Compilation of Extracts from the Bahá'í Writings on Music

Prepared by the Research Department
of the Universal House of Justice

March 1972
Revised June 1996

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From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh

Intone, O My servant, the verses of God that have been received by thee, as intoned by them who have drawn nigh unto Him, that the sweetness of thy melody may kindle thine own soul, and attract the hearts of all men....

(*Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983), p. 295) **[1]**

We have made it lawful for you to listen to music and singing. Take heed, however, lest listening thereto should cause you to overstep the bounds of propriety and dignity. Let your joy be the joy born of My Most Great Name, a Name that bringeth rapture to the heart, and filleth with ecstasy the minds of all who have drawn nigh unto God. We, verily, have made music as a ladder for your souls, a means whereby they may be lifted up unto the realm on high; make it not, therefore, as wings to self and passion. Truly, We are loath to see you numbered with the foolish.

(The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Paragraph 51) **[2]**

Blessed is he who, at the hour of dawn, centering his thoughts on God, occupied with His remembrance, and supplicating His forgiveness, directeth his steps to the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár and, entering therein, seateth himself in silence to listen to the verses of God, the Sovereign, the Mighty, the All-Praised. Say: The Mashriqu'l-Adhkár is each and every building which hath been erected in cities and villages for the celebration of My praise. Such is the name by which it hath been designated before the throne of glory, were ye of those who understand.

They who recite the verses of the All-Merciful in the most melodious of tones will perceive in them that with which the sovereignty of earth and heaven can never be compared. From them they will inhale the divine fragrance of My worlds—worlds which today none can discern save those who have been endowed with vision through this sublime, this beauteous Revelation. Say: These verses draw hearts that are pure unto those spiritual worlds that can neither be expressed in words nor intimated by allusion. Blessed be those who hearken.

(The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Paragraphs 115 and 116) **[3]**

Teach your children the verses revealed from the heaven of majesty and power, so that, in most melodious tones, they may recite the Tablets of the All-Merciful in the alcoves within the Mashriqu'l-Adhkárs. Whoever hath been transported by the rapture born of adoration for My Name, the Most Compassionate, will recite the verses of God in such wise as to captivate the hearts of those yet wrapped in slumber. Well is it with him who hath quaffed the Mystic Wine of everlasting life from the utterance of his merciful Lord in My Name—a Name through which every lofty and majestic mountain hath been reduced to dust.

(The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Paragraph 150) **[4]**

From the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

This wonderful age has rent asunder the veils of superstition and has condemned the prejudice of the people of the East.

Among some of the nations of the Orient, music and harmony was not approved of, but the Manifested Light, Bahá'u'lláh, in this glorious period has revealed in Holy Tablets that singing and music are the spiritual food of the hearts and souls. In this dispensation, music is one of the arts that is highly approved and is considered to be the cause of the exaltation of sad and desponding hearts.

Therefore ... set to music the verses and the divine words so that they may be sung with soul-stirring melody in the Assemblies and gatherings, and that the hearts of the listeners may become tumultuous and rise towards the Kingdom of Abhá in supplication and prayer.

(*Bahá'í World Faith: Selected Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, rev. ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976), p. 378) **[5]**

Thank thou God that thou art instructed in music and melody, singing with pleasant voice the glorification and praise of the Eternal, the Living. I pray to God that thou mayest employ this talent in prayer and supplication, in order that the souls may become quickened, the hearts may become attracted and all may become inflamed with the fire of the love of God!

(*Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas*, vol. 3 (Chicago: Bahá'í Publishing Society, 1916), p. 512) **[6]**

...although sound is but the vibrations of the air which affect the tympanum of the ear, and vibrations of the air are but an accident among the accidents which depend upon the air, consider how much marvelous notes or a charming song influence the spirits! A wonderful song giveth wings to the spirit and filleth the heart with exaltation....

(*Bahá'í World Faith*, p. 334) **[7]**

The utmost joy was attained, for—praise be to God!—the friends of the Merciful passed some time on that day joyous and singing in the land of the Mashrak-el-Azcar and enjoyed commemorating the Lord of the verses with the greatest joy....

I am hopeful that, during the coming Rizwan[1], a great feast shall be held in the land of the Mashrak-el-Azcar, a spiritual celebration prepared and the melodies of the violin and the mandolin and hymns in praise and glorification of the Lord of Hosts make all the audience joyous and ecstatic.

(*Tablets of Abdul Baha Abbas*, vol. 1 (Chicago: Bahai Publishing Committee, 1930) **[8]**

O maid-servant of God! Sing with beautiful melodies in the meetings of the maid-servants, praising and glorifying thy Supreme Lord.

(*Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas*, vol. 1, p. 65) **[9]**

O thou attracted one of the Kingdom! Complete thou the study of the art of music and sacrifice thyself more or less to the Lord of the Kingdom.

(*Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas*, vol. 3, p. 671) **[10]**

...a musical and melodious voice imparteth life to an attracted heart, but lureth toward lust those souls who are engulfed in passion and desire.

(*The Divine Art of Living*, rev. ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1979), p. 100) **[11]**

O servant of Bahá! Music is regarded as a praiseworthy science at the Threshold of the Almighty, so that thou mayest chant verses at large gatherings and congregations in a most wondrous melody and raise such hymns of praise at the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár to enrapture the Concourse on High. By virtue of this, consider how much the art of music is admired and praised. Try, if thou canst, to use spiritual melodies, songs and tunes, and to bring the earthly music into harmony with the celestial melody. Then thou wilt notice what a great influence music hath and what heavenly joy and life it conferreth. Strike up such a melody and tune as to cause the nightingales of divine mysteries to be filled with joy and ecstasy.

(From a Tablet—translated from the Persian) **[12]**

Extracts from the Utterances of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

What a wonderful meeting this is! These are the children of the Kingdom. The song we have just listened to was very beautiful in melody and words. The art of music is divine and effective. It is the food of the soul and spirit. Through the power and charm of music the spirit of man is uplifted. It has wonderful sway and effect in the hearts of children, for their hearts are pure, and melodies have great influence in them. The latent talents with which the hearts of these children are endowed will find expression through the medium of music. Therefore, you must exert yourselves to make them proficient; teach them to sing with excellence and effect. It is incumbent upon each child to know something of music, for without knowledge of this art the melodies of instrument and voice cannot be rightly enjoyed. Likewise, it is necessary that the schools teach it in order that the souls and hearts of the pupils may become vivified and exhilarated and their lives be brightened with enjoyment.

(*The Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912*, rev. ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), p. 52) **[13]**

Music is one of the important arts. It has a great effect upon the human spirit. Musical melodies are a certain something which prove to be accidental upon etheric vibrations, for voice is nothing but the expression of vibrations, which, reaching the tympanum, affect the nerves of hearing. Musical melodies are, therefore, those peculiar effects produced by, or from, vibration. However, they have the keenest effect upon the spirit. In sooth, although music is a material affair, yet its tremendous effect is spiritual, and its greatest attachment is to the realm of the spirit. If a person desires to deliver a discourse, it will prove more effectual after musical melodies. The ancient Greeks, as well as Persian philosophers, were in the habit of delivering their discourses in the following manner:—First, playing a few musical melodies, and when their audience attained a certain receptivity thereby they would leave their instruments at once and begin their discourse. Among the most renowned musicians of Persia was one named Barbod, who, whenever a great question had been pleaded for at the court of the King, and the Ministry had failed to persuade the King, they would at once refer the matter to Barbod, whereupon he would go with his instrument to the court and play the most appropriate and touching music, the end being at once attained, because the King was immediately affected by the touching musical melodies, certain feelings of generosity would swell up in his heart, and he would give way. You may try this: If you have a great desire and wish to attain your end, try to do so on a large audience after a great solo has been rendered, but it must be on an audience on which music is effective, for there are some people who are like stones, and music cannot affect stones.

Music is an important means to the education and development of humanity, but the only true way is through the Teachings of God. Music is like this glass, which is perfectly pure and polished. It is precisely like this pure chalice before us, and the Teachings of God, the utterances of God, are like the water. When the glass or chalice is absolutely pure and clear, and the water is perfectly fresh and limpid, then it will confer Life; wherefore, the Teachings of God, whether they

be in the form of anthems or communes or prayers, when they are melodiously sung, are most impressive.

It was for this reason that His Holiness David sang the psalms in the Holy of Holies at Jerusalem with sweet melodies. *In this Cause the art of music is of paramount importance.* The Blessed Perfection, when He first came to the barracks (Acca) repeated this statement: "If among the immediate followers there had been those who could have played some musical instrument, i.e., flute or harp, or could have sung, it would have charmed every one." In short, musical melodies form an important role in the associations, or outward and inward characteristics, or qualities of man, for it is the inspirer or motive power of both the material and spiritual susceptibilities. What a motive power it is in all feelings of love! When man is attached to the Love of God, music has a great effect upon him.

("Table Talk", Acca, July 1909, quoted in "Herald of the South" (January 13, 1933), pp. 2–3) **[14]**

Voice is the vibration of the air, and is like the waves of the sea. The voice is produced through the instrumentality of the lips, throat, teeth, tongue, etc. These cause a wave in the air, and this wave reaches the nerve of the ear, which is thereby affected. This is the voice....

There are two kinds of voices. One when the complete instrument is perfect, then the emission of sound is perfect. The second is when the instrument is imperfect, it affects the voice in such a way that it is far from pleasing. What we have just said refers to the voice itself.

It is natural for the heart and spirit to take pleasure and enjoyment in all things that show forth symmetry, harmony, and perfection. For instance: a beautiful house, a well designed garden, a symmetrical line, a graceful motion, a well written book, pleasing garments—in fact, all things that have in themselves grace or beauty are pleasing to the heart and spirit—therefore, it is most certain that a true voice causes deep pleasure.

What is music? It is a combination of harmonious sounds. What is poetry? It is a symmetrical collection of words. Therefore, they are pleasing through harmony and rhythm. Poetry is much more effective and complete than prose. It stirs more deeply, for it is of a finer composition.

A fine voice when joined to beautiful music causes a great effect, for both are desirable and pleasing. All these have in themselves an organization, and are constructed on natural law. Therefore, they correspond to the order of existence like something which would fit into a mold. A true voice fits into the mold of nature. When it is so, this affects the nerves, and they affect the heart and spirit.

In the world of existence physical things have a connection with spiritual realities. One of these things is the voice, which connects itself with the spirit; and the spirit can be uplifted by this means—for though it is a physical thing, it is one of the material, natural organizations—therefore, it is effective.

All forms when understood aright gladden the spirit. Melodies are like water. The voice is like a goblet. The pure water in a pure glass is pleasing. Therefore, it is acceptable. But even though the water be pure, if it be in a goblet which is not so, this receptacle will make it unacceptable. Therefore, a faulty voice even though the music be good, is unpleasing.

In short: melodies, though they are material, are connected with the spiritual, therefore, they produce a great effect. A certain kind of melody makes the spirit happy, another kind makes it sad, another excites it to action.

All these feelings can be caused by voice and music, for through the nerves it moves and stirs the spirit. Even over animals, music has an effect. For example: When they wish to take a camel

over a desert road, they attach to him some bells, or they play upon a flute, and this sound prevents him from realizing the fatigue of the journey; his nerves are affected, but he does not have an increase of thought, he feels nothing but physical sensation....

Whatever is in the heart of man, melody moves and awakens. If a heart full of good feelings and a pure voice are joined together, a great effect is produced. For instance: if there be love in the heart, through melody, it will increase until its intensity can scarcely be borne; but if bad thoughts are in the heart, such as hatred, it will increase and multiply. For instance: the music used in war awakens the desire for bloodshed. The meaning is that melody causes whatever feeling is in the heart to increase.

Some feelings occur accidentally and some have a foundation. For example: some people are naturally kind, but they may be accidentally upset by a wave of anger. But if they hear music, the true nature will reassert itself. Music really awakens the real, natural nature, the individual essence.

With whatever purpose you listen to music, that purpose will be increased. For instance: there will be a concert given for the poor and unfortunate, and if you go there thinking of the aim, the music will increase your compassion and generosity. This is the reason why music is used in war. And so it is with all the things that cause the excitation of the nerves.

('Abdu'l-Bahá's words to Mrs. Mary L. Lucas, as quoted in "A Brief Account of My Visit to Acca" (Chicago: Bahá'í Publishing Society, 1905), pp. 11–14) **[15]**

From Letters Written on Behalf of Shoghi Effendi

With regard to singing some of the hymns written by Mrs. ..., he thinks that it would be a splendid idea and when Mrs. Lua Getsinger was living with the Master's family, she often sang them and tried to teach them to the small children in the family.

(22 March 1928 to an individual believer) **[16]**

He thinks that it would especially be beautiful to see little children singing them in groups....

(22 March 1928 to an individual believer) **[17]**

The Guardian values the hymns that you are so beautifully composing. They certainly contain the realities of the Faith, and will indeed help you to give the Message to the young ones. It is the music which assists us to affect the human spirit; it is an important means which helps us to communicate with the soul. The Guardian hopes that through this assistance you will give the Message to the people, and will attract their hearts.

(15 November 1932 to an individual believer, cited in *Bahá'í News*, no. 71, February 1933), p. 2) **[18]**

In regard to the main question you have raised in connection with the singing of hymns at Bahá'í meetings: He wishes me to assure you that he sees no objection to it whatsoever. The element of music is, no doubt, an important feature of all Bahá'í gatherings. The Master Himself has emphasized its importance. But the friends should in this, as well as in all other things, not pass beyond the limits of moderation, and should take great care to maintain the strict spiritual character of all their gatherings. Music should lead to spirituality, and provided it creates such an atmosphere there can be no objection against it.

A distinction of vital importance should, however, be clearly established between the singing of hymns composed by the believers and the chanting of the Holy Utterances.

(17 March 1935 to an individual believer) **[19]**

With regard to your question concerning the use of music in the Nineteen Day Feasts, he wishes you to assure all the friends that he not only approves of such a practice, but thinks it even advisable that the believers should make use, in their meetings, of hymns composed by Bahá'ís themselves, and also of such hymns, poems and chants as are based on the Holy Words.

(7 April 1935 to an individual believer) **[20]**

Although now is only the very beginning of Bahá'í art, yet the friends who feel they are gifted in such matters should endeavour to develop and cultivate their gifts and through their works to reflect, however inadequately, the Divine Spirit which Bahá'u'lláh has breathed into the world.

(4 November 1937 to an individual believer) **[21]**

Music, as one of the arts, is a natural cultural development, and the Guardian does not feel that there should be any cultivation of "Bahá'í Music" any more than we are trying to develop a Bahá'í school of painting or writing. The believers are free to paint, write and compose as their talents guide them. If music is written, incorporating the sacred writings, the friends are free to make use of it, but it should never be considered a requirement at Bahá'í meetings to have such music. The further away the friends keep from any set forms, the better, for they must realize that the Cause is absolutely universal, and what might seem a beautiful addition to their mode of celebrating a Feast, etc., would perhaps fall on the ears of people of another country as unpleasant sounds—and vice versa. As long as they have music for its own sake it is all right, but they should not consider it Bahá'í music.

(20 July 1946 to a National Spiritual Assembly) **[22]**

Instrumental music may be used at the Bahá'í Feasts.

(20 August 1956 to an individual believer) **[23]**

As regards producing a book of Bahá'í songs, your understanding that there is no cultural expression which could be called Bahá'í at this time (distinctive music, literature, art, architecture, etc., being the flower of the civilization and not coming at the beginning of a new Revelation), is correct. However, that does not mean that we haven't Bahá'í songs, in other words, songs written by Bahá'ís on Bahá'í subjects....

(21 September 1957 to a National Spiritual Assembly) **[24]**

You should try and work out the questions about songs with the Reviewing Committee or the National Spiritual Assembly. A Bahá'í can write songs, mentioning the Faith. This is not "Bahá'í Music", but music in which the Faith is mentioned. This is probably what the National Spiritual Assembly meant.

(24 October 1957 to an individual believer) **[25]**

Notes

1 April 21, 1909. ↩

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