

OVERTONE SINGING (part 3)
SCIENTISTS, SINGERS AND HEALERS : THE WESTERN TRADITION
by Brian Lee

This is the third part of a series of articles on overtone singing. The first part was an introduction to the harmonic series and an overview of the different singing traditions. The second part looked at the musical traditions of Mongolia. This part covers the introduction of this style of singing to the Western world over the last thirty years and the development of its use in healing.

It often happens that different people make the same discovery at the same time. There's something in the air. It's the zeitgeist, the spirit of the times and different creative individuals pick up on it. This seems to have happened in the late sixties with overtone singing. Recordings of this type of singing which originates in Central Asia had been around for quite a while. Then all of a sudden people in the west started noticing them and getting interested in this technique of singing which produces two tones, a fundamental and an overtone, *le chant biphonique* as it is called in French.

In Britain, if people have heard of overtone singing then the chances are that it is Jill Purce's name that they know. Jill worked with the German composer, Karlheinz Stockhausen in the late sixties and introduced him to mystical ideas from the Sufi tradition, ideas which were to have a strong influence on the development of his music. Around this time Stockhausen was into non-western music and he first heard overtone singing from recordings of the chanting of Tibetan monks. The other story is that he developed the technique by changing the volume of his mouth while shaving with an electric razor. The result of this discovery was a piece for six vocalists called **Stimmung** (Tuning), the first piece of music composed by a Westerner using overtone singing.

Around the same time in the late sixties, Vietnamese ethnomusicologist Tran Quang Hai who was doing research in Paris first heard overtone singing on a recording from Mongolia. Then in 1971, after two years of work, (while stuck in a traffic jam as he tells it) he worked out the technique of how to sing "with two voices". He then went on to analyse and develop a scientific framework for the technique using X-rays to discover what is really happening inside the mouth when overtones are produced. These fascinating colour X-rays can be seen in his 1988 film "**The Song of Harmonics**". Also with the aid of a sonograph which enables you to see the spectrum of sound you are singing, he used the visual feedback to gain great precision in the vocal production of harmonics.

The research that Hai has done goes deeper into the acoustical and physiological aspect of overtone production. His direct observations of the action of the larynx and vocal folds using a fibroscope has led him to better control of the vibrations of different parts of the mouth for the purposes of producing sound. One spin-off of this has been his work with people who have dysphonia, the inability to control the different elements of voice production. He has also taught overtone singing to people who have no confidence in their ability to sing in tune. The harmonic series is a universal so when you're singing overtones there's no way you can be "out of tune".

Hai's approach is concerned with the power of the voice and the precise control of sound production. He contrasts this with the sweeter, more meditative style of overtone singing found in the west. This style was begun by Stockhausen who never developed it. It was **David Hykes** who turned it into something of compelling beauty. Hykes was an experimental film maker in New York who was exploring various techniques for soundtracks using unusual (ethnic or retuned) instruments. Then in 1974 he produced a film called "Moving Parts" which on the soundtrack uses a Harmonizer, a special effects device which produces "an unearthly chorus of voices from a single voice". This experiment led him to look for non-electronic ways of producing the same effect and he came across recordings from central Asia, Mongolia, Tibet and Tuva. These plus a meeting with Tran Quang Hai and the influence of others on the New York scene, led to what Hykes calls the incarnation of his work, the formation in 1975 of the Harmonic Choir and the creation of some of the most beautiful albums in this genre.

Currently Hykes is finishing off a book on his work and is preparing teaching tapes for publication this autumn. He also has plans to open a new institute in Boulder, Colorado at the end of 1999 which will complement the work of his centre near Orleans, France.

But the real step in making the technique of overtone singing more widely available has come from another American resident in Europe, **Rollin Rachele**. Coming from a strong musical background in early music and men's "Glee Clubs" he taught himself overtone singing after his choir master played them an ethnomusicological recording. Although Rollin has taken inspiration from the Central Asian traditions he sees what he is doing as a different stream, bringing a practical musicianship to his work. In his workshops he aims to give an understanding of the universal principles of the harmonic series, familiarity with the individual overtones and their intervallic relation to the fundamental, and a systematic approach to producing the sounds themselves through use of lip and mouth positions. With this method, he says, the basics of the technique can be learned in a day whether you have a musical background or not. Musicians have the advantage of knowing the theory but non-musicians are unburdened by pre-conceptions.

Rollin does not claim any healing effects from overtone singing. He is aware however that it can produce a change in perception and a shift into a different consciousness. "When I stop singing, my ears are just open to sounds that are much further out, and I get a much larger sense of self. Then it fades back into my normal way of existing after maybe 20 or 30 seconds." Others have reported their chakras opening, seeing colours, seeing light, or having a sensation of floating. One woman described it as "The most sacred sound I've ever heard."

The healing aspect of overtone singing is being developed as well. **Amanda Relph** who practises in Wiltshire, studied overtone singing with Marianne Wex, a healer and overtone singer from Germany. Overtone singing brought together two strands for Amanda, her interest in voice production from acting and her interest in Spiritual Healing. For her, the Central Asian techniques of constriction, strength and control are not what she's after, although they produce clearer overtones. Her approach to overtone singing is part of the process of allowing the person to be open through opening up the register of the voice.

For Amanda, healing with overtone singing is analogous to colour healing which she also practises. "By thinking of a colour like the spring green of the beech leaves when they come out, that colour can be directed through your hands into the person's body. With the overtone singing, I'm hearing the notes, so I'm using the overtone singing like my hands to pick up what's going on in the body." As she sings overtones into a part of the body Amanda gets feedback from what she hears. "There are three sounds. One is a really dead sound that the voice makes which means that the sound isn't actually penetrating into that spot where the blockage is. The next you hear it clearing and it gets to an amazingly clear note and then I feel that it's really penetrating into that space. Then there's a wobbling sound which comes when you're much further away from the body. I treated somebody who had an ovarian cyst, I was quite far away from her for the first treatment, the second treatment I was getting a bit closer, and with the third treatment I really got right into that place and the wobbling sound stopped."

Amanda's approach is intuitive rather than technical and her work is based on what feels right in the moment. She is conscious that in using overtones in healing it's the same principle of energy following thought so that you can sing a note to somebody and as you're singing it you're doing healing. "At the same time... you're receiving that sound inside your body and you feel very tranquil as well. It works both ways."

The healing aspects of overtone singing have been discussed at length by Jonathan Goldman in his book "**Healing Sounds**" (**Element: 1992**). For Jonathan the difference in the effect of the sound is the intent behind it. "You can be making a certain sound and it doesn't do much," he says. "Then you can add focalised intent to the sound and all of a sudden you're balancing a chakra or activating a part of the brain that helps access higher dimensions. And it's the same sound." He adds, "Once you've gotten to the ability to create the harmonic, what do you do with it? How do you use it?"

Jonathan's answer to his own question is, "We just try to become conduits for sacred sound as best we can." The answer for Tran Quang Hai is "It doesn't matter. I give you the key. You open the door, what door you want, you get inside, it's the same technique." For Rollin Rachele, the harmonic series and the simple ratios it contains are the core of something. They are "... the fundamentals of sound, of motion, of movement itself. So if you base your life around these core elements, then you're tapping in on something. I'm not going to pretend to know what you're tapping in on but you're tapping in on something."

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