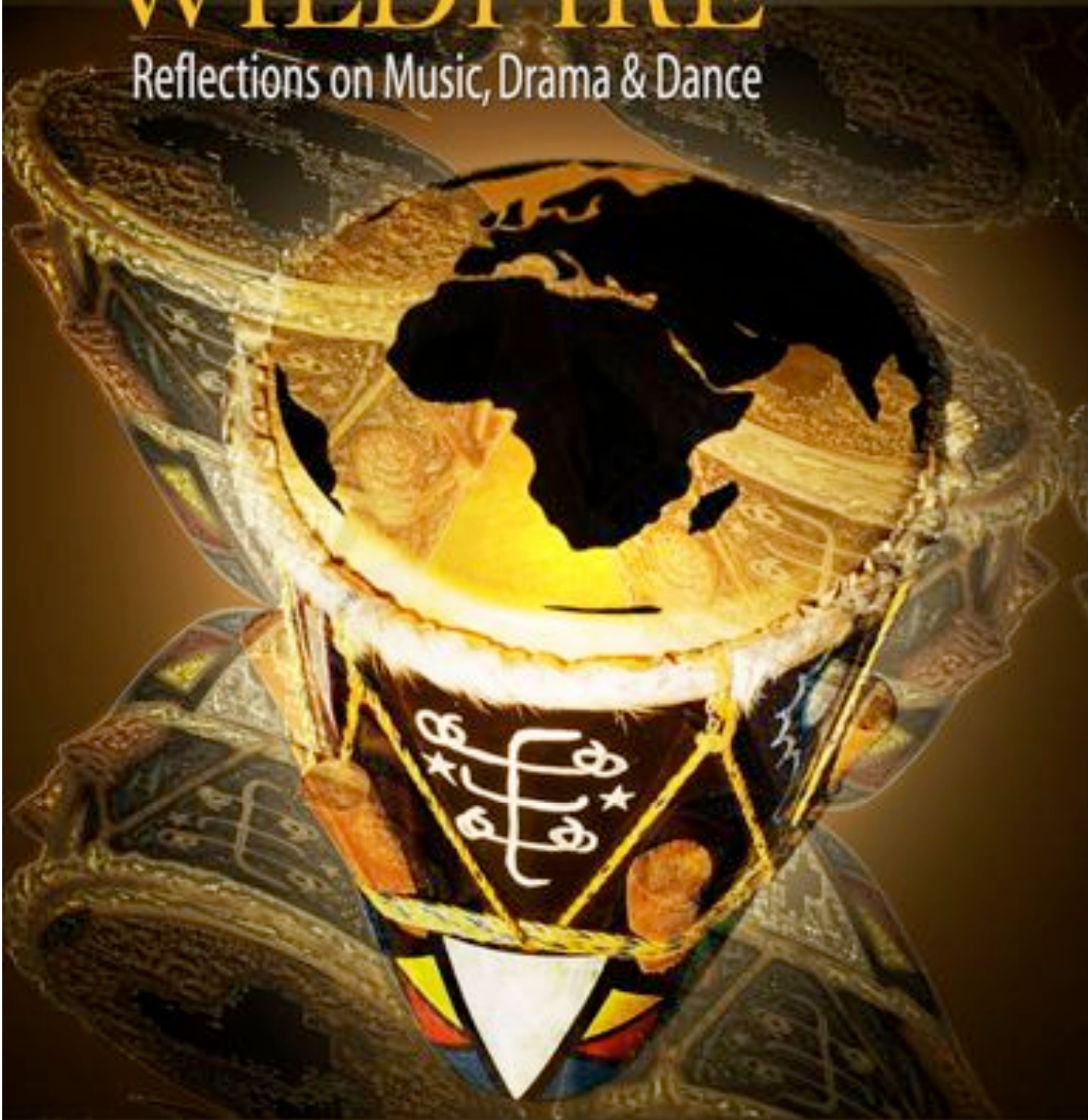


# WILDFIRE

Reflections on Music, Drama & Dance



By Istvan Dely

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Music, Drama & Dance**

**By Istvan Dely**

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“Through the mere revelation of the Word ‘Fashioner’, issuing forth from His lips and proclaiming His attribute to mankind, such power is released as can generate, through successive ages, all the manifold arts which the hands of man can produce. This, verily, is a certain truth. No sooner is this resplendent word uttered, that its animating energies, stirring within all created things, give birth to the means and instruments whereby such arts can be produced and perfected.”

**Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings LXXIV***

## Introduction



### Profession of love

Hungary, the boxing ring for the last round of the fight of the century, between Germans and Russians, nazis and communists: my native land. I was born in the midst of a freezing European winter with no heating, to the pounding of the falling bombs. This fact, I believe, determined two major decisions in my life: I would become a drummer and I would find my home in the tropics.

Twenty two years later in Havana, Cuba, where I was sent to finish my Masters degree in Hispanic literature, the *babalaos* (Yoruba divines) told me I had the spirit of a Black Congo standing behind me, which, to them at least, explained why every time I heard the drums my legs would tremble, and why I would beat those drums like crazy till my hands bled, with no technique, but with all my heart and soul. I believe this is why Jesus Perez and Carlos Aldama, unforgettable masters of Yorubá liturgical drums, deigned to teach me, this little white guy from far away. I have since had many mentors, among them El Niño Ramirez, rumbero de solar, Rafael Cueto, the last of the Trio Matamoros, and above all, my *padrino* José Oriol Bustamante, *tatan'ganga* Vititi Congo. Upon my initiation into their temple they gave me a name that became my mission for life: Millero Congo (Congo seedbed), cultivator of love for all that is Africa.

And I have been carrying it out ever since. When I returned to Europe after three memorable years in Cuba, I introduced Afro Cuban drums to my country. By chance, this coincided with the explosion set off by Carlos Santana in international rock music. I played and recorded with all the top musicians and groups then in business in my country. I later assisted with the birth of Jazz in Hungary, which helped break the ice of orthodox

communism. I did several European tours with different rock and jazz groups and became a legend of sorts by the name of Konga Dely. At the same time I continued my literary vocation, too, translating North and South American authors, among them Gabriel García Márquez, into my native tongue. In Márquez I heard the siren call of a magic world. The Colombian Caribbean beckoned.

So that's where I am today. Over the last twenty-eight years God has given me two great gifts. One is my Colombian family, all musicians, whom I managed to infect with my tambour fever. Together we made up the Millero Congo acoustic fusion band and taught others for many years, in our drumming school in Cartagena and Barranquilla. We became a major cultural factor as standard-bearers of a movement to recover the rich traditions of African drumming and Native American gaita flutes among the city youth of the North Coast of Colombia.

The other great gift from God that I received in Colombia is having come across the Bahá'í Faith, which "hath lent a fresh impulse, and set a new direction, to the birds of men's hearts", to mine, too, and finally reconciled my thirst for mysticism and community, on the one hand, and the quest for social transformation, on the other, as motivating forces and final purpose of the arts, of music, of drumming.

This is how, slowly by slowly, out of the growing convergence in my heart and mind, of the African traditions that I had learned in Cuba, on the one hand, and of the Bahá'í teachings on the vital importance of cultural diversity for an organically united humankind in our shrinking global village, on the other, I started promoting what I coined Cultural Ecology as part of my work as an active Bahá'í, a musician, a drumming teacher, a researcher of the African heritage in the Circum-Caribbean.

In this spirit I gathered my almost three-decade experiences as drummer and drumming teacher into a comprehensive hand-drumming teaching book called "Tabalá – Drums for everyone" which covers the drumming traditions and over sixty rhythms of nine countries of the Caribbean basin (Colombia, Cuba, Haiti, Honduras, Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, the Bush Negroes of Suriname and French Guiana, and Brazil), presented in a new notation system that I developed over the years to make hand-drum music reading and writing more precise and above all more widely accessible to untutored learners.

Then came the fulfillment of my childhood dream: after so many years, in 1997 I finally got to Africa! More precisely West Africa, cradle of all those drumming traditions that captivated my heart and still enrapture me more than any other music of the world. The International Teaching Centre of the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa, Israel, sent me as travel teacher and resource person to the Light of Unity project in Ivory Coast, Ghana, The Gambia and Guinea Bissau to promote the use of traditional music for proclamation, teaching and consolidation of the Faith. Just imagine that: how come an East-European white guy from Colombia going to teach the Africans how to drum?! That's exactly what my beloved first spiritual and drumming teacher, tatan'ganga Congo Oriol foretold me in Cuba thirty years ago. He said: I see you before many many Black youth teaching them what you learned here from us and what you'll learn on your life's journey. And indeed, the Cuban sound is very admired in West Africa and my deep, instinctive tuning in to the West

African musical modes not only amazed my African friends but brought home to them, more clearly than any discourse, that it is well worth their while to value and cherish their own traditions because they are very much sought after even by whites!

I used to begin my talks to my African audiences with this startling statement: I'm a Hungarian of African descent. And it is true on two accounts. First: all human beings on Earth today descend "from the same original parents" in East Africa. And second: from my very first awakening as a musician, I have been permanently wedded to African and Afro Latin music.

Before saying a word, though, I would just sit down at my drum and, closing my eyes, would play my heart, play a prayer on the drum, pray drum. And that would instantly bridge the gap created by centuries of estrangement and separation and atrocities between our Black and White races.

I remember one night a team of young Yakuba Bahá'í teachers and myself were in the clearing between the huts of a far out village in Ivory Coast near the Liberian border. We started a great joyful gathering after dusk, drumming, singing, dancing, talking, the whole village was there. I played with three Yakuba boys, my disciples at the Training Institute in Danane. At one o'clock at night I got real tired and stepped out of the circle, leaving the drumming to the boys. But then a delegation of the women hurried to me, protesting: No, no, mesyé, vou batt tambou! (No, no, Mr, *you* play the drum!) They needed my drumming to go on dancing and singing! For me, this is the diploma of the highest value, worth more than a Grammy Award! And I had a lot of experiences like that. It's like an instant initiation into their community, an acceptance on equal terms. Brotherhood that needs no words. In Ghana, after three weeks of intensive training at the Dyankama Institute, my twenty-odd pupils and I were all moved to tears because we had to part. The Akan are a proud people, they don't often cry... In The Gambia we had an experience which eloquently spoke for the intrinsic harmonizing, uniting power of collective drumming. The group of youth that gathered together for a two-week intensive training with me at the Latrikunda Institute came from at least six different tribes and were a nasty quarrelling lot in the beginning, so much so that we were about to close down the project. Yet after a couple of days of bringing them together to practice in groups for hours, there was a remarkable change: the suspicions and rivalries disappeared and they all became good friends, a good team indeed. Together then we toured the biggest schools in and around the capital, Banjul, all Muslim of course, and spoke of the spiritual dimension of drumming and unity in diversity, and attracted a lot of interest for the Bahá'í teachings. They asked the Bahá'ís to return to their schools and form drumming cultural groups (you have to know that for most of fundamentalist Islam today, music in general and drumming in particular is a lowly, ungodly, frivolous, almost sinful activity)!

In Bissau, capital of Guinea Bissau, my pupils had to walk for more than an hour to come to my classes (and then an hour back) because they were so poor they didn't have for the bus ride. And this was during the Bahá'í month of the Fast, when we don't eat and drink anything from sunrise to sunset! And Bissau is really hot at that time of year! These were powerful lessons those kids taught me about love, commitment, sacrifice.

Back in Colombia, I went on another assignment. I spent three months in the predominantly Black Northern Cauca region incorporating the teaching and practice of traditional communal music (singing, drumming, and dancing) into the Institute Study Circles. We did revolutionize the hamlets and villages around the Ruhi Institute in Puerto Tejada. In one village at one time the number of participants swelled to over 90 and they didn't fit into the local school! And we started a process of creation of new folklore, so to speak, by bringing the traditional music forms into the context of the contemporary spirituality and global world vision of the Bahá'í Faith. It's important for people everywhere to understand that Bahá'u'lláh came to every race and people and kindred of the world and that the contribution which the traditions, the skills, the knowledge, the wisdom, the culture, of each and every people can make is lovingly welcomed into the future global civilization. The loss of any traditional art form, culture, language, etc. impoverishes not only the particular nation or ethnic group concerned but the whole of humanity! This perspective gives a real motivation and a great responsibility for the preservation of the cultural ethnic diversity of the myriads of peoples that make up the human family. And also, it makes us aware of the urgency of this task in the face of the growing cultural erosion of globalization as practiced by multinational commercial and ideological interests.

In Haiti, my next assignment, cultural erosion is not as rampant as elsewhere, due to the extreme poverty: no lights, no television, and no discos in most of the countryside. Sometimes a curse is a blessing in disguise! Here the challenge for the Bahá'í community was to overcome the centuries-old misconceptions, prejudice, myths, fear and shame that surround Vodoun, which is at the very core of Haitian cultural identity. As I said earlier, my spiritual and musical beginnings took place in an African derived religious setting very much like Vodoun – indeed, Santería, Congo, Abakuá, Vodoun, Winti and Candomble can all be regarded as branches of the same Traditional African Religion. The fact of once having been a Congo priest myself just like the hougans of Vodoun, and my drumming skills, made me a catalyst or channel to help the Haitian friends overcome their confusion and mixed feelings towards their own roots and identity. I wrote a course on Vodoun for Bahá'í teachers that was taught at Institute trainings, and gave a lot of talks and firesides on the subject in the light of the Writings which clearly say that we should “consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship” and that certainly includes Vodoun, and that Bahá'u'lláh's revelation is “the highest essence and most perfect expression of whatsoever the peoples of old have either said or written” and that “in this most mighty Revelation, all the Dispensations of the past have attained their highest, their final consummation.” As a result of 20 months spent in Haiti on four terms of travel teaching, the community has made great strides toward the goal set by the International Teaching Centre: “At the most profound depth of every culture lies veneration of the sacred. Efforts to advance the Faith in rural areas, then, are most successful when the sacred in the culture of the villagers is identified and they are assisted in transferring their loyalty and allegiance to the Faith, placing Bahá'u'lláh and His Covenant at that sanctified core of their universe. It is here, at the very heart of a culture that the process of the transformation of a people begins.”

Haitians are an extremely artistic and deeply religious people, very much steeped in the West African tradition. As soon as the friends regained their self esteem and the pride in



their cultural-spiritual heritage, a veritable creative explosion occurred among the grass roots youth, in musical compositions, drumming, dancing, drama, story-telling, proverbs, all related to their new spiritual experiences in the Institute learning process. A whole CD of new repertoire in traditional Vodoun style music set to Bahá'u'lláh's words was recorded and distributed in the whole national community. One of the leading Sanbas (roots music composers), drumming teachers and bandleaders of the country became so enamored by the bias-free, welcoming and sincerely loving spirit of the Bahá'í Faith that he composed almost half, and certainly the best, of that material and was like a long lost brother to this lowly servant. In the south-east of the country we had a wonderful, open-minded and open-hearted meeting and jam session with the association of hougans (Vodoun priests) of the region. And everywhere in the countryside our troop of drumming-singing-dancing-drama playing Bahá'ís (all native except me) had wonderful close rapport, heart-to-heart fraternity with a population which is, according to a widely quoted statement, 80% Catholic and 100% Vodouizant.

Something very similar happened, although in a briefer time span, on my teaching trips among the Saamaka and Ndyuka Bush Negroes of Western French Guiana and Suriname. They still very much preserve the Akan tradition of the talking drum: that is, the master drummer “speaks” with his drum, says prayers, salutations, whole discourses. The elderly still understand this traditional drum language. And everybody expects the drums to be meaningful. This gave us the idea to “speak” to my village audiences with my drum, while my team mate, who spoke the local language, “translated” the phrases I played out (obviously we agreed beforehand on what he would say). You should have seen with what reverential concentration they listened to every phrase on the drum and every sentence pronounced and how they understood and later remembered all the complexities and the inner essence of the Bahá'í message!

Drums have a very special place and great power in their culture. Wherever our small team appeared, I just took out my West African djembé drum from its case and sat down to play and lo! in minutes everybody left whatever they were doing and came literally running down to us shrieking with joyous excitement and in no time everybody was fiercely dancing. They simply couldn't believe their eyes: a serious-looking middle-age white man playing their sacred rhythms! The spiritual and social leaders of the villages greeted me with the deference due to one of their own rank and of course I, too, showed the deep, sincere respect I always had for these patriarchal figures that are the keepers of the culture and history of their peoples. From my acting and playing and from the Bahá'í teachings in our conversations they fully understood that preserving and handing down their sacred drumming traditions, dances, ways of dressing, of building their houses, their handicrafts, their language, was one of the central messages of the Bahá'í teachings, together with their right to real progress, to take from the white world whatever seemed beneficial to their society as a whole without having to give up their own ways or diluting their ethnic cultural identity. The principle of unity in diversity solves the seeming dichotomy of either tradition or progress, either inherited identity or globalization. Not either / or. Both! The best of both worlds.

In Honduras my wife Leonor (singer, composer, guitar player) and myself were invited to help rally grass roots participation through the use of traditional music for the

Garífuna Bahá'í congress, by holding an Institute training with drumming, singing and drama for more than 20 youth. At the closing event of the course, the long-time white pioneers couldn't hold back their tears at seeing so much creative artistic talent surging in a mighty explosion. Most of the time you need but scratch the surface of ingrained inhibitions and lovingly encourage the youth to bring out their latent talents from within their own very precious traditions, and veritable miracles happen! Many times people told me: thank you for making me aware of talents I didn't know I had at all! Many a new drummer was born this way everywhere I went with my contagious enthusiasm and obsessive pushing...

In Salvador de Bahia, Brazil, towards the end of our two-week intensive institute training in the use of the performing arts for proclamation, teaching and consolidation of the Cause, I took my pupils on a public bus to see the pre-carnival cultural parade downtown. On the way, the twenty odd youth burst into singing, at the top of their voices, the compositions they themselves have made collectively during the training to chosen quotes by Bahá'u'lláh in fiery, contagious Bahian style music, beating out the rhythms and cross rhythms on any available object and surface on the bus. It was an amazing revolution! There you had a veritable time bomb in the hands of the institutions to use: pure hearted youth oozing faith, love, energy and joy, culturally relevant music, and Bahá'u'lláh's words for everyone to hear make up a very explosive blend!

While working for the preservation of the sacred musical traditions of African and Native American cultures at the grass roots level is, I feel, crucial at this moment when modern mass media have reached the farthest corners of Earth carrying the germs of cultural leveling and uniformization, it is just as important to attend to the unfolding and growth of this same tree at canopy level, and to break into the professional music industry with this kind of alternative proposition. "Bahá'í artists who achieve eminence and renown in their chosen field, and who remain dedicated to the promotion of the Faith, can be of unique assistance to the Cause at the present time when public curiosity about the Bahá'í teachings is gradually being aroused." (Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, 30 June 1988). As a result of years of working and maturing together within Millero Congo, Leonor composed and we recorded 20 songs for a CD that with the title "Leonor Dely: Ámame – Palabras Ocultas de Bahá'u'lláh" was produced and released by multiple Grammy Award winner music producer KC Porter under his inspirational label Insignia Records in Los Angeles in 2001. New York Times critic Tom Conelli hailed it as "A musical masterpiece throughout! A must for any world music enthusiast!" Los Angeles Times critic Enrique Lopetegui calls it "one of KC Porter's finest recordings". In 2004 there followed our second album, *Talisman*, this time having no less than four Grammy winners on board: Executive producer KC Porter, Producer JB Eckl, Coproducer Shangó Dely, and Sound engineer Jeff Poe!

The four concert tours that we had in as many years promoting these albums in the US and Canada, as well as the ongoing album sales worldwide, have taken Bahá'u'lláh's name and Words to many thousand thirsting souls. It is our hope that they also inspired and continue to inspire the unnumbered talented artists of divers cultural and spiritual traditions in the Bahá'í world community to "come out of the closet", so to speak. We are convinced that to save these traditions it's not enough to preserve them as museum pieces from an

overhauled past or to fuse them into secular musical context like Haitian “rasin mizik” (roots music) or modern Cuban jazz like Irakere (both of which deserve our admiration though). To save is to let live, to foster growth. From the sacred context of their past they must be allowed to grow into a contemporary spirituality, into the new, all-inclusive, all-embracing universal Cause and common Faith: Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation. Otherwise they are doomed to extinction, oblivion. This is the lesson I’ve learned since those days more than thirty years ago when I earned the liturgical name Millero Congo for my love and commitment to African music, drumming and spirituality.



### The challenge

Counselor Kobina Fynn in Guinea Bissau remarked to me once with a trace of bewilderment and frustration: Why is it that the friends walk for days to attend a traditional celebration in a distant town or village but they don’t show up for the Nineteen Day Feast in their own locality?

I understood his predicament only too well and share his concerns. My first and only real spiritual experience before becoming a Bahá’í had been within an African Traditional Religion in Cuba. My initiation into the Vititi Congo community was not an act of rational, intellectual choice, since I was a committed atheist communist at the time, a follower of the Che Guevara. It was a rapture of the heart generated by the tremendous power of the arts: the drumming, the singing, the dancing, the drama of the rituals, the emotional charge and group synergy, the loving and caring and joyful community.

Abdu'l-Bahá repeatedly said that love and joy are the foremost signs of spirituality. Bahá'u'lláh often sets rapture and ecstasy, passionate devotion and fervid love as touchstones of the depth of our search, knowledge, and worship. That arts, especially the performing arts: music, drama, and dance, can better awaken these noble sentiments than cold rationalizing, is also clearly stated in our Writings and authoritative guidance. So if our community life, our celebrations and worship, are lacking in the abovementioned qualities, so much so that many of the friends prefer somewhere else to go, it means that we are clearly not acting upon the Guidance. **“Until the public sees in the Bahá'í Community a true pattern, in action, of something better than it already has, it will not respond to the Faith in large numbers.”** (Shoghi Effendi)

The whole of the Bahá'í world is now embarked upon a collective learning process to work out and implement precisely this “true pattern in action” through the twin movements of the institute process and the cluster core activities envisaged as a dynamically interacting mechanism to create portals of growth: the growth of a new race of men, the growth of a new civilization.

Arts and artists clearly have a major role to play in this process. There is an urgent need, I feel, for all the protagonists – the individuals (artists, their friends and foes), the community and the institutions – to sincerely and honestly review our assumptions about arts and culture, to reflect upon the current conditions of society, on the one hand, and the function and nature of the arts, the qualities and attributes required from the artists, the attitudes of the community towards arts and artists, on the other, that the New World Order of Bahá'u'lláh maps out for us. And then act accordingly.



### **A call to the artists**

The immigration official at the Los Angeles International Airport looked at our passports, the P1 visas issued to us as members of the Leonor Dely & Millero Congo band invited for the Embrace the World bahá'í tour in the US and Canada. "So, you are entertainers", he commented with a scornful smile. "No, not entertainers. Musicians", I corrected, to no avail, I'm afraid. Definitely, for the consumer society today there's no culture and arts any more, just entertainment. Everything else is crushed under the "steamroller of the West's cultural weapons of mass distraction." As one American writer bitterly complained: "I can't live without a culture anymore and I realize I don't have one. What passes for a culture in my head is really a bunch of commercials and this is intolerable. It may be impossible to live without a culture." ( Kurt Vonnegut, Jr)

The assessment of the Universal House of Justice is stern and to the point:

**“One of the signs of a decadent society, a sign which is very evident in the world today, is an almost frenetic devotion to pleasure and diversion, an insatiable thirst for amusement, a fanatical devotion to games and sport, a reluctance to treat any matter seriously, and a scornful, derisory attitude towards virtue and solid worth.”** (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, Compilations, The Compilation of Compilations vol. I, p. 53)

Bad news for artists who have to make a living off their trade in such an environment. So what can artists do to reverse the tide? Like Ulysses in ancient times, they must have themselves tied to the mast of their ship so as not to be lured into extinction by the ubiquitous siren calls of the entertainment industry promising instant success, fame and riches. The firm mast is the Bahá'í teachings, principles and specific guidance:

**“... the House of Justice feels that one of the great challenges facing Bahá'ís everywhere is that of restoring to the peoples of the world an awareness of spiritual reality. Our view of the world is markedly different from that of the mass of mankind, in that we perceive creation to encompass spiritual as well as physical entities, and we regard the purpose of the world in which we now find ourselves to be a vehicle for our spiritual progress.**

**This view has important implications for the behaviour of Bahá'ís and gives rise to practices which are quite contrary to prevailing conduct of the wider society. One of the distinctive virtues given emphasis in the Bahá'í Writings is respect for that which is sacred. Such behaviour has no meaning for those whose perspective on the world is entirely materialistic, while many followers of the established religions have debased it into a set of rituals devoid of true spiritual feeling.**

**In some instances, the Bahá'í Writings contain precise guidance on how the reverence for sacred objects or places should be expressed, e.g., restrictions on the use of the Greatest Name on objects or indiscriminate use of the record of the voice of the Master. In other instances, the believers are called upon to strive to obtain a deeper understanding of the concept of sacredness in the Bahá'í teachings, from which they can determine their own forms of conduct by which reverence and respect are to be expressed.**

**The importance of such behaviour derives from the principles expressed in the Bahá'í Writings, that the outward has an influence on the inward. Referring to "the people of God" Bahá'u'lláh states: "Their outward conduct is but a reflection of their inward life, and their inward life a mirror of their outward conduct."**

**It is within this framework that the Universal House of Justice wishes you to view the concerns which have been expressed over the past several years. Bahá'ís endowed with artistic talent are in a unique position to use their abilities, when treating Bahá'í themes, in such a way as to disclose to mankind evidence of the spiritual renewal the Bahá'í Faith has brought to humanity through its revitalization of the concept of reverence.**

**Questions of artistic freedom are not germane to the issues raised here. Bahá'í artists are free to apply their talents to whatever subject is of interest to them. However, it is hoped that they will exercise a leadership role in restoring to a materialistic society an appreciation of reverence as a vital element in the achievement of true liberty and abiding happiness.” (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, 24 September 1987)**

Now this is good news for artists! We are singled out to “exercise a leadership role” in the process of reversing the tide...

### A call to the community



If as an artist you strive to exercise this kind of spiritual leadership you obviously cannot expect much recognition, support and reward from the “Priestly Media Empires” (a term coined by a fellow Bahá’í artist in Australia) and the masses held under their hypnotic spell. But if you are met with indifference, suspicion, discouragement, belittling from your own beloved Bahá’í community as well, then you are really in a tight spot! And many times this is just the case. Quoting from a letter from a fellow Bahá’í artist: “My husband and I and many of our fellow Bahá’í musicians have struggled with the dilemma of being drawn to a calling that is met on the one hand with encouragement from the writings and on the other with discouragement from a number of well-respected believers who seemed to regard art as frivolous play suitable only for children.”

The Writings put arts and crafts at the same level, with the same rank and station, as sciences.

**“The third Tajalli is concerning arts, crafts and sciences. Knowledge is as wings to man's life, and a ladder for his ascent. Its acquisition is incumbent upon everyone... Great indeed is the claim of scientists and craftsmen on the peoples of the world. Unto this beareth witness the Mother Book on the day of His return.”** (Bahá’u’lláh, Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh, p. 51)

This claim is none other than to be used, to be useful. The letter quoted above goes on to say: “And while it's wonderful to have people praise our music or my writing, the

most sincere praise the Bahá'í community and its institutions can give is to make use of those things. Don't just pat the musician on the head and say, 'Thanks for playing at feast'; invite them to play at a teaching event to 'warm up the crowd' or even to give a musical fireside. Don't just tell the writer you're proud of her accomplishments, ask her to write articles for the newspaper or suggest stories she's written that might be given to seekers. Don't just admire the painter's art in his home. Ask if prints can be made to use for a Bahá'í display at the fair or used to teach the Faith in some other way. The arts and artists need the support of their communities. And by support, I mostly mean that we need to be used in order to feel that we are contributing to the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh from our most sacred centre – the place our creations arise from.” (Maya Bohnhoff)

Let me stress at this point that the World Centre – the Universal House of Justice and the International Teaching Centre – are very much aware of the importance of the use of the arts (and hence, of artists) in every proclamation, teaching and consolidation plan and activity and have repeatedly urged us all – individuals, communities, institutions – to make more and better use of them. Later on I will quote at length from the International Teaching Centre's 2001 Letter on the Arts in the Five Year Plan which will make this point clearer.

Let me end these reflections on the still uneasy and unsettled relationship between the community and its artists with some excerpts from a talk by no lesser a figure than poet laureate Roger White. While his opinions cannot be said to be authoritative guidance, he gave his talk to youth in Haifa and was not excommunicated for it...

“Art has a message for us. It says: 'Care, grow, develop, adapt, overcome, nurture, protect, foster, cherish.' It says: 'Your reality is spiritual.' It says: 'Achieve your full humanness.' It invites us to laugh, cry, reflect, strive, persevere. It says: 'Rejoice!' Above all, it says to us to be! We cannot turn our backs on art.

I am of the conviction that, in the future, increasingly, one important measure of the spiritual maturity and health of the Bahá'í world community will be its capacity to attract and win the allegiance of artists of all kinds, and its sensitivity and imaginativeness in making creative use of them.

Artists -- not tricksters and conjurers, but committed artists -- will be a vital force in preventing inflexibility in our community. They will be a source of rejuvenation. They will serve as a bulwark against fundamentalism, stagnation and administrative sterility. Artists call us away from formulas, caution us against the fake, and accustom us to unpredictability -- that trait which so characterizes life. They validate our senses. They link us to our own history. They clothe and give expression to our dreams and aspirations. They teach us impatience with stasis. They aid us to befriend our private experiences and heed our inner voices. They reveal how we may subvert our unexamined mechanistic responses to the world. They sabotage our smugness. They alert us to divine intimations. Art conveys information about ourselves and our universe which can be found nowhere else. Our artists are our benefactors.



To the degree the Bahá'í community views its artists as a gift rather than a problem will it witness the spread of the Faith "like wildfire" as promised by Shoghi Effendi, through their talents being harnessed to the dissemination of the spirit of the Cause.

In general society, artists are often at war with their world and live on its fringes. Their lack of discretion in expressing their criticism -- which may be hostile, vituperative, negative, and offer no solutions -- may lead to their rejection and dismissal by the very society they long to influence. Artists are frequently seen as troublemakers, menaces, destroyers of order, or as frivolous clowns. Sometimes the kindest thing said of them is that they are neurotic or mad. In the Bahá'í community it must be different. Bahá'u'lláh said so. Consider that the Bahá'í Writings state that 'All art is a gift of the Holy Spirit' and exhorts us to respect those engaged in sciences, arts and crafts.

The artist has among other responsibilities that of questioning our values, of leading us to new insights that release our potential for growth, of illuminating our humanity, or renewing our authenticity by putting us in touch with our inner selves and of creating works of art that challenge us - as Rilke says - to change our lives. They are a stimulus to transformation.

In the Bahá'í Order the artists will find their home at the centre of their community, free to interact constructively with the people who are served by their art; free to give and to receive strength and inspiration. It is my hope that you will be in the vanguard of this reconciliation between artists and their world. As Bahá'u'lláh foretells, the artists are coming home to claim their place. I urge you: Be there! Welcome them! Bring chocolate!" (Roger White: address to Bahá'í youth in Haifa, 1990)

In the meantime and while that happens, here are some comforting words to you, fellow Bahá'í artists, to cling fast to that mast on our ship, no matter what:

**“With the evolution of Bahá'í society which is composed of people of many cultural origins and diverse tastes, each with his conception of what is aesthetically acceptable and pleasing, those Bahá'ís who are gifted in music, drama and the visual arts are free to exercise their talents in ways which will serve the Faith of God. They should not feel disturbed at the lack of appreciation by sundry believers. Rather, in knowledge of the cogent writings of the Faith on music and dramatic expression...they should continue their artistic endeavours in prayerful recognition that the arts are powerful instruments to serve the Cause, arts which in time will have their Bahá'í fruition.”** (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, 9 August 1983 [56])



### A call to the institutions

The following letter from the International Teaching Centre dated November 2001 and addressed primarily to the Continental Boards of Counsellors makes it clear that the systematic, integral and pervasive use of the arts is not the artists' concern and responsibility alone. It calls on the institutions, the administrators, the planners, the decision makers, the tutors alike not to consider the arts "simply an embellishment to our programs or an afterthought in our planning. Rather they must become an integral part of our teaching plans and community life."

Furthermore, the special emphasis on a grass-roots focus of the systematic use of the arts rests on the conviction that creative self expression through the different arts media is not the exclusive and privileged turf of artists. In most traditional tribal societies music, for example, "is a social game in which every member of the community has a place of his own; and this is the purpose of the game: to find our place in society." (Ray Lema, African musician). So with the other art forms, too.

Every member of the community has a place in music-making, yes, but not the same place. Some are more gifted than others, some have been training for a while, others have become specialists (in the West we would say professionals) through long and demanding training. We can safely assert that there are three levels of artistic proficiency: the communal, the amateur and the professional. It's like a pyramid. The wider the base, the higher the structure can be raised.

The sequence of Institute Courses delivered worldwide in thousands and thousands of study circles was designed to empower the grass roots – individually and collectively, and bring about transformation. This empowerment must also include artistic expressions which in turn help deepen and emotionally fuel transformation.

Having said this by no means belittles the merits of accomplished professional artists among us or robs them of the distinction earned by long years of hard training and practice. **"Bahá'í artists who achieve eminence and renown in their chosen field, and who remain dedicated to the promotion of the Faith, can be of unique assistance to the**

**Cause at the present time when public curiosity about the Bahá'í teachings is gradually being aroused.”** (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, 30 June 1988)

The clear message the International Teaching Centre conveys in its letter is that the institutions, and ultimately all the protagonists of this collective learning process that the Bahá'í community is so vigorously and single-mindedly going through worldwide, all have to pay greater attention to the arts and redouble our efforts to promote and cultivate its use at all levels – communal, amateur and professional – focused systematically on the overriding goal at hand: to reach the critical mass and effect entry by troops.

Below are the most relevant parts of the ITC Letter on the Arts in the Five Year Plan, a document that as a Bahá'í artist, administrator and travel teacher I feel is of paramount and historical importance:

**“In the Writings of our Faith the arts are described as a powerful instrument to move the spirit and serve the Cause. 'Abdu'l-Bahá praised the arts and testified to their capacity to awaken and uplift the hearts. "Music," 'Abdu'l-Bahá said, "has a great effect upon the human spirit," and drama "is of the utmost importance. It has been a great educational power in the past; it will be so again.”**

**'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi encouraged many forms of art and at the same time extolled a special path of service for Bahá'í artists. 'Abdu'l-Bahá proclaimed that "All Art is a gift of the Holy Spirit.... These gifts are fulfilling their highest purpose, when showing forth the praise of God."**

**In a letter written on his behalf, the Guardian reinforces this sentiment with the following advice to an individual: " 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.”**

**Against this backdrop of inspiring guidance, the Universal House of Justice called on the believers at the outset of the Four Year Plan “to give greater attention to the use of the arts, not only for proclamation, but also for the work in expansion and consolidation. The graphic and performing arts and literature have played, and can play, a major role in extending the influence of the Cause. At the level of folk art, this possibility can be pursued in every part of the world, whether it be in villages, towns or cities”.**

**Two years later the House of Justice released a compilation prepared by the Research Department at the Bahá'í World Centre, "The Importance of the Arts in Promoting the Faith," which provides a rich source of excerpts from the Writings and enlarges our vision of the use of the arts for the work of the Cause.**

The record of the past five years in promotion of the arts was outstanding on all continents. There has been a proliferation of artistic endeavours in the teaching field, most notably through youth dance workshops and musical groups, but also through choirs, drama, and folk art. These experiences have assisted the individuals involved to consolidate their own faith along with that of many friends in the communities they visited. The Counsellors, in collaboration with National Spiritual Assemblies and assisted by Continental Pioneer Committees, contributed significantly to the stimulus and support of many artistic endeavours.

### **Arts in the Five Year Plan**

The Five Year Plan ushers in a new stage in our efforts to promote the arts in the life of the Cause. As with all other aspects of the expansion and consolidation work, the requirements of the time call on us to be more systematic in the use of the arts. They should not be considered simply an embellishment to our programs or an afterthought in our planning. Rather they must become an integral part of our teaching plans and community life. The arts have a vital role to play in the process of entry by troops.

A natural channel through which the friends can express their artistic talents and sentiments is the study circle. At this critical juncture, when promotion of the arts needs to be more systematic in approach and more grassroots in its focus, we are fortunate to have the material presented on this subject in Book 7 of the Ruhi Institute curriculum. In this book, the unit "Promoting the Arts at the Grassroots" explains how an appreciation of beauty is one of the spiritual forces that lifts us to higher realms of existence. To strengthen this power of attraction it is beneficial for the friends to be exposed to various forms of art. Tutors are encouraged to integrate the arts into study circles so as to enhance the spiritual development of the friends and open avenues for meaningful service. By being a promoter of the arts at the grass roots, a tutor opens up "creative channels through which can flow inspiration and the force of attraction to beauty."

Devotional gatherings can also be greatly enhanced if the arts are integrated into such programs. At the beginning of the Four Year Plan, the House of Justice stated that devotional gatherings are "essential to the spiritual life of the community"; they are also a measure "indispensable to large-scale expansion and consolidation." Virtually synonymous with devotions in many cultures is the chanting or singing of prayers and songs. 'Abdu'l-Bahá said that music is "divine and effective," "the food of the soul and spirit." To an individual who was gifted in chanting, He wrote: " 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!"

Children's classes represent yet another aspect of community life in which the arts should be an essential element. Various forms of music, such as singing and

**playing traditional or contemporary instruments, as well as activities like storytelling, drama, dance, drawing, puppetry, and a wide range of crafts, can be introduced into classes at all levels. 'Abdu'l-Bahá said that music "has wonderful sway and effect in the hearts of children....The latent talents with which the hearts of these children are endowed will find expression through the medium of music."**

**As activities begin to be organized at the level of clusters, yet another arena will present itself for utilizing the arts. Artistic expression, such as music and drama, in reflection meetings, cultural events, and other gatherings will quicken the hearts, enabling them, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote, to "become inflamed with the fire of the love of God." When non-Bahá'í artists are invited to share their talents at such events, they too come into contact with the compelling spirit of the Faith."** (The International Teaching Centre, 5 November 2001, to the Continental Boards of Counsellors)

The guidance is unmistakably clear, detailed, and binding on all, whether we have professional or even amateur artists in our cluster or not. As to the how, there are no clear-cut recipes. The circumstances, the conditions, the culture, the human resources of each community or cluster are unique and call for creative responses. The institutions will need to identify the divers talents and put them to good use. The tutors will have to stop using excuses like "I'm not an artist – I don't even like arts -, so I just skip that part in my group..." The artists in the community will have to think of ways of making themselves available and finding their usefulness within the channels outlined in the foregoing guidance. And the community will have to come to view all manifestations of art produced in its midst – whether communal, amateur or professional – as an essential and integral part of their very community life.

## Creating new folklore



This is something new that is required from us on an unprecedented scale and surely if we could all share the growing body of our experiences in different parts of the world it would be very beneficial to the learning process. I, for one, submit to you, for what they are worth, some of my amazing experiences in different communities of the African Diaspora that I summarized in an article in the hope that they may be of some use to you even to the degree of a mustard seed.

### **New LORE – New FOLK = New Folklore MUSIC IN THE INSTITUTE PROCESS**

Moonlit night in a wide clearing in front of the Bahá'í Center in Kambalua, in the jungles of Upper Suriname. Heini, the local Saamaka tutor and myself sit in the heart of a tightly packed circle of kids, junior youth, young mothers with suckling babes, elderly women, young men and elderly men (in this order). The two of us are tirelessly playing the traditional apinti and apuku drums, and the multitude around us is singing at the top of their voices: *Haika, baa! Mbei du ma no mbe wöutu bisi yu.* (Say, O brethren! Let deeds, not words, be your adorning). The kids started it half an hour ago. The drums and the singing drew as a lodestone virtually the whole village into the growing circle around us. More and more people learn the song and join in. They keep on singing, ever more vigorously, and wouldn't let us, poor drummers, stop.

This “hit song” was composed by a group of junior youth of a Study Circle three villages downriver barely five days ago, a previous stopover of our teaching trip among the Saamaka Bush Negroes of the Upper Suriname. Two other villages since then already learned it and added a composition each. The group in Kambalua learned all three and added their own contribution, another song in traditional music style, to Bahá'u'lláh's selected quotes in Ruhi Book 1 in their mother tongue. I and my African drum served

merely as catalysts in starting and encouraging this process, recording on a cheap cassette recorder the new repertory being created, so that other communities could learn it. This process, simple as it looks, is nothing short of CREATING NEW FOLKLORE.

Folklore, Shoghi Effendi says, is the expression of a people. A people, however, is not a static entity. By law it must change: decay or grow.

The Creative Word of God for today is the single most potent agency to empower people to grow.

The Institute Process is at present the best channel for effecting individual and collective transformation organized around a carefully sequenced group study of the Sacred Word.

The Sacred Word can only release its transforming power if it is planted in the very heart of the culture of a people. "It is here, at the very heart of a culture that the process of the transformation of a people begins." (Letter dated 21 August 1994 from the International Teaching Centre to all Continental Counsellors)." Hence the importance and urgency, stressed time and again by the Universal House of Justice and the International Teaching Centre, of an integral, systematic and grass roots focused use of the arts as an essential part of the Institute process.

Let me stress again: it was not this lowly servant who performed such an outburst of musical creativity among the Saamaka: it was their own grass roots youth, participants of the Study Circles. I only took the lid off the pressure cooker. The fire heating the cooker was Bahá'u'lláh's Words, teachings, and love.

In some communities you'll find specially gifted individuals who would spontaneously compose music to express their newly found faith, knowledge and love of Bahá'u'lláh. But my experience is that every group of youth, without expression, can be successfully induced to make collective compositions to the quotes you give them. Toward the end of a two-week intensive training course on drumming and related arts for tutors and participants of Study Circles at the Regional Institute in Salvador, Brazil, I split up the twenty odd participants into four groups, wrote Bahá'u'lláh's Hidden Word "O friend! In the garden of thy heart plant naught but the rose of love..." on the board (in Portuguese, of course), broken down as if it were a poem or lyrics for a song, and gave them all the task to scatter in the spacious green area surrounding the institute and collectively compose music to these words, in any of the traditional, typical Bahian music styles. Each group took along one or two drums, a pandero, an agogo or a birimbao to help shape the rhythm. After about an hour and a half we all gathered together and each group presented its composition to the rest: four very different and equally beautiful compositions were born that day, within their distinctive musical identity! I had just walked around from group to group, encouraging them with eager sympathy. That's all a tutor has to do: to be a promoter: "By being a promoter of the arts at the grass roots, a tutor opens up 'creative channels through which can flow inspiration and the force of attraction to beauty.'" (Letter dated 5 November 2001 from the International Teaching Centre to all Continental Counsellors)."

By so doing, we are not only enriching and deepening the collective learning and transformation process which is at the core of Study Circles, but also performing an urgent task of “cultural ecology”. Shoghi Effendi says that “Music, as one of the arts, is a natural cultural development... (Shoghi Effendi, *Directives from the Guardian*, p. 49).” However, this natural cultural development has been interrupted and all but effaced by the omnipresent multinational media onslaught of our consumer society: the music thus carried to the farthest corners of the globe is not the expression of a people any people but manipulation from a giant industry which tends to level to uniformity the rich cultural diversity we Bahá’ís have a Divine mandate to preserve. To offset the cultural erosion brought by globalization as practiced today, a conscious, sustained effort, resting on principle, must be brought to bear, and Bahá’ís, though not alone in this enterprise, should be at the forefront of the battle for the preservation of the diversity of cultural identities as essential building blocks of a future global civilization as envisaged by Bahá’u’lláh. That’s why “The House of Justice supports the view that in every country the cultural traditions of the people should be observed within the Bahá’í community as long as they are not contrary to the Teachings. (Letter of the Universal House of Justice dated 16 December 1998, regarding traditional practices in Africa).”

On the other hand, the prevailing, world-engulfing “MTV culture” of our times not only threatens cultural diversity, but spreads what Shoghi Effendi called “the prostitution of the arts.” “Even music, art, and literature, which are to represent and inspire the noblest sentiments and highest aspirations and should be a source of comfort and tranquility for troubled souls, have strayed from the straight path and are now the mirrors of the soiled hearts of this confused, unprincipled, and disordered age (Letter of the Universal House of Justice dated 10 February 1980 to the Iranian believers residing in various countries throughout the world).” In the face of this trend “...the House of Justice feels that one of the great challenges facing Bahá’ís everywhere is that of restoring to the peoples of the world an awareness of spiritual reality...One of the distinctive virtues given emphasis in the Bahá’í Writings is respect for that which is sacred...Bahá’ís endowed with artistic talent are in a unique position to use their abilities, when treating Bahá’í themes, in such a way as to disclose to mankind evidence of the spiritual renewal the Bahá’í Faith has brought to humanity through its revitalization of the concept of reverence (Letter dated 24 September 1987 on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual. Compilations, *The Importance of the Arts in Promoting the Faith*).”

So in our work promoting the arts at the grass roots we should reach back to those layers of the culture that are still untouched by modern contamination. “At the most profound depth of every culture lies veneration of the sacred. Efforts to advance the Faith in rural areas, then, are most successful when the sacred in the culture of the villagers is identified and they are assisted in transferring their loyalty and allegiance to the Faith, placing Bahá’u’lláh and His Covenant at that sanctified core of their universe .” (Letter dated 21 August 1994 from the International Teaching Centre to all Continental Counsellors).”

This “sanctified center of their universe”, of course, is easier to identify and plug into where traditional religions are still preserved and practiced. Such is the case of the native American religions and the African religions of the Americas (santería, vodoun,



winti, candomble). In these religions the medium of “theology”, so to speak, are the arts, especially music, dance and drama. Here, arts are not reduced to mere hedonistic and trivial entertainment, but preserve their primary sacred, spiritual and community building nature and function. This fact makes the music and dance modes preserved in these deeply religious cultures especially appropriate to be used as preferential “raw material” in the institute process which revolves around Bahá’u’lláh’s Words, instead of the prevalent fashionable pop music styles. When brought into the Faith, however, they undergo a process of **selection, adaptation and synthesis**: that is, while preserving their original association with the sacred, they grow and develop into something much greater and more universal.

As a one time tatan’ganga (high priest) in the Afro Cuban Congo religion, I feel especially privileged and graced by Bahá’u’lláh’s bounty that allowed me to help the friends in West Africa, Haiti, Honduras, Suriname, French Guyana and Brazil free their rightful African spiritual and cultural heritage from centuries-old prejudice and discrimination on the part of the dominant Western cultures and incorporate it into the Bahá’í Faith through the Institute process. I was moved to tears when I saw a representative of the National Spiritual Assembly of Haiti state with pride in a television interview: “We are Bahá’ís, but we are also Haitians and Bahá’u’lláh teaches us to preserve our cultural identity, and vodoun is definitely part of Haitian cultural identity.” To say this publicly in Haiti takes a lot of courage. This very friend, at the time of my first teaching trip to Haiti, would vehemently deny any association with, nay, even any knowledge of vodoun and its rich treasure house of music, dance, drama and visual arts. Let there be no misunderstanding: this change of heart is not my merit. It’s all there in the Writings and the spirit of our Faith. We only have to look, hearken and heed.

There is, in my experience, an additional benefit to this “cultural ecological” approach in the promotion of the arts at the grass roots in the institute process: it can offset and counterbalance the apparent uniformity of the institute courses that have been adopted in the entire Bahá’í world and ensure that the Faith becomes culturally embedded into every community and is not perceived as something foreign. The International Teaching Center is aware of those concerns and even reticence I myself have encountered in some quarters regarding the Ruhi courses: “Gradually most national communities around the world adopted for their basic sequence of courses the Ruhi Institute curriculum, which had been developed over many years specifically in response to large-scale expansion. In light of the focus and energy being devoted to furthering the institute process in every national community, concerns were expressed by some believers about the emphasis on training and the use of a uniform curriculum. In such a wide-scale enterprise of taking great numbers of friends through a set curriculum, it is to be expected that some individuals might not find the materials suited to their learning style.” (from the document arranged by the International Teaching Centre, *Building Momentum: A Coherent Approach to Growth*)

I found that by bringing those cultural ingredients that a systematic use of the community arts imply, into the ways we deliver these courses, these fears and perceived obstacles can easily be surmounted. Those Saamaka villagers from the Upper Suriname who memorized the Ruhi book quotes by singing them in their own music, certainly didn’t feel threatened by any undue imposition from outside. They were creating their own new

folklore from the powerful new “lore” (knowledge, wisdom) enshrined in the Teachings of Bahá’u’lláh, on their way, from their own roots, to become a new “folk” (people), part of the promised “new race of men.”

(Note: you may have noticed that some of the quotes cited in the above article have already been mentioned before. Some will surely come up later, too. Those are the issues that I, personally, cannot overemphasize. Forgive me if I’m being too persistent.)

**Wildfire  
from the  
stage**



**A call for  
sponsors**

My Afro Colombian drums are set up at the front of the stage, ready to speak forth. Behind them, arranged in a semicircle, are some more African and Native American drums, Native American flutes, a Chinese violin called erhu, an Iranian violin, a classical violin, a Scottish bagpipe, two state-of-the-art keyboards, an electric bass, electric and acoustic guitars and a drum set... In front of them, neatly arranged rows of seats in the Auditorium of Nevada University. Behind those, a huge mixing console of a professional sound system. Backstage in the greenroom ten professional musicians from China, Iran, Colombia, Hungary, Scotland, Guatemala and the United States, plus a sound engineer and the road manager, are anxiously awaiting the magic moment: it’s showtime!

This is a far cry from that other scenario in the village center where you just start drumming (unplugged, of course!) and the whole village quickly gathers for a spontaneous, collective musical proclamation and teaching event... For one thing, this one is immensely more complex and demanding on resources: human as well as material.

The Embrace the World Spring 2004 Tour was a Bahá’í road show that brought together top-notch musicians from East and West, North and South: singer-songwriters Leonor Dely and KC Porter, Chinese erhu virtuoso Lin Chen and Iranian master violinist

Farzad Khozein with Millero Congo as backing band, put them all, plus the crew, into a tour bus specially designed for the purpose and took them on a 28 day marathon to perform in 20 cities of 11 States in the United States and Canada. This memorable feat required long months of careful preparation from our multi-Grammy Award winner music producer KC Porter, the sponsoring Malibu JD Local Spiritual Assembly, the host communities and their institutions. And a lot of money! The bus rental alone cost USD 600 a day. Then the plane tickets for the musicians, from Beijing, Budapest, Cartagena. Then food and hotel rooms, posters and flyers, venues and sound equipments to hire. Although the artists involved obviously did not seek material gains with this proclamation/teaching tour, they also needed compensation for lost earnings to pay their bills at home. It is a lot of money we are speaking about, even seeking to economize on everything in the customary Bahá'í fashion. However, it was money well spent, worth the while, according to the evaluation by all communities and institutions involved. For one thing, the preparation and coordination of the events mobilized entire communities, some of them otherwise dormant. For another, the concerts and the subsequent firesides reached more than ten thousand souls directly and at least double that many indirectly, through publicity in the press, radio and television. All the interested seekers in the wake of the concerts were then immediately invited to the core activities going on in each community. The public success of the concerts was so overwhelming that many an organizer in the host communities exclaimed: If we had known it was going to be this good, we would have made much greater publicity!

I'm telling you about this here because it illustrates two facts and brings up a sensitive issue that we cannot possibly put off facing much longer.

Both facts are expressed by Shoghi Effendi in the following oft quoted passages:

**“That day will the Cause spread like wildfire when its spirit and teachings are presented on the stage or in art and literature as a whole. Art can better awaken such noble sentiments than cold rationalizing, especially among the mass of the people.”**

And: **“the progress and execution of spiritual activities is dependent and conditioned upon material means”**, in other words, you cannot start that wildfire without someone putting up the money required.

The related sensitive issue is the sponsorship or patronage of the arts in the Bahá'í Cause.

Patronage of the arts is one thing; patronage of the artist is another. About the latter, the Universal House of Justice clearly states:

**"The patronage of artists and their life in art, while important in itself, is not a stated goal of the Cause in its current unfoldment, any more than the support for believers practicing medicine or working in agriculture, worthy as these fields are in themselves."** (June 2001 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, quoted in the International Teaching Centre's Letter on the Arts)

This is a very wise stance, even admitting that it has always been much more difficult and risky for an artist to make a living in his profession than for a doctor or a farmer, and it is even more so today when entertainment entirely replaced arts and culture in the media and hence in public opinion. However, as someone who grew up in a communist regime which heavily subsidized arts and patronized its own choice artists I can testify that the kind of material security that comes from institutional patronage has unsavoury strings attached to it. I'd much rather be a skinny free man than a fell fed slave... The creative artist, by definition, treads the roads least travelled, ventures into uncharted territory, and from the outset he can have no absolute guarantee that he'll get anywhere. But of one thing a Bahá'í artist can be sure: his sincere, pure hearted, selfless efforts to serve the Faith with his art, however inadequate, will always meet the good-pleasure of his Beloved, and, ideally, of his community as well.

On the other hand, the above quoted letter of the International Teaching Centre goes on to say that the growing emphasis on the arts and on the use of the work of Bahá'í artists does require efforts from the institutions and the Cause as such to facilitate the efforts of Bahá'í artists to use their talent in service to the Faith. Now that through the twin movements of the Institute process and the cluster core activities we are out to reach the critical mass of the people around us, it is increasingly urgent, I feel, to bring our artists and their work "out of the closet", on to the stage, radio, television, music stores, bookstores, exhibition halls, etc. To go public, so to speak.

And that, as we all know, takes some professional organizing, promotion, publicity and money. Which, in my opinion, does not have to come from the institutions or from the always overstretched Bahá'í funds. I can envisage instead a growing and ever more effective collaboration between individual Bahá'í artists, producers, promoters, managers, PR people, entrepreneurs and investors setting up business ventures to take outspokenly Bahá'í arts to millions of people. Openly engaged arts and artists rocking the world have recent historical precedents in the late sixties, early seventies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: American rock and country music against the Vietnam War, for Civil Rights, the Nueva Trova Cubana, the tropicalismo movement in Brazil, the protest songs of Mercedes Sosa in Argentina or Violeta Parra in Chile, early salsa in New York, progressive jazz and fusion, etc. The last of these great "artists with a cause" was Bob Marley. We, Bahá'í artists have a far greater and more revolutionary Cause than any before. Let us not be shy about it. Let us come forward. Let us be **"the ones who, before the gaze of the dwellers on earth and the denizens of heaven, shall arise and, shouting aloud, acclaim the name of the Almighty, and summon the children of men to the path of God, the All-Glorious, the All-Praised."** (Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 280)

For our shout to be heard, though, we need daring and dedicated sponsors, who cannot shout themselves, so they generously deputize the shouters. Especially those in the poor and underdeveloped four-fifth of the world in the South, where neither the artists nor their communities have the means to develop and show their work.



## Lessons

In the course of my successive teaching trips as drummer resource person to help and encourage Bahá'í youth and communities in the use of their traditional arts for the work of the Cause, I have learned many an important lesson. Those were indeed more like learning trips than teaching trips for me.

The first important lesson I learned early on in Africa and one that radically changed my outlook and approach was the universal community involvement in the use of the arts – especially drumming, singing and dancing – in every Bahá'í event and activity: the grass roots focus that later the International Teaching would hold up for the whole world community to follow. The question to be posed from now on was not how artists can make arts to be used in and for the Cause (although this question will never use its validity) but how grass roots communities can create and cultivate the arts and gradually generate a native Bahá'í culture.

Although the “main dish” of my assignments was to teach the kids at institute trainings the basics of drumming, encourage them to learn and preserve their folklore, ensure through contacts with local master drummers that they will be able to continue their apprenticeship after I leave, encourage and organize repertory building and collective compositions, I did, from the beginning, include “theory” in the curriculum: relevant Bahá'í teachings and Writings. Through confrontation with my pupils' questions, concerns, blind spots, and also with the larger community's varying and often conflicting views, tastes and prejudices, about what constitutes the “correct” arts, expressions of reverence, acceptable religious background, for Bahá'ís, as well as with the inevitable, pervasive and subtle influence of the decadent society that surrounds us all with its prostitution of the arts and cultural erosion, this body of “theory lessons” began to grow.

It was not always easy. At that time, many a respected member of the communities, oftentimes pioneers or native intellectuals raised by white-dominated Western education,

would find African drums, Native Indian flutes and rattles, traditional spiritual dances, African religious temperament, or manifestations of modern big-city youth culture, outright incompatible with the name of Bahá'u'lláh, let alone His Words. So I had to dig deeper and wider into the Writings, the Interpretation and the Authoritative Guidance. Thanks to our strong and impregnable Covenant, we don't have to abide by any personality's strongly held feelings and views, no matter how respectable and eminent they may be; **“the Book itself is the unerring balance established amongst men. In this most perfect balance whatsoever the peoples and kindreds of the earth possess must be weighed...”** (Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings, p. 198) We only have to search and look hard. The Universal House of Justice has commissioned and published wonderfully comprehensive compilations on Music, on the Importance of the Arts, on Arts, on Cultural Diversity, on Traditional African Practices, on Indigenous Peoples, etc. Whatever we need to know is in there.

I organized my very personal selection of quotes from the Writings and authoritative guidance around those topics that I felt are most urgent and important to deal with as a result of successive and ongoing investigation-action-reflection with training institutes and cluster core activities in those flesh-and-blood communities I have had the privilege to serve in a modest way. Although my experiences were gained in African cultural context both in Africa and the New World, the universal nature of the quotes and principles expressed make for a general application in any culture.

The lessons presented here deal with the performing arts: music, drama and dance. On the one hand, these are the art forms that I worked with on my teaching assignments. On the other, they are art forms that are practiced collectively, in groups, not individually, so they are especially fitted for study circles, children's classes and devotional meetings. Not for a moment do I think, however, that all the other avenues of artistic expression - the visual arts, literature, handicrafts etc. - are not of the same value and usefulness in our Bahá'í work as the performing arts. **“All art is a gift of the Holy Spirit.”** ('Abdu'l-Bahá)

Although it has been successfully used in parts as study material at Institute trainings in a number of communities, this is not a course. It is simply an organized sequence of reflections on some issues related to music, drama and dance in the Bahá'í community at the present stage of its development, and it can be used in any way any individual or institution deems it fit. However it is best if studied and consulted in a group of the friends. While all the quotes cited are authoritative and thus binding, the rest is merely an individual Bahá'í artist's understanding of them and their implications.



# MUSIC



## LESSON ONE: THE IMPORTANCE OF MUSIC

**“In this Cause the art of music is of paramount importance.” Abdul’-Bahá (1)**

1. For what Cause is music of paramount importance?
2. What does the expression *paramount importance* mean?
3. In your opinion, why is music so important for Bahá’ís?
4. In your community, do the friends use music? In what ways?

Music – and musicians – can certainly make a difference. As **Abdu’l-Bahá** recalled:

**“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, or could have sung, it would have charmed every one.’”** (“Table Talk” Acca, July 1909, quoted in “Herald of the South” (January 13, 1933), pp. 2-3)

Music has such a high rank in the Bahá’í Faith that **Bahá’u’lláh** Himself dedicates a whole paragraph to it in His Most Holy Book, The Kitab-i-Iqan, the Book of His Laws for no less than the next thousand years. Part of the paragraph defines for us the nature and purpose of music:

**“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.”** (2)

1. Who has made music as a ladder for our souls?
2. For what part of our being is music intended?
3. In your own words, what does it mean to *be lifted up unto the realm on high*?
4. What should be lifted up unto the realms on high by means of music?
5. On a ladder we can ascend or descend, go up or go down. If we choose bad music, where will our souls descend?
6. What does the expression *wings to self and passion* mean? Think of examples related to music.
7. What kind of music can give wings to self and passion?



## LESSON TWO: GOOD, NEUTRAL, AND BAD MUSIC

We have learned that music is a means that can be used for good as well as evil. It is like a ladder on which our souls may go upwards into light or descend into darkness.

**Bahá'u'lláh** expects each of us to know the difference: **“man should know his own self and recognize that which leadeth unto loftiness or lowliness, glory or abasement...”** (3) Today, in an age of advanced technology in telecommunications and mass media, more than ever before, music of every variety is increasingly being showered upon us. It is our responsibility to be selective, to choose.

To see it graphically, draw a horizontal line which represents the floor. Then draw two ladders or two flights of stairs from that line: one going up, another going down.

Let's say that the dividing line, the ground floor, is neutral: 0

The steps going upward are increasingly positive: +

The steps leading downwards are increasingly negative: --

Any piece of music that we hear or perform falls within one of these areas of value: it is either good (+), that is, it uplifts our spirit, or neutral (0), it is neither harmful nor beneficial; or it is bad, harmful (-) and can seriously endanger our spiritual health.

How can we tell the difference? Can we say that some specific musical forms in themselves are good or bad? Rock music? Salsa? Reggae? Romantic music? Pop music? Blues? Jazz? Our own music or imported music?

It is not the genre that defines the spiritual value of a given art form. It is rather the artistic quality of the form and above all, the nature of its contents. In other words: what does it say? And how is it said? **Abdu'l-Bahá** gives us the clue, the standard:

**“The song we have just listened to was very beautiful in melody and words.”**  
(4)

So we have to pay close attention when we listen to music, and watch out for the beauty or lack of beauty of the form, and the message that the lyrics convey.

Group discussion: randomly tune to any radio station in your locality that plays music, choose a song, listen carefully, then reflect and analyze together: was the melody beautiful? What did the lyrics say? What was it about? Does it belong to the positive, the negative or the neutral range of our “musical ladder”?

Unfortunately, much of the music being poured out of the music industry and diffused by the mass media in many parts of the world today is of poor quality, both in

form and message. **Bahá'u'lláh** made reference to this loss of people's sense of taste more than a hundred years ago:

**“Methinks people's sense of taste hath, alas, been sorely affected by the fever of negligence and folly, for they are found to be wholly unconscious and deprived of the sweetness of His utterance”.** (5)

1. What is our sense of taste?
2. What has happened to most people's sense of taste nowadays?
3. In Bahá'u'lláh's words, what is the cause of people's bad taste?
4. What does Bahá'u'lláh mean by the phrase *His utterance*?

In view of the prevailing bad taste and even prostitution in the arts, **Shoghi Effendi** warns Bahá'ís, and especially the youth, to be on guard: **“Such a chaste and holy life, with its implications of modesty, purity, temperance, decency, and clean-mindedness, involves no less than the exercise of moderation in all that pertains to dress, language, amusements, and all artistic and literary avocations. ...It condemns the prostitution of art and of literature...”** (6) The Universal House of Justice clarified that the phrase *prostitution of arts and literature* means *using the arts and literature for debased ends*.

Can you give a few examples of the prostitution of arts in our society today? Consult together.

In some religious communities, joy, exultation and music are considered ungodly and wayward. **Bahá'u'lláh** in His Book of Laws frees us from such fetters of fanaticism, but also exhorts us to moderation:

**“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.”** (7)

We should bear in mind that propriety and dignity are universal human qualities but the manner in which they are outwardly expressed varies from culture to culture.

Complete the sentences:

1. God allows us to \_\_\_\_\_
2. We must be careful to preserve our \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ while listening to music.
3. We should be joyous and happy out of love for \_\_\_\_\_
4. When we offer up our hearts and minds wholly to God, we are filled with \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.

### LESSON THREE: BAHÁ'Í MUSIC?

Before we go into this lesson, answer this question: Is there such a thing as Bahá'í Music? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Let us hear what **Shoghi Effendi** has to say about this:

**“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 of 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.”** (8)

**“We believe that, in the future, when the Bahá'í spirit has permeated the world and profoundly changed society, music will be affected by it; but there is no such thing as Bahá'í music.”** (9)

Complete the sentences:

1. Over the centuries, the divers peoples and cultures of the world have developed a great diversity of musical forms and styles; this is the meaning of the phrase ‘music is a \_\_\_\_\_.’
2. Bahá'u'lláh has come to unite all the peoples, races, nations of the earth; this is the meaning of the phrase *the Cause is* \_\_\_\_\_.
3. We should have music for \_\_\_\_\_ in our meetings.
4. There is no such thing as \_\_\_\_\_.

Consult together: what kind of music do the friends enjoy at Bahá'í meetings in your region, community, locality? What kind of music would they consider unpleasant?

## LESSON FOUR: UNITY IN DIVERSITY

Although, in Shoghi Effendi's words, the friends are free to compose music as their talents guide them, there are also strong indications in the Writings that the starting point, the first step on the positive side of the ladder, should be each region's own traditional music, its folklore or popular music:

**“Music... has grown up as an expression of the people.” Shoghi Effendi (10)**

**“At the level of folk art, this possibility can be pursued in every part of the world, whether it be in villages, towns or cities.” The Universal House of Justice (11)**

**“It is here, at the very heart of a culture, that the process of the transformation of a people begins.” International Teaching Centre (12)**

1. Make a list of the traditional and popular music forms of your region.
2. Sing together some of the folklore music of your region that you like best.
3. If you come from different regions of the country or from different countries, show and if possible, teach your traditional music one to another.

As Bahá'ís, we are called upon to appreciate and preserve our own cultural identity:

**“Bahá'ís should obviously be encouraged to preserve their inherited cultural identities, as long as the activities involved do not contravene the principles of the Faith. The perpetuation of such cultural characteristics is an expression of unity in diversity.” The Universal House of Justice (13)**

1. What is meant by our *inherited cultural identity*?
2. When we become Bahá'ís, should we break with all the customs and traditions of our ancestors? Why or why not?
3. Are there some cultural practices of our ancestors that we should definitely NOT continue as Bahá'ís? \_\_\_\_\_ Give some examples.
4. To perpetuate means to \_\_\_\_\_

When we accept Bahá'u'lláh and become Bahá'ís, we enter into an all-embracing brotherhood with all peoples, races, kindred and nations. We must learn to respect and love the culture of others as we do our own, yet we still identify with our own kindred, race or nation and even acquire a greater respect and love for our cultural identity.

**“The goal of every Bahá'í community is the preservation of ethnic cultural diversity in the context of a harmonious, equal interaction.” Craig Loehle (14)**

1. To preserve means to \_\_\_\_\_.
2. The great variety of music of the different peoples and races is part of \_\_\_\_\_ diversity, and must be \_\_\_\_\_.

3. Interaction is to give and receive. If we have nothing to give, how can we interact with others as equals?
4. The music of my people is better than that of another's. True \_\_\_ False \_\_\_\_\_
5. The music from abroad is superior to ours. True\_\_\_ False\_\_\_

## LESSON FIVE: COMMUNAL MUSIC

In regard to performing or creating music, there are two levels:

**Communal music** in which all of us can participate without exception; and

**The music of specialists** performed by professional or amateur artists with special musical gifts and studies.

Both levels are equally important and necessary to the Bahá'í community. However, since (1) communal music is the soil out of which the artists grow, (2) universal participation is one of the principles of our Faith, and (3) we do not always have artists among us in our local communities, we will focus more on the communal level of music here.

In order to make use of music in all our Bahá'í events and gatherings, we should not be dependent upon the presence or absence of artists among us. We are all artists; we are all musicians by birthright. Music is a gift from God to every human being and God has provided each of us with a natural musical instrument: our body - our voice, our hands and feet. Not only that: our environment, wherever we live, is full of all kinds of objects that can easily be used as improvised musical instruments, from a simple laurel leaf to plastic water tanks.

In his book *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, Adib Taherzadeh tells the story of Mirzá Abbás, known as Qábil, one of the outstanding believers and teachers in the times of Bahá'u'lláh. "He was a zealous and enthusiastic man, a poet of remarkable talent, a teacher of wide repute and, above all, devoted to Bahá'u'lláh. His enthusiastic spirit, coupled with his deep love for Bahá'u'lláh, cheered and uplifted the believers whom he met on his way. They would gather to meet him and he would often request them, whenever circumstances permitted, to chant in unison certain Tablets or poems of Bahá'u'lláh which lent themselves to collective chanting, and he would teach them to sing together. ... Qábil had a certain genius for clapping his hands to accompany their songs of love and praise. Where greater freedom prevailed, a homemade drum was a welcome accompaniment to his chant of love for Bahá'u'lláh." (15)

1. In the above description of collective music, which component is the most important?
2. How did those friends accompany their collective singing?

For group discussion:

Make the following experiment.

Together choose any song that everybody knows.

First, play it on a recording (cassette, CD). Everybody listens, sitting in silence. Then, one person sings it, while the rest listen in silence.

Afterwards, everybody sings it in unison, but still sitting, with no accompaniment. Then, everybody stands up, sings together in unison, clapping hands to keep time and moving along with the natural rhythm of the song. Finally, the same is repeated, but adding one or two volunteers from the group to accompany the collective song with a drum (improvised if necessary) and with some shaker (maracas or a small tambourine or a bottle or can filled with pebbles), or any other improvised percussion instrument.

Now sit down, recall and talk about the feelings you experienced in each of these modes of relating to music. Which did you enjoy the most? Why?

## LESSON SIX: SACRED MUSIC

The highest step on the ladder of music is sacred music, the music of worship where we **“try to bring the earthly music into harmony with the celestial melody.”**(Abdu'l-Bahá) The focal point of this “mystical link that unites man to God” is the Sacred Word, the Word of God, often compared to music, to melody, by Bahá'u'lláh and Abdu'l-Bahá.

**“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 beautiful Revelation. Say: These verses draw hearts that are pure unto those spiritual worlds that can neither be expressed in words nor intimated by allusion.” Bahá'u'lláh (16)**

1. What are *the verses of the All-Merciful*?
2. Is it permissible to sing the prayers revealed by Bahá'u'lláh or Abdu'l-Bahá?
3. When we do this, what will we perceive in them?
4. What will we inhale from these prayers sung in the most melodious of tones?
5. None can \_\_\_\_\_ these worlds today except those who have been \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_ with vision.
7. Who are those that have been endowed with vision?
8. Do the verses of God attract every heart?
9. Singing these verses with the most melodious of tones allows us to feel the spiritual worlds better than through \_\_\_\_\_ or \_\_\_\_\_ alone.

The Word of God for today is Bahá'u'lláh. **Abdu'l-Bahá** encouraged the friends to set His Father's Persian poems to music:

**“The day is not far distant when these poems will be set to Western music and the sweet accents of these songs will reach the Abhá Kingdom with exceeding joy and gladness.”** (17)

What emotions, then, should characterize our sacred music, our music for worship? Exceeding joy and gladness, joy and ecstasy! Our soul should leap for joy!

**“Strike up such a melody and tune as to cause the nightingales of divine mysteries to be filled with joy and ecstasy.”** Abdu'l-Bahá (18)

**“Wherefore... play and sing out the holy words of God with wondrous tones in the gatherings of the friends, that the listener may be freed from chains of care and sorrow, and his soul may leap for joy and humble itself in prayer to the realm of Glory.”** Abdu'l-Bahá (19)

Consult together about how we can make our worship (devotional meetings, devotional part of the 19 Feast, etc.) conform more and more to these standards of exceeding joy, gladness and ecstasy set for us by Abdu'l-Bahá.

## LESSON SEVEN: CULTURE AND RELIGION

The spiritual need to worship God is a universal characteristic of man, but the ways to give expression to this need vary greatly from culture to culture, from one spiritual tradition to another. Sometimes, unconsciously, we take it for granted that everybody should worship God in the same manner as we do.

**“There is a tendency to feel that other peoples' cultures are less refined than one's own. This feeling is confirmed when contact with another people is superficial. But whenever those from outside penetrate another culture and discover its depth and subtleties, they develop an attitude of genuine respect for the people. At the most profound depth of every culture lies veneration of the sacred. Efforts to advance the Faith in rural areas, then, are most successful when the sacred in the culture of the villagers is identified and they are assisted in transferring their loyalty and allegiance to the Faith, placing Bahá'u'lláh and His Covenant at that sanctified core of their universe.”** (Letter dated 21 August 1994 from the International Teaching Centre to all Continental Counsellors).

1. What attitude should Bahá'ís take towards the culture of other peoples?
2. What do we find in the innermost heart of every culture?
3. What happens if we do not pay attention to the sacred within the culture of the people we are teaching?
4. When will the rural cultures feel deeply identified with and loyal to the Faith?

5. As Bahá'í teachers, why are we advised to take interest in the culture of the people we are called upon to serve?

Let us always bear in mind that Bahá'u'lláh has come to every nation, people, race and culture of the earth, to the followers of every religion, including the so called traditional or indigenous religions whose Founders appeared either in prehistoric times or among peoples that knew no writing. Each and all must be helped to feel and understand that the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh is “the highest essence and most perfect expression” of their own spiritual traditions:

**“The highest essence and most perfect expression of whatsoever the peoples of old have either said or written hath, through this most potent Revelation, been sent down from the heaven of the Will of the All-Possessing, the Ever-Abiding God.” Bahá'u'lláh (21)**

Complete the sentence:

The Bahá'í Faith is the highest \_\_\_\_\_ and most perfect \_\_\_\_\_ of whatsoever the peoples \_\_\_\_\_ have either \_\_\_\_\_ or \_\_\_\_\_ .

Among the followers of Traditional Religions who have no scriptures, the arts take on an added significance, being the only means of religious expression: music, dance, drama, tales and legends, proverbs, painting, sculpture embody their teachings and theology. Bahá'ís coming from this religious background should be encouraged to use their traditional religious art forms to give beautiful and heart-felt expression to their new faith in, and love for, the Manifestation of God for this day. At the same time, however, they should come to understand and accept without compromise the implications of the fact that in our Faith there is no place for rituals, animal sacrifices, offerings, religious statues or images, ceremonial narcotic substances, that intervene between God and man.

1. Are you familiar with, or do you know of, any Traditional Religion, different from the Major Religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Taoism, Sikhism)? \_\_\_\_ Which?
2. Do you think it is appropriate to accompany Bahá'í prayers with African drums or Amerindian flutes? \_\_\_\_ Give your reasons.
3. Do you think dance can be part of a devotional meeting or the devotional part of a 19 Day Feast? \_\_\_\_ Give your reasons.

This is the guidance given to us by the Universal House of Justice: **“There is no objection to the interpretation of a prayer in the form of movement or dance if the spirit is properly reverential, but preferably this should not be accompanied by reading the words.” (22)**



In many cultures dance is inseparable from worship and is sometimes carried out in a highly emotionally charged atmosphere, in pursuit of rapture. The pursuit of rapture or ecstasy, a state of oblivion of oneself and of soaring on the wings of the spirit towards nearness to God, has an important place in the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. His as well as Abdu'l-Bahá's repeated and explicit references to it should be taken more to heart as our new "Bahá'í culture" gradually evolves and finds new and higher levels of expression:

**“Whosoever experienceth the holy ecstasy of worship will refuse to barter such an act or any praise of God for all that existeth in the world.” Bahá'u'lláh (23)**

Consult together about the meaning of *the holy ecstasy of worship* and its implications for the way we conduct our Bahá'í worship (devotional meetings, devotional part of the 19 Day Feast).

## **LESSON EIGHT: IN ALL BAHÁ'Í GATHERINGS**

On what occasions should we make use of music in the course of our Bahá'í life and work? **Shoghi Effendi** states:

**“The element of music is, no doubt, an important feature of all Bahá'í gatherings.” (24)**

1. What is music for all Bahá'í gatherings?
2. In what kind of Bahá'í gatherings have you participated?
3. In which of those gatherings have the friends made use of music, either recorded or live?

**The Universal House of Justice** also stresses:

**“Inasmuch as the spirit of our gatherings is so much affected by the tone and quality of our worship, of our feeling and appreciation of the Word of God for this day, we would hope that you would encourage the most beautiful possible expression of the human spirits in your communities, through music among other modes of feeling.” (25)**

1. What factors affect the spirit of our gatherings?
2. What do you understand by “the tone and quality of worship”?
3. By what means can we contribute to the most beautiful expression possible of the human spirit in our communities?

**“In accordance with our Teachings, music and the arts are to be encouraged, and they add immeasurably to the vitality and spirit of the community.” The Universal House of Justice (26)**

1. In accordance with the Bahá'í Teachings, what should we do with music and the arts?
2. How do music and the arts affect the vitality and spirit of our community?
3. If the vitality and spirit of our Bahá'í community is low, can we expect others to be attracted to Bahá'u'lláh?
4. Besides music, what other arts could be used to increase the vitality and spirit of our community, and in what ways?

The guidance given to us by the Universal House of Justice clearly shows that the music and arts we encourage within our community should grow out of our own cultural identity:

**“The Faith seeks to maintain cultural diversity while promoting the unity of all peoples. ... The House of Justice supports the view that in every country the cultural traditions of the people should be observed within the Bahá'í community as long as they are not contrary to the Teachings.” (27)**

## **LESSON NINE: MUSIC AS A TEACHING TOOL**

**“... the arts are powerful instruments to serve the Cause...” The Universal House of Justice (28)**

**“... the friends are also asked to give greater attention to the use of the arts, not only for proclamation, but also for the work in expansion and consolidation. The graphic and performing arts and literature have played, and can play, a major role in extending the influence of the Cause.” *Ibid.* (29)**

1. What do the arts represent for those who are serving the Cause (year of service youth, tutors of Study Circles and junior youth groups, children's class teachers, etc.)?
2. In what fields of teaching should we employ the arts?
3. What are the performing arts?
4. How can the use of arts affect the spread of our Cause?

As to **proclamation**, Shoghi Effendi promised us:

**“The day will come when the Cause will spread like wildfire when its spirit and teachings will be presented on the stage or in art and literature as a whole. Art can better awaken such noble sentiments than cold rationalizing, especially among the mass of the people.” (30)**

1. How does wildfire spread?
2. When will the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh spread like wildfire?
3. How can the arts accelerate the process of entry by troops?

### To give the Message:

**“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.”** On behalf of **Shoghi Effendi** (31)

1. Music helps us to affect the human \_\_\_\_\_, to communicate with the \_\_\_\_\_ and to attract the \_\_\_\_\_.
2. Can only artists, musicians give the Message through music?
3. Consult together and rehearse a small presentation to teach the concept of the unity of the human race with the aid of music, dance, drama and recital of quotations.

### Children’s classes:

**“The art of music is divine and effective. It is the food of the soul and spirit. ... 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.”** Abdu’l-Bahá (32)

1. The art of music is a gift from God: this is the meaning of the word \_\_\_\_\_
2. The art of music gives good results: this is the meaning of the word \_\_\_\_\_
3. It is the food of the \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.
4. Music helps develop the \_\_\_\_\_ talents with which the \_\_\_\_\_ of the children are \_\_\_\_\_.
5. Abdu’l-Bahá instructs the teachers of children’s classes and tutorial schools to \_\_\_\_\_.
6. \_\_\_\_\_.

### Junior Youth Groups and Study Circles:

It is also very important for us to use music, along with other arts, in our work with junior youth and Study Circles. The following are some of the benefits we can derive from using music:

- It enhances the sense of belonging and group cohesion;
- it strengthens identity, both Bahá’í and cultural;
- it brings down barriers and creates affection, unity, harmony;
- “the souls and the hearts of the pupils become vivified and exhilarated and their lives brightened with enjoyment” (Abdu’l-Bahá);
- this makes our junior youth and youth groups, including Study Circles, much more attractive to their peers and their numbers will not dwindle, but will grow;

- the medium of the arts, especially music and drama, is very effective in reinforcing the same topics, concepts, skills and capacities dealt with in the Institute course we are teaching;
- through the medium of the arts, the participants of the Study Circles not only learn more readily, but can also teach the Faith as one of their acts of service, giving public presentations of what they have learned, to their relatives, friends and neighbors;
- As with the children, music, traditional dance, drama and stories can work wonders in bringing out the talents and creativity latent within the hearts of the junior youth and youth. The tutor has only to encourage his or her students at every opportunity, with sincere love, interest and insistence, so that they participate in the collective composition of music, choreography and drama on the subjects and quotes they are learning. The results may surpass their wildest dreams!

Finally, may these words of **Abdu'l-Bahá** spur us on to give the arts, especially music, in our Bahá'í work and life the high rank and importance so explicitly accorded to them in our Teachings:

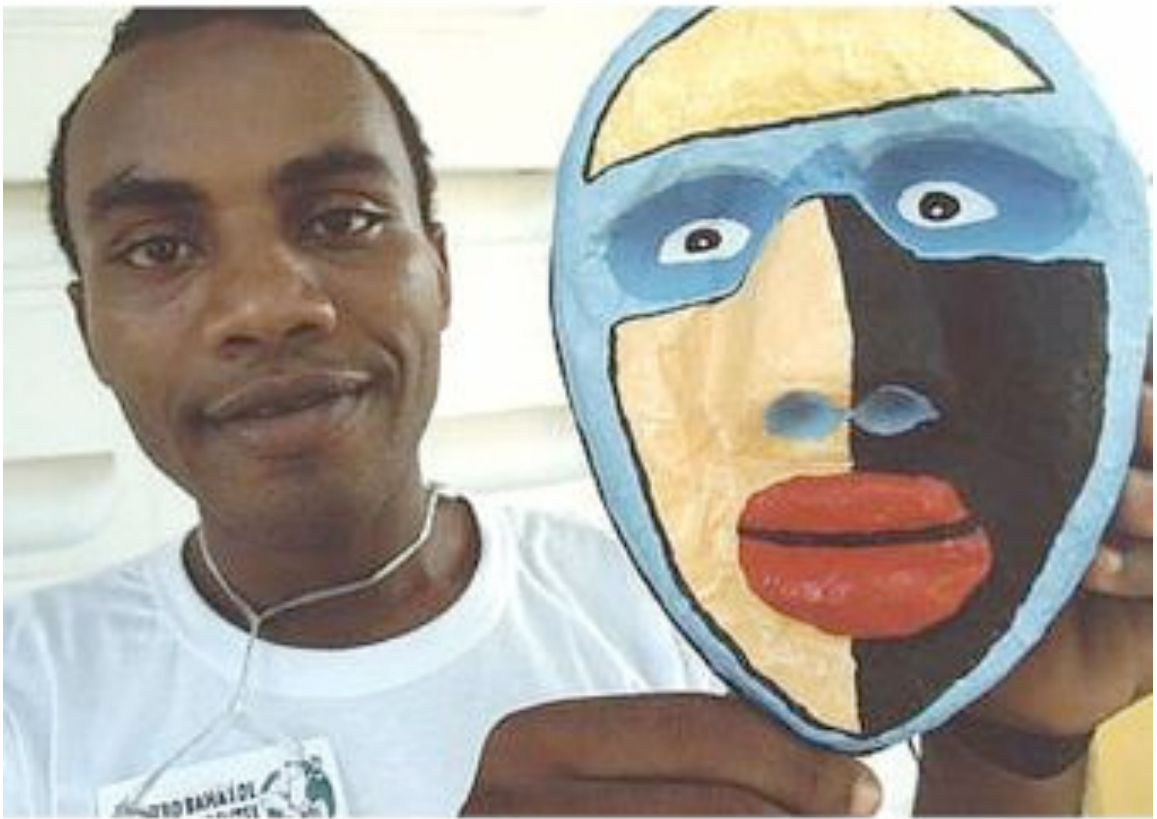
**“The art of music must be brought to the highest stage of development, for this is one of the most wonderful arts and in this glorious age of the Lord of Unity it is highly essential to gain its mastery.”** (33)

Does Abdul-Bahá mean by this that now we all have to become highly accomplished professional musicians? No: He demands excellence from us in all things. We must strive to gain mastery of our music-making, no matter at what level we are doing it, whether communal, amateur or professional. Practice makes the master: at the communal level, if we live in societies that have long lost the habit of collective singing, for example, then it takes some pushing and perseverance to overcome the initial frightening cacophony that emerges when we try to sing together. It is my experience that even without any formal vocal training, just by insisting on doing it again and again until it becomes a habit, we will end up with very pleasant, harmonious results. Excellence at our level, within our limitations, that's what Abdu'l-Bahá means by mastery.

## Notes

1. Bahá'í Writings on Music, The Bahá'í Publishing Trust, England, 1973, p.8
2. Bahá'u'lláh, Kitab-I-Aqdas, K51
3. Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets, p.35
4. In "The Importance of the Arts in Promoting the Faith", a compilation of the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, Bahá'í World Centre, 1998,(UHJ), p.6, quote 21
5. Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets, pp.174-74
6. UHJ, p.7, quote 25
7. Bahá'u'lláh, Kitab-i-Aqdas, K51
8. UHJ, pp.10-11, quote 38
9. UHJ, p.11, quote 41
10. ibid.
11. UHJ, p.22, quote 69
12. International Teaching Centre, letter dated August 21 1994
13. Memorandum Concerning Cultural Practices, p.1
14. Craig Loehle, On the Shoulders of Giants
15. Adib Taherzadeh, The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh
16. Bahá'u'lláh, Kitab-í-Aqdas, K116
17. UHJ, p.3, quote 8
18. ibid., quote 11
19. ibid., p.4, quote 14
20. International Teaching Centre, letter dated August 21 1994
21. Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets, p.87
22. UHJ, p.20, quote 63
23. In "The Importance of Obligatory Prayer and Fasting" compiled by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, Bahá'í World Centre, 2000, p.3, quote III.
24. UHJ, p.94, quote 34
25. Ibid., p.12, quote 44
26. Ibid., p.16, quote 58
27. The Universal House of Justice in "Concerning Cultural Practices", p.2, quote 2
28. UHJ, p.15, quote 53
29. Ibid., p.21, quote 69
30. Ibid., p.8, quote 30
31. Ibid., p.9, quote 31
32. Ibid. p.6, quote 21
33. Ibid., p.3, quote 9

# DRAMA



## LESSON ONE: A GREAT EDUCATIONAL POWER

“An actor once commented to Abdu’l-Bahá about the influence of drama. **Abdu’l-Bahá** replied: **‘Drama is of the utmost importance. It has been a great educational power in the past; it will be so again.’** He described how as a young boy He had witnessed the Mystery Play of Alí’s Betrayal and Passion, and how it had affected him so deeply that he wept and could not sleep for many nights.” (1)

Complete the sentence:

\_\_\_\_\_ is of the utmost \_\_\_\_\_. It has been a great \_\_\_\_\_ in the past; it will be so again.

After many years Abdu’l-Bahá remembered an experience He had had as a young boy with a drama performance. What effects did it have on Him?

Consult together: why and how is drama a great educational power?

In the above passage Abdu’l-Bahá says that drama has been a great educational power in the past and it will be so again in the future. This means it is not so today. Drama, together with all other art forms, is now in a state of deep crisis and decadence:

**“Even music, art, and literature, which are to represent and inspire the noblest sentiments and highest aspirations and should be a source of comfort and tranquility for troubled souls, have strayed from the straight path and are now the mirrors of the soiled hearts of this confused, unprincipled, and disordered age.”** The Universal House of Justice (2)

1. What purpose should the arts (music, drama, visual arts, literature, etc.) serve?
2. What have they become today?
3. Explain in your own words the meaning of “this confused, unprincipled, and disordered age”. Think of telling examples.

Consult together: what forms of drama do you get to see more often? Theatre? The movies? Television? TV dramatizations? Pictures? What do you think of these presentations: are they “a great educational power” or “mirrors of soiled hearts”? Give your reasons.

Just as we have to be critical and careful about the music we choose to listen to, we must also screen and select from the dramatic presentations offered by the media, to protect our hearts from becoming inadvertently soiled as well.

**“The standard of dignity and reverence set by the beloved Guardian should always be upheld, particularly in musical and dramatic items...” The Universal House of Justice (3)**

## **LESSON TWO: THE TEACHINGS ON THE STAGE**

Besides being more critical and careful as Bahá'ís with what we “consume” from the menu of dramatic items our environment has to offer, how do the performing arts concern us as tutors of the Institute process? Since drama has a great educational power, we should make an active use of it as one of our working tools.

In its Ridvan Messages the Universal House of Justice has time and again exhorted us to make use of the tremendous potentialities of the arts, in particular the performing arts (music, drama, dance):

**“Expand the use of music and drama in your proclamation and teaching work...” (4)**

**“... the friends are also asked to give greater attention to the use of the arts, not only for proclamation, but also for the work in expansion and consolidation. The graphic and performing arts ... have played, and can play, a major role in extending the influence of the Cause.” (5)**

How can the performing arts help extend the influence of the Cause? Just imagine: if the most famous singers, musicians and songwriters, the movie and TV stars and scriptwriters were Bahá'ís, how many people could they reach with the Message?

It is not our job to take by assault the bastions of show business, the music industry, MTV and Hollywood. These are but superstructures of the old world order and will fall and disintegrate together with it. Our task is to build “the new house for all mankind” from the ground, laying its very foundations. This is what the hundreds and thousands of Study Circles are doing around the world. And it is precisely here that we must “expand the use of music and drama”.

**Shoghi Effendi** promised us many decades ago:

**“The day will come when the Cause will spread like wildfire when its spirit and teachings will be presented from the stage... Art can better awaken such noble sentiments than cold rationalizing, especially among the mass of the people.” (6)**



Complete the passage:

The day will come when the \_\_\_\_\_ will \_\_\_\_\_ like \_\_\_\_\_ when its \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ will be presented from the \_\_\_\_\_ ... Art can better awaken such \_\_\_\_\_ than \_\_\_\_\_ rationalizing, especially among the \_\_\_\_\_ of the \_\_\_\_\_ .

Consult together: why do you think the arts can influence people's hearts better than cold rationalizing? Give examples.

### LESSON THREE:

#### THE PROHIBITION OF REPRESENTING THE MANIFESTATIONS OF GOD

**“As to your question concerning the advisability of dramatizing Bahá’í historic episodes: the Guardian would certainly approve, and even encourage the friends to engage in such literary pursuits which, no doubt, can be of immense teaching value. What he wishes the believers to avoid is dramatizing the personages of the Báb, Bahá’u’lláh and Abdu’l-Bahá, that is to say treating them as dramatic figures, as characters appearing on the stage. This, he feels, would be quite disrespectful. The mere fact that they appear on the scene constitutes an act of discourtesy which can in no way be reconciled with their highly exalted station. Their message, or actual words, should be preferably reported and conveyed by their disciples appearing on the stage.”** On behalf of Shoghi Effendi (7)

1. Is it permissible to represent the History of the Faith on the stage?
2. What personages of the Faith cannot be represented on the stage? Why?
3. Can personages like Quddús, Mullá Husayn or Táhirih appear on the scene?
4. What do you think: would it be advisable to represent Shoghi Effendi?
5. Many Christians represent each year the Passion of Jesus Christ at Easter, with actors in the role of Jesus. Are Bahá’ís allowed to do that?

**“Your understanding that the portrayal of the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh in works of art is forbidden is correct. The Guardian made it clear that this prohibition refers to all the Manifestations of God... However, there can be no objection to symbolic representation of such Holy Figures, provided it does not become a ritual and that the symbol used is not irreverent.”** The Universal House of Justice (8)

1. In addition to the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh and Abdu'l-Bahá, who else should we avoid representing either by images or by actors on the stage? Give at least five names.
2. If we want to dramatize the concept of Progressive Revelation, how could we represent the Holy Figures of Past Dispensations?
3. What is meant by “symbolic representation”?

**“Regarding the use of symbolism in art, the following extract from letters written to individuals by the House of Justice may provide the answer you seek: ‘We see no objection to the use of natural phenomena as symbols to illustrate the significance of the three Central Figures, Bahá’í Laws, and Bahá’í Administration; and we also appreciate the suitability of using visual symbols to express abstract concepts.’” The Universal House of Justice (10)**

Here is a beautiful example of the rich symbolism that **Bahá'u'lláh** so often uses to hint at the mysteries of Progressive Revelation:

**“This is the Ocean out of which all seas have proceeded, and with which every one of them will ultimately be united. From Him all the Suns have been generated, and unto Him they will all return. Through His potency the Trees of Divine Revelation have yielded their fruits, every one of which hath been sent down in the form of a Prophet, bearing a Message to God's creatures in each of the worlds whose number God, alone, in His all-encompassing Knowledge, can reckon.”**

(Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 104)

Bahá'u'lláh uses a language very rich in metaphors and symbols taken from the world of Nature to describe spiritual realities. The Manifestations of God are frequently referred to as the Sun of Reality, Luminary, Tree of Life, Divine Lote Tree, Nightingale of Paradise, Royal Falcon, etc.

The question in point is no less than that of respect for the sacred which, while still very much alive in many traditional societies wrongly called “primitive”, has all but disappeared from our modern “civilized” world. Reflect and consult together on the following passage from the Universal House of Justice:

**“... the House of Justice feels that one of the great challenges facing Bahá’ís everywhere is that of restoring to the peoples of the world an awareness of spiritual reality. Our view of the world is markedly different from that of the mass of mankind, in that we perceive creation to encompass spiritual as well as physical entities, and we regard the purpose of the world in which we now find ourselves to be a vehicle for our spiritual progress.**

**... One of the distinctive virtues given emphasis in the Bahá’í Writings is respect for that which is sacred. Such behaviour has no meaning for those whose perspective on the world is entirely materialistic, while many followers of the established religions have debased it into a set of rituals devoid of true spiritual feeling.**

**... Bahá'ís endowed with artistic talent are in a unique position to use their abilities, when treating Bahá'í themes, in such a way as to disclose to mankind evidence of the spiritual renewal the Bahá'í Faith has brought to humanity through its revitalization of the concept of reverence.**

**Questions of artistic freedom are not germane to the issues raised here. Bahá'í artists are free to apply their talents to whatever subject is of interest to them. However, it is hoped that they will exercise a leadership role in restoring to a materialistic society an appreciation of reverence as a vital element in the achievement of true liberty and abiding happiness.” The Universal House of Justice (10)**

In our treatment and use of the arts within Study Circles, how can we balance and harmonize respect for the sacred, the concept of reverence, and artistic freedom? Consult together.

## **LESSON FOUR: TWO WAYS OF MAKING THEATRE**

“To make theatre, all that is required is someone to do it and someone to watch it.”  
(11) The stage is any space that these two parties tacitly assign for the dramatic event to take place.

Taking this minimal definition as a starting point, there are two ways for us to make theatre as part of our teaching and consolidation work in the Faith:

### **Stable theatre group (Drama workshop)**

This mode, similar in structure to the popular Dance Workshops, has for its manifest aim the setting up and running of a stable company of actors (amateurs in most cases), working out a repertory of stage plays and making public presentations to proclaim the teachings and principles of the Faith. Its other goal, not necessarily expressed but no less important, is the collective study of the Sacred Word as an integral part of the training of the group. This mode of making theatre requires persons with a calling for the dramatic arts, to become directors and actors. The director and his actors must aspire to achieve a fairly high standard of technical and artistic perfection, and need to work hard and for a sustained length of time toward this goal.

Drama workshops, if you have the somewhat specialized human resources to establish them, can prove to be an extremely useful and attractive strategy for teaching the Faith especially among city youth, in schools and universities.

## **Community theatre**

This mode simply means the use of drama in and by the community as a whole, with universal participation of all its members, as another means among several others, to enhance the tutor's work with his Study Circle (children, junior youth and youth, women's group, etc.). Here we are more concerned with the learning process than with artistic quality, and neither the tutor nor the participants need any special stage experience, calling or interest. This strategy aims more at teaching and consolidation than proclamation.

The benefits of working with drama, at any level and in any mode, are many, and flow as much from the group to the outside as within the interior of the group itself. Its effects on the outside world are those that Shoghi Effendi has pointed out: by the means of the arts we can reach the hearts of our audiences better than with cold rationalizing. A dramatic performance, an artistic event draws more people than a talk.

On the other hand, participation in activities of performing arts, which are collective by nature, exerts a powerful effect on character building and individual and collective transformation. "The skills that will be developed by an individual working as a member of such a group will include creativity, cooperation, communication and concentration, as well as the ability to listen, compromise, contribute and take initiative. Making theatre at whatever level is a terrific learning tool for anyone who works or lives as part of a team, which includes most of us." Hahlo-Reynolds (12)

## **LESSON FIVE: DRAMA IN STUDY CIRCLES**

Of the two ways of making theatre described in the previous lesson, it is the communal theatre with universal participation that is of interest to us here.

Again, there are two levels on which we can use this form of drama in our work:

- **Dramatization as a learning strategy of the Institute Courses being studied by the group;**
- **Drama pieces to be presented by the group to outside audiences.**

### **Dramatization as a learning tool:**

An ancient Chinese proverb says: I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand.

Suppose your Study Circle is studying Ruhí Book One. Take the very first quote by Bahá'u'lláh:

**“The betterment of the world can be accomplished through pure and goodly deeds, through commendable and seemly conduct...”**

You study this quote with your group in the established manner: explaining the meaning of the words, consulting and reflecting together, completing the exercises in the book, after which you ask the participants to memorize the quote. When this step is reached, you tap the latent reservoir of artistic creativity in the group by leading and organizing them to set music to this same quote (collective composition). One way to proceed is this:

You write the quote on the board broken down into phrases like poetry. For example:

The betterment of the world

Can be accomplished

Through pure and goodly deeds,

Through commendable

And seemly conduct.

Now have your group all stand up, establish a steady tempo by marching in place and clapping hands on the beat. When that is clear and firm and precise, have them repeat in chorus the above quote phrasing it like poetry, making pauses when the rhythm requires. If you wish you can repeat a phrase twice to make it more musical. While repeating over and over again, start raising the pitch (not the volume!) of your voices above the level of ordinary speech, to the stage of chanting. At this point – without ever stopping the process – encourage anyone in the group to come up with a melody to the rhythmically chanted poem. The best melody that emerges from this collective creation is adopted and learned by the group, adding it to their repertory of songs of Bahá'í identity. Besides enriching the growing body of community music available to the group, this method also serves to reinforce memorization of the words at a deeper, easier and more lasting level.

Now, after seeing and hearing, let us raise the learning process to the stage of doing: play acting.

Divide your Study Circles in smaller groups, of three to four participants each.

Before breaking up into teams you explain to them that they have to work out a drama skit about the verities enshrined in the above quote: that is, how can the betterment of the world be accomplished? Why does the world need betterment at all? What kind of deeds and conduct do we, here and now, have to show so that the world around us (our family, our school, our neighborhood, our community) becomes better? Make clear that they have to start out from their concrete, familiar, everyday experiences. Also recommend that they avoid simplistic, “Deus ex machina” solutions, where at the critical moment one of the actors would say: Bahá’u’lláh says that... and by an act of instant miracle everybody and everything becomes perfect. Tell them to think in terms of real life. Now you give a definite time limit (fifteen minutes, half an hour) for the teams to prepare their improvisations (avoid writing down their lines). Then you reassemble your Circle and have each team present their performance. Each skit should be analyzed by the whole group in loving consultation, but never criticized, belittled or ridiculed. Our aim here is collective learning.

This kind of exercise in drama improvisation allows the participants to relate the universal, abstract concepts of the quote they have been studying, to the concrete and particular circumstances of their everyday lives, and see the practical relevance of the Teachings. On the other hand, this kind of activity is thrilling, challenging, amusing and greatly contributes to strengthening the bonds of fellowship and harmony within the group. As dramatization becomes a regular feature of the Study Circle sessions, the self esteem and self confidence of the participants will increase by discovering the creative talents latent within them.

### **Plays for public presentation**

At a later, more consolidated stage of our Study Circle we can prompt the participants to accomplish more complex challenges of drama improvisation: the group as whole may be guided to create, in joint consultation with the tutor, a more demanding piece of drama about aspects of the Teachings: a quality like truthfulness, a principle like the equality of men and women or unity in diversity. After rehearsing it, they may want to present it at some public event or offer it to parents and friends, to a school, at a gathering of Study Circles, at a 19 Day Feast, or as part of a teaching activity the group may undertake as an act of service to the community. Such a collective enterprise and the unfailingly positive response to it by outsiders will do much to enhance the sense of group identity. Moreover, it is a powerful tool for proclamation, teaching and consolidation.

**Notes:**

1. Published in Abdu'l-Bahá in London (Oakham Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1987, p. 93)
2. The Universal House of Justice, compilation "The Importance of the Arts In Promoting The Faith (referred to as UHJ henceforth), 1998, N° 50, p. 14
3. UHJ, N° 43, p 12
4. Ridvan Message to Africa, 1996, paragraph 13
5. UHJ, N° 69, pp. 21-22
6. *ibid.*
7. UHJ, N° 35, p. 10
8. UHJ, N° 45, p. 12
9. UHJ, N° 59, p. 17
10. UHJ, N° 60, p. 18
11. R. Hahlo – P. Reynolds: Dramatic Events, p. 21
12. *ibid.*, p. 20

# DANCE





## LESSON ONE: DANCE WITH OVERFLOWING EMOTIONS

**“Lo, the Nightingale of Paradise singeth upon the twigs of the Trees of Eternity, with holy and sweet melodies, proclaiming to the sincere ones the glad tidings of the nearness of God...” Bahá’u’lláh (1)**

If the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh is music, the response of the contingent world to it is dance:

**“In the Holy Books a promise is given that the springtime of God shall make itself manifest; Jerusalem, the Holy City, shall descend from heaven; Zion shall leap forth and dance; and the Holy Land shall be submerged in the ocean of divine effulgence.” Abdu’l-Bahá (2)**

Answer these questions:

1. In the above quote by Bahá’u’lláh, who is the “Nightingale of Paradise”?
2. What are those “holy and sweet melodies”?
3. In Abdu’l-Bahá’s words, how will Zion receive the glad tidings of the nearness of God?
4. What emotion is expressed by the metaphor “Zion shall leap and dance”?

The most direct, contagious and evident physical expression of the emotions of extreme happiness, joy, exultation, ecstasy, and celebration is dancing:

**“Take the cup of the Testament in thy hand; leap and dance with ecstasy in the triumphal procession of the Covenant!” Abdu’l-Bahá (3)**

**“Today, to this melody of the Company on high, the world will leap and dance: ‘Glory be to my Lord, the All-Glorious!’” Abdu’l-Bahá (4)**

1. What emotion should fill the hearts of those who have the privilege of having recognized Bahá’u’lláh?
2. According to Abdu’l-Bahá’s words above, what is the source of our ecstasy and overflowing joy?

Bahá’u’lláh and Abdu’l-Bahá exhort us to convey this same overflowing joy to our hearers when we teach the Cause, share its Teachings and give the Message:

**“Indeed expositions and discourses in explanation of such things cause the spirits to be chilled. It behoveth thee to speak forth in such wise as to set the hearts of true believers ablaze and cause their bodies to soar.” Bahá’u’lláh (5)**

**“I ask and supplicate God to make you two convinced souls, to bring you forth with such a steadfastness that each of you may withstand the people of a country, and**

**to intoxicate you with the wine of the love of God so that you may cause your hearers to dance, to be joyful and to exult.” Abdu’l-Bahá (6)**

1. Bahá’u’lláh warns us that if we speak only to the rational mind of our hearers when we teach, their \_\_\_\_\_ will be chilled.
2. The words of a Bahá’í teacher should affect the heart as well as the body of his hearer. How?
3. One condition of effective teaching is for us to be intoxicated with the love of God. What does that mean?
4. When we are intoxicated with the love of God, how will our words affect our hearers?

In summary: in the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh and Abdu’l-Bahá, dance is associated with the expression of emotions of overflowing happiness and joy, of ecstasy and intoxication with the love of God, with His Word. Dance is a universal human manifestation of celebration:

**“...celebrate ye in joy, dance with overflowing emotions...” Abdu’l-Bahá (7)**

## **LESSON TWO: TO DANCE OR NOT TO DANCE?**

In stark contrast to the spiritual and sacred nature assigned to dance in the Writings of the Faith, dancing in our modern materialistic and decadent culture has gradually degenerated into a socially accepted form of sexual promiscuity, vulgarity and pornography, closely linked to the consumption of alcohol and other drugs. The practice of this kind of dancing has no place in our lives as Bahá’ís:

**“In the teachings there is nothing against dancing, but the friends should remember that the standard of Bahá’u’lláh is modesty and chastity. The atmosphere of modern dance halls, where so much smoking and drinking and promiscuity goes on, is very bad, but decent dances are not harmful in themselves. There is certainly no harm in classical dancing or learning dancing in school... The harmful thing, nowadays, is not the art itself but the unfortunate corruption which often surrounds these arts. As Bahá’ís we need avoid none of the arts, but acts and the atmosphere that sometimes go with these professions we should avoid.” Shoghi Effendi (8)**

1. Is dancing permissible for Bahá’í youth?
2. Is it appropriate for Bahá’í youth to go to discotheques? Give your reasons.
3. What does “promiscuity” mean?
4. Is it permissible for Bahá’í youth to have a dance party let us say for someone’s birthday?
5. What do “modesty and chastity” mean when applied to our manner of dancing?

6. Consult together: what would you consider indecent dancing? What is decent dancing? What is the difference between the two?
7. Analyze together: what kind of dancing is propagated in the media – television, video clips, musical shows - ? Decent or indecent? Edifying? Harmless? Harmful?

Dance has been a very popular form of entertainment in our Western culture for many centuries, an integral part of every festive meeting or social gathering. There is no reason for Bahá'í youth to be deprived of wholesome entertainment and diversion as long as they heed the Guardian's words of caution:

**“Such a chaste and holy life, with its implications of modesty, purity, temperance, decency, and clean-mindedness, involves no less than the exercise of moderation in all that pertains to dress, language, amusements, and all artistic and literary avocations. It demands daily vigilance in the control of one's carnal desires and corrupt inclinations. It calls for the abandonment of a frivolous conduct, with its excessive attachment to trivial and often misdirected pleasures.”** Shoghi Effendi (9)

### LESSON THREE: DANCE AS AN ART FORM

Dance is far more than a mere pastime or entertainment. It is a form of art. It is deeply imbedded in people's culture and their expression of the sacred.

#### Traditional dances (folklore)

**“...traditional dances associated with the expression of a culture are permissible in Bahá'í Centres. However, it should be borne in mind that such traditional dances generally have an underlying theme or a story being represented. Care must be exercised to ensure that the themes of such dances are in harmony with the high ethical standards of the Cause and are not portrayals that would arouse base instincts and unworthy passions...”** The Universal House of Justice (10)

True or false?:

1. It is not permissible to dance in Bahá'í Centres. T\_\_ F\_\_
2. It is permissible to perform traditional dances in Bahá'í Centres. T\_\_ F\_\_
3. Traditional dances are an expression of a culture. T\_\_ F\_\_
4. All traditional dances are appropriate in a Bahá'í Centre. T\_\_ F\_\_
5. Some folklore dances, in their present form, arouse base instincts and unworthy passions. T\_\_ F\_\_
6. We have to select carefully what aspects of our own cultural traditions deserve protection and preservation. T\_\_ F\_\_

Consult together: What traditional dances are there in your region? What is the underlying theme or story in each of them?

The protection and promotion of the cultural identity of every people is one of the principles of our Faith, so as Bahá'í teachers or tutors we must take this into account.

**“Much like the role played by the gene pool in the biological life of humankind and its environment, the immense wealth of cultural diversity achieved over thousands of years is vital to the development of the human race which is experiencing its collective coming of age. It represents a heritage that enriches us all and that must be permitted to bear its fruit in a global civilization.” Bahá'í International Community (11)**

Consult together: why is it important to preserve cultural diversity? Is not the “modern culture” of globalization, offered through the media, enough for the future?

Folklore – says Shoghi Effendi – is the expression of a people. Peoples do not stand still: they evolve, change, and progress. So does their expression. The “people of Bahá” must become a new people; our cultural expression must also be something new. Bahá'ís should go beyond the mere preservation of the cultural traditions of our inherited identities, and undertake **a process of selection, adaptation, and synthesis**. The process of transformation of a people, released and fueled by the Creative Word of God for our age - the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh -, begins in the very heart of its culture. The Teachings and Words of Bahá'u'lláh, in turn, transform this same culture, by purifying it, strengthening it, and making it grow. Each and every people will take upon themselves, as they become more and more deepened in the Faith, the task of selection, adaptation and synthesis of the best and most progressive features of their culture. This process will yield in time a new folklore: a new expression of a transformed people.

Bahá'í tutors and teachers can do much to start and accelerate this process. On the one hand they can and should encourage their Study Circles, Pre-Youth Groups, Children's Classes to cultivate their own cultural traditions, to learn and perform the traditional dances of their region. On the other hand, through collective reflection, analysis and consultation among their groups, they can identify and modify those negative contents and forms of dance that are at variance with the high moral standards of our Cause. We have to bear in mind that the general prostitution of the arts so characteristic of our modern society has not left the traditional dances unaffected, especially where these have been adapted to the tourist entertainment industry.

### **Choreographed dances**

Choreography is the art of creating and arranging ballet and dances with a specific theme or story.

**“As for choreographed dances whose purpose is to reinforce and proclaim Bahá'í principles, if they can be performed in a manner which portrays the nobility of such principles and invokes appropriate attitudes of respect or reverence, there is no objection to dances which are meant to interpret passages from the Writings;**

**however, it is preferable that the motions of a dance not be accompanied by the reading of the words.**

**The principle which must guide the friends in their consideration of these questions is the observance of "moderation in all that pertains to dress, language, amusements, and all artistic and literary avocations". The Universal House of Justice (12)**

Consult together: how can we observe moderation in the way we dress? In our language? In the way we have fun? In the way we make theatre, music, and dance? Give concrete examples.

In recent years a new modality of proclamation and teaching has emerged and spread like wildfire among the youth of many parts of the world:

**Dance Workshops.** Originating in the United States and Canada, these dance Workshops proclaim Bahá'í principles through choreographed dances. The **Universal House of Justice** acknowledged with satisfaction this new development: **“involvement of youth in music and the arts as a means of proclaiming and teaching the Cause distinguished their exertions in many places; the spread of dance and drama workshops was particularly effective...” (13)**

Forming drama and dance groups or workshops to “represent the spirit and the teachings of the Cause from the stage” requires a group of young people with special interest in and calling for these art forms. In other words, we need “specialists” to some degree. Nevertheless they are very attractive modes of action for the Bahá'í youth, especially in the cities, to draw their peers into the youth movement. However, care should be taken that these newly formed dance workshops are not mere carbon copies of their North American models. While emulating the original method, discipline, concepts of organization, they should create their own choreographies based on the music and dances of their region, and addressing social and moral problems that are relevant to their own people. Otherwise, we would be adding to the already massive cultural erosion taking place in the modern world, which would be contrary to our principle of Unity in Diversity.

It is not necessary to have major artistic objectives or specialized skills for a Study Circle tutor to initiate the first steps towards simple choreographies. Based on the “motion vocabulary” of the traditional dances of the region, Bahá'í principles, like equality of men and women, unity in diversity, elimination of extremes of poverty and wealth, racism, etc. can be expressed. As with the creation of community music and drama, here, too, we can safely rely on the latent creativity of our Study Circle participants and the liberating bounties conferred by consultation.

Along with music and drama, dance can be a very useful tool for proclamation, teaching and consolidation, as the following report by the **Bahá'í International Community** points out:

**“One noteworthy example is the collaboration between UNIFEM and Bahá’í communities in Bolivia, Cameroon and Malaysia, aimed at improving the status of rural women by using traditional media, such as music and dance, to stimulate village-wide discussion of women’s roles. Messages communicated in this way are taken very seriously in non-literate communities, and they provide a non-threatening opening for dialogue with the whole community.” (14)**

Practice: team up in couples. Each couple will, independently from the others, create a simple choreography about the equality of men and women, using instrumental music (live or recorded). A good idea is to first show how women are traditionally treated in your society, and then how both sexes should relate according to Bahá’í teachings. No spoken words should be used. Then reassemble and each couple present their dance. Reflect on and analyze together the performances. Then, as a second step, if time and circumstances allow, make a more complex dance-drama together, using the ideas and insights gained in the first exercise on the same topic and present it at your closing celebration.

#### **LESSON FOUR: DANCE AND WORSHIP**

In many cultures dance is synonymous with worship, the expression of reverence for the sacred. In the history of the Heroic Age of our Faith one finds many examples of this devotional use of dance:

**“When one of the victims fell to the ground and they prodded him up with bayonets, if the loss of blood which dripped from his wounds had left him any strength, he would begin to dance and to cry out with even greater enthusiasm: 'In truth, we come from God and unto Him do we return!' "Some of the children expired on the way.” Shoghi Effendi (15)**

Even Siyyid Muhammad-i-Isfahani, this “Antichrist of the Bahá’í Revelation”, took recourse to dancing as the ultimate sign of his devotion, while trying to disguise his real sentiments:

**“Although embarrassed, he arose, and to the amusement of some and the amazement of others, performed a dance of rapture in an attempt to dispel their suspicion.” Adib Taherzadeh (16)**

In the above descriptions, dance is performed as a public demonstration of what?

For a great segment of mankind, dance is the primary expression of religious feeling, of reverence before the sacred, of devotion and worship. In this context, “dance is the meditation of the body”. In the authoritative Writings of the Bahá’í Faith this dimension of dance is also recognized as legitimate, along with other means and forms of giving expression to our worship, like reading prayers, chanting prayers, singing prayers or playing an instrument in prayer:

**“There is no objection to the interpretation of a prayer in the form of movement or dance if the spirit is properly reverential, but preferably this should not be accompanied by reading the words.” The Universal House of Justice (17)**

What do you think:

1. what makes a dance acceptable as “the interpretation of a prayer”?
2. would it be appropriate for someone to read a prayer while another is interpreting it through dancing?

**“It is perfectly acceptable for a prayer to be interpreted in the form of movement or dance. As you know, in many parts of the world there are certain tribal and traditional dances which are performed in glorification of God. Just as a composer can create a piece of music as a result of inspiration by some passage in the Writings, so can a person perform a reverential dance, which is another form of art, to interpret a passage from a prayer or from the Writings. However, to avoid that such expressions of prayer become gradually ritualized, it is preferable that they not be accompanied by reading the words of the prayers.”**

(Letters of The Universal House of Justice, 1994 Mar, Dancing at Feast)

In secular materialistic Western culture which is now being globalized, this dimension of the sacred dance has been lost. It will take time for us to recover it. No doubt, the so-called “primitive” societies, where the reverence of the sacred permeates all moments of life, have a lot to teach us in this respect.

## Notes

1. Tablet of Ahmad, Bahá'í prayers
2. Abdu'l-Bahá, Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 38
3. Abdu'l-Bahá in Bahá'í World Faith, p. 351
4. Selection from the Writings of Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 93
5. Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 142
6. Tablets of Abdu'l-Bahá, vol. 2, p. 320
7. *ibid.*, p. 361
8. Compilation by the Universal House of Justice "The Importance of the Arts in Promoting the Faith", 1998 (henceforth UHJ), N° 42
9. UHJ, N° 25
10. UHJ, N° 66
11. Bahá'í International Community (BIC): Valuing Spirituality in Development, p. 15
12. UHJ, N° 66
13. The Universal House of Justice, Ridvan Message 1996
14. BIC: Protection of Women's Rights
15. Shoghi Effendi, in Dawn Breakers
16. Adib Taherzadeh: Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, vol. 1, p. 220
17. UHJ, N° 63
18. Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 143



## Miscellaneous Reflections

After all, I'm a drummer. A conga drummer or ethnic hand drummer, to be precise. I cannot leave you without sharing some of my reflections and convictions about this specific topic of drums, especially the sacred drums, within the Bahá'í Cause. If you happen to be a classical violinist who hates drums, just skip the remaining pages.

### WHY DRUMS?

#### NINE REASONS TO PLAY DRUMS IN THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH

*“On my last visit you gave me a drum.*

*Whenever I am harassed or troubled I go into my room and beat on my drum.*

*I hear in it the loving voice of the Bahá'ís of Africa and I am comforted.”*

Amatu'l-Bahá Ruhiyih Khanum

This servant has spent more than 35 years in passionate love with hand drumming; researching, studying, playing and teaching West African polyrhythmic hand drumming as found in the diverse musical traditions of The Americas. Ever since he became a Bahá'í 25 years ago, he has tirelessly been promoting, with his musical family Millero Congo, the use of drums in and for the Cause, at all levels of application:

- at the level of professional musicianship (see CDs Leonor Dely: Amame – Palabras Ocultas de Bahá'u'lláh, and Talisman; both published by Insignia Records in Los Angeles);
- at the semiprofessional level (see CDs Construyendo Identidad Bahá'í published by the Ruhi Institute in Colombia, Limbo Teeja, published jointly by the Friedland Institute of Suriname and the Apinti Institute of French Guyana, Bahá'íti, published by the Blackwell Institute of Haiti, and Ilú Bahá, published by the ALBASE Regional Institute in Brazil);
- and most importantly, at the grass roots level within the growing Institute Process in many countries of African cultural background (see the Bahá'í World Centre document “The Four Year Plan and the Twelve Month Plan, 1996-2001, Summary of Achievements”).

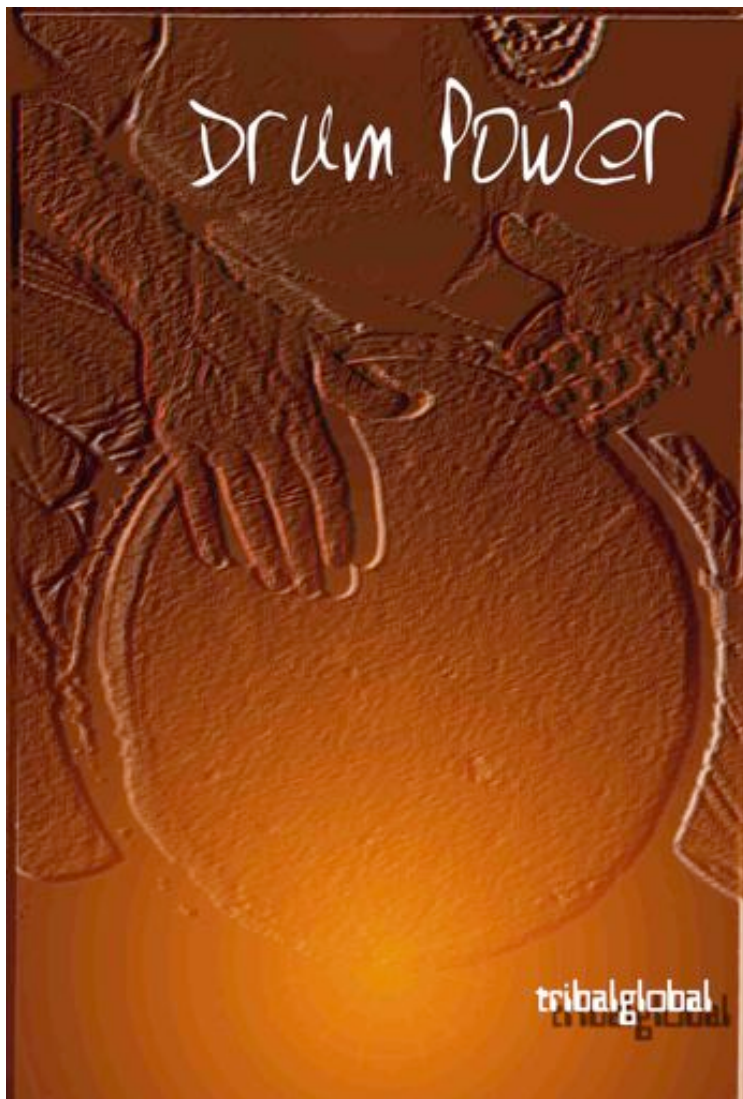
So, understandably, he can be said to have personal, vested interests and passionate commitment in this matter.

Nevertheless, there are also powerful objective reasons and practical considerations that speak for the extensive use of drums within the Bahá'í Faith at this moment when “the Five Year Plan ushers in a new stage in our efforts to promote the arts in the life of the Cause.” (International Teaching Centre). None of these reasons should, however, be construed as an attempt to ascribe any inherent superiority to these instruments over any other, whether traditional or modern, folk or classical. Putting in some words in favor of the drums is only necessary insofar as they have been despised, belittled, condemned and even anathemised for centuries in some Western and Islamic cultures, and even deemed

unworthy of Bahá'í spirituality and solemnity by some of the friends until recently. So, to dispel any misgivings, I'll start with the words of no less an authority for Bahá'ís than the Master:

“...with flying flags, and **TO THE BEAT OF DRUMS**, let us pass into the realm of the All-Glorious, and join the company on high.” (Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Bahá N° 210, p 267)

So: why drums?



**Drums are the most ancient and also the most modern instruments of man.**

Even chimpanzees have been observed to beat on hollow trunks in the jungle. After his own body, these same hollow trunks were the first obvious choice for man to amplify rhythm and sound. Drums are “tools for exploring rhythm, one of the deepest mysteries in the universe. Science has taught us that we live in a rhythmscape in which everything is pulsing in time with everything else. Every atom, every planet, every star is vibrating in a complex dance. **We live on planet drum.** And human beings, as multidimensional rhythm machines, are also embedded in this universe of rhythm.

As a species we love to play with rhythm because it seems to connect us to something fundamental in the nature of reality. We deal with it every second of our lives, right to the very end, because when the rhythm stops, we die.” (Mickey Hart). In modern Western music, hand drums are the latest, most recent additions to the standard instruments of orchestras and bands of all genres, and their numbers, kinds and relative importance is steadily growing.

**They are universal.** Throughout history and across the planet, there’s hardly any people, nation, ethnic group or culture that hasn’t developed and used some kind of drum. Of all the families of musical instruments, the family of drums is the most numerous, varied and extended.





In their original nature and even the present-day practice of many traditional societies **drums are closely associated with the sacred, with worship.** There is no reason why the sacred drumming traditions of the earth shouldn't find a place for preservation and growth within the Bahá'í Faith alongside with other modes of worship from other spiritual traditions. Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation is "the highest essence and most perfect expression" of all cultures and spiritual traditions and welcomes diversity in unity in this field, too.

Before the age of modern communications, **drums have been widely used to convey and relay messages over long distances.** They have been called the “telegraphs of the jungle”. And not only the jungle! Until recently in my native Hungary, in small towns and villages new decrees and laws were “shouted abroad” to the accompaniment of a snare drum! The drum announcing the new Law, like Siddharta Gautama the Budha had said: “Wherever I go I play the Drum of the Law”. Bahá’ís have a Great Message to give, a Great Announcement to make, a Great New Law to make public . Drums can help.

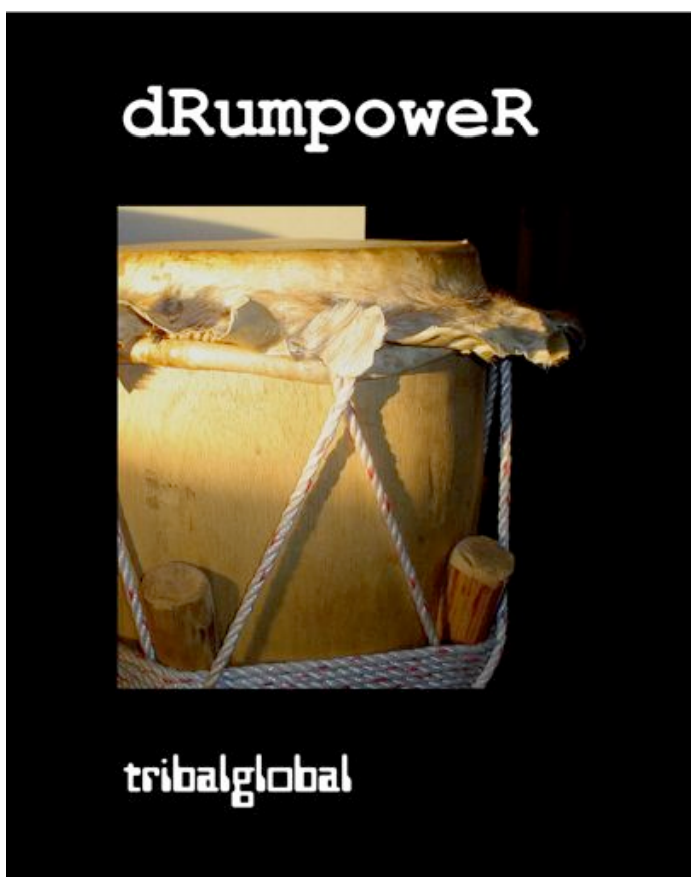


I'd like to share a moving anecdote about this. Among the Bush Negroes (Maroons) of Suriname and French Guiana the West African tradition of the “talking drums” is still alive. Whenever I played my drum, the elders would ask: and what does it say? This gave us the idea of a novel “teaching mode”: I would play phrases on my drum, and my team-mate and translator would “translate” these phrases to the villagers in their language (of course we agreed beforehand about what I would “say”). It worked wonderfully well and really touched the hearers’ hearts. And they remembered everything they heard because they were paying keen attention to both the drum and the “translator”!

**Drums are excellent vehicles for focal practices**, both for the individual and for a group.



- a. For the individual: “The most timid of us find making a loud noise on a drum intensely pleasurable. Wow! That was me – roaring like a lion! Drums are great instruments for building self-esteem. You can be loud and aggressive, using your whole body, and it’s okay because you’re not fighting or harming anything, you’re just drumming. And if you keep it up for twenty or thirty minutes you’ll probably feel very calm, very centered –a kind of drummer’s high.” (Mickey Hart)
- b. For the community: “The drum held as much knowledge as the text of the Bible, the distance education kit, or computer access at the North Island College. The songs to emerge from its drumming taught of pains and joys, and the intelligence of a community. Its rhythm taught of the human place in the cosmos and its complex set of relationships, only vaguely hinted at in that word “ecology”. Its precise and skilled playing could cause a hall of a thousand to dance, to weep, to understand the meaning of speech, birth, death, and to viscerally grasp their place in the cosmos.” (Daniel Bogert-O’Brien)



**They are easily available**, more so than other kinds of instruments. We have already referred to a hollow tree trunk as a drum. A desk, a wooden chair, a plastic bucket or water gallon and countless other objects in our environment – whether in city, town, village or jungle – will do as drums.

In his book *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, Adib Taherzadeh tells the story of Mirzá Abbás, known as Qábil, one of the outstanding believers and teachers in the times of Bahá'u'lláh. “He was a zealous and enthusiastic man, a poet of remarkable talent, a teacher of wide repute and, above all, devoted to Bahá'u'lláh. His enthusiastic spirit, coupled with his deep love for Bahá'u'lláh, cheered and uplifted the believers whom he met on his way. They would gather to meet him and he would often request them, whenever circumstances permitted, to **chant in unison** certain Tablets or poems of Bahá'u'lláh which lent themselves to collective chanting, and he would teach them to **sing together**. ... Qábil had a certain genius for **clapping his hands** to accompany their songs of love and praise. Where greater freedom prevailed, a **homemade drum** was a welcome accompaniment to his chant of love for Bahá'u'lláh.”

**They're very democratic to play.** Somebody who has never played a drum before can meaningfully participate in a drumming orchestra or help accompany collective singing and handclapping, something impossible with any other instrument.



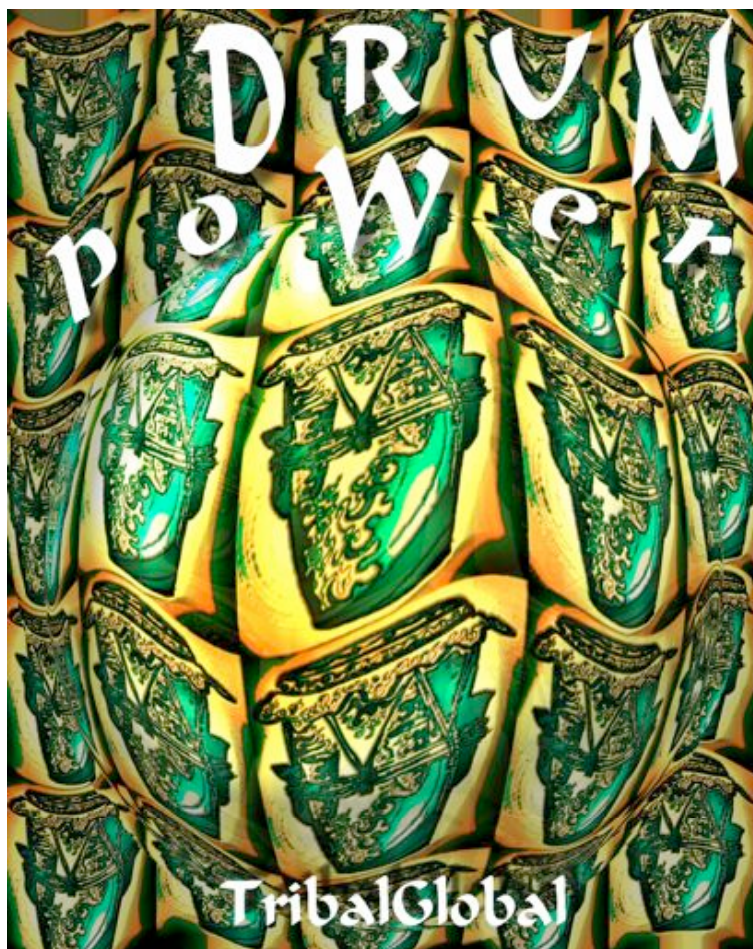
The sense of rhythm is innate in human beings and, just like collective singing, improves with frequent practice. Of course it takes many years of study to become a master drummer, but in collective drumming only one of the many drummers has to be a master drummer (or just a reasonably good drummer). This democratic feature of drumming which allows for universal participation in the same way as collective singing and handclapping, can go a long way toward breaking the ice, leveling barriers, healing wounds, overcome estrangement within the community. In other words, to cement the hearts together.



**Drums are loud!**

Many drums together are even louder... That comes handy in our societies where the level of noise is usually high and in order to call people's attention you have to climb well over that level! Wherever and whenever you play a couple of drums, a crowd is sure to gather.

For many of the above reasons, drums are “in” worldwide. Just think back to the opening ceremonies of the last two soccer world cups! Hundreds of drums! Not to speak of the thriving “drumming circles” business in the United States and Europe...



Traditionally, through the ages, “the drum provided opportunities for entertainment, carrying messages through time and space, teaching spiritual connection, a contact with deep emotional tones, and gave a profound music.” (D. Bogert-O’Brien) “Its round form represents the universe and its steady strong beat is the pulse, the heart throbbing at the centre of the universe.” (Black Elk, Lakota)

“Bahá’í children’s classes and youth audiences recognize intuitively and respond spontaneously to presentations of drum music. At Bahá’í Feasts and Holy Days, the Drum finds a place in both the social and the sacred part of the events.” (The Native North American Drum and the Bahá’í Faith)

“May such memories resound afresh in your hearts, quickening your will to fulfill the major aim of the Plan before you, and setting a pace for your actions like **the urgent rhythm of drums** pulsating throughout your immensely potent, far-stretching land.” (The Universal House of Justice)



## Conclusion

This modest work is by far not the last word on arts in the Bahá'í Faith, not even in my tiny, limited corner of the field. **“We cannot possibly foresee, standing as we do on the threshold of Bahá'í culture, what forms and characteristics the arts of the future, inspired by this Mighty New Revelation, will have. All we can be sure of is that they will be wonderful; as every Faith has given rise to a culture which flowered in different forms so too our beloved Faith may be expected to do the same thing. It is premature to try and grasp what they will be at present.”** (From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 23 December 1942) The sole aim and purpose of the author in publishing his very personal reflections born of many years of inner struggle, spiritual battles, trial and error, has been to stimulate a healthy exchange of ideas and experiences among fellow Bahá'í artists so that as a result of such a consultative process and the synergy it can generate perchance we might become better equipped and prepared for the tremendous opportunities and responsibilities that our “standing on the threshold of Bahá'í culture” entails.

