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INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Musical Interludes

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Dear Peter,

A snake-charmer is walking down the street outside of my house, playing a wooden horn that sounds like a bagpipe. For a few rupees, he will open his reed basket to release a hooded cobra or a savage viper to be charmed by the music.

Never mind that snakes are deaf; the musician will use his horn to prod the serpent into the open as he plays an eerie melody. In order to extort a few more rupees from onlookers, he will pretend to let the snake bite him and then demonstrate a miracle cure by putting a stone on the alleged wound.

Charming: A Pakistani musician with a viper snake dangling from his horn.

No, this is not a letter about con men and scoundrels, although that might be forthcoming. It is about music on the subcontinent, which ranges from the raucous marching clarinet bands in Nepal to the meditative chanting of Tibetan monks. You can see zithers painted with gold-leaf on display in the former Maharajah palaces of India or watch Himalayan hill people dance as they beat on empty gasoline cans. Once, I even danced in total silence with a group of Afghan women.

Carol Rose is an ICWA fellow writing about South Asia.

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These musical performances rarely take place in concert halls. They are informal gatherings in people's homes, somewhat like the blue-grass musicals I grew up with in the United States.

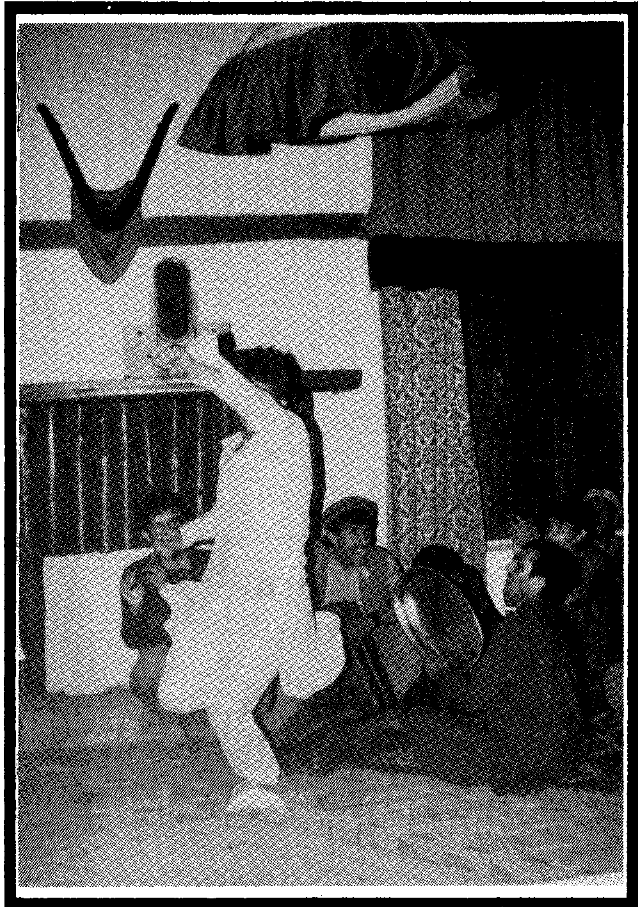
My first experience with local music came only three weeks after I arrived in Peshawar. My Afghan neighbor's son said that he was looking for a place to play music. His father forbade a concert at their house, since music-making might be considered "un-Islamic" by local mullahs or mujahideen commanders, some of whom threaten to kill Afghans who have fun during the jihad. Tom and I offered to host the concert.

The event began the next evening with a traditional Afghan meal at the neighbor's house: mutton, chicken, rice and pudding. I was ushered to the kitchen, where the other women were preparing food for the five musicians and 20 male guests. I urged the Afghan women to attend the concert, but they merely giggled at the thought of showing themselves in public.

After dinner, the party shifted to our house. Tom and I removed the furniture from our living room and threw carpets and pillows on the floor. The musicians sat around a small Afghan rug in the center of the room, while the audience formed a circle around them. As hosts, we were expected to serve tea and fruit to the guests throughout the evening.

A Chitrali band: tin-whistle, metal tray and gasoline can.

One musician played the harmonium, an accordion-like instrument that sits on the floor and looks like a miniature piano. Another played the *tabla*, or Indian drums, while a third strummed the *rabab*, an Indian lute with five main strings and 20 sympathetic strings.



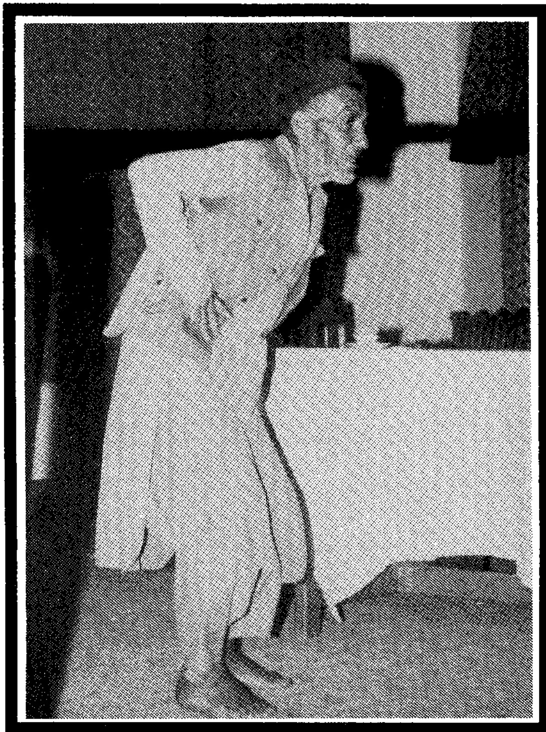
A Chitrali dancer spins in a trance.

Afghan classical music, like that of Pakistan and India, is made up of "ragas," songs that are based on Indian musical scales. There are seven common scales and more than 150 variations upon them. A raga begins when a musician slowly plays a scale, thus introducing a theme. He then improvises upon it, weaving an intricate harmonic pattern, pushing the tempo ever faster until the song reaches a frenzied pitch and then suddenly stops.

During the concert, the audience sat quietly on the floor, sipping green tea and murmuring "wow, wow" to inspire the musicians to play ever more complicated motifs. Wary of angering the neighborhood mullahs, I got up repeatedly to shut the front door, which mysteriously kept opening. The third time I did this, the guards told me that the neighbor women were listening to the concert from the other side of a wall that separates our houses. They kept asking him to open the door. After that, I left the door ajar until the music stopped -- around two o'clock in the morning.

Since this first concert, Tom and I have attended a number of Afghan musicals, low-key affairs that are open only by invitation. The pattern is usually the same: the host feeds the musicians, then guests gather in a circle for the concert, which continues far into the night.

My favorite musicians include a pudgy hashish-smoking clarinetist who plays sitting straight-backed and cross-legged like a Buddha. He can bend tones and improvise in the fashion of



A Chitrali dancer struts around the room in imitation of a mountain ram.

Bennie Goodman, lifting his eyebrows as he reaches for the high notes. The local *rabab* master plays with his eyes shut and head thrown back, looking like the Afghan twin of British rock-guitarist Eric Clapton. The most memorable musician is a *tabla* player who produces amazing pitches and cadences by rubbing his fingers and palms over the skin heads of his drums. His rhythmic masterpieces can cast a spell over any audience. During these drum solos, the *rabab* player offers encouragement, crying out in Persian, "oh very good, very good." He and the drummer then challenge each other to play the same melodic line, faster and faster, louder and louder. Suddenly they stop, leaving listeners breathless.

I had an entirely different musical experience last September while staying in the mountainous city of Chitral, in northwest Pakistan. After a grueling 13-hour drive over rough but scenic roads, I checked into a local hotel for a much-needed rest. As I drifted off to sleep, there was a knock at my door. It was the hotel desk clerk, inviting me to hear a performance of Chitrali music in the hotel restaurant. My curiosity got the better of my fatigue and I decided to go. When I entered the restaurant, there were four Pakistani women, a man and two children sitting at a long table. This was the audience.

The band consisted of the hotel staff: a porter who played a tin-whistle, the desk clerk who beat on a drum made from a gasoline can, a waiter who banged on a metal serving tray, an aged sweeper who sang and six other men who clapped and danced.

Using this odd assortment of "instruments," the band played music based on a theme of four notes, with this notation:

(repeat endlessly)

One man beat the gasoline can while the others clapped and shouted "*ayii, ayii!*" One by one, each man got up to dance. Some of the dancers pretended to be mountain rams, putting their heads down and moving around the dance floor as if butting an

enemy or performing a mating dance. Other dancers would flick their hands and wrists over their heads, spinning like whirling dervishes in a trance. Often the music sent the dancers thrashing violently around the room before they suddenly collapsed on the floor.

After two hours, the concert was over. I sat with the musicians around a table, sipping Pepsi and talking. They warned me not to talk about the concert to anyone, because the local mullah had threatened to burn the hotel if such merry-making continued. Even this sour note could not dampen my spirits. As I walked through the hotel courtyard to my room, a full moon illuminated the magnificent mountain peaks all around and the sweet trilling of the tin whistle echoed in my head.

Soon thereafter, I was treated to an even more spontaneous musical performance. I was staying near Chitral with the *Kaffir Kalash* -- or black infidels. It was harvest time, so my host, Saifullah Jan, and I had spent the day helping to pick grapes and gather walnuts. When the work was done, we tasted the first home-brewed wine of the year, a pinkish liquid reminiscent of British cider. Slightly tipsy, we stumbled home in single-file on a path that Saifullah told me "no foreigner has ever walked." As we tripped along, Saifullah bellowed out a Kalash song that he later told me had been written 50 years ago by a man named Mandalee, who has since converted to Islam:

Hai Mai Rurook o A zhee tu parik Durik-o parik e Shawala o eek	Oh my little partridge You and I will go Over the Durik pass and home over the Shawala pass.
Tai Hatdieh Kezem e Sureroo kursee Tu tara nesis e Dan jagalek kee	For you I will pull A golden chair You sit upon it and I will gaze upon you
Hai mai ghamburi Salaam Karim dai O a satai gandurak Nasua karu dai	Oh, my flower I say hello to you That is your smell Upon which I get drunk
Kat tare nisai o Sharap mai pee eye To pio parik durush zhe mratch nuik.	You make me sit on the veranda You make me drink the wine, after that, we will go together to our house in the trees.

Twisting the night away: Pakistani children enjoy a local concert in Chitral.

On yet another occasion, music provided solace during an otherwise frustrating and depressing journey. It occurred last spring as I traveled in the remote border region of eastern Nepal interviewing refugees from Bhutan. It had been one of the most difficult days of my life: I had ridden a motorcycle to countless refugee camps, stopping to hear people's stories of torture, sickness and death. I had held a dying child in my arms, unable to save it or even carry it to a hospital on the motorcycle. At the end of the day I returned to the mosquito-infested hotel in the tiny Nepali city of Birtamod, flinging myself upon the bed for a long cry.

Once again, there was a knock at my door. This time it was a man named Dhital, who owned the book shop in Birtamod. He was joined by the town's intellectual elite: the printer, the school teacher, and the singer.

"We've come to give you a concert," said Dhital.

Music was the last thing on my mind; I felt more like weeping than singing. Still, I appreciated Dhital's effort to be hospitable. A dingy hotel room was hardly the place for a concert, however, so I suggested we hold the performance on the roof of the hotel.

The five of us gathered chairs in a circle under the stars and a crescent moon. The singer sang a folk song acappella. The lyrics told of a young couple who love one another from opposite banks of a river they are unable to cross. The singer then insisted that I sing one song before he would continue. Reluctantly, I belted out a pitiful rendition of "She's Only a Bird in a Gilded Cage," an old Broadway show tune about a beautiful young woman who marries an old man for his gold, only to feel imprisoned. The lyric sentiments seemed to please them.

After that, the singer sang a series of ballads that he had written, all of them about love. As he sang, the other four men

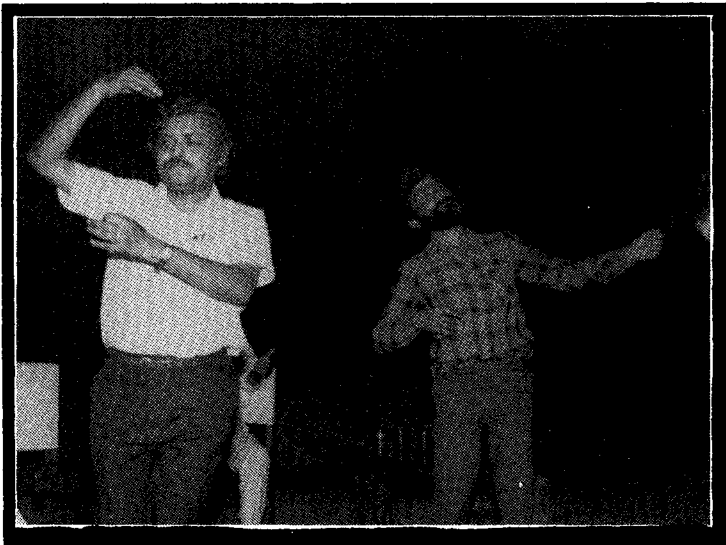
began to dance in a circle around my chair.

My initial embarrassment disappeared as I became enraptured by the performance. The dancers moved gracefully, as if their hands were painting pictures on the air. The songs spoke of love in the midst of life's sorrows.

Stars sparkled overhead like diamonds against a black velvet sky. For the rest of the evening, I set aside the suffering I had seen that day and succumbed to the sweet embrace of music.

Regards,

Carol



Nepali men dance beneath the stars.

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Nepali folk singer and dancers.