tones are used in relation to the time of the day and the year, in relation to seasonal changes, natural rhythms and energies. In a certain sense, there are no false notes; anything may happen between the tones because they are living entities, and they can relate to one another by subtle glissandos or undulations. It is the quality of the **livingness** of those tones which counts, whereas in Europe, if you do not strike exactly that note you make a wrong note.

In Asia it was only during the Classical period at the courts of kings or rajahs that music also became to some extent formalized into a very definite system of rules — rules which had to do with the esthetical or formal values. Still it retained at all times a very basic quality of livingness and the realization that it is through tone that man could reach higher consciousness and that certain elements in man's nature could be changed. There is the famous story of the **Rag Dipak**, a type of chant which when properly sung would set afire everything around it because it brought to a focus, the element, Fire. In other words, there is a very definite difference between the typical classical Europe and the music of early periods in Asia. I grew strongly aware of what this difference meant when I came to America in 1917. I began to tell musicians that Oriental music had just as much value for the culture from which it was born as our Western music has for us. And of course everybody thought I was slightly insane.

Today the situation has somewhat changed but still there usually is a great reluctance in institutions of learning along musical lines to realize that what we call the fundamentals of music are not fundamentals of Music, but fundamentals of **European** music, and that **human music** is not merely European music. There are "musics" of many types which have to be recognized as realities in them selves. What really happened since the time of Debussy, who began to introduce in our music a few Oriental scales, has been an attempt, mostly unconscious, to dis-Europeanize music, to break away from the basic concept, canons, and strict regulation of our classical music.

One may call this a process of musical deconditioning — just as young people are passing through various stages of commune living or sensitivity training in order to decondition themselves in some way, in order to break away from the regulations and the patterns — abstract intellectual patterns — of our European society. Thus, much of what happened with Debussy and Stravinsky, and in a somewhat different way in Scriabin's music which is very profoundly mystical and transforming music, was an attempt to really produce a completely new quality of tone, to discover a new value for music; and it is, unfortunately, what musicians and especially critics have very great difficulty in

understanding. Also the neoclassical movement followed the First World War — when Stravinsky, then an exile from Russia, turned back to the classical Past. He became so frightened [by the power he had released in *Sacre du Printemps*] that he had to go back to the sixteenth century to feel secure. The same thing happened to some extent in America also, and much of that which was started in the Twenties was stopped because neoclassicism had become so fashionable and powerful. I remember always the famous sentence of Varèse, "Music must sound." It seems to be a common sense statement, but actually it was a revolutionary slogan. Everybody thought he was terrible!

When you reach the level where you truly deal with sound, with vibrant tone and with the **quality** of human beings, you find that there are two basically different ways in which the tones you are using can be related. I have spoken of these for many years as "the consonant and dissonant orders" of relationship. This is a very broad subject which I can only touch here. It refers not only to music, but also to society as a whole or to any group formation whatsoever.

First of all we have to realize that the subjective feeling of what is consonant and what is dissonant changes all the time. Chords which sounded awful fifty years ago are now taken for granted. The **feeling** of dissonance changes, nevertheless there exists a very basic difference between what you might call the consonant order and the dissonant order of musical relationship — and likewise of social relationship. Actually this is a very simple difference, but like so many simple things, hardly anybody thinks of it. When you are dealing with a certain type of group organization, essentially characterized by the old tribal order of society you see human beings who are linked together by a common Great Ancestor, a common ideal of unity in the past. This is the root power which brings them together, which gives them their unity. They live in a common land, have a common tradition, a common language, a common religion; the god of that religion is the spiritual Ancestor, the Soul of the tribe. You have there a type of organization where unity is back of you, in the past. The One is becoming the Many; the one Ancestor has many children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and so on — all of the same common type.

When, on the other hand you consider people with entirely different cultural background (language, religion and social temperament) who come together **in order to reach a common purpose** to reach a unity which is **ahead** of them, to develop a sense of working together, of co-operation individuals dedicated to something which is ahead of them, in the future — a totally different situation is encountered. You are starting with individuals who are different; then somehow those differences are becoming harmonized by a **common purpose**, a common decision, a common will to achieve something which is of value to all and which they all consciously recognize as individual persons.

In the tribal order there are no "individuals" because in a sense every tribesman is just a specimen of a common type with a common origin. But where the dissonant order of relationship prevails, if harmony is achieved, that harmony is something that had to be worked for, striven for, created. It is not something anyone can take for granted. It creates problems — problems that must be solved.

A similar situation unfolds in a music based on certain types of intervals, certain types of relationships between tones which have a dissonant character. The character is dissonant, because the tones are not related to a common ancestor, a common root-sound, a tonic. In the consonant type of music — in the C-major scale with its tonic and dominant, (the famous tonal C-major chord) and with all the regular progressions and modulations on which the Western classical music of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is based — you are dealing with a tribal kind of order. The tonic is the king, the old powerful king; behind it, the fundamental tone of the Harmonic Series is at least implied. All consonant chords and melodic progressions are theoretically based on the Harmonic Series. In acoustics you speak of fundamental tone and overtones. There is a long series of overtones, in a sense an infinite one; and those overtones are all related to that fundamental according to an **arithmetical** progression. That is to say, if the fundamental is one hundred vibrations per second, the first overtone is two hundred vibrations per second; the second, three hundred; the third, four hundred, etc. This is arithmetic progression. The unity adds itself to itself in order to create a progeny, thus simply duplicating and multiplying its own type.

The other type of music is based essentially on something else, or at least partly on something else. It is based on cycles — series of fifths, series of fourths, series of intervals which are equal intervals and which therefore are not considered to arise from the same fundamental. If you take the piano key-board, you see there about seven octaves. Now, let us start with the lower C and go to the seventh octave above the C. Within these seven octaves you can also pair a series of twelve fifth intervals — C, G, D, A, E, B, F sharp and so on. These twelve fifths take about the same space as seven octaves. This musical space is really our musical universe. This cycle of fifths gives you the twelve notes of the chromatic scale.

You have also the cycle of fourths which extends to about five octaves. A very interesting thing is that the cycles of twelve fifths, which equal seven octaves, equal seven octaves **plus** a little, small interval which is called the Pythagorean "comma." A series of twelve fifths is always a little larger than the seven octaves.

Here you have two very different principles: the principle on which the series of the seven octaves is based is the principle of the Harmonic Series. It is an arithmetic progression and it refers to the very process of life and of the multiplication of the seed. But when you are dealing with series of fifths or fourths (that is, with geometrical progressions) it is the same relationship which is added to itself not the same frequency, but the same **relationship** between two tones. This geometrical kind of relationship belongs to the level of the creative mind; it is creative rather than procreative.

It is quite important to understand these matters when one hears much of my music or the last compositions of Scriabin. Most of my music is more or less based on series of fifths. If you listen attentively those of you who are musicians — in 'Stars' for instance, and also at the end of "Sunburst" — you will hear constantly repeated such series of fifths. You will find it also at the end of the last movement of **Syntony**, "Apotheosis". The fifths of course are not always perfect fifths. They are modified by sharps and flats, and so on. But still the

fundamental principle can be sensed. The chords, in order to become harmonized — a dissonant kind of harmony — do not depend on tonality, but on the proper spacing of dissonant centers. If you have different people coming together in a group — people of different countries, habits, and temperaments — it is very important that you space them right, that they have enough space to live their own life. They should come together at certain times in a certain way. They should join in some kind of ritual which helps to build the harmony of the whole. If they are too close together, they begin to rub against each other and conflicts arise — discords instead of a dissonant harmony.

The same thing occurs in music. Thus you find in my music extended chords which provide a definite sense of **spacing** between notes, notes which are supposed to be in dissonant relationship. These harmonies can be disturbing at first, but eventually you can learn to realize what is their essential purpose; and this purpose is to stimulate you, to arouse you, to break down crystallization, to decondition you from the paternalistic order of the tribal society which still pervades our so-called Christian world. It is to make you live a more intense, creative, transforming type of life.

I began with music to demonstrate such a purpose, then developed it in different ways. The basic aim is to provoke a realization, or experience of wholeness, of a resonant vibration which includes all sorts of disparate vibrations, but all arranged in such a way that they carry a definite meaning, a definite power of inducing a new level, a new kind, of consciousness.

Take also the gongs of Buddhism. Buddhism has very little typical music, but the gong is the music of Buddhism because in a gong — in those huge gongs from Java, China and even to some extent in India — you have a brotherhood of tones. The term "brotherhood" is not very good because one should not speak here of "brothers" but rather of "companions". In the gong we hear a companionship of tones potentially brought together in a definite form and a definite structure, and as it were hammered together so as to create a compound tone which is infinitely resonant and contains in itself a multitude of tones. In the same way, when you hear a piano, you don't hear the strings of the piano. What you hear is really the sounding board. A grand piano really is a modern gong, a gong that can be infinitely modified by striking constantly different centers of resonance.

It is that kind of music to which you are subjected tonight. I hope that it will bring to you some sort of a realization of a possibility which perhaps you have not been aware of, or confusedly so, in the past. To really help you to live a more intense, a more creative life — this is the purpose I have always had in music, in other arts, or in my philosophy, astrology — indeed in whatever I have done. It is always an attempt to bring the human person away from the old traditional pattern of a classical, set and definite kind of society, and to lead it to new horizons where the creative factor in what really is man can be seen operating in full and glorious freedom.

I thank you.