



Temple Studies Group

Symposium II

Temple Music: Meaning and Influence

Temple Church, London
Saturday 30 May 2009

Harmonics, Vowels, God and the Angels

Jill Purce

Abstract

Jill talked about how sound is a bridge between the worlds of spirit and matter – for by its very nature, music is a product of counting and measuring and yet gives rise to the ineffable, it is therefore itself, quantity yet gives rise to quality. So in many traditions it is seen as the way in which spirit becomes form, as in creation, and why it is used for the ‘dissolution of form’ – spiritual or yogic practice or the return musical journey of the soul in the neo Platonic tradition. This she linked with cosmic and musical order as in the Music of the Spheres and the journey of the soul described in Plato. She discussed the classical and medieval tradition of Musica Mundana (cosmology) Musica Mundane (psychology) and Musica Instrumentalis (audible music), and how music was used to bring cosmos and psyche into harmony.

Jill discussed why we chant and sing – how resonance creates order and coherence within the mind and body and entrains us with the world of nature or community. She talked about the nature of the mind as understood as going beyond duality and how this ‘at-one-ment’ is the goal of most traditions attainable in the Buddhist tradition through vocal practices. She dramatically demonstrated ‘Overtone Chanting’ on one note, revealing the high flute-like, rainbow sound-colours of the harmonics, which reverberated magically around the dome of the temple. She linked the vowels required for this with ancient Egyptian invocations with the Gnostic and Mithraic traditions of vowel utterances. She discussed the resonant nature of temples from paleolithic caves to the present day and discussed the function of music in the temple to remove the undesirable and invoke the desirable and sacred.

Finally discussing the magic of the human voice, she led us in a beautiful medieval Irish Alleluia chant, relating it to the tradition of ancient vowel chants and overtone chanting.