

The Art of Indian Music - Its Origins, Its Development, Its Architectonics and Its Intimate Relation to Transcendental Realisation - Swami Omkarananda

Music and the Other Arts

Not merely the magical spell it wields, the widest universality it claims, the subtleties that characterise its melodious manifestations, but several other unique features, all its own, distinguish, dignify and exalt the art of music over and above all other arts. Painting, Sculpture, Literature and all other avenues of human emotional expression have the advantages of form of some kind, of being able to appeal to the human mind through the eye, a more satisfactory sense than the ear, and a comparative stability of existence of duration. The forms can be seen, kept steady for constant inspection and even corrected over and over again, if need be. But Music has no facility of this sort, and originating as it does, as invisible sound, lingering in the air for but the barest fraction of a moment, it disappears into ether, leaving not a tangible trace behind for verification even, let alone for correction. In its effects and influence on the human mind, however, it is more universal than others: even the grossest forms of the other arts can be neither enjoyed nor appreciated by anyone who has not had some preparation or training in these respective arts and their functioning principles. But Music is for all; from inanimate objects to consciousness-transfigured Yogi, every bit of creation is subject to its irresistible sway, in some measure or the other, to a smaller or greater extent; and if there is any agency under the sun which can make Man, with all his conflicts of feelings and passions and with sorrow, disease and death dogging him at every step, forget all of them for at least a blissful moment of unalloyed pleasure, it is music and music alone. That this form of art happens to be also a delectable medium for getting in tune with the Infinite is one of the favours bestowed on Mankind by a merciful Providence.

The Indian Music: Its Differentia

Apart from its aesthetic and artistic value, this wonderful art of music had always held for the Indian mind, a clarion call to spiritual development, and had been widely cultivated and had attained a high level of perfection in India, at least some three thousand years ago. It was in fact one of the unmistakable indications to us of the high state of civilisation which the people of the land had reached even in those early times. What distinguished Indian Music, however, from its prototypes in other climes was its outlook and tendency: it was never regarded in India as a mere lay art, as a mere system of pleasing the sensuous part of man. It was always held to be but an extension and outward symbolisation of the Omnipresent Pranava Sound - OM - and utilised only for purposes of God attainment - a feature it has retained to the present day, as will be evident from the fact that, up to the end of the last century, the subject of musical compositions has rarely been anything but God and His glories.

Music: Carnatic and Hindustani

The elaborate system of musical practice and expression developed along these lines was originally one and the same throughout the vast land and had a supreme unity of nature and purpose. From the early centuries of the Christian era, however, the northern part of the peninsula came to be coloured by the impact of Arabic, Persian and Moghul civilisations. As a result, it began to show increasingly certain natural and inevitable modifications in practice and came gradually, in course of time, to be labelled the northern or Hindustani Music. The South, which was protected from such onsets by its geographical position, escaped from coming under the sway of these influences; and the original system accordingly was preserved there in a purer condition and is flourishing even today under the appellation, Carnatic Music. But it is well-known that both these systems are of the same origin and substance, though, of course, considerable variations have manifested themselves owing to growing differences in the styles of expression.

The Birth and Development of Musical Theory

Even as it is the case with other arts, the art of Indian Music too was for a long time confined to its practical and operative or expressive aspect. As soon as practice reached a certain height of development and gathered growth and variety, theoretical expositions of the subject began to appear. These were, of course, something in the nature of a necessity, if the practical secrets of the art, garnered by centuries of experience, were to be preserved from oblivion and corruption. These treatises on Music were accordingly a record of the practices up to their respective dates and functioned naturally as a grammar of rules on that basis for subsequent guidance. Narada, Bharata, Sarangadeva, Purandaradasa, Venkatamaki and a host of others, form a galaxy of musician-grammarians who earned immortal names for themselves by leaving to posterity rich treasure-troves of musical knowledge. In the treatises left by them, we have clear and accurate expositions of the principles governing musical practice – the differentia and genius of the various Ragas and Melas, the nature and operation of the distinctive Gamakas and other important points calculated to give a practitioner a firm and comprehensive grasp of his chosen field. These, therefore, served both as a record of the achievements up to their time in the theory and practice of Indian Music, as well as a stimulant to further research and progress.

The Keystone of Musical Architectonics

But, then, the growth of any form of art is never appreciably dependent on the rules and grammars on the subject but is more the result of uninterrupted and rich tradition in the practice of the art. The art of music is no exception to the rule. Speaking generally, we find that what kept Carnatic Music on such a high level of excellence is not the grammatical rules and regulations laid down from time to time but the careful preservation and fostering of the rich heritage of practice by generation after generation through the Gurukula system of musical education.

But a special factor that worked in the same direction and contributed to the same result deserves mention here. It is a fact admitted on all hands that the special feature and glory of Carnatic Music is its Raga system and that for rendering a Raga with verse and truth of

expression wide "hearing", constant practice, considerable experience, rich imagination, and flair for artistic effects are the sine qua non. This is only to say that the Raga is the keystone of musical architectonics and that on the preservation of its purity depends the well-being of the whole melodic system. The invention of a device for mapping out the all-important Ragas and the handling of the device with brilliant efficiency is the special factor adverted to above. The reference, of course, is to the musical form of composition known as the Kirtan or Kriti. It is impossible to imagine a more suitable or satisfactory method for fixing the contour and trends of a Raga, and making a blueprint of it, so to say, leaving at the same time plenty of scope for imaginative handling of the same. What better medium can be conceived of, for preserving the outlines of the special ambulations of each particular Raga than a composite picture of it, which the Kriti is? Even today, you will find eminent professors engaged in the ticklish task of laying down the grammar of Raga, sedulously investigating all the Kritis in that Raga as sung by various authoritative exponents in the past and clinching the issues only after such exhaustive comparisons. It must also be a matter of common experience that beginners in music who want to distinguish and recognise Ragas like Ananda Bhairavi, Yadukula Kamboji, Nilambari, etc., are always advised by knowledgeable persons to take one or two Kritis in those Ragas as infallible patterns to guide them to the spirit of the Ragas. This, again, is also why great pioneers who design a new Raga (for the first time) invariably take the precaution of composing one or more Kirtans in that Raga, laying thereby down, as it were the four corners of the new Raga for the guidance of others.

The Sheet Anchor of Carnatic Music

This Kriti form of composition, so reliable an indicator of Raga tendencies and the sheet anchor of Carnatic music, has been handled by numberless composers from the time of its invention by Thalappakkam Chinnayya in the fifteenth century A.D. Many of them have been outstanding geniuses and left behind them a rich legacy of soul-stirring Kirtans. But it is sad to have to record also that the greater portion of this has been allowed to be lost. Lacking the means of permanent recording and easy duplication, few of them used to keep any systematic records or copies of their composition pieces. A few notes jotted down now and then by a composer, excerpts made from the originals by admiring pupils – these form the extent of the records that have come down to us! The result was that, when a particular singer who had sole custody of some Kirtans shuffled off his mortal coil, those Kirtans promptly joined him where he was: they were lost to posterity once for all! The magnitude of the loss sustained in this way and by accidents, is simply staggering.

A Sacred Duty for Musical Organisations

A few instances will serve to give us an idea of the above referred to fact. Tradition has it that Purandara Dasa, entitled to be called, so far as an individual can be so called, the Founder of the Carnatic Music because of his abundant and meritorious services to it, composed as many as 500,000 Kritis; today the most diligent search would probably fail to unearth more than 560! Kshetragna, it is believed, left over 4,000 of his inimitable Padas. We can call ourselves lucky if we can lay our hands on even 200 (and even these

are on the eve of permanent disappearance)! There is evidence to show that Tyagaraja who lived barely a hundred years ago, composed no less than 23,000 Kritis (it will be noticed with interest that this number is the same as the total number of verses in Valmiki Ramayana); 700-800 is the utmost we could boast of being able to recover! It is the sacred duty of all Nada-Yogis to preserve the Kritis that the unique good fortune of the present generation and the Lord's Supreme Grace have preserved so far; and further to enrich music by adding soul-elevating compositions in praise of the Lord and vividly portraying the evanescent nature of the tantalising pleasure of this world and the eternal nature of the Bliss of communion with the Lord. Thus would they render a double service: spiritually elevating the people, and preserving the grandeur of our music.

Music and Spiritual Experience

Now, let us consider the spiritual Power of Music. Music melts the hardest heart, softens the brutal nature of man, heals many people of many maladies. Wherefrom has music derived this mighty power? From the Supreme Music of Brahman, the Sacred Pranava. Listen to the vibration of the Tambura or the Veena: do you hear the majestic Pranava-Nada? All the musical notes are blended beautifully into this Pranava; all the musical notes spring from this Pranava; music is intended to reverberate this Pranava-Nada in your heart. For OM, or the Pranava is your real name, your real Swarupa. Therefore, you love to hear music which is but the most melodious intonation of your own essential name. When the mind thus gets attracted and unified with one's essential nature, the great Power of God stored up there wells up within and heals body and mind. The Bhakta enters into Bhava-Samadhi by singing devotional music. He comes face to face with the greater storehouse of Knowledge and Wisdom, Ananda or Supreme Bliss. Therefore, he emerges from this Samadhi as a Jnani and radiates Peace, Bliss and Wisdom all around.

- Swami Omkarananda