

Mireille HELFFER: *Mchod-rol. Les instruments de la musique tibétaine*, CNRS Éditions/ Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme. Paris, 1994, 401 pp. + Compact disc.

Review by Per Kvaerne

For two decades, Mireille Helffer has been the foremost expert in the West on Tibetan music, especially ritual (or religious) music. Many of her friends and colleagues have been aware that she was preparing a comprehensive survey of the instruments used in Tibetan religious music. The present volume is the product of many years of dedicated research - and it is indeed a fascinating, scholarly book which will be eagerly read by Tibetologists as well as by ethnomusicologists.

The Introduction relates a number of episodes from the first Western encounters with Tibetan ritual music, and provides a brief survey of the various instruments, their use and organological classification. Further, it contains a useful general survey of the manifold sources: written sources in Tibetan (canonical as well as non-canonical) and iconographical material.

The main body of the book is a presentation of each instrument in separate chapters, starting with the wind-instruments: trumpets (*dung-chn*), oboes (*rgya-gling*), followed by a heterogeneous group of instruments defined by their function, viz. calling the monks to assembly: the wooden *gandi*, the gong (*'khar-rnga*), and the conch (*dung-dkar*). The following chapters deal with instruments used for marking the beat: the drum (*rnga*), various cymbals (*sbug-chal*, *sil-snyan*, and *ting-shags*). Separate chapters discuss the bell (*dril-bu*), the flat-bell (*gshang*), the hand-held double drum (*damaru*), and the bone trumpet (*rkang-gling*, often, in spite of the name, made of metal), all of them characterized by being not only instruments used in rituals, but also ritual objects and in some cases, iconographical symbols. Finally, three instruments, which are not used in rituals, but are found in religious iconography (and also used in lay music), are briefly discussed: the lute (*pi-wang* and *sgra-snyan*) and the flute (*gling-bu*).

Two short, but extremely interesting chapters, dealing with the use of music in rituals and the effect of combining various instruments, complete the main part of the book.

There are several useful appendices, including a survey of all examples of musical notation in Tibetan texts known to the author and a discussion of the so-called "Tibetan bowls" (which, while apparently not entirely unknown in Tibet, are in no sense "Tibetan"). The bibliography is, as could be expected, extensive, listing 89 works in Tibetan and probably virtually all relevant Western works; there is also a useful list of CDs, records, and films, as well as of recordings preserved in the archives of the Musée de l'Homme in Paris.

The author points out that all Tibetan rituals presuppose a text, and hence the ethnomusicologist who wishes to study Tibetan music on more than a superficial, purely technical level has to have access to the relevant texts in Tibetan; in other words, she or he has to be a Tibetologist as well. This Mireille Helffer is, and thereby the book achieves a unique breadth as well as depth. She makes use of a large number of written Tibetan sources, some of them difficult indeed to read and interpret, and this enables her to present, for each instrument, the relevant Tibetan traditions regarding the manner of playing and historical and mythological origins. Several of the instruments, such as the conch, the drum, and the flat-bell, have quite elaborate origin myths, which are translated in the book. In general, the following topics are discussed in relation to each instrument: morphological and acoustic characteristics; Tibetan systems of musical notation and relevant terminology; repertory and techniques of playing; historical and/or mythological origins; iconographical sources; symbolism of the instrument and of its parts.

The author (or the publishers?) have followed the policy of not using diacritical marks for Sanskrit terms, except for the long vowels. This is perfectly acceptable, but there are, unfortunately, numerous errors in the use of this mark. There are also a number of printing errors, as well as Tibetan words which presumably have been faithfully copied from manuscripts, but retaining erroneous spellings; in the most obvious cases, at least, the correct form might have been added in parentheses.

There are a few points which require comments; thus on p.48 *dkar-brgyud bstan-pa* is rendered "la doctrine des *bka'-brgyud-pa*". On p.98 the author states that "L'usage du *'khar-gsil* semble s'être perdu assez tôt au Tibet"; this is not entirely the case, as this object is still part of the equipment of a fully ordained Bonpo monk and is used by these monks on certain ceremonial occasions. On p.145 *Bu-ston* (1290-1364) is anachronistically referred to as "le savant *dge-lugs-pa*"; surely it is more correct to refer to him as a *bka'-gdams-pa*, and reserve the term *dge-lugs-pa* for the school founded by Tsong-kha-pa. On p. 221, *stong-gsum* is translated as "les trois mondes"; this expression refers, however, to the concept of "a thousand worlds three times multiplied", i.e. a billion, in other words, an infinite number. On p. 285 there is a reference to Liui and Kiggel 1988, a work which does not seem to be listed in the Bibliography. On p. 288 there is a reference to a Bhutanese instrument *surlim*, to which the author adds *sic*; the *sic* is, however, uncalled for, as the word *surlim* is the normal Dzongkha pronunciation of Tibetan *zur-gling*.

These details are, obviously, of marginal importance and do not detract in the least from the overall excellency of the book, both as an indispensable handbook and as an important contribution to the study of Tibetan culture. On the whole, the documentation is extensive and meticulous, and the use of illustrations generous. The inclusion of a compact disc is particularly praiseworthy.

Precisely because of the excellency of the present volume, the lack of comprehensive studies of other aspects of Tibetan musical traditions becomes all the more apparent. First and foremost, a study of the vocal traditions of ritual music is needed; these traditions can only be studied in conjunction with the relevant rituals. Likewise, the various regional traditions of folk-music should be studied and documented systematically. Mireille Helffer's book will serve as an inspiration for research in all these fields, and provides a standard of excellence and comprehensiveness against which all future contributions will be measured.

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