Sounding Statues: The Symbolism of Musical Instruments

What did he do with his breast bone? He made him a violl to play thereupon. What did he do with his fingers so small? He made him pegs to his violl withall. What did he do with her nose-ridge? Unto his violl he made him a bridge.

"The Two Sisters," a British Traditional Ballad.

A technological society defines most inventions, most devices, in terms of their supposed primary function as tools. Thus, a car is seen consciously mainly as a useful device for transporting us across the town or the country; its product, we believe, is transportation; and we have the greatest difficulty in understanding its other symbolic, psychological, and historical roots and functions. And yet, obviously, the automobile, in its design, appearance, wastefulness, illusionary power, and indulgence of our restlessness lays bare the very heart of our society—its fantasies, its hidden preoccupation, its dreams.

Similarly, a musical instrument to us is a tool made to produce musical sound, and the "better" the sound quality, the more highly we rate the instrument. We admire workmanship and "decoration," of course, and we readily admit that the rich woods and complex shapes of instruments are beautiful, but our conscious thoughts, shaped by the bias of technology and functionalism, dwell but little on the form of an instrument. It was not always so; it is not everywhere so; indeed, it is not so in the deepest sense even for us.

All over the world—in legend, in shape, in lore, in nomenclature—there is evidence that musical instruments are not only (or even primarily) technological devices that are made only—mainly—for sound-production. Indeed it may be the other way round: a society, using whatever natural materials and constructional techniques are available, shapes instruments after its own symbolic preoccupations. The sound quality is but a result of this process. Instruments, and indeed the very music that they make, touch deep, strong roots in humankind. We need not look far to find stories describing the magical origin of music—and we need not look for these only in societies separated from us by thousands of years or thousands of miles. This theme occurs often in Irish and Scottish tradition, as is demonstrable in the following tale:

In the course of a banquet given at Dunvegan Castle in Scotland, the Lord suggested a competition in which all pipers present would participate. Piper after piper took his turn, but when at last it came the turn of the local resident piper, MacCrimmon, it turned out that he was drunk—hopelessly drunk. Thereupon the chief insisted that a young and unskilled boy take MacCrimmon's place. In despair, the lad rushed out and flung himself on a hillside, weeping bitterly. Suddenly a fairy appeared and helped him acquire a silver pipe chanter. When the boy played upon it, music more beautiful than ever before heard floated through the glen. It is hardly necessary to point out that the boy won the contest without difficulty.

Thus, it is the instrument itself that possesses the magical property; and this idea, of course, is reminiscent of the magical swords and ships of medieval legend, which of themselves possessed miraculous powers. Similar ideas about music are prevalent in Morocco: a person there who wishes to learn to play a musical instrument goes to the tomb of a certain saint, leaves an offering, and invokes the aid of the holy man's spirit. The following day he awakes with an ability to play a musical instrument. Here again, this ability is specifically connected to magic.

We very often find a specific legendary or physical connection between the human body and a musical instrument. This anthropomorphism is evident on such European instruments as the viola d'amore, which is generally surmounted with a carved human head. It is quite obvious in Sweden, where the player of the keyed fiddle known as nycckelharpa "regarded his instrument as a living thing and gave it a woman's name. Its eyes were the sound holes and the instrument had to be hung with these the right way up.... Instruction by a water spirit who charmed souls with his playing is a persistent feature and the powers of darkness in the form of black hounds or the like are also said to have helped players become skillful musicians."

Far to the east of Sweden, the Mongols make the bridge of their fiddle khol-khuur from the lower jawbone of a human being. In Tibet, the ritual trumpet made from a human thigh-bone—often the player's father's—plays an important part in religious ceremony. One of the most striking references to this anthropomorphic view of musical instruments is found, of all places, amongst the Arabs, who are forbidden by the Islamic religion from overt anthropomorphism. This tale was first written down in the ninth century by Ibn Salama: it might be summarised as follows:

The first man to make and play the Arab lute, ud-ud (from which Europe gets both the name, lute, and the instrument itself) was Lam'ik (the Biblical Lamech). Though

1 Trumpets from Tibet (upper) and Japan, made of human bone
2 Nycckelharpa, probably from Sweden
he had long been married, and though he had fifty wives and two hundred concubines, he had no sons, but at last, when he was an old man, a son was born to
him, and he rejoiced. But the son died at the age of five, and his father was so
grieved that he took the body, hung it on a tree, and said that he would never lose
sight of his son’s body. But the body decayed until only the thigh, the leg, the
foot, and the toes remained. So the father took a piece of wood, and following the
shape of his son’s body, the wood, he formed a neck to represent the head, a leg-box the same size as the foot, and pegs like the toes, to this
he added strings like his son’s sinews.

Then he began to play on it; to weep, to
lament, until he became blind.

There is no space here to probe into the
meaning of the father’s act in hanging the
body in a tree, though it seems clear that
there may be an analogy to the Christian
crucifixion and even to the agony of the Norse
god Odin, whose suffering as he hung for nine
nights on a wind-swept tree led to his learn-
ing the Nine Magic Songs. As with these acts,
the body of the Arab boy hung in a tree be-
came the subject of a kind of idol—this in
case as a musical instrument. At the outset,
we quoted a Scottish version of the Ballad of
the “Two Sisters.” The tale, in outline, tells us of
two maidens who both love the same
young man; he, however, prefers the younger.
The older sister drowns the younger, whose
body, when fished out of the sea, is made into
a fiddle or a harp. In some versions, the story
goes on to relate that when the newly-made
instrument is played, it tells the sorry and
grimy tale of the maiden’s death. Thus, though
the girl is killed, her voice is heard again
as an instrument.

Central to both the story of the lute and
that of the “Two Sisters” is the idea of a
kind of symbolic resurrection in the form of
a musical instrument which, however little it
may look like its human model, is none
theless founded upon it and sings with its voice.
From this insight, it is but a step to a re-
examination of the Orpheus legend, which has had
a long and continuing influence far beyond
the boundaries of its native Greece. As an
example we may refer to another Scottish
ballad, “The Two Brothers,” where a bereaved
maiden, weeping over the grave of her slain
lover, is said to have
...put the small pipes to her mouth.
And she harped both far and near.
Till she harped the small birds off the
briers.

And her true love out of his grave.
In this, and all other versions of the
Orpheus story, it is the power of song and
instrumental performance that lifts the lover,
however briefly, out of the realms of death.
There are two closely related ideas here: in

Lute with bull’s head and legs from the Royal Tombs of Ur excavated by the Joint Expedition of the British Museum and the University Museum. About 2500 B.C. (Above) Monocular plaque from the sound-box of the lyre from Ur.

the first place, certain instruments are
modelled after human beings and, thus in a
way, are sounding statues. At the same time,
the sound of an instrument can be sufficiently
powerful to charm the dead out of their
groves. Moreover, this principle operates in
yet a third way. The flute, for example, is
associated in most parts of the world with
resurrection, and the thereby associated con-
fertility. The Babylonian god, Tamm
Mun, was able to revive the dead when he
played on his sacred flute. Similar examples
could be given from many cultures.

Freidun says that he is the phallic
shape of the flute, that gives it its strong
power, and this idea is supported by the fact
that the flute is taboo to women in many
societies (e.g., in parts of New Guinea). How-
ever, in the many societies where flutes are
used in pairs, they are generally known as
male and female; again, flutes are most fre-
quently manufactured from cane or bamboo,
and these materials, with their capacity for
extremely rapid growth, have a fertility sig-
nificance all their own. Thus, though the
Freidun hypothesis may be true in certain
places, there is no reason to assume that every
society uses such symbolism.

In many parts of the world, musical in-
struments are associated in shape or legend
with powerful and significant animals, whose
power is conserved in the instruments after
the death of the animal itself. In Africa, dur-
ing the third millennium B.C., the harp for
the ritual kettledrum, known as the jilius, was
made as follows:
A perfect black bull is selected and
brought to the Temple; offerings are
made, and the animal is stung; twelve
images of the gods are placed near the
beast; the body of the drum is set in
place. Incantations are whispered to
the animal through a reed; a hymn
is chanted; the animal is slain. The skin
is removed and treated, the twelve
images are placed within the bowl;
the skin is fastened to the drum. The bull,
now personified in the drum, is taken
finally into the presence of the gods of
the temple.

In this account it is quite clear that the
eminence and the spirit of the slain bull
would somehow survive in the material
and sound of the drum. The bull, of course,
bad
and still has a powerful significance in
Western Asia and the Mediterranean; the
term, “Bull-God,” is common in Mesopo-
tamia; the sacred bull, Apis, was of great
importance in ancient Egypt; the Minotaur
was a central figure in Cretan cult. Nowhere,
however, was the bull more important than in
Mesopotamia, and we might expect, therefore,
to find considerable further evidence of this
in the symbolism of musical instruments. And
indeed, many lyres are surrounded with
carved bulls’ heads, or in some cases the
sound-chamber of the lyre is made in the form
of a bull’s body. These bull-lyres were used
both within and without the temples. Since
the city-god of Ur was known as “Lord Wild
Bull,” it is not inappropriate that a number of
surviving instruments and representations of
instruments should have been recovered
there. Again, the connection between the
lyre and the bull extends even to Greek my-
thought in a less specific form. Myth reveals
that Hermes, having stolen Apollo’s caduceus,
was deeply troubled, since he had been called
to Zeus’ presence to explain his misdeed—
though Hermes was at the time a horned
babe. On his way to the presence of this
majoestic god, he by accident kicked an empty
tortoise-shell, with the sinews still clinging
to the inside. He picked it up in the realiza-
tion that this new invention, presented to
Zeus and Apollo, might well help alone for
his transgression. And so it was: Hermes,
having improved the instrument by the addi-
tion of several horns, played it for Apollo, and
then, seeing that the god was charmed by it,
gave it to him. Tortoise-shell was in fact used by the ancient Greeks as the
resonator of their lyres; and indeed, it is the
material used today occasionally in those few places (mostly in East African cultures) where
the lyre is still played.

The theft of Zeus’ herds was atoned for
by the Lyre; the Lyre, itself, is certainly a
ceremonial symbol. A lyre, seen from the
front, with its two crosspieces resembling
horns and its skin covering the oval resonating
chamber (often with two horns resembling
eyes), can be seen to resemble the hooved

The legendary musician Mountsalon, right, stands holding a tortoise-shell lyre in the presence of two Maenads on an ancient
red-figured vase of about 450 B.C. The Muse at the left holds an order, a
double-pipe instrument, and the Muse in the lower center is playing a tri-
der of the lyre. Hung on the wall is a kithara.
1 European viola da gamba

2 Painted pottery figures of musicians playing (left to right) a harp, a yu-p'u, and a sheng. China. Tang Dynasty, A.D. 814-806

3 Japanese moon guitar

4 European lyre-guitar
whale. Listening to this sound, she fell asleep, and when her husband came upon her and understood that the sound of this Aeolian music had calmed her, he made a framework of wood for the strings. [In Ireland of old, there were three categories of music, and one of these, suintri, was music that caused the hearer to fall asleep.] In a Scottish version of the ballad, “Lady Isabel and the Elf-Knight,” the wicked knight performs similar magic:

He's put a harp into his hand,
He's harped them all asleep,
Except it was the king's daughter.
Who one wink couldisa get.

But what interests us mainly in this story of Canda is the use of the remains of a dead creature as the inspiration—and indeed the material—for the creation of a musical instrument.

A similar story is told in the Finnish national epic, the Kalevala. In this tale, the great hero of the cycle of stories, Wainamoineo, is sailing under a waterfall in a small boat when the vessel becomes stuck on the back of an enormous fish. Though others make the attempt, only Wainamoineo himself is able to slay the huge fish. After it is cooked and eaten, the hero, seeing the bones scattered, attempts to get the blacksmith, Ilmarinen, to make of them a musical instrument. But the smith refuses, and Wainamoineo himself takes on the task.

And he made a harp of pikebones.

Fit to give unending pleasure,
Out of what did he construct it?
Chiefly from the great pike's jawbones.
Whence obtained he pegs to suit it?
Of the teeth of pike he made them.
Out of what were harp strings fashioned?
From the hairs of Hilti's girding
No one, however, was able to draw music from the instrument; so discordant was it, that people listening to it gave it as their opinion that it should be cast back into the waters from whence it came. But the instrument itself answered:

No, I will not sink in water,
Nor will rest beneath the billows,
but will play for a musician.

Play for him who toiled to make me.

So Wainamoineo himself begins to play on the instrument, which is known as the kantele, and all creatures—men, birds, wolves, bears, and even fish—assemble to hear the marvelous music played by this “joyous and primeval minstrel.” In another part of the Kalevala, the glorious instrument is lost at sea in a magically induced storm, but Wainamoineo, nothing daunted, eventually constructs another. At first, however, he wanders disconsolate through the countryside mourning the lost kantele; in a thick woods he listens to a birch tree lamenting its fate. It has been stripped by children and girdled by
course made of wood. But the significance of the story is greater than this alone. In the famous and deeply poetic passage from The Thousand and One Nights known as "The Song of the Late," the instrument, mourning its former verdancy, sings:

A tree while ere I was the bulbul’s home. To whom for love I bowed my grass-green head; They moaned on me, and I their meaning learnt.

And in that moan my secret all men read; The woodman felled me without offense, And slender lute of me (as view me) made;

But when the fingers smite my strings, they tell How man despite his patience did me dead.

The felled tree lives on as an instrument, and we begin to see deeper meaning behind the juxtaposition of the human body and the tree from which it was hung in the tale given by Ibn Salama.

We have seen that Wainamoinen made the strings of his first kantele from horsehair, and of course this material is of fundamental importance to music, since it forms the bow-hair of nearly all fiddles— as well as the strings of a number of instruments. No creature in Eurasian belief is of greater or more fundamental importance than the horse, and thus we might expect that it would find its way into the lore of instruments as well as furnishing so prominent a constructional material. This indeed is so, and from Japan to Norway there is clear evidence that many stringed instruments have a symbolic relationship to the horse. Amongst the Mongols, the fiddle is provided with a carved horse’s head and, in this culture, which is so dependent on the horse as to have been dubbed a “horse culture” by anthropologists, this can hardly be simply an insignificant “decoration.” Indeed, a Mongol tale relates that the winged horse of the star-prince, exhausted and wounded, sank to the earth and died. The weeping prince caressed the body of his beloved steed, and while he did this, a miracle took place: the body of the horse was transformed into the first kha’hum (the Mongol horse-headed fiddle). The tuning pegs of the instrument are called chikhe (“ears”) and this lyre from Uganda

entirely incomprehensible at present. Yet, what can be more symbolic of the industrial age than the orchestra, with its uniformed functionaries, its managing director, its almost military precision? What, again, can be more redolent of the electronic age than the bridges that follow the rock and roll ensemble? Here every member of the group is linked by wires to the electronic heart of the ensemble; to complex electrical circuits—in fact, to mere wires. If the modern electric guitar and drum set betray their ancient origins in their shape, they equally betray, in their glittering plastic and electronic linkage, the new age growing, in an orderly—if not serene—way out of the old.

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Suggested Reading


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