

6. Musical Musings

This article is not of the usual type ; it may be heterodox and unconventional. It does not propose to put forth any new ideas or suggestions for acceptance; nor does it propose to be the result of any serious high-brow research. Some of my statements may go violently contrary to accepted ideas ; they may upset some self-complacent minds. It may startle some into violent opposition also. But then that is the very object of this article. It is meant to provoke thought, to irritate the grey cells of some brains to violent activity. I do not for a moment expect my readers to agree with me. In fact I do not want them to agree with me. I court violent opposition, if that would mean active thought on the part of the opposers.

The first law of Newton is true not only in the physical world of matter but in the mind world also. There is as much mental inertia as physical inertia. Though many may hesitate to acknowledge it, a little observation will indicate that generally our minds run along old grooves. "That is our custom" is an oft quoted excuse for avoiding having to spend mental energy on a new line of thought. "Tradition" is often used as such an excuse also. Of course tradition is very valuable; it ensures and guarantees a continuity of those life impulses which make for the growth of Culture. But when people speak of tradition it generally stands for all kinds of accretions which have gathered round the original life current in course of time, almost stifling it. Mental complacency is the greatest enemy of any true advancement.

In the history of any art it is a matter of common experience that a certain stage is reached when the form

side and the life side compete for supremacy. The impulse generated by inspired great people finds suitable forms of expression and as the impulse gets more and more vitalised it finds newer and richer forms of expression. The expression is the form side and the impulse the life side of the art. Usually the impulse at the beginning is so strong that it controls the form in which it finds expression. In course of time, men who follow the practice of that art slowly lose that living contact with the life impulse which is necessary to keep the form as a perfect expression of the life, with the result that the life side recedes to the background and the form side dominates. Then the struggle begins between life and form, and often the form wins and life is stifled and the art becomes static. In a recent article on "the Mirror of Gesture" Dr. Mulk Raj Anand speaking of the Dance Art says: "As codification always follows the arrival of a static tradition, the grammarian's attempt to record the 'mudras' and 'bhavas' of dance art also seems to show the beginning of the process of decay. For skill in India has always been hereditary and the tradition of creative arts has been kept alive from father to son by mnemonic repetition or memory. The composition of a code or a text was a much later process and probably happened when everything had become customary and the conventions were unalterably fixed". What Dr. Anand says of the dance art is true of every art. The life of art is inspiration, and codification and inspiration are natural enemies.

We often hear of 'lakshya' and 'lakshana' in regard to our music. It has been said times out of number that 'lakshya' is the more important and 'lakshana grandhas' came to be written only when things got settled down to a routine as it were. Lakshana codifies the static condition reached, presumably with the idea that the art has reached a settled and unchanging and unchangeable form. A living art is always in a condition of flux. It can never stagnate.

If it stagnates at all it means absence of inspiration. (I do not for a moment suggest that such grammar books are valueless. Personally I set very high value upon such works; they give us an idea of the peak points reached in the progress of our musical art which moves forward not in drab straight lines but in undulating curves with crests and falls, each succeeding crest being higher than the preceding one.) But the real danger lies in people mistaking the 'lakshana' as superior to 'lakshya' and trying to fit in the ever growing living 'lakshya' to the code and mechanical forms prescribed by 'lakshana'. The living organism can never be crabbed in a shell. If so crabbed either it will die or break the shell.

Let us consider for a moment the Melakarta scheme propounded by the great musicologist Venkatamakhi. His work is monumental and marks an important step in the evolution of the science of music. But what is the net result of that great gift of Venkatamakhi? He has said over and over again that what he has suggested is mainly a *scheme* indicating possibilities. While he contemplated the theoretical possibility of 72 Melakartas he never for a moment thought that all these could be handled as *ragas*. He himself dealt only with about 19 of these 72 melas. An intellectual scale need not necessarily conform to aesthetic standards. Aesthetics and intellection pertain to two different aspects of the composite human nature. While one may help the other it can never claim to be superior to the other. It is obvious that some of these 72 melas have no aesthetic justification for being called *ragas*. Music has evolved in this country independently of such schemes. These schemes have been more convenient gadgets for purposes of codification. When people say that all these 72 melas can be sung as *ragas* I get amused. A *mela* is not necessarily a *raga*. The former is an item in an intellectual scheme while the latter is a living expression of some of the

deeper expressions of human personality. Even among the melas which are sung nowadays as ragas some have only a sort of arithmetic interest and nothing more. While on the contrary, some of the janya ragas and vakra ragas are charming and move the hearts of anyone who may be sensitive even to a slight extent. Harikambodhi is a mela. Yedukula Kambodhi, Mohana and Kedaragowla are derivatives from it. In the scale of aesthetics how can the mela stand anywhere near these derived ragas? The ragas are the outcome of inner emotional experiences and they take shape according to those experiences; some of them are simple and straight; others are a little more complicated; and still some others are greatly involved. The ragas corresponding to these experiences will also have corresponding outer forms. This is how ragas have evolved and not according to a preconceived intellectual framework.

We know that Maha Vaidhyanatha Iyer composed the famous 'Lakshana Gita' in 72 melakartas. But what about its aesthetic appeal? Except for the fact that some of our vidwans air some sections of this occasionally, perhaps to impress their superior knowledge, what aesthetic appeal can be claimed by it? Frankly, none. That is why very few people sing it or care to hear it. Human soul is essentially musical. Though it may be surrounded by veils which need to be lifted, we cannot deceive the soul. The unfortunate thing is that instead of looking upon such schemes as convenient scaffoldings we mistake them for life impulses and try to fit in music which has evolved through various aesthetic stages into the schemes. Of course some part of our heritage may fit in. But there is a large mass of our musical stock which could not be fitted into any scheme. In such cases a common mistake committed is to change the shapes of these ragas so that they may be pigeon-holed in the scheme, or call these ragas by such names as 'bashanga' and so on, as if they are renegades and rebels. The remark-

able thing about some of these "rebels" is that they are more musical, more popular and more appealing than the so-called "good boys" who follow the strict letter of the law. Ragas like Ananda Bairavi, Bairavi, Kambodhi, Sahana, Useni, Yedukula Kambodhi, Saveri, which are shining jewels in our musical heritage, are "rebels"! One wonders whether their unique aesthetic charm is not due to their being "rebels"!

When one reads and hears about the possible number of ragas which can be derived from various enunciated schemes one's head reels. We have already seen books which give the arohana and avarohana of a thousand ragas and more. The late Gayakasikamani Muthiah Bagavathar was contemplating a list of 2,400 ragas for this purpose in the proposed second volume of his "Sangeetha Kalpa Druma". Even for the ordinary scales the number 5,184 has been mentioned as a possibility. Mention has also been made of 34,776 possible ragas which take not less than 5 notes (swaras) either way. If we include four-notes scales also the total number might be 1,26,936 without involving any vakra sanchara (involved phrases). All this is mere speculation and not music. As matters stand to-day even some of the ragas prevalent and gaining currency are what have been called "ghost" ragas. Such ragas are only jumbles of swara and have no aesthetic reality about them. The characteristic life of a raga is bhava. Some of the present-day ragas are conspicuous by the absence of any such bhava. Let me quote Mr. K. V. Ramachandran, "Like ghosts we may seem to see them or fancy they exist; but they have no real entity. Of late there has been a mass emigration of ghost ragas into Carnatic music. Ever since the intrusion of pseudo-ragas without musical life or light our musicians have lost the faculty of singing or playing the real ragas with the lapse of the art of grand alapa they have lost the musical architecture." In many of our present-day concerts we

rarely hear the alapana of Nattakurinji, Yedukula Kam-bodhi, Useni, Devagandhari, but even beginners dabble in ragas like Charukesi, Sarasangi, Vagadeeswari, Jothiswaroopini and so on. Further comment is unnecessary. By long usage or otherwise the first set of ragas mentioned above have acquired an unique grandeur, a characteristic charm and an individuality all their own. They do not depend upon mere schemes or swaras. It is the graceful deviations from the actual swara points that make the charm and grandeur and sweetness and delicacy of those ragas. The second set of ragas on the other hand are only swara jargon ; and so it is easier to handle them and produce some noise. No one with any musical sense will dare to do this with the other bhava-ragas.

Let me not be mistaken as being against the advent of any new ragas, simple or involved. As I have mentioned already life impulse is never static ; it ever seeks newer and newer avenues of expression. Among the 72 meals formulated as a possibility by Venkatamakhi, there are of course some which do not lend themselves to be elaborated as ragas. But there may be some which may reveal some unique hidden beauty not recognised so far. I am very much in favour of research in this direction to explore the possibility of giving life and form to some scales which now remain only as scales and have not been evolved into ragas. For example, *Subhapantuvarali* was only a scale so far. Even Sri Tyagaraja, who perhaps handled more melaragas than any other celebrity, is believed to have composed only one or two kritis in this raga. (Even this is doubted by several.) Still this mela is capable of being developed as a raga with its own characteristic bhava. This is sung as a major raga (under the name *Todi*) in North India, and it is a musical feast to hear it expounded by a good North Indian Ustad. Once some friends and I happened to hear it elaborated by Pandit Omkarnath Takhur and we went into ecstatic

raptures. One can never exhaust possibilities of musical expression; as long as life is dynamic there will be room for newer modes of such expression and new melody moulds will be found to express new impulses of life. We should welcome all such expressions as enriching our cultural heritage. But no mechanical scheme or intellectual formula can be expected to do this, because this line of expansion is ultra-rational, super-intellectual and above mechanical formulation.

The place given in modern concerts to swara singing is inexcusable from the aesthetic standpoint. Swara singing is of later growth. In the ancient concerts, I believe, they mostly dealt with raga alapana and what must have corresponded to our modern Pallavi. There were not many Kritis then. It is with the advent of Sri Tyagaraja that Kritis in such large numbers came to be added to the musical repertory of a Vidwan. On account of their innate charm, scintillating brilliance and irresistible appeal these Kritis came to be an integral part of our concerts. But raga alapana and pallavi continued to retain their important place in concerts.

Neraval and swara singing were always integral part of Pallavi in which the sahitya was a small phrase and played only an insignificant part. But of late, neraval and swara singing have come to be almost an indispensable appendage for almost every kriti. The propriety of such an intrusion may well be challenged. There is a definite place set apart for those special features which will bring out the mastery of the artist; why then indulge in it in and out of season? And especially with beginners it seems to have become almost an obsession. The veriest tyros who cannot handle properly even some of the well-known ragas start indulging in swara singing, jumbling up swaras into premeditated tala groupings. The other day the Hon'ble Justice T. L. Venkatarama Ayyar presiding over a lecture

on music by myself made a statement which for a moment startled me; but when I thought over it I found it was profoundly true. He said that with the coming in of swara singing the raga began to decline. How true! The swara singing seems to have become a trick to justify one's wasting time. If one cannot keep an audience interested by giving soulful and appealing music he takes refuge under swara jumbling. Let me again quote Mr. K. V. Ramachandran; "Look at the other mediocrity of that facile verbiage—swara singing—the process of bundling swaras according to set formulae! What is the aesthetic or spiritual value of a mechanical mix-up of rhythm and design? It was Wilde who said that the incompetent could always be correct..... Is the rich sonorous material meant to deliver some pompous trifle? And have we nothing better to express through music's celestial medium than the banalities of an outworn technique?"

Even granting that swara singing and neraval have some aesthetic purpose to serve in some cases, should one indulge in it *ad nauseam*? Some discretion is certainly called for. Certain ragas are best left without this swara drag. This swara singing takes away the beauty of ragas like Nilambari, Punnagavarali, Kuranji. Especially swara singing in higher tempo (second kala) has no place in some of these *vilambakala rakti* ragas.

This leads one to consider the appropriateness of *chittaswara* in compositions. One can understand that when a composition in a rare involved raga is made, a group of swara sancharas (*chittaswara*) bringing out the special characteristics of the raga tagged on to the piece may be tolerated. Or when a *madhyamakala* sahitya forms a part of any composition the singing of the swara counterpart of this portion may in some cases be permitted. But a *chittaswara* for all kinds of compositions needs to be justified. The pity

is that in several of the compositions used in our concerts the Anupallavi and the Pallavi together make a continuous idea, and to introduce a chittaswara at the end of the Anupallavi before going back to the Pallavi in such cases is inexcusable. Take for example, the well-known kriti "yendudaginado" in Todi raga; the sentence is not complete at the end of the anupallavi. Only taken together anupallavi and pallavi make sense. What then is the justification for allowing a chittaswara to butt in between and cut the idea? There are several other pieces of a similar nature where chittaswara is indulged in.

Then a word about singing 'tana'. "Raga, tana, pallavi" has come to be a very common phrase. In the olden times our music seems to have evolved mainly on the basis of veena. The earliest experiments in fixing the swaras in a scale have been made on the veena. Veena seems to have been also an accompaniment for vocal music. The pattern of music was therefore veena-coloured. While vilambakala was the natural feature of the veena madhyamakala played on it came to be called 'tana'. It is an undisputed fact that veena is essentially suited for tana and the effect of tana on veena is something marvellous. Historically it is quite possible that singers began to imitate on their voice this madhyamakala display on the veena. That was, perhaps, the beginning of tana singing in vocal music. But what is the artistic propriety of doing tana on a flute or a clarinet or a nagaswaram or even on the violin? On the violin the rhythmic stressing of the bow has a pleasant effect and this may be taken to correspond to tana. But how does a tana come out on the flute or the nagaswaram? I do not stress the point further. Personally the aesthetic soul in me feels that tana must be restricted entirely to the veena. Because our ears have become in a way accustomed to tana on human voice we do not feel the aesthetic misfit. And as I said at the beginning, our mind gets also used to the idea

of vocal tana. I know some friends of mine who are deeply sensitive to music and who like very much our music concerts, speaking violently against this tana business. One friend went even so far as to say that vocal tana looked some sort of parody or mimicry. He evidently represents a type of listener and we can't ignore that type.

And now to that inevitable curse of the modern age, the mike. Evidently it has come to stay. But it has come also to kill all the fine, delicate, subtle, almost spiritual nuances of our music. Let those who want bold strokes and loud sounds have it by all means. But let there be also provision for people who are inclined to hear our music as it is and as it is intended to be, without any distortion through a mechanised gadget. Our music is said to be essentially chamber music. While arguments may be adduced in favour of the mike for big halls and thousands of listeners, there is no altering the fact that real Carnatic music should be heard only in its appropriate setting. The use of the mike in several cases helps to drown the noise made by the audience themselves. I have in my younger days attended music performances where a thousand people have sat and listened and enjoyed for 4 or 5 hours without any mike. If the people who come to listen to music make up their minds to provide the necessary silence to enable the singer to be heard all through the hall, there wouldn't be any need for a mike; but the present-day music hall crowd is almost a noisy mob and the poor musician, alas! has to be pitied. He seeks the aid of a mike to be heard above the din and bustle in the hall. The worst effect of this mike will be that our ear will gradually lose its sensitiveness, its power to understand and appreciate delicacy and subtlety. And what is left of our music if we take away from it the charm, the delicacy, the fineness and the finish so characteristic of it? The success of a music performance depends as much on the listener as on the performer. It is

the responsive audience that draws out the best in the performer. Unless there is a kind of sympathetic understanding between the singer and the listener we cannot expect the performance to serve its high purpose. Music needs a suitable atmosphere and those who believe in the Divine quality and the spiritual purpose of our music should provide the necessary atmosphere in a concert hall so that the art may serve its purpose.