

Mystic Cymbalism

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Sound Healing & Meditation with Finger Cymbals

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Finger

cymbals started working their magic in my life soon after I began playing them in 1975. Resistant at first, I quickly surrendered, reconnecting with a love of percussion that I had had since I was a child. I also came to love their high, light music. Playing them heartened me; it expanded my energy, lifting my spirit and helping me connect with others more easily.

A Sufi

master's inspiration

The

first time I heard Adnan Sarhan play a long meditation with finger cymbals was in the mid-1980's, He played them in the same unique, stream-of-consciousness style that is the hallmark of his drumming: arrhythmic, mesmerizing, and as rich in subtle sound variations as a mountain creek in spring. While he played, time vanished, and I found myself entering deep moving spaces, like diving into deep water. I resurfaced feeling rested to the bone, slowed down and

exquisitely present.

Adnan's

unorthodox creativity inspired me. At a time when I had only heard finger cymbals played in a traditional manner, using three or four basic sounds to play rhythmic patterns, his unpredictable, ringing flow of sound was profoundly interesting. I have always preferred improvising my dance, especially to unfamiliar music; in Adnan's drum and cymbal meditations, I saw a way to follow the unknown as a musician as well. I began to want to expand the expressive range of my cymbals. Moving towards that goal, I committed to regular practice.

My

solo practice sessions eventually yielded a wealth of insight into the art of playing finger cymbals - also called zills (Turkish). I began to realize that there was a lot missing in the Western body of knowledge around this instrument, and I applied myself to finding and filling in those missing pieces.

Zillwork

entrained

In

the past, I had noticed that while a group of dancers might play a rhythm together in time, the sound of their collective zillwork was often cacophonous. Drawing from the drumming and chanting experiences I had had over the years in Sufi workshops and summer camps with Adnan, I taught a group to merge with each other as they played together in unison. The resulting sound was truly synchronous - a complete transformation.

What

arose from the ashes of cacophony was a lush flight of blended resonance. All the different cymbals were unified in a rich tonal texture. Since I was accustomed to a certain degree of self-consciousness in students, what especially struck me during their entrainment was that they were absolutely absorbed and transfigured. They were not thinking anymore. Their absorbed unity created a much cleaner and more powerful effect in their zillwork.

Beyond

imagining

I met Amina Salah in the late 1990's. Adnan's zillwork had inspired her as well, and when I began working on *The Dancing Cymbalist* (©2007), she assisted me with computer skills in exchange for zill lessons. Our exchange turned out to have a significant influence on the content of the book. Since Amina was already a professional dancer and had studied zills with other teachers, including Sufi musicians in Egypt, she had very specific issues and goals. I was often challenged to formulate new material in order to answer some of her questions and needs. A number of times after a lesson with her, I was inspired to write whole new sections. In this way, *The Dancing Cymbalist* grew beyond anything I had originally imagined.

Apparently, it went beyond what anyone else had imagined either. When I finally published it and began to show it to my friends, several expressed a rather bewildered surprise. They told me they had expected "a little pamphlet". One friend even said, "I can't imagine writing a hundred and fifty pages about finger cymbals." This blind spot in the imagination seems to be a recurring theme in response to this work.

Dunya
Dianne McPherson, founder of Dancemeditation, also trained with Adnan. During a workshop at her winter retreat in 2003, she invited me to join her in playing a zill meditation. Although our duet was deeply rooted in Adnan's style, it was definitely something new - a revelation to both of us, since we both had only heard and played solo meditations before.

I came home with fresh inspiration, and Amina and I began to develop the duet form. A few days before our first concert (*Fire & Light*, 2005), I was telling a friend about it; our exchange went like this:

"Well...
are you going to dance?"

"No,
we're playing finger cymbals."

"Well...
is someone playing music for you?"

"No,
we're playing music, with finger
cymbals."

He
couldn't imagine it. How can you play an
entire concert with just finger cymbals? The question is a very good one.

You
see the difficulty; the common belief that finger cymbals are only played by
women while belly dancing has led to a belief that they are a limited
percussion instrument, even a toy. In truth, as with any other musical
instrument, the quality of professional finger cymbals is quite different from
toys; and, in the hands of a master, even a "simple" percussion
instrument can produce profound music.

Amina
and I are expanding our skills to play with other musicians, and also playing
in other settings for new audiences. One such setting was a short set in a
performance of solo and duet improvisational theater and comedy, during the
2008 International Fringe Festival in Boulder. In the spirit of the
evening, we chose to improvise on themes suggested by the audience, creating
tiny sound bytes, like haiku with zills. It was a delight having so many improv
artists present, for they playfully tossed us such diverse themes as
"mysterious sex", "sibling rivalry between sisters",
"a beehive", "reading Yoga
Journal", "a carwash", and "the sound of the
planets". Our wide-ranging improvisations drew a thoughtful response from
our audience, again reflecting the I-never-would-have-imagined theme.

Live
bilateral sound

I
had my first experience with the therapeutic use of binaural beats in an EMDR
session. I listened in headphones to a tone that alternated from one ear to the

other, to help me anchor a particular mental and feeling state. I was highly intrigued by the effects, and promptly experimented with this process using zills. The results were again very intriguing, so I began to think about playing finger cymbals as a form of live bilateral sound.

I went online looking for others who were working with this phenomenon, and found Robert Yourell, who has produced several sound meditation recordings using binaural beats. My contacting him was serendipitous: he was living in Denver, only 30 miles away, and was only two weeks away from moving to California. I arranged to meet with him.

When we met, he introduced me to the fact that bilateral sound can help integrate the right and left sides of the brain, and he let me listen to some of his music. I described my experiments with finger cymbals, and demonstrated with a couple of short improvisations. He recorded them, and ran them through a program to enhance the binaural quality of the recording, with interesting results. When I asked what he thought of using finger cymbals as bilateral sound meditation, his comment was encouraging: "I think you're onto something!"

An acoustic treasury

As Amina and I continued to perform our meditative concerts, we became excited over the treasury of choices that opened to us because we play together. I have nine different sets of zills that vary in pitch, tuning, character, range, and resonant sustain, and Amina has several different sets as well. Either of us can change to a different set without breaking the flow of sound, and we can create a third harmonic tone between our instruments as we play - all of which generates a remarkable range of tonal relationships. This allows us to modulate easily through subtle shifts of mood and energy during our meditations.

When we play, in addition to blending and weaving tones, we move to explore qualities of sound in relation to the sweet spot and features of a room. This is a vastly different experience from dancing with zills for an audience, or playing them with other musicians. In those circumstances, we would usually consider acoustics only in terms of choosing which cymbals to play and how loud to play them.

We

have been fortunate to play in different spaces: a small room with low ceiling, large domed skylight, and plush carpet; a large room with wooden wainscoting on the twelve-foot ceiling and walls; a dance studio with a beautiful wood floor; a carpeted living room with log walls and ceiling; a small theater, two stories high with a concrete floor, plywood stage and velvet curtain. With such spatial diversity, we are learning how to play expansively, three-dimensionally, surfing the acoustics in a spirit of open inquiry.

Imagine

a quiet gong bath

The

experience of improvising together with the cymbals is powerful. Once we've created the conceptual framework for a concert, we adjust timing for each section of the hour-long progression. Once it is balanced, we play it through. Sometimes we can go through it twice in a rehearsal. Many times, we become spiritually saturated in one round; then, once is enough.

In

a concert, the flow of the cymbal song moves into and through us, drawing us intensely and wholly into the present moment together. Listeners fall into different degrees of absorption, and have described experiences ranging from peaceful clearing to evocative journeys and profound connection. A deep silence often follows, charged with soulful energy.

Besides

Adnan's meditations, the only comparable experience I have had was in a gong bath with the masterful Richard Rudis. Compared to finger cymbals, the gong is a much louder, lower-pitched, and more overwhelming instrument, with a huge expressive range. If you can imagine a quiet gong bath, many octaves higher with a proportionately smaller range of sound, resonating through the body and psyche with a subtle, persistent power, you will begin to grasp what a meditative concert of finger cymbal music is like.

Healing

soundscapes

Early

in 2009, I developed a pain in my left hip and was having difficulty walking. I

scheduled two bodywork sessions over a period of days; afterwards, while I was practicing a new functional movement pattern, I became frustrated. Fatigued by intermittent pain, the unfamiliar pattern, and the slowness of it all, I needed a break. I picked up a set of finger cymbals and began a flowing, lyrical improvisation. I continued for perhaps fifteen or twenty minutes, and then put the cymbals down. To my surprise, I was able to walk more easily, without pain!

Until

that moment, it had not occurred to me to play my zills as a healing instrument. Though I am trained in healing arts, I had not used sound as a modality in private sessions before. The closest thing I have done is based in my Sufi training - using chanting and other vocal sound, selected recorded music, zills and drumming to help draw my dance students into absorption to ease their learning. Although I have integrated all my training in the direction of teaching dance, I was yearning to integrate it in the direction of healing work. This unexpected experience was the turning point I had been waiting for, inspiring me to play my zills more for my own solitary meditation and healing, and also to begin to play them for others in private healing sessions.

I

put out a call for volunteers to help me experiment in the private session format. In these early sessions, I was discovering how to shape the song of my cymbals in sound and space for healing in an intimate setting. With every session, the work gains in nuance, and already it is taking on its own life, beyond anything I could have imagined before I began. I am encouraged by results; in general, participants reported feeling calmer, more balanced, energized and emotionally lifted by their short sessions. Some also reported a reduction of symptoms.

I

look forward to taking these investigations to new levels - not only in sound healing sessions, in the meditative concerts with Amina, and in other kinds of opportunities, but also teaching others to play this ancient instrument in solitary and group meditation practice. With all of these experiments, I feel that we are slowly building bridges, from tradition-based expectations of finger cymbals, to new possibilities in the rarified, healing soundscapes of new cymbalism.

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