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INDIAN MUSIC

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MUSIC has been a cultivated art in India for at least three thousand years. The chant is an essential element of Vedic ritual; and the references in later Vedic literature, the scriptures of Buddhism, and the Brahmanical epics show that it was already highly developed as a secular art in centuries preceding the beginning of the Christian era. Its zenith may perhaps be assigned to the Imperial age of the Guptas—from the fourth to the sixth century A. D. This was the classic period of Sanskrit literature, culminating in the drama of Kalidasa: and to the same time is assigned the monumental treatise of Bharata on the theory of music and drama.

The art music of the present day is a direct descendant of these ancient schools, whose traditions have been handed down with comment and expansion in the guilds of the hereditary musicians. While the words of a song may have been composed at any date, the musical themes communicated orally from master to disciple are essentially ancient. As in other arts and in life, so here also India presents to us the wonderful spectacle of the still surviving consciousness of the ancient world, with a range of emotional experience rarely accessible to those who are pre-occupied with the activities of over-production, and intimidated by the economic insecurity of a social order based on competition.

The art music of India exists only under cultivated patronage, and in its own intimate environment. It corresponds to all that is most classical in the European tradition. It is the chamber music of an aristocratic society, where the patron retains musicians for his own entertainment and for the pleasure of the circle of

his friends: or it is temple music, where the musician is the servant of God. The public concert is unknown, and the livelihood of the artist does not depend upon his ability and will to amuse the crowd. In other words, the musician is protected. Under these circumstances he is under no temptation to be anything but a musician: his education begins in infancy, and his art remains a vocation. The civilisations of Asia do not afford to the inefficient amateur those opportunities of self-expression which are so highly appreciated in Europe and America. The arts are nowhere taught as a social accomplishment: on the one hand there is the professional, proficient in a traditional art, and on the other the lay public. The musical cultivation of the public does not consist in "everybody doing it," but in appreciation and reverence.

I have indeed heard the strange objection raised that to sing the music of India one must be an artist; and this objection seems to voice a typically democratic disapproval of superiority. But it would be nearly as true to say that the listener must respond with an art of his own, and this would be entirely in accord with Indian theories of æsthetics. The musician in India finds a model audience—technically critical, but somewhat indifferent to voice production. The Indian audience listens rather to the song than to the singing of the song: those who are musical, perfect the rendering of the song by the force of their own imagination and emotion. Under these conditions the actual music is better heard than where the sensuous perfection of the voice is made a *sine qua non*: precisely as the best sculpture is primitive rather than suave, and we prefer conviction to prettiness—"It is like the outward poverty of God,¹ whereby His glory is nakedly revealed." None the less the Indian singer's voice is sometimes of great intrinsic beauty, and sometimes used with sensitive intelligence as well as skill. It is not, however, the voice that makes the singer, as so oftens happens in Europe.

Since Indian music is not written, and cannot be learnt from books, except in theory, it will be understood that the only way for a foreigner to learn it must be to establish between himself and his Indian teachers that special relationship of disciple and master which belongs to Indian education in all its phases: he must enter into the inner spirit and must adopt many of the outer conventions of Indian life, and his study must continue until he can improvise the songs under Indian conditions and to the satisfaction of Indian professional listeners. He must

¹ Mahesvara, who wanders through the world a penniless and naked ascetic.

possess not only the imagination of an artist, but also a vivid memory and an ear sensitive to microtonal inflections.

The theory of scale is everywhere a generalisation from the facts of song. The European art scale has been reduced to twelve fixed notes by merging nearly identical intervals such as E \flat and D \sharp , and it is also tempered to facilitate modulation and free change of key. In other words, the piano is out of tune by hypothesis. Only this compromise, necessitated in the development of harmony, has made possible the triumphs of modern orchestration. A purely melodic art, however, may be no less intensely cultivated, and retains the advantages of pure intonation and modal colouring.

Apart from the tempered instruments of modern Europe there scarcely exists an absolutely fixed scale: at any rate, in India the thing fixed is a group of intervals, and the precise vibration value of a note depends on its position in a progression, not on its relation to a tonic. The scale of twenty-two notes is simply the sum of all the notes used in all the songs—no musician sings a chromatic scale from C to C with twenty-two stopping places, for this would be a mere *tour de force*.

The 'quarter-tone' or *sruti* is the microtonal interval between two successive scale notes: but as the theme rarely employs two and never three scale notes in succession, the microtonal interval is not generally conspicuous except in ornament.

Every Indian song is said to be in a particular *raga* or *ragini*—*ragini* being the feminine of *raga*, and indicating an abridgement or modification of the main theme. The *raga*, like the old Greek and the ecclesiastical mode, is a selection of five, six, or seven notes, distributed along the scale: but the *raga* is more particularized than a mode, for it has certain characteristic progressions, and a chief note to which the singer constantly returns. None of the *ragas* employs more than seven substantive notes, and there is no modulation: the strange tonality of the Indian song is due to the use of unfamiliar intervals, and not to the use of many successive notes with small divisions.

The *raga* may be best defined as a melody mould or the ground plan of a song. It is this ground plan which the master first of all communicates to the pupil; and to sing is to improvise upon the theme thus defined. The possible number of *ragas* is very large, but the majority of systems recognise thirty-six, that is to say six *ragas*, each with five *raginis*. The origin of the *ragas* is various: some, like *Pahari*, are derived from local folk-song, others, like *Jog*, from the songs of wandering ascetics, and still

others are the creation of great musicians by whose names they are known. More than sixty are mentioned in a Sanskrit-Tibetan vocabulary of the seventh century, with names such as 'With-a-voice-like-a-thunder-cloud,' 'Like-the-god-Indra,' and 'Delighting-the-heart.' Amongst the raga names in modern use may be cited 'Spring,' 'Evening beauty,' 'Honey-sweet,' 'The swing,' 'Intoxication.'

Psychologically the word raga, meaning colouring or passion, suggests to Indian ears the idea of mood; that is to say that precisely as in ancient Greece, the musical mode has definite *ethos*. It is not the purpose of the song to repeat the confusion of life, but to express and arouse particular passions of body and soul in man and nature. Each raga is associated with an hour of the day or night when it may be appropriately sung, and some are associated with particular seasons or have definite magic effects. Thus there is still believed the well-known story of a musician whose royal patron arbitrarily insisted on hearing a song in the Dipak raga, which creates fire: the musician obeyed under protest, but as the song proceeded, he burst into flames, which could not be extinguished even though he sprang into the waters of the Jamna. It is just because of this element of magic, and the association of the ragas with the rhythmic ritual of daily and seasonal life, that their clear outlines must not be blurred by modulation: and this is expressed, when the ragas are personified as musical genii, by saying that 'to sing out of the raga' is to break the limbs of these musical angels. A characteristic story is related of the prophet Narada, when he was still but a learner. He thought that he had mastered the whole art of music; but the all-wise Vishnu, to curb his pride, revealed to him in the world of the gods, a spacious building where there lay men and women weeping over their broken arms and legs. They were the ragas and raginis, and they said that a certain sage of the name of Narada, ignorant of music and unskillful in performance, had sung them amiss, and therefore their features were distorted and their limbs broken, and until they were sung truly there would be no cure for them. Then Narada was humbled, and kneeling before Vishnu prayed to be taught the art of music more perfectly: and in due course he became the great musician priest of the gods.

Indian music is a purely melodic art, devoid of any harmonised accompaniment other than a drone. In modern European art, the meaning of each note of the theme is mainly brought out by the notes of the chord which are heard with it; and even in unaccompanied melody, the musician hears an implied harmony.

Unaccompanied folk-song does not satisfy the concert-goer's ear; as pure melody it is the province only of the peasant and the specialist. This is partly because the folk-air played on the piano or written in staff notation is actually falsified: but much more because under the conditions of European art, melody no longer exists in its own right, and music is a compromise between melodic freedom and harmonic necessity. To hear the music of India as Indians hear it one must recover the sense of a pure intonation and must forget all implied harmonies. It is just like the effort which we have to make when for the first time, after being accustomed to modern art, we attempt to read the language of early Italian or Chinese painting, where there is expressed with equal economy of means all that intensity of experience which nowadays we are accustomed to understand only through a more involved technique.

Another feature of Indian song—and so also of the instrumental solo—is the elaborate grace. It is natural that in Europe, where many notes are heard simultaneously, grace should appear as an unnecessary elaboration, added to the note, rather than a structural factor. But in India the note and the microtonal grace compose a closer unity, for the grace fulfils just that function of adding light and shade which in harmonised music is attained by the varying degrees of assonance. The Indian song without grace would seem to Indian ears as bald as the European art song without the accompaniment which it presupposes.

Equally distinctive is the constant portamento. In India it is far more the interval than the note that is sung or played, and we recognize accordingly a continuity of sound: by contrast with this, the European song, which is vertically divided by the harmonic interest and the nature of the keyed instruments which are heard with the voice, seems to unaccustomed Indian ears to be "full of holes."

All the songs, except the 'alaps' are in strict rhythms. These are only difficult to follow at a first hearing because the Indian rhythms are founded, as in prosody, on contrasts of long and short duration, while European rhythms are based on stress, as in dance or marching. The Indian musician does not mark the beginning of the bar by accent. His fixed unit is a section, or group of bars which are not necessarily alike, while the European fixed unit is typically the bar, of which a varying number constitute a section. The European rhythm is counted in multiples of 2 or 3, the Hindu in sums of 2 or 3. Some of the countings are very elaborate: Ata Tala, for example, is counted as 5+5+2+2.

The frequent use of cross rhythms also complicates the form. Indian music is modal in times as well as melody. For all these reasons it is difficult to grasp immediately the point at which a rhythm begins and ends, although this is quite easy for the Indian audience accustomed to quantitative poetic recitation. The best way to approach the Indian rhythm is to pay attention to the phrasing, and ignore pulsation.

The Indian art-song is accompanied by drums, or by the instrument known as a *tambura*, or by both. The *tambura* is of the lute tribe, but without frets: the four very long strings are tuned to sound the dominant, the upper tonic twice, and the octave below, which are common to all ragas: the pitch is adjusted to suit the singer's voice. The four strings are fitted with simple resonators—shreds of wool between the string and the bridge—which are the source of their 'life': and the strings are continuously sounded, making a pedal point background very rich in overtones, and against this dark ground of infinite potentiality the song stands out like an elaborate embroidery. The *tambura* must not be regarded as a solo instrument, nor as an object of separate interest like the piano accompaniment of a modern song: its sound is rather the ambient in which the song lives and moves and has its being.

India has, besides the *tambura*, many solo instruments. By far the most important of these is the *vina*. This classic instrument, which ranks with the violin of Europe and the *koto* of Japan, and second only to the voice in sensitive response, differs chiefly from the *tambura* in having frets, the notes being made with the left hand and the strings plucked with the right. The delicate nuances of microtonal grace are obtained by deflection of the strings, whole passages being played in this manner solely by a lateral movement of the left hand, without a fresh plucking. While the only difficulty in playing the *tambura* is to maintain an even rhythm against the variation of the rhythm of the song, the *vina* presents all the difficulties of technique that can be imagined, and it is said that at least twelve years are required to attain proficiency.

The Indian singer is a poet, and the poet a singer. The dominant subject matter of the songs is human or divine love in all its aspects, or the direct praise of God, and the words are always sincere and passionate. The more essentially the singer is a musician, however, the more the words are regarded merely as the vehicle of the music: in art-song the words are always brief, voicing a mood rather than telling any story, and they are

used to support the music with little regard to their own logic—precisely as the representative element in a modern painting merely serves as the basis for an organisation of pure form or colour. In the musical form called *alap*—an improvisation on the raga theme, this preponderance of the music is carried so far that only meaningless syllables are used. The voice itself is a musical instrument, and the song is more than the words of the song. This form is especially favoured by the Indian virtuoso, who naturally feels a certain contempt for those whose first interest in the song is connected with the words. The voice has thus a higher status than in Europe, for the music exists in its own right, and not merely to illustrate the words. Rabindranath Tagore has written on this:

When I was very young I heard the song, 'Who dressed you like a foreigner?', and that one line of the song painted such a strange picture in my mind that even now it is sounding in my memory. I once tried to compose a song myself under the spell of that line. As I hummed the tune, I wrote the first line of the song, 'I know thee, thou stranger,' and if there were no tune to it, I cannot tell what meaning would be left in the song. But by the power of the spell of the tune the mysterious figure of that stranger was evoked in my mind. My heart began to say, 'There is a stranger going to and fro in this world of ours—her house is on the further shore of an ocean of mystery—sometimes she is to be seen in the autumn morning, sometimes in the flowery midnight—sometimes we receive an intimation of her in the depths of our heart—sometimes I hear her voice when I turn my ear to the sky.' The tune of my song led me to the very door of that stranger who ensnares the universe and appears in it, and I said:

'Wandering over the world
I come to thy land:
I am a guest at thy door, thou stranger.'

One day, many days afterwards, there was someone going along the road singing:

'How does that unknown bird go to and away from the cage?
Could I but catch it, I would set the chain of my mind about its feet!'

I saw that that folk-song, too, said the very same thing! Sometimes the unknown bird comes to the closed cage and speaks a word of the limitless unknown—the mind would keep it forever, but cannot. What but the tune of a song could report the coming and going of that unknown bird? Because of this I always feel a hesitation in publishing a book of songs, for in such a book the main thing is left out.

This Indian music is essentially impersonal: it reflects an emotion and an experience which are deeper and wider and older

than the emotion or wisdom of any single individual. Its sorrow is without tears, its joy without exultation and it is passionate without any loss of serenity. It is in the deepest sense of the words all-human. But when the Indian prophet speaks of inspiration, it is to say that the Vedas are eternal, and all that the poet achieves by his devotion is to hear or see: it is then Sarasvati, the goddess of speech and learning, or Narada, whose mission it is to disseminate occult knowledge in the sound of the strings of his vina, or Krishna, whose flute is forever calling us to leave the duties of the world and follow Him—it is these, rather than any human individual, who speak through the singer's voice, and are seen in the movements of the dancer.

Or we may say that this is an imitation of the music in heaven. The master musicians of India are always represented as the pupils of a god, or as visiting the heavenworld to learn there the music of the spheres—that is to say, their knowledge springs from a source far within the surface of the empirical activity of the waking consciousness. In this connection it is explained why it is that human art must be studied, and may not be identified with the imitation of our everyday behaviour. When Siva expounds the technique of the drama to Bharata—the famous author of the *Natya Sastra*—he declares that human art must be subject to law, because in man the inner and outer life are still in conflict. Man has not yet found Himself, but all his activity proceeds from a laborious working of the mind, and all his virtue is self-conscious. What we call our life is merely artificiality, far from the harmony of art, which rises above good and evil. It is otherwise with the gods, whose every gesture immediately reflects the affections of the inner life. Art is an imitation of that perfect spontaneity—the identity of intuition and expression in those who are of the kingdom of heaven, which is within us. Thus it is that art is nearer to life than any fact can be; and Mr. Yeats has reason when he says that Indian music, though its theory is so elaborate and its technique so difficult, is not an art, but life itself.

For it is the inner reality of things, rather than any transient or partial experience that the singer voices. "Those who sing here," says Sankaracarya, "sing God": and the *Vishnu Purana* adds, "All songs are a part of Him, who wears a form of sound." We could deduce from this a metaphysical interpretation of technique. In all art there are monumental and articulate elements, masculine and feminine factors which are unified in perfect form. We have here the sound of the tambura which is

heard before the song, during the song, and continues after it: that is the timeless absolute, which as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be. On the other hand there is the song itself which is the variety of Nature, emerging from its source and returning at the close of its cycle. The harmony of that undivided Ground with this intricate Pattern is the unity of Spirit and Matter. We see from this why this music could not be improved by harmonisation, even if harmonisation were possible without destroying the modal bases: for in breaking up the Ground into an articulate accompaniment, we should merely create a second melody, another universe competing with the freedom of the song itself, and we should destroy the peace of the Abyss on which it rests.

This would defeat the purpose of the singer. Here in this ego-conscious world we are subject to mortality. But this mortality is an illusion, and all its truths are relative: over against this world of change and separation there is a timeless and spaceless Peace which is the source and goal of all our being—"that noble Pearl," in the words of Behmen, "which to the World appears Nothing, but to the Children of Wisdom is All Things." Every religious teacher offers us those living waters. But the way is hard and long: we are called upon to leave houses and lands, fathers and mothers and wives to achieve an end which in our imperfect language we can only speak of as Non-existence. Many of us have great possessions, and the hardest of these to surrender are our own will and identity. What guarantee have we that the reward will be commensurate with the toil?

Indian theory declares that in the ecstasies of love and art we already receive an intimation of that redemption. This is also the Katharsis of the Greeks, and it is found in the æsthetic of modern Europe when Goethe says

For beauty they have sought in every age
He who perceives it is from himself set free—

aus sich entrückt. We are assured by the experience of æsthetic contemplation that Paradise is a reality.

In other words the magical effects of a song in working mere miracles are far surpassed by its effects upon our inner being. The singer is still a magician, and the song is a ritual, a sacred ceremony, an ordeal which is designed to set at rest that wheel of the imagination and the senses which alone hinder us from contact with reality. But to achieve this ordeal the sycophant must coöperate with the musician by the surrender of

the will, and by drawing in his restless thought to a single point of concentration: this is not the time or place for curiosity or admiration. Our attitude towards an unknown art should be far from the sentimental or romantic, for it can bring to us nothing that we have not already with us in our own hearts: the peace of the Abyss which underlies all art is one and the same, whether we find it in Europe or in Asia.