Tibetan "Musical Offerings" (Mchod-rol): The Indispensable Guide

Hubert Decleer
School of International Training
Brattleboro, Vermont

Himalayan rituals

A few years ago, Franz-Karl Ehrhard wrote his ground-breaking article on two "accession lists of teachings" (*thob yig*) microfilmed in the course of a Himalayan expedition for the Nepal Research Center & Manuscript Preservation Project.[1] These easily overlooked 19th century manuscripts, abounding in spelling mistakes, were to lead him to his now standard formulation about the spread of the Revealed Treasure (*gter ma*) lineage transmissions, such as those of Ja'-tson snying-po (1585–1656) and gTer-bdag gling-pa (1646–1714) specifically dealt with in these texts, throughout the Nepal Himalayas:

> That one can still see in the mountain regions of Nepal bordering on Tibet these late-flowering blossoms of a movement that came to full fruition in the 14th century with Klong-chen rab-'byams-pa (1308–54) and Rig-'dzin rGod-ldem 'phru-can (1337–1408) is of a significance not to be downplayed, particularly at present, for the study of the region's cultural history and geography.

In one sweep the emphasis was on a switch from chronologically largely undefined clan histories (*rus yig*) to the parallel lines of "spiritual genealogies" within Buddhist transmission. Only by pegging the former onto the latter,

[1] Franz-Karl Ehrhard, 'Two Documents on Tibetan Ritual Literature and Spiritual Genealogy", *Journal of the Nepal Research Centre* Vol. IX (1993), pp. 77–100.

historically much better documented, was there a chance of also situating the Sherpa clan histories, and even their early migrations from Eastern Tibet, on a much surer footing doing away with what had often been calculated guesswork.

Gone too was the until then often major concern to study, the "exclusive Sherpa- or Tamangness" in a Himalayan ritual. A *gterma* text encountered within the context of such a ritual obviously belongs to some major (Tibetan!) Revealed Treasure tradition: it did not just appear out of the blue, nor was it "a Tamang text" composed by the Buddhist grandfather of Peter-Paul Tamang in the village of Sisapani-gaon. Once connected to one of the major transmission lineages that go back to historically well defined personalities, a serious start can be made at anchoring the clan genealogical name lists of "semi-literate" Himalayan groups to the secure dates of these contemporaries. Dr. Ehrhard has further demonstrated that spiritual lineages, from one generation to the next, travelled through both royal houses and local clans. By a systematic study of the numerous sacred biographies involved, the fuller picture can gradually be painted in, for one region or one historical period at a time.

For the study of Himalayan ritual, Mireille Helffer's work on Mchod-rol,[2] adds another panel to the diptych, the grand synthesis of her painstaking fieldwork on mostly Tibetan ritual music spanning a full two decades.[3] This musical offerings (*mchod-rol*) volume is bound to become the standard reference work for some time to come. There is as little likelihood, in the foreseeable future, of another musicologist-*cum*-TibetoIogist spending twenty years on the topic of Tibetan ritual music as there is of another Monseigneur Etienne Lamotte devoting forty years to the translation of one single Mahāyāna scripture from the Chinese sources.[4]

One wonders how Mireille Helffer got started on the subject. Could it have been that she saw the New Wave (Nouvelle Vague) movie with recordings of

[2] Mireille Helffer, *Mchod-rol, les instruments de la musique tibétaine*, Paris: CNRS Editions with Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme (Collection Chemins de l'ethnologie), 1994. Also enclosed is a compact disc with recordings carefully annotated in the book, an innovation likely to become the foreseeable formula for any serious musicological work in the future, outdoing the classical and most admirable Cambridge Studies in Ethnomusicology, i.e. James Kippen, *The Tabla of Lucknow;* Bonnie Wade, *Khyāl: Creativity within North India's Classical Music Tradition;* Regula Burckhardt Qureshi, *Sufi Music of India and Pakistan: Sound, Context and Meaning in the Qawwali*, that still rely on a cassette awkwardly added on.

[3] "Mostly Tibetan ritual music" in the sense that her range also includes an annotated LP of Nepali gaine fiddler-singers (in collaboration with A. W. Macdonald) and a study on the *damaru* type drum of Kumaon and Western Nepal (in collaboration with Marc Gaborieau), not forgetting her original Ph.D. work on the recitative melody types of the Gesar epic, *Les chants dans l'épopée tibétaine de Ge-sar d'après le Livre de la Course au Cheval—version chantée de Blo-bzang bstan-'dzin*. *Genève* & Paris: Librairie Droz, 1977.

[4] Moreover there has been a desertion from the field among the already minimal circle of specialists, with Ter Ellingson switching to Newari and Sri Lankan music, and Ricardo Canzio moving on to the Indians in the Brazilian rain forest.

Tibetan music showing in a sculptor's studio? Were the early Arnaud Desjardins documentaries on Buddhist Masters of the Tibetan exile responsible for her initial fascination with the subject matter, as they also included some of the first professional recordings ever heard by a larger public in the West? Was it her private challenge one day to decrypt those supremely elegant musical notations associated with Tibetan ritual music—her husband too, the well known concert pianist Mr. Claude Helffer, dealt with occasionally esoteric musical notations when working on the Premiere creations after the *aeuvre* of Olivier Messiaen—or could it have been her early acquaintance with the extremely learned Gene Smith, then still with the Library of Congress in Delhi, and with Ven. Matthieu Ricard of Zhe-chen Gompa at Bauddha (the latter formerly a harpsichord player himself)? Probably all these factors contributed to guiding and maintaining her interest in that direction.

Although work of hers on several Tibetan musical instruments has already appeared in the form of monographs—on the Bönpo *gshang* bell, on the use of the large drums in the monastic setting, on the standard ritual bells, on various notations of ritual music and chant,—the scope of her latest opus presents the same within a much vaster panorama. Of particular importance is the way the author organized her materials, opting, as she did, not for a dead enumeration or museum-like catalogue by families of musical instruments, but for a classification according to their ritual function. Much thought has obviously gone into this ingenious classification:

I. Ceremonial instruments (the *long dung-chen* horn, the *rgya-gling* oboe)
II. Instruments for the assembly calls of the monastic congregation (the wooden *gandi* gong, the gong and conch shell)
III. Instruments basic to the structuring of time (the hanging and large hand-held drum, the three kinds of cymbals)
IV. Ritual objects with aural function (various bells, two kinds of *ḍamaru* drum, bone trumpet)
V. Emblematic instruments (the two types of lute, the flute)

As an immediate result, the presentation is very much alive, concerned foremost with live music. This is particularly reflected in the photography (for the bell: "Procession of the young Rinpoches of Zhe-chen Monastery," p. 192; for the *gcod ḍamaru:* "Group of *sngags-pas* with their instruments, Lhasa 1991," p. 249). Yet Helffer equally belongs to what one scholar tried in vain to launch as the anthropological school of ethno-philologists—a term she herself always avoided as all too pompous—since her field recordings and subsequent analyses thereof in the light of the corresponding musical scores are further backed up with extensive research in the scriptural and iconographic sources, not to mention near-exhaustive surveys of the pieces in foreign museum collections. Such an approach, along the lines of an entire range of different disciplines, is extremely rare indeed.

The way of the conch

It is hard to believe that one general music encyclopedia of long standing, by Corbet and Paap,[5] still had this to say about Tibetan music a mere twenty years or so before Dr. Helffer started out on her research:

> Tibetan esthetics, in fact, is a "science of sound" comprehended within *mantra*, which in their thought is connected with control of the energy within the human body. In his musical instruments, the Lama hears the counterparts of the sounds that, during perfect stillness, can be perceived inside the body. Within the body he hears:
>
> | | |
> |---|---|
> | throbbing, | with its counterpart in the big drum, |
> | clashing, | with its counterpart in the cymbals, |
> | rushing, | with its counterpart in the conch shell, |
> | ringing, | with its counterpart in the bell, |
> | throbbing, | with its counterpart in the damaru, |
> | moaning, | with its counterpart in the gyaling oboe, |
> | deep moaning, | with its counterpart in the long horn and |
> | a shrill sound, | with its counterpart in the bone trumpet |
>
> The secret sound formulas (*mantra*) are able to bring about the true harmony of sounds, both within man and in his music.

Most hilarious in all this profundity is no doubt the "rushing, with its counterpart in the conch shell". Here the author seems to have imagined that playing this instrument consists in holding it to one's ear and "hearing the ocean" (with the irrefutable internal logic that, for the Tibetan monks on their Roof of the World, hearing the ocean must represent some sort of mystic thrill)!

As one example of her research strategy, it is worth looking at what Dr. Helffer does for the same instrument. Her treatment includes:

(1) Definition of the conch (Tib. *dung dkar* ("white shell"), Skr. *shan- kha*)*;*
(2) The physical alterations whereby it is turned it into a musical instrument: piercing the tip, occasionally adding a mouthpiece and/or an ornamental metal wing; with reference to famous pieces in museums (e.g. the Bhutanese one in Neufchâtel).
(3) Indian traditions: conch shells as war horns in the *Bhagavad Gīta;* as Viṣṇu's emblem, as one of the Eight Auspicious Emblems, as Indra's offering to the Buddha. A discussion on the rare and much valued "clockwise spiraling" conches, with mention of these as famous gifts in Tibetan history (related to the First Karma-pa, to 'Phags-pa, and to

[5] What follows must have been a quick note taken in some public library, just at closing time, for I have no other bibliographical data than the names of the authors and the title in Dutch, *Algemene muziek-encyclopedie*, Vol. IV, 528ff, the particular contribution being signed by one W. G. Gilbert.

Tsong-kha-pa) and as part of monastic treasures (Nāropa's conch in the sTtog Palace, Ladakh). Association with the *nāgas*, further iconographical sources, etc.

(4) The mythical origin of the conch according to Bön sources; its mention in popular song,[6] as well as in the sacred biography of Padma 'od-'bar, basic tale for the mystery play (*a lce lha mo*) of that name; and in two songs by 'Brug-pa kun-legs, etc.

(5) Use of the conch as the calling signal for the monastic assembly, with references to *The Life of Milarepa*, to the travel accounts of F. Hue, to the musical observations by Waddell, Alexandra David-Neel, Fürer-Haimendorf and Ricardo Canzio, corresponding to what is already noted in one passage of the Dunhuang texts, plus her personal observations and recordings at the Dpal-spungs, Khams-pa-gar and Ze-chen monasteries; and a few paragraphs on the role of the 'conch attendant'.

(6) The musical scores for the conch play.

Dr. Helffer's major contribution, for the conch as for the other instruments, is in the region of the final section 6. It is definitely the first time that even a nonspecialist reader, with the assistance of her descriptive annotations, for each instrument's notation and its marginal written codes, can learn to imagine the actual music, for which the score fulfils the role of a mnemonic aid. For a number of pieces (for instance the call by the long horns referred to as Great Compassionate One (*thugs rje chert po*), p. 58), Helffer goes as far as to provide: (a) the original Tibetan score, and a set of four "translations",(b) a corresponding sonagram print-out, (c) the equivalent Western notation, (d) the Tibetan written code names, (e) a descriptive analysis, (f) the actual recording on the accompanying compact disc, (g) under its original Tibetan reference title, *thugs rje chen po*.

Most admirable too is the way the author has systematized her data, by first determining the musical value of each separate graphic convention and written formula, then isolating these, eventually presenting in various tables a comparison between the different monastic traditions. The latter further include the variations in "initial formula" and "finale" (pp. 54f, for the long horns).

Of particular interest too is her sub-chapter, *The onomatopoeias associated with the sounds of musical instruments* (pp. 293–5), which must have profited from her long acquaintance with the Gesar epic materials; *vide* the corresponding sub-chapter, *Ornaments with regard to sound*, in her Gesar work.[7]

[6] With a slight oversight in line two of the Tibetan text (*dung gcig dbus gtsang bla ma'i tshogs dung nyan*, by analogy to the other strophes to be emended to, *dung gcig dbus gtsang yul la khyer*.

[7] Helffer, *op. cit.*, pp. 386–7. The work has recently been translated into Chinese; no publication data available. We can only hope that, before long, this earlier work of hers might also profit from a companion compact disc from the Ethnomusicology Lab of the CNRS.

This plainly is the last word; nothing further could be added.

Drum language

What immediately strikes the reader of the *Mchod-rol* treatise is the degree of sophistication where one would have expected it least: in the musical notations for instruments like the *ḍamaru*, the bone trumpet or the long horns. Precisely by restricting her work to what, in a concluding chapter as in her title, Helffer aptly calls "[instrumental] offering music (*śabda pūja*)", and leaving aside the Tibetan chant,[8] it was possible for her to enter into these series of micro-studies with the requisite amount of detail, it now turns out, they amply deserved. Almost in passing, she provides the solution to a number of incomprehensible statements in the ancient texts. Take for instance the following passage from the Copper Isle Version (*zangs gling ma*) where Guru Rinpoche is at the last moment invited to help out the beleaguered Buddhist community at the Vajra Throne, threatened by Tīrthika debaters ready to take over all the institutions in the event of their own victory. He enters meditative stabilization, then:

> With his hand he started beating the *gandi*, and the "Masters of Sound" among the Tīrthikas in the four directions spoke: "Just now an unpleasant sound is resounding, unlike any ever heard before." When they were being asked: "What does it say, that sound?" the Masters of Sound in the *east* replied: "By beating this big drum of mind set on enlightenment (manifesting as) loving kindness, I'll defeat those Tīrthikas with brains like foxes! That's what it says." The Masters of Sound in the *south* replied: "By beating this big drum of mind set on enlightenment (manifesting as) compassion, I'll gather under my power those armies of demonic misleaders! That's what it says." The Masters of Sound in the *west* replied: "By beating this big drum of mind set on enlightenment (manifesting as) joy, I'll root out these assemblies of pernicious and troublesome arguers! That's what (the drum sound) is telling." The Masters of Sound in the replied: "By beating this big drum of mind set on enlightenment (manifesting as) equanimity, I'll pound to dust all these black assemblies of evil without exception! That's what the drum sound proclaims."[9]

We are led to understand that Guru Rinpoche beats the *gandi*, but this is

[8] Amply dealt with in Ter Ellingson, "The Maṇḍala of Sound: Concepts and Structures in Tibetan Ritual Music", Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1979. It is obtainable through University Microfilms International (Ann Arbor and London), 1980.

[9] In H.H. Dilgo Khyentse's edition, vol. I, p. 27, of the 64 volumes in the *Rin chen gter mdzod*. Compare the recent English translation by Erik Pema Kunsang, *The Lotus-born—The Life Story of Padmasambhava*, composed by Yeshe Tsogyal, revealed by Nyang-ral Nyima Oser, Boston & London: Shambala, 1993, p. 50, where one could easily miss the reference to the *gandi*, as the translation only speaks of "a wooden drum."

perceived by the Tīrthikas as the beating of a large drum (*rnga chen*), with a message that can be decoded, at least by their "Masters of Sound" (*sgra mkhan rnams*).[10]

In her own chapter on the *gandi*, Mireille Helffer (pp. 93–5), basing herself on a Vinaya text from the *bKa' 'gyur* and on a commentary to that passage by 'Jam-dbyangs gzhad-pa'i rdo-rje, also discovered "three sequences of the *rgyud* formula of 36 beats (18 heavy, 18 light; 36 x 3 making up 108 beats) in the present day practice; each sequence being accompanied by the enunciation of the same strophe (4 verses of 9 syllables = 36, meaning that one beat on the *gandi* corresponds to one syllable of the mentally recited strophe)." The third verse of the mentally recited strophe is quite close in meaning to the Sound Masters' elucidation of the *gandi* sounds found in the above quoted passage from the Guru Rinpoche biography:

> **…….**
> **tib. Text**
>
> Offering to the gods, *nāgas* and *yakṣas*! By beating this *gandi* ("ghanti") of the Precious Three, *may the demon brains of the Tīrthikas dry out and break apart* and may the Buddha's teaching spread and be propagated farther and farther!

The relationship between sound and meaning, hence, is one of association. Certain verses are being recited simultaneously with the drumming, beat for beat corresponding with one of its syllables. The triple *gandi* sequence consequently becomes associated with the recited strophe and, as with the *thugs rje chen po* piece for the long horns, is eventually named after it and easily recognized ("decoded") as such by listeners in the know.

When a similar claim is being made for royal proclamations by drum, we can only presuppose a parallel procedure, even though the text, taken literally, suggests otherwise:

> Then the King had the *big hanging drum* beaten, so that the sound resounded, to be heard in all directions: "I, King Indrabodhi, will cause to come down like rain from the Precious Wish-fulfilling Gem everything one could possibly wish for. Whatever you want, whoever wants

[10] One should not forget that *śabda-vidyā* expertise of these Masters of Sound covered *all* areas of the "arts and sciences of sound", including the entire field of Sanskrit studies and music theory. The Masters of Sound in the cardinal directions each interpreting the message, suggest that the *gandi* player consecutively turns towards these directions; seemingly a parallel to the "swastika steps" recorded for the *gandi* player in the New sMan-ri Monastery (p. 96).

anything, come and receive it!" Such a message did the sound proclaim.[11]

Even so, at least one learned musicologist in recent times has tried to resuscitate the romantic idea of a drum language able, by purely rhythmical means, to convey messages along linguistic patterns. In his erudite, though far from convincing article, "Ancient Indian Drum Syllables and Bu-ston's Sham-pa-ṭa Ritual",[12] Ter Ellingson comes up with a hypothesis to the effect that, "Indian drum patterns, used till at least the eight century AD. to represent linguistic utterances, later lost their significance and became stereotyped musical patterns." This is a bold statement, based on the very limited data of some nine syllables supposedly representing what he interprets as four corresponding rhythmical patterns. With Dr. Helffer (p. 145) we are greatly tempted to assign this "evidence" to the rank of "The Talking Drums Of The Jungle" feature from *The Phantom* comics (fig. 1)—if not to "drumology" science and its largely unsubstantiated claims, well reflected by Philippe de Baleine in a rec-orded conversation with one of its present day founders:

> Author: What I didn't understand is how the drum talks. Does it send out some kind of sonorous ideograms, or does it talk like a human being, through syllables?
> Prof. Niangorau-Bouah (Iw. University, Côte d'Ivoire, West Africa): The drum talks exactly like a human being, through syllables. … The drum can reproduce just about every sound and tone produced by the human voice.
> Author: So it is a language that follows closely the syntax of a language?
> It is a series of auditory ideograms?
> Prof. N.-Bouah: No, not at all. It's a language that "marks down" (*démarque*) the human voice. The drum emits entire sentences.[13]

Without wanting to react like the Côte d'Ivoire public who, "ferociously attacking his theories" in the course of a public lecture in the Houphouet-Boigny stadium pelted Prof. N.-Bouah with empty beer bottles,[14] we much prefer Dr. Helffer's minute counterchecks between evolving theory and actual practice, and her structural analyses that reveal the logic and system within these far from arbitrary drum compositions.

About symbolic values

[11] Copper Isle Version, p. 9. The Eric Pema Kunsang translation, p. 35, has the more logical, "Then the king let the great drum resound and the good news be announced in all directions."
[12] *Ethnomusicology* (Sept. 1980), p. 448.
[13] Philippe de Baleine, *Le petit train de la brousse*, Paris: Plon, 1982, as reviewed in *Lire* Vol. 8 (May 1982), pp. 78–83.
[14] Lire, ibid.

The only reservation that could possibly be raised is with regard to the author's discussions on the symbolism of the instruments and her somewhat uncritical quotation from existing translations. Still within the conch chapter (p. 111) she, for instance, reproduces an extract from a song by 'Brug-pa kun-legs:

> ' ' ' ' ' '
>
> **tib. Text**
>
> These clockwise spiraling conch shells, covered with image patterns,
> Tranquilly abide in the vastness of the ocean,
> Unharmed by its ordinary inhabitants,
> Unmoved by the ocean's waves.
> They feed on the poison mind of the makara,
> By their splendor suppressing the crimes (that take place) in the ocean.
>
> The white conch shells of steady meditation
> Reside in splendor amidst the great lake of the non-conceptual. What-
> Ever appears surfs on the waves of the authentic, for
> Cut through is the basic error of non-meditation.
> They feed on the mind of those holding on to mind (as a thing),
> By their splendor suppressing the self-fabricated contemplation
> Of the fools.[15]

She then comments upon this as follows: "In addition to the wealth of this aquatic symbolism, there further is the brilliant whiteness of the shell that may evoke the fine qualities of the spiritual master." Thereupon an extract from another 'Brug-pa kun-legs song is quoted. Of course this is not "the symbolism of the conch" at all, nor especially a statement about "the conch symbolizing meditation". It is simply a matter of the Bhutanese yogin's temporarily, and in this one song, borrowing the image of the conch and of its traditional enemy, the *makara* sea monster.[16] Helffer is herself aware of the fact that in the next song, the presumed symbolism is of an entirely different order.

[15] Rolf A. Stein, *Vie et Chants de 'Brug-pa Kun-legs le Yogin*, Paris*:* G.P. Maisonneuve and Larose, 1972, p. 258, after *The Autobiography, Songs and Instructions of 'Brug-pa Kun-legs* (the 1882 gNal Dre'u-lhas redaction), Darjeeling: Kargyud Sungrab Nyamso Khang, 1978, p. 199. English translation here after the original; with conch (singular) changed to plural, so as to avoid the third person inconsistent with the conch viewed as a living being, at the risk of diminishing the extreme rarity of clockwise-spiralling conch shells.

[16] One wonders whether the sight of a hermit crab ("bernard l'hermite") was at the origin of the belief and/or imagery of the conch that feeds on the *makara*.

The listing of poetic metaphors in the vain hope of tabulating supposedly "standard meanings", also attempted by Per Kvaerne in his *Caryā* Songs edition, is a misguided method that leads nowhere. Symbolic meanings occur in a context and are not fixed algebraic equations. Nowhere is this perhaps clearer than in the famous song of Milarepa addressing a group of yogins encountered at Tigers Den (sTag-tshang) near Paro. They request from him a song that alludes to the symbolism of the [true yogin's dress and] *ḍamaru* drum; Majestic Lord Mila replies with exactly that:

> The shell-adorned strap around the waist
> Symbolizes the ornamented enjoyment body;
> The clappers striking against the skins are
> The emanation bodies streaming from it.
> And the sound it makes when spun
> Shows mastery over warriors and dakinis.

But then, after an admonition ("Do you get my meaning, ascetics? // Listen further, friends") he adds a Part II to the song, strictly symmetrical in structure and examples to the previous song, but where, irony supreme, each element of the dress and drum now goes to symbolize the very opposite, all aspects of the outstanding ignorance of the pretender yogin:

> That shell-adorned strap around the waist
> Is a true sign of a twisted mind.
> The clappers striking against the skins
> Mimic your knocking at doors for food.
> And the sound the drum makes when spun
> Proclaims the laughter of derision.[17]

Helffer, likewise, does not always draw a clear distinction between what is an orthodox statement within a given tradition and what is a Western author's opinion, if not a deduction concocted on the spur of the moment. Thus, it may be easy enough to go along (p. 109) with Panchen Öthrul Rinpoche's statement—obviously backed up by scriptural evidence—about the conch instrument, "Symbolizing the profound and melodious sound that carries far away the Dharma teachings which, in accordance with the nature, predisposition and aspiration of the disciples, awakens them from the deep sleep of ignorance and exhorts them to the good of self and others." It is a very different

[17] Rin-chen rnam-rgyal from the *Brag-dkar rta-so* (1473–1557), Majestic Lord Milarepa's Six Vajra-Songs and Miscellanea from the Oral Tradition modern blockprint, Rumtek, c.1984, with this Tagtsang episode starting at f. 97b). Translation in Kunga Rinpoche and Brian Cutillo, *Drinking the Mountain Stream and Miraculous Journey*, Novato: Lotsawa Publications, 1978, 1986. For this section, cf. the latter volume, pp. 184 ff, "A Challenge from Four Ascetics." This may well be the only major textual reference to the *ḍamaru* drum missed by Dr. Helffer.

matter when we have also to read (p. 112) a symbolical explanation from the hand of a Mr. K. Dowman, which has about as much basis in tradition as the earlier quoted of Mr. W. G. Gilbert's conch horn.

The Target Audience

At first sight it may appear strange, coming from someone who has been ardently working on extremely rare Tibetan source materials, to find in the notes definitions pertaining to even the most common standard ideas and Buddhist terminology. Far from being redundant, we should understand that an important section of the public will consist of musicologists operating in their own specialized regions and not necessarily familiar with even the basics of Tibetan Buddhist traditions. This adaptation may well have constituted the most difficult aspect of Helffer's project: to address in a satisfactory manner several, very different interested groups, each with their own informed knowledge in one domain and blind spots in other ranges of learning. The same applies to scholars involved in Tibetan studies, but not necessarily specialized in Central Asian and Middle Eastern musical traditions: for them too, the *Mchod-rol* study has a few surprises in store. Regarding the training technique for the *rgya gling* oboe players, for instance the memoires of Rakra Tethong Rinpoche, or the *dobdob* monk's biography from the hand of Hugh Richardson, and the training diary of D. A. Scheidegger, the Swiss musician and musicologist, all agree on what a *zurna* oboe player goes through in Turkey (to develop "circular breathing" by means of blowing through a straw into a glass of water and learning how to make constant and even water bubbles!).

The volume also contains a mine of information for people with an interest in Indo-Tibetan Buddhist iconography; all the more reason to applaud the inclusion of the full colour plates after exceptional pieces (the Mahākāla in his Brahmin aspect in the Lionel Fournier collection; the Bönpo *tsakali* images in Pala style from the New sMan-ri Monastery; the amazing Ma-gcig lab-sgron and the gCod transmission lineage *thangka* from the Zürich University Museum, etc.)—a rare feature in a musicological work. Among the iconographical material related to the bone trumpet, one further item might have been included, probably its earliest depiction in Western sources: the roaming Ngagpa portrait, with part of a bone trumpet emerging from his backpack (fig. 2).

The bibliography contains a list of original Tibetan sources little looked into so far; and the up-to-date discography (especially compact dies) is extensive. It does not, however, address yet another and potentially vast public of foreign Buddhist practitioners. Suppose someone is engaged in a *mi la bla rgyud* retreat, the Guru Yoga practice whereby one visualizes one's own *lama* in the form of Majestic Lord Mila. No doubt one of the most rewarding things to do for this person during the breaks in between meditation sessions would be to listen to the Mila songs as recorded by Stephan Beyer at the Mahāyāna Buddhist Nunnery of Tilokpur, Himachal Pradesh (*The Songs of*

Milarepa, Lyrichord LLST 7285, c.1973). Hence it might be worthwhile to compile a separate discography where the items for each set of recordings are ordered by meditative-ritual topic, like the Padmasambhava *mchod-pa* with the Mahākāla offering of Lyrichord LLST 7270 (Swayambhu 1973). This would then function as a counterpart to the efforts by Tarthang Tulku to list the most important translations available so far in Western languages after the canonical works.[18]

The work concludes (p. 314) on a note of surprise: this genre of musical offerings could so easily have disappeared from the face of the earth after the Tibetans' expulsion from their Chinese-occupied homeland. Nothing of the sort happened: far from being eradicated, this savant music, like other forms of Buddhist learning, instead conquered the earth. Even if less resplendant than in pre-1959 Tibet, at the earliest opportunity the monastic communities in exile did everything they could to to revive the musical traditions. Few refugee communities have ever directed their priorities to such a degree towards preserving their living culture intact.

The work, finally, contains a few inaccuracies. The head of the Gelugpa order is not the fourteenth Dalai Lama, but the "Throne Holder of Ganden (*dga'ldan khri pa*, p. 10). Bde-mchog is a "main" Yidam, not a Protector (pp. 239, 270). And it is impossible that a certain *sūtra*, by definition the Buddha's word, could have been authored by Dharmaśrībhadra" (p. 89); obviously, what is meant is that the Indian Dharmaśrībhadra co-translated that *sūtra* in collaboration with his Tibetan counterpart. Also the discussion about the origins of the *gandi* (p. 87) does not take into account the fact that it originated with (and is described in) the Vinaya, which is again the Buddha's word; hence no need for any hypothesis about beating a tree trunk.

These few minor errors apart, Dr. Helffer's clear style at all times shines with precision and elegant diction, even for the most repetitive sequences: the rare synthesis of a specialized work that remains accessible to the serious non-specialist.

A Weird Note on "Tibetan Singing Bowls"

It started off, the story goes, as a bequest to the Musée de l'Homme in Paris: the relatives of an enthusiastic and regular visitor to Nepal donated a collection of some sixty "Tibetan singing bowls which no one knew what to do with". They transferred the bequest to the musicologist responsible for the Himalayan collections, Mireille Helffer, who did not want to offend anyone either; all the less so, as she notes (p. 327), because of the interest shown towards these objects by a growing number of takers such as collectors, musicians, adepts of various religious movements, music-therapists, and so [18]

[18] Cf. *Crystal Mirror*, Vol. VII (1984), pp. 285–369. It would also be a welcome addition to any survey articles about the state of the art, like Helffer's own "European Studies in Ethnomusicology: Historical Developments and Recent Trends", *Intercultural Music Studies* 4, pp. 87–101.

forth. These metal "singing bowls" first appeared in the tourist shops of Bhaktapur, sometime in the mid-seventies. At the time they were simply introduced and defined as a standard wedding present in the hilly regions, as yet without the epithets "singing" or "Tibetan". I distinctly remember taking a foreign guest around Kathmandu Valley a couple of years later, and as the visitor entered a souvenir shop, the shopkeeper happened to be "demonstrating" the high quality sound of "this piece" by turning a wooden stick (already specially crafted for that purpose) around the inner rim, first slowly, then with increasing speed, till the ringing sound became distinctly audible. With a straight face he went on, in a whisper, to assure the potential customer that "this is the way Tibetan *lamas*, in private, enter meditation". "Here, you can try it yourself", he added, assuming a dreamy expression, supposed to represent *samādhi* in its early stage. After the customers left, I could not help bursting into laughter as he tried out the same on my visitor, a laughter in which he happily joined. It was merely a late addition to the Kathmandu street vendors' slang of the sixties, who used to approach foreign customers with the standard phrase, "Very old, very Tibetan."

None of this was to stop the development the "Tibetan singing bowls" were to undergo in Europe (p. 328):

> They are being used by Western musicians for their acoustic qualities (cf. the compositions of Alain Kremski on some sixty bowls purchased from Paris antique dealers); lovers of floating music [New Age; advanced Kitaro, I suppose] find their vibrations out of this world; psychologists and music-therapists recommend their beneficial influence (cf. Eva Rudy Jansen, *Singing Bowls: A Practical Handbook of Instruction and Use*, translated from the Dutch, 1992). Collections of bowls were also gradually deposited in museums … starting from the early 80s. … One should also draw attention to the record published as early as 1981 by Alain Presencer, *The Singing Bowls of Tibet*, Saydisc CD SDL-326.

As Dr. Helffer emphasises: none of the musicologists who has worked on Tibetan music since the 1960s has ever come across a single 'Tibetan singing bowl", nor does any such bowl appear in the analytical treatise on bells and cymbals by the Tibetan author Humkarajaya. Accordingly, the lot deserves to be deposited in what my friend the art critic Freddy de Vree once started as a "Museum Of Tiny Curiosities", as far away as possible from the prestigious Musée de l'Homme—like Dr. Helffer herself did, burying this note on the Tibetan singing bowls in small print among the appendices.

Let us not, in the meantime, overlook the fact that *Mchod-rol* will indeed be an indispensable guide for any future author who but touches upon Tibetan or Himalayan ritual and music, and failure to quote it will condemn the work as unprofessional.

Fig. 1: A frame from the Phantom comic series featuring the "talking drum"

Fig. 2. Waddell, p. 212, after Giorgi.