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Music as Sādhanā

The great Saint-Composer Thyāgarāja of Karnatic (South Indian) music has said: Music gives one the fruit of sacrifices (*yāga*), and contemplation (*yoga*), renunciation (*tyāga*) as well as enjoyment (*bhoga*). These words give us in a nutshell the Indian view on music as *sādhanā*. Thyāgarāja knows that those who are proficient in sound, the mystic syllable OM, and the music notes—which are all forms of the Lord himself—are liberated souls. Music as sound is the primordial manifestation of Brahman. It is both pleasing as sweet melody and demanding like any other rigorous discipline. I shall attempt to explore in the following pages the basis and the limits of this tradition.

Music probably had its origin as an element of tribal ritual dance. The differentiation between the sacred and the secular, between song and action, is a later development. But in its earliest stages music was part of an integrated community action. Such a totality may be the goal of a process of re-integration that we are seeking today in looking for the links which bind music with spirituality.

It is traditional in India to trace the origin of music back to the tonal recitation of the *Sāma Veda*, just as it is the custom to discover the origin of Christian sacred music in the chanting of the Psalms. Both the Vedas and the Psalms belong to a later written,—less oral-audial—stage of cultural development. While the element of dance may be missing here the context of ritual action is still present. As living becomes more complex the distinction between the sacred and the secular spheres of life becomes more pronounced and we have a certain autonomous development of the arts, even of the themes and the contents of their practice still remain religious. The various arts like music, dance and sculpture also begin to develop along independent lines. This development is perhaps most obvious in India where the arts become progressively the preserve of the courtesans—among the 64 in which they are supposed to be proficient.

However, music never became a stranger to worship. But its status varied widely from being just an aid to the recitation of sacred texts to that of an independent medium of religious experience. The Christian tradition represents one end of the spectrum. In its initial stages, musical instruments were rejected as something associated primarily with non-Christian worship. The emphasis in worship was on the word, and music was seen simply as a help to recitation. St Augustine says in his *Confessions*:

On the whole I am inclined to approve the custom of singing in the Church, that by the pleasure of the ear the weaker minds may be roused to a feeling of devotion. Yet whenever it happens that I am more moved by the singing than by the thing that is sung, I admit that I have grievously sinned, and then I should wish rather not to have heard the singing (X, 33).

And yet the same Augustine had confessed a little earlier,

I wept at the beauty of your hymns and canticles, and was powerfully moved at the sweet sound of your Church's singing. These sounds flowed into my ears, and the truth streamed into my heart, so that my feeling of devotion overflowed and the tears ran from my eyes, and I was happy in them (IX, 6).

In spite of such testimony to the power of music the general attitude to music was, on the whole, very negative. Only Psalms and, from the time of St. Ambrose, hymns were exempted from censure. St. Clement of Alexandria writes:

It must be banned, this artificial music which injures souls and draws them into various states of feelings, snivelling, impure and sensual, even a bacchic frenzy and madness. One must not expose oneself to the powerful character of exciting and languorous modes, which by the curves of their melodies lead to effeminacy and infirmity of purpose. Let us leave chromatic harmonies to banquets where no one even blushes at music crowned with flowers and harlotry.

We notice the characterization of certain modes and styles of music not only as secular, but as sensual. Churchmen, who would like to banish from the Church the guitar and rhythmic music irrespective of its quality and purpose, are in the same tradition.

But even such music as was given a place in worship was assigned only a subordinate role. Even the Second Vatican Council did not go further than calling music the handmaid of worship. Music is seen as an ornament, adding beauty and solemnity to the words. Instrumental music is viewed with suspicion. St. Augustine still speaks of wordless music :

He who sings a *jubilus* does not pronounce any words; he utters a wordless sound of joy; it is the voice of his soul pouring forth happiness as intensely as possible, expressing what he feels without adverting to any particular meaning (*Enar. in Ps. 99, 4*).

This is now a forgotten tradition.

At the other end of the spectrum stands the Indian tradition. Sound is seen as the first manifestation in the process of cosmic evolution originating from the union of Siva and Shakthi—fire (*nā*) and breath (*da*) producing sound (*nāda*). This is the cosmic sound *OM*, the *pranava* that keeps making this sound with the breath in the heart of man is unstruck, i.e. not artificially produced sound (*anāhata nāda*). To hear this mystic sound after having freed oneself from all “noise” and to merge with it is the purest form of *sāadhanā*, only one step short of the ultimate union beyond name and form. If we combine this tradition with the other one which considers aesthetic experience the twin-brother of mystic experience (*brahmānanda sahōdara*), we have given music the purest and highest possible place as a means of self-realization.

We may find it difficult to accept this apotheosis of music based on a particular micro- and macro-cosmic hypothesis. But we cannot deny to music a certain cosmic significance and power. Alain Daniélou says :

Because the mathematical laws observed in musical art and in cosmic spheres are related to the natural rhythms of the soul, music forms a logical and direct tie between the movements of the world and the movements of our soul.¹

This sense of cosmic harmony was keenly felt by the Chinese Tong Tshung-chu :

The vital spirits of men, tuned to the tone of Heaven and Earth, express all the tremors of Heaven and Earth, just as several cithars,

1. *Introduction to the Study of Musical Scales*, first published in 1943, p. 12.

all turned on *Küng* (tonic), all vibrate when the note *Küng* resounds. The fact of harmony between Heaven and Earth and Man does not come from a physical union, from a direct action, it comes from a tuning on the same note producing vibrations in unison. . . In the universe, there is no hazard, there is no spontaneity; all is influence and harmony, accord answering accord.²

Once this vision of cosmic harmony is accepted, it is only a step to see music as a means of maintaining and restoring harmony not only in the cosmos but also in human and social life. Yō Ki says :

In periods of disorder, rites are altered and music is licentious. Then sad sounds are lacking in dignity, joyful sounds lack in calm. . . when the spirit of opposition manifests itself, indecent music comes into being. . . when the spirit of conformity manifests itself, harmonious music appears. . . So that, under the effect of music, the five social duties are without admixture, the eyes and the ears are clear, the blood and the vital spirits are balanced, habits are reformed, customs are improved, the Empire is in complete peace.³

This oriental vision must have reached the West through Pythagoras so that the Greek Philosopher Aristotle writes :

Music has indeed the power to induce certain conditions of mind, and if it can do that, clearly it must be applied to education and the young must be educated in and by it. . . . Moreover there is a certain affinity between us and music's harmonies and rhythms; so that many experts say that the soul is a harmony, others that it has harmony.⁴

All of these ideas on human-cosmic inter-relationships may sound a little esoteric and, at times, exaggerated. But vibrations, rhythm and harmony are verifiable physical facts and do provide the basis for certain human-cosmic homologies that may have been intuitively or experientially perceived in earlier times. Theories about music helping plants to grow better or cows to yield more milk, need not be regarded as idle speculation. Vibration, rhythm and harmony may have pro-

2. Quoted by Danielou, *op. cit.*, pp. 6-7.

3. Cited by Danielou, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

4. *Politics*, VIII, 5.

found effects on man through the body which is certainly susceptible to them. However, rather than go deeper into these physical - metaphysical correlations and juggle with the theories of number, let us look at music as we normally experience it and explore its various aspects and potentialities as an aid to realization.

Sādhana aims at integration and concentration. But this can take place effectively only in the context of integration at cosmic and human (social) levels. We have alluded to possibilities of cosmic integration in the preceding paragraphs. Let us see how music can be instrumental in promoting social integration in the task of building up a new humanity. Music can render service in two areas: in building up community and in changing and energizing attitudes that lead to action. Every revolutionary movement has its anthem and every army on the march has its band of musicians. Songs provoke the mind, music touches the heart and both can transform attitudes. Rhythm can weld a group together for common action. The national songs of Rabindranath Tagore, Subramania Bharathi or Vallathol inspired many during the movement for Indian independence. Anthems like the "Marseillaise" of the French or "We shall overcome" of the American Blacks are familiar the world over. The usefulness of music and song as a tool for communication and even of education is too obvious to need comment.

Music can be termed a yoga because it is an ideal means for achieving integration and concentration. Yoga uses a three-fold technique in achieving these: The *āsana* (posture) integrates the body, the *prāṇāyama* (breathing) controls the emotions and the senses and the *dhāraṇa* (meditation) unifies the mind and controls the imagination and repetition helps concentration at all three levels. Music can achieve the same effect, but in a more dynamic fashion, thus adding dimensions that are not available to yogic techniques. *Tāla* (rhythm) and *Rāga* (melody) are said to be the father and mother of music. Rhythm involves the body. In the presence of powerful rhythm the whole body starts to vibrate, even unconsciously. The body response and involvement is almost physical and automatic. When the rhythm is measured and controlled in repetitive patterns the body can be held in a dynamic equilibrium. It will not be the calm repose of the Buddha, but the moving stillness of Nataraja, the dancing God. Melody evokes the emotions and creates a mood. Ragas are based on *rasās* and are capable of summoning up all the delicate shades of feeling. However,

once again, it is not a wild, animal evocation of passion, but the controlled and refined realization of a *rasā*. Like the flute of Krishna it enchants and enthrals. The combination of the *rāga* and the *tāla* is a feast for the mind and the imagination. Here perhaps is the biggest difference between yoga and music. While concentration in yoga depends on repetition, music introduces the element of variation in repetition. Concentration becomes imaginative with the creativity of art. Monotony gives place to the rich variety of play. Music as Yoga becomes *līla* (play). The mind and the imagination may be helped further by the images and ideas of song, and where the song rises to the level of poetry it will add a counterpoint to the creative aspect of the *līla*. Can music be termed a better yoga, more pleasant, with greater freedom, more heightened in experience, more integrally human, more creative and with greater cosmic inter-relationships?

The personal, human and cosmic integration that music is capable of creating can further be deepened when it is combined with other arts. There is a tradition in Indian music that assigns appropriate *rāgas* as suited to appropriate times of the day and seasons of the year. This convention certainly tries to integrate *nādayoga* with physical and cosmic conditions. A similar relationship of *rāgas* to life-situations is affirmed and given visual form in the *ragmāla* paintings. One hears occasional stories of musicians who had produced rain or fire by singing a particular *rāga*.

A better way of linking melody to image and rhythm to bodily movement is sacred dance. The dance can turn into a story if it includes also song and *abhinaya*. The *Rāslīla* tradition is a good example of this. While the songs evoke typical relationships of the divine lover and the beloved, the dance makes vivid the various *bhāvas* implied. In Brindavan, the traditional place where Krishna grew up among the *gopis*, the people gather every evening and a troupe of young boys re-enacts the *līlas* of Krishna in song and dance. For the people this is a spiritual experience so that, when at the end Krishna and Radha are seated in state, they offer them gifts, worship them, sing and dance before them, etc. It is an integral experience of worship.

Efforts have also been made in India to link music to architecture. For instance, a number of South Indian temples (in Suchindram, Tirunelveli, Madurai etc.) have musical pillars. There are one or more clusters of thin fluted columns, each of which gives out or resonates to

one or other *swara* in the scale. It needs no great imagination to see that when a devotional song is sung or a sacred dance is performed near the pillars an atmosphere of resonance is created.

Contrasting the languages of the intellect and of the imagination, Alphonso de Nicolas writes (in a MS not yet in print):

The languages of the imagination build up the mechanism of embodiment. Those of the intellect provide information that can be used for power control, or simply gossip. . . . The language of the intellect—as built by cognitive criterion—focuses primarily on things, substances; the language of the imagination on the background, the total field. . . . while the former through its focussing increases by addition or multiplication of things to a subject, the latter increases by appropriation of the body to share the limits of the field, of the image, the background. . . . The human imagination is coded. It has universal structures which respond to a model more akin to musical categories than contemporary scientific mathematical models.

This existential and experiential link between the imagination and the arts in general and music in particular is the basis for the power of music towards integration and wholeness—what de Nicolas calls embodiment and total field. The elements that give music this power are rhythm and harmony—harmony itself being nothing more than various rhythms in resonating agreement and equilibrium or balance.

This quality is common to all music, Eastern or Western, folk or developed. Melody and harmony may seem opposed to each other. But they are only different manifestations of consonant tones. While melody presents this consonance in time, harmony does so in space, that is, simultaneously. But the basic principles of musical structure are the same: variety, contrast, balance, rhythm, consonance—all leading to harmony. The harmony is a creative, dynamic, living unity, not a static sameness. This is what makes music a challenging model and the means to wholeness and integration. The communitarian dimension is not forgotten either. For music is never a solo performance. One cannot think of music in the West except in orchestral terms. But even in the East, one cannot think of music without a minimal rhythmic accompaniment. It would be more proper to say counterpoint

than accompaniment That is why music becomes a game with that stress more on formal structure than on content or medium.

Under ideal conditions, to benefit by the power of music one must be a performer oneself. But creative listening also has its place. In any common activity some one will have to take up the role of leader. In practice, therefore, we can envisage various situations from a crowded *Bhajan* or *Raslila* to a solo effort at self-realization.

When Tagore sings : "There are numerous strings in your lute; let me add my own among them," we need no longer take this as a metaphor. The power of music can make our whole being resonate with the melody of our lives that will merge with the eternal harmonies of God.