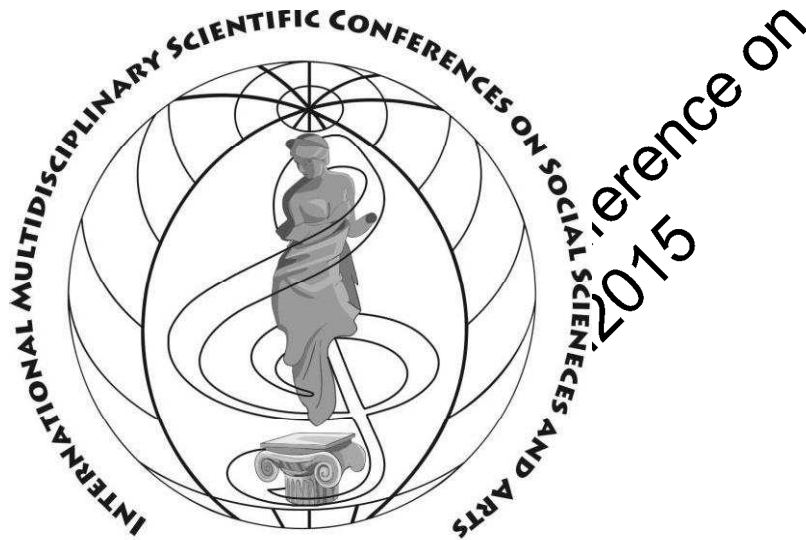


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**“TREATISE ON MUSIC” BY SA SKYA PAṆḌITA AS A VALUABLE SOURCE
FOR UNDERSTANDING MEDIEVAL TIBETAN VOCAL SYSTEM AND
SINGING TECHNIQUES**

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ABSTRACT

Among different extant written sources of Tibetan music, namely theoretical works, notations and manuals, the “Treatise on Music” written in the thirteenth century by prominent Tibetan scholar Sa skya Paṇḍita Kun dga’ rGyal mtshan (1182—1251) is the earliest and most informative one. As this work includes three chapters almost entirely dedicated to the theory of vocal music production and composition techniques (with a small part relating to musical instruments), the treatise seems to be very important for getting deeper knowledge of the medieval Tibetan vocal tradition. The translation and multidisciplinary analysis of this source, aided by consulting other written sources of Tibetan music and main research conducted in that scientific sphere, displayed various features of Tibetan vocal system as it was perceived by Sa skya Paṇḍita, e.g. close relations between articulated phonemes and melodic movement, lack of scale or mode system, rhythmic structure utterly dependent upon the poetical meter, and many others. Taking into account highly developed vocal (and musical) systems of the neighboring countries in the period under consideration, the tradition of singing described in detail in the “Treatise on Music” seems to have been a unique product of the Tibetan world. Archaic as it was, this tradition would have had little opportunity to become known to the scholars of the modern times if it were not a Tibetan Buddhist scholar trained in the lines of Indian scholastic tradition who described it in his treatise. As there is still not so many scientific works dedicated to the history of Tibetan music, these findings can contribute to the construction of consistent narration about the development of musical art in Tibet. Used in worldwide context, they may help to define some general trends in the history of music of various ethno-cultural societies.

Keywords: Tibet, Sa skya Paṇḍita, history of music, ethnomusicology, singing, musical theory

INTRODUCTION

Sound historical research should be based on sources – material objects that can reveal facts of the past to an eager scholar. Many authors agree that written sources seem to be the most informative ones, providing the scholar with a linguistically structured set of information. Working on a text, finding clues to difficult passages, getting deeper insight into the meaning of single expressions and technical terms, the researcher may obtain required information and use it as a basis for making statements about historical events, cultural phenomena, social processes, political and economic trends, etc.

As far as the history of music is concerned, there is a variety of written sources available to scholars: written and printed sheet music, libretto, letters, diaries, musicological works, periodicals and many others. For the Tibetan medieval music, however, the list of written sources is rather short and includes mainly theoretical treatises with commentaries, manuscripts of chant notation (dbyangs yig), manuals for conducting Buddhist rituals (lag len) and encyclopaedic works [1]. Most of these sources are dedicated exclusively to Buddhist ritual music, as Buddhist monasteries for a long time had been the centres of cultural activity and education in Tibet.

The object of our discussion, “Treatise on Music”, is the earliest extant Tibetan theoretical work on music available to contemporary readers. It is believed to have been written in 1204 [2], in the period of “later diffusion” (phyi dar) of Buddhism in Tibet. Its author, Sa skya Paṇḍita Kun dga’ rGyal mtshan (1182—1251), was one of the most prominent Tibetan scholars, translators and political figures throughout the whole Tibetan history. He is known as one of the Five Sa skya patriarchs (sa skya gong ma rnam lnga), i.e. the five founding fathers of the Sa skya school. Working for the dissemination of Buddhist teaching and scholastic knowledge in Tibet, Sa skya Paṇḍita wrote numerous treatises on different topics, such as rhetoric, composition and translation, Buddhist philosophy, education, debate logic, epistemology, Sanskrit grammar, poetics, and many others.

“Treatise on Music” is an early work of Sa skya Paṇḍita and is not in fact as famous among the followers of the Sa skya School as the other major works written by the author. In spite of this, the treatise has found great appreciation among modern musicologists because of its uniqueness: being a proponent of an ideal of a Buddhist scholar with universal knowledge, Sa skya Paṇḍita was almost the only Tibetan Buddhist hierarch who paid so much attention to musical theory. Besides Sa skya Paṇḍita’s “Treatise on Music” there are also theoretical works by Tsandragomi Zla ba dPal rin (1375-?) that are comparable in their value with the treatise by Sa skya Paṇḍita.

The treatise is quite short, comprising about seven double-sided folios of Tibetan format. It is included in the “Collected Works of the Great Masters of the Sa skya School” (sa skya bka’ bum), in the *tha* volume. The structure of the “Treatise on Music” is as follows:

- Introductory part;
- Chapter one: On Melody (dbyangs kyi le’u ste dang po);
- Chapter two: How to Apply Words (tshig sbyor ba’i le’u ste gnyis pa);
- Chapter three: The Way of Combining [Words and Melody] (sbyor ba gtan la babs pa ste le’u gsum pa);
- Concluding section;
- Colophon.

The first and the third chapters of the treatise will be in the focus of our present paper, as they deal with vocal music and singing techniques.

It is necessary to note that it would be impossible to translate and interpret the “Treatise on Music” by Sa skya Paṇḍita without an extensive commentary on this work written in 1624 by A myes zhabs Nga dbang Kun dga’ bSod nams (1597-1660). The full title of

his work runs: “Commentary on the Treatise on Music, a Part of Arts and Crafts, one of the Five Sciences, - Delightful for Clear Mind, Melodious Sound that is Pleasant to the Lama [Sa skya Paṇḍita, an Incarnation of] Mañjuśrī, - an all-pervading spiritual activity” (rig pa'i gnas lnga las bzo rig pa'i bye brag rol mo'i bstan bcos kyi rnam par bshad pa 'jam dbyangs bla ma dges pa'i snyan pa'i sgra dbyangs blo gsal yid 'phrog 'phrin las yongs khyab). This commentary comprises about forty double-sided folios of Tibetan format and is included in the collected works by Kun dga' bSod nams. It is very remarkable that, besides commenting on Sa skya Paṇḍita's treatise, the author of this work included some passages from other theoretical writings on music familiar to him and gave a list of bibliographical references. If studied thoroughly, Kun dga' bSod nams's commentary could undoubtedly provide very useful information for understanding Tibetan medieval musical theory.

The “Treatise on Music” and the commentary have become subjects of scientific research in the second half of the 20th century. Sa skya Paṇḍita's theoretical work was translated into English by R.Canzio, into Hungarian by A.Eggen, into Chinese by Zhao Kang [3]. Some technical terms and concepts were discussed by T. Dingson in his PhD thesis, by M.Helffer in her books and articles on Tibetan ritual music and by dGe 'dun 'Phel rgyas in his works on the history of Tibetan music [4]. Although several scholars tried to interpret the treatise, many passages and notions of this theoretical writing still remain obscure and wait for further research.

In the present paper we consider the “Treatise on Music” as a source for understanding Tibetan medieval vocal tradition. In fact, singing techniques and rules of vocal music composition constitute the central theme of the treatise (as can be seen from the contents of the work described above). Despite apparently being informative, “Treatise on Music” rather raises questions than gives answers, because the meaning of technical terms used abundantly by its author is now almost entirely forgotten. Therefore, taking into consideration the impossibility of reconstructing the vocal tradition in its entirety, we will try to represent the main features of the Tibetan vocal music as it is described in Sa skya Paṇḍita's treatise and point out some difficult passages that require a further study.

THEORY OF SINGING ACCORDING TO “TREATISE ON MUSIC”

First, as singing is a part of musical art, it is necessary to characterize the place of performing arts (zlos gar), i.e. music, dance and drama, in the Tibetan system of knowledge. Along with Buddhist teachings that spread to Tibet from India the Tibetans adopted the whole system of traditional Indo-Buddhist sciences as a framework for educational and scholastic activity. There are five major (rig gnas che ba lnga) and five minor (rig gnas chung ba lnga) sciences in this system. The latter group includes performing arts and, consequently, music. Interestingly, in this system of knowledge music is closely connected with linguistic sciences (phonology, grammar, poetics, etc.). Probably, this fact denotes the real interconnections that existed between music and speech, and, it also may indicate the priority of vocal music in comparison with instrumental one. Description of music as a traditional science is included into the title of Kun dga' bSod nams's commentary. It is also worthy to note, that, from the Buddhist standpoint, all sciences should be profitable for attaining the ultimate goal, *bodhi*.

What is vocal music for Sa skya Paṇḍita?

According to the first lines of the Chapter on Melody, there are two main types of music – “produced together” with the body (*lhan cig skyes pa*) and “arising from external agencies” (*rkyen gzhan ‘byung ba*). Apparently, vocal music belongs to the former type, which also comprises some other sounds such as whistling and clapping. Scholars and contemporary Tibetan musicians agree that the term *lhan cig skyes pa’i rol mo* generally refers to vocal music [5].

Sa skya Paṇḍita then proceeds to describe the inner structure of vocal melody and the rules of composition. In fact, the concepts introduced by him seem to be complex and differ from the vocal systems of the neighboring peoples. The basic element of melodic structure is *nga ro*, which was interpreted differently by various scholars. We use here the translation “melodic type” proposed by A.Egyed and R.Canzio. As can be deduced from Sa skya Paṇḍita’s work, *nga ro* is a fundamental component of melody, which implies changing of pitch, volume, timbre, place of resonance or some other dimensions of vocal sound. The author gives a list of four main melodic types – sustaining (*‘dren pa*), descending (*bkug pa*), changing (*bsgyur ba*) and ascending (*ldeng ba*). Each type comprises its varieties: the sustaining type may be straight (*drang po*), elevated (*bsgreng ba*), curved (*bkug pa*), high (*bstod pa*) or low (*smad pa*); the descending melodic type can be simple (*rkyang pa*) or multiple (*brtsegs pa*); the change may be implemented with throat (*mgrin*), tongue (*lce*) or nose (*sna*); the ascending *nga ro* is either long (*ring*) or short (*thung*) [Table 1].

Table 1. Melodic types and their varieties.

<i>'dren pa</i> sustaining	<i>bkug pa</i> descending	<i>bsgyur ba</i> changing		<i>ldeng ba</i> ascending
<i>drang po</i> straight	<i>rkyang pa</i> simple	<i>mgrin</i> throat	<i>ring</i> long <i>thung</i> short	<i>ring</i> long
<i>bsgreng ba</i> elevated	<i>brtsegs pa</i> multiple	<i>lce</i> tongue	<i>ring</i> long <i>thung</i> short	<i>thung</i> short
<i>bkug pa</i> curved		<i>sna</i> nose	<i>ring</i> long <i>thung</i> short	
<i>bstod pa</i> higher				
<i>smad pa</i> lower				

Noteworthy, this system of melodic types is not based upon scale or mode concept characteristic of many developed musical cultures, e.g. ancient Greek, Chinese or Indian ones. Basic intervals such as octave and fifth are not mentioned in the treatise, fixed notes or tones are not distinguished by the author. Apparently, we have here quite a different way of musical thinking, in which a scale is not yet developed and certain melodic units are used instead to describe and construct a musical phrase. Some

scholars presume that pitch changes were not necessarily the main feature of related melodic types, there being other important dimensions – vowel modification, timber, volume, resonating cavity, etc. [6]. The assumption that there were some interconnections between speech and vocal music is partly confirmed by the fact that the names of the *'dren pa* varieties coincide with the terms used for indicating different vowels in the Tibetan language.

In process of vocal composition these melodic types may be sung separately (so sor spel ba) or in mixtures (bsres spel). Many varieties of such compound melodic structures are given in the “Treatise on Music”.

Sa skya Paṇḍita distinguishes two types of sung material – words (tshig), i.e. something that has a meaning, and vocalization (dbyangs), i.e. sung melody without a meaning. In modern Tibetan music practice different types of vocalized meaningless syllables are still used in ritual and secular vocal music and are called *tshig lhad* [7]. The author describes in detail how and in what succession one should combine *ngy ro* with words or meaningless syllables.

Three registers (sgra) of singer’s voice are mentioned in the treatise – male (pho sgra), female (mo sgra) and neutral (ma ning sgra). Sa skya Paṇḍita characterizes these three registers one by one and emphasizes the necessity of using all of them by one singer in the performance. Thus, these “registers” appear to indicate certain sections of voice diapason that have distinguishable timbric quality.

The so called “occasions” (rkyen) for melodic types (*ngy ro*) are also of great interest. These occasions are in fact different vowels that appear in a sung text (lyrics) or as meaningless syllables and call for certain changes in melodic contour. All melodic types listed in the treatise are given corresponding occasions for their appearance in a song [Table 2].

Table 2. Occasions for melodic types.

Melodic type	“Treatise on Music”	Commentary
<i>'dren pa</i> sustaining	a a	a ā / la la / a e
<i>bsgyur ba</i> changing	la lo	la lo / a yi / ka yi
<i>'dren pa</i> descending	ai (a yi)	ai / kai / yai
<i>ldeng ba</i> ascending	a a	a / aH / la

Taking into account the use of *tshig lhad* and “occasions” in singing practice, we may assume that phonetic structure of a sung text was closely related to the melodic contour and timbric changes of a vocal composition. Probably, these dimensions were interdependent.

Rhythmic structure of songs is not described in the treatise, but we can see the notion of the long and the short in the passage dedicated to melodic types. It certainly implies some rhythmic organization of sung material. Temporal categories are also present in the “Treatise on Music” and a skillful use of fast/slow tempo is characteristic of a professional rendering of a song.

As to the functional sphere of vocal music, Sa skya Paṇḍita writes that singing may fulfill quite diverse needs of people: it may be an offering to the Three Jewels, entertain the sensuous, help to earn one’s living, etc. The author argues that music is pleasant for all people: men and women, wise and fool, rich and poor.

In the first and the third chapters of the “Treatise on Music” he gives a list of vocal genres:

- praising (bstod pa),
- deriding (smad pa),
- comparison (‘gran pa),
- narration of realization (rtogs brjod),
- admonition (rjes su gdams pa),
- confession (bshags pa),
- [happy] songs ([dga’] glu).

This list seems to be relatively short and does not contain such famous Tibetan vocal genre as *mgur*. Most of these genres are connected with Buddhist practice and imply religious content. Each one is characterized in the treatise by a principal melodic type, suitable mental attitude (sems kyi ngang shul) and appropriate bodily posture (lus kyi ‘dug stangs).

After reading and analyzing the text, one can comprehend that there was a group of professional musicians in Tibet who specialized in composing and singing different kinds of songs. They transmitted their knowledge and skills orally, the learning process being implemented through imitation and repetition. This fact partly clarifies the reason why the “Treatise on Music” did not become a manual for students who learned music and remained only a theoretical work with limited practical use.

CONCLUSION

There is a vast number of musical cultures all around the world that deserve to be studied and described. Not all of them can provide scholars with written sources that allow to study the history of music in a given society. Fortunately, the Tibetan musical culture is rich in written documents, one of which, the “Treatise on Music” by Sa skya Paṇḍita, was briefly described in the paper.

This written source, although not very lengthy (7 folios), is unique and very useful. Mostly, it is dedicated to the vocal system, that existed in Tibet in the beginning of the 13th century and of which a renowned scholar, Sa skya Paṇḍita Kun dga’ rGyal mtshan, was a witness.

Musical concepts, described in the treatise, are very specific. There was a system of *ngarö*, or melodic types, - basic structural units for constructing melody. They were closely connected with articulated vowels and implied changes not only of pitch, but also of timber, resonating cavity, volume and other features of a vocal sound. Intercalary meaningless syllables played an important role in vocal composition. Melodic contour was closely connected with phonetic structure of a sung text.

Three registers of human voice were distinguished by the author. They seem to represent three segments of voice diapason that have special timbric qualities. Some notions about rhythm and tempo, genre system and learning process can also be found in the treatise.

What remains uncertain is whether there was scale or mode system in Tibetan music in the 13th century. What were these melodic types in real singing practice? What particular singing tradition was described by the author? Was there a musical notation system in the times of Sa skya Paṇḍita? All these questions require a further study by qualified musicologists.

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