

12. Hidden Potentialities of Music

In India from time immemorial extraordinary powers have been claimed for music. Several stories of miracles worked by music have been handed down to us by tradition. Whether these stories are authentic or not, it cannot be denied that such a belief has persistently existed.

For one thing music has always been considered Divine in origin. Great rishis and devas have been associated with music. The authorship of some standard treatises on music, dance, aesthetics and so on, has been attributed to great rishis. In ancient Samskrit literature there are descriptions of music concerts in which Great Ones like Brahma, Indira, Prahlada, Narada, the Great Kumaras have taken part and the sage Shuka acted as interpreter of the performance. Music is intimately connected with Divinity.

As I have said above, abnormal powers have been ascribed to music. It is said that Muthuswami Dikshitar brought rain by singing the raga *Amritavarshani*. I have actually seen rains being brought about by chanting the *Varunajapa*. The raga *Megharanjani* also is considered capable of bringing about cloud-formation in the sky and subsequently rain. *Nagavarali* subdues snakes. We hear of snake-charmers, especially in the village parts. I have heard from authentic sources that the late Nagaswaram Vidvan Sivakozhundu could draw out cobras from their holes and make them swing their hoods rhythmically in tune with the music of his nagaswaram.

We have the following traditional story about the raga *Deepak*. Gopal Naick was an expert musician in the court

of the great Akbar. One day Akbar was asking Gopal Naick whether he really believed in the mysterious powers attributed to music and particularly about the alleged power of Deepak to *kindle* fire. Gopal Naick affirmed his belief in those powers. Akbar challenged him to demonstrate the power of *Deepak* to produce fire. Gopal Naick said, "Sire, I can prove it; but the moment I sing the essential part of the raga I shall be consumed by fire". Akbar could not believe; but he suggested a demonstration with adequate safe-guards against fire, and said, "Gopal, I suggest that you stand neck-deep in the river Jumna and sing. Certainly no fire can consume you then!" Gopal Naick was not, however, so sure; but he was intent on removing the doubts in the mind of the Emperor regarding the powers of music. So he agreed and started singing *Deepak* raga standing neck-deep in the river. The story goes that when he fell into the proper mood and sang the characteristic phrases of the raga, his body burst into flames and was reduced to ashes in an instant and the ashes were washed down the stream. That was how Gopal Naick met his end.

We are told that every occurrence in this world of phenomena leads us in the ultimate analysis to vibrations. It is only a very limited range of these vibrations in a limited number of media that are cognisable by our outer senses. A certain gamut gives the experience of sound, another gamut the phenomenon of light and so on; but there are ranges of vibrations below as well as above our sensuous experiences. In the case of music, the vibrations set up in air affecting certain regions in our auditory organism convey certain impressions to the brain which in its turn relates them to other aspects in our nature on the principle of correspondence, i.e., the sense vibrations are converted into subtle vibrations in some of the subjective aspects of our nature, mind, emotion, intuition, etc. It is a matter of common experience that sense experiences very

often produce results in aspects of a man's nature not so obviously related to the outer senses. Man is not merely a bundle of organs and senses. The physical part is the least important part of his existence. He has an emotional and intellectual life, a moral life, a superintellectual or intuitional life and a spiritual life of his own. Though these are far too subtle to be clearly envisaged by the ordinary man, any thinking individual will be able to see the important part played by these aspects of human nature in the life of the individual.

Musical expression, as any art expression, is fundamental in human beings and its appeal is universal. All art is in essence an expression of the inner being in man, and music, the queen of the arts, is especially so. It is fundamentally related to the aesthetic and super-intellectual aspects of life. Just as spoken words express our inner thoughts however inadequately, music expresses some of the indefinable, subtle experiences of human nature in a way that it alone can do. The mode of achievement of this may be vague and may escape our analysis, but then in the very nature of things it ought to escape such analysis. Edward Carpenter speaking of the emotional appeal of all arts says—"Some times people ask what is the meaning of such and such a work? Meaning be hanged". It is this, at times unexpressible, subtle, vague, elusive appeal that is essentially characteristic of all Indian Art, and especially of music.

We have heard of the oft-quoted verse in Samskrit :

Pasurvetti Sisurvetti Vetti Ganarasam Phanee.

In one sense this is literally true. A beast, a child on the side of innocence and a serpent on the side of the aggressive are responsive to music properly chosen. If a lullaby is not able to lull a child to sleep, one may feel certain that there is something wrong with the melody. If a good flute player or Nagaswaram player is not able to

calm down a hissing cobra, it is time he examines and finds out what is wrong with him. In the same way, if any of our musicians finds he is not able to evoke any appeal at least in a certain section of his hearers, he has to examine himself with a view to discover what needs mending in his musical items.

Raga is the basis of Indian music; we may say that it is the soul of our musical system. Each *raga* has its own essential, unique, aesthetic quality, called *bhava*; each *raga* has an individuality of its own; it is as it were a unique entity. No one may dare to do anything which will impair a *raga's* uniqueness. Each *raga* is associated with a *devata* (presiding deity), which is the ensouling principle which gives life and unique structure to the *raga*.

(We may have seen pictorial representations of some of our *ragas*, especially from the Bengal school of painting. Some of them are remarkable and convey the characteristics of the *ragas* they represent).

In this connection it will be of great interest to note that an young Soviet scientist has succeeded in transforming musical sounds into colour patterns. This discovery is of great importance; we shall hereafter not only "hear" music but "see" it too. May it not be that the *raga devatas* as conceived by our ancients are only music "seen" in colourful patterns?

It is generally believed that all vibrations down here have their correspondences in subtler realms of being. Sound and form are closely linked; form and colour have some mutual association. The idea is that music can build forms in the inner regions and these forms are directly dependent on the music which originates them. If the music is flawless the forms will be beautiful; otherwise the forms may be ugly, truncated or maimed. This is very well illustrated in the following story.

Narada, the sage bard, used to delight Lord Vishnu in Vaikunta every day with his music. And the Lord used to enjoy it and show his approbation by the usual gestures such as shaking of the head and so on. In course of time Narada got to be cocksure of his expertness and ability to please the Lord, and a touch of pride and over-confidence began to manifest itself. Pride is the harbinger of downfall in every region, and in the case of great sages it is unpardonable. The Lord noticed this and wished to teach Narada a lesson.

One day when Narada was playing his veena before the Lord, he noticed that the Lord was not giving any sign of approbation; on the contrary there were frequent frowns on the Lord's face indicating displeasure. Narada at once knew that something was wrong, and falling at the Lord's feet, asked to be enlightened as to the cause of the displeasure. The Lord smiled and said, "If you desire to know what real music is, go to Hanuman who is performing *tapas* in Kandamadana hill and learn it from him."

Narada set forth to meet Hanuman. On the way when he was passing near a grove he heard the wailings of a number of women and went into the grove to ascertain the cause. He was shocked at what he saw. He saw a group of otherwise beautiful damsels, disfigured in various ways; some with their noses cut, some with other limbs dismembered—a ghastly and pitiable sight. Moved at the heart Narada made enquiries as to the cause of their plight. They said, "We are the *raga devatas*; a rishi named Narada played such bad music today in Vaikunta that we have been reduced to this plight. It is only a really good musician who knows our true forms that can bring us back to our original shapes." Narada was humbled. He confessed to them who he was. He said that he was going to Hanuman to learn true music and he promised to restore their original forms

as an act of expiation for the sin he had in his ignorance and pride committed against the *devatas*.

Narada went to meet Hanuman in his hilly home and explained his mission to him; the latter took the veena from Narada and began to play on it. Narada was simply astonished at the mastery and finish of Hanuman's music and forgot himself in the enjoyment of that soulful music. After a while Hanuman stopped his playing and put the veena down on the floor. After explaining some subtle points regarding the technique of the art he asked Narada to play on his veena on the lines explained by him. Narada tried to lift his veena from the ground, but it would not move. When Hanuman was playing veena the rocky floor had melted and when he put it down it was on this molten granite. When the rock cooled and solidified the veena had got stuck up in it. Narada did not know what to do. Hanuman thereupon suggested that Narada might sing and melt the rock and take out the veena. Narada tried and tried but in vain. The story goes that Hanuman sang, melted the rock and then took out the veena. Narada was cured of his pride.

One important point comes out of this story apart from the idea of *raga devatas*. Music can produce such physical effect as melting a rock. There is nothing strange in this. It is well-known that a glass tumbler can in certain circumstances be broken to pieces by drawing a violin bow along the rim of the tumbler. We also know that if some sand is scattered on a thin metal plate and a bow is drawn across the edge the sand arranges itself into beautiful geometrical shapes.

The appeal of Art is, however, primarily to human emotion. If a piece of music, or for that matter, any art fails to have an emotional appeal it is no art. When people attempt to read any meaning—which is essentially an

intellectual function — into a work of art, they are missing the basic function of art. By first rousing the emotion and then sublimating it music lifts one into supra-intellectual regions — intuitional and spiritual.

As expressing human emotions, there is no other aspect of art or philosophy which can excel music. Human emotions, while they can in general be grouped under several heads, are beyond clear-cut definition. We can only deal with certain broad divergences. Some of these emotions are very difficult to express either by words or by action; but such emotions can be expressed by music. I have myself felt that emotions like *shanti*, *self-surrender* and so on are best expressed either in music or not expressed at all. While we may not agree with the classification of our current ragas according to their emotional appeal, it is beyond doubt that certain ragas definitely evoke some typical emotions.

Music has its own language, the language of emotions; and as human emotions are universal emotions such as joy, fear, depression, despair are universal and so the appeal of music which uses such emotions as its language must be *universal*.

The one vital difference between expressing human thoughts in spoken words and expressing human emotions through music is the fact that while spoken words may unconsciously or deliberately mislead and give erroneous impressions, the musical expression of the inner emotion can never mislead, because it is not in general based on any conventional combination of words as in the case of speech; and hence understanding human nature through its musical expression will lead to a truer and better understanding than perhaps through the camouflage of spoken words.

We know that the soul-culture of a nation (or an individual) finds the best and truest expression in music and

other fine arts. This culture has two aspects: one universal, common to all humanity, based on the fundamental unity of Life. The other aspect is distinctive and expresses the unique characteristics of the national culture and enables the nation to make its unique contribution to the integrated and harmonised world-culture. Though this is distinctive it is not alien to or incompatible with other cultural expressions. On the other hand it adds to the beauty and richness of the synthetic world culture. Hence one should be careful in effecting any changes in the cultural expressions of a nation. That was why Plato warned people against tinkering with the music-style of a nation lest such a tinkering should lead to disturbance in the very foundations of the State. Of course this does not mean that we should not enrich our music by assimilating ideas which can be adapted without violence to the basic characteristics of our musical system.

There are certain other aspects of music which have not yet come to be universally recognised. We hear now-a-days of colour being used for the curing of diseases. In mental hospitals it is found that colour plays a very important part on various types of dementia. It has been found that red coloured glass for window shutters tends to put more activity into people who are suffering from mental langour, morbidity etc. In the same way, it is quite possible that different types of music may be used as treatment for various types of mental disorders. Any disease is in essence an abnormality and all treatments are attempts to introduce normal conditions where abnormality exists. and music to my mind can be used to minimise such abnormalities. It is a potential field for investigation and our music lovers and experts will do well to start an investigation in this unexplored field. I do not see why, in a mental hospital, there could not be a "Todi" ward, or a "Kalyani" ward, or a "Mohanam" ward for those people whose ab-

normal conditions stand a chance of being influenced for the better by these particular ragas, I am sure that turbulent lunatics could to a very large extent be made amenable and to some extent quieted by *Neelamburi* or *Yadukula Kambhoji*. Similarly, cynical and morbid temperaments could be enlivened by *Atana* or *Begada*. This is a field of investigation which is worth being taken up by people who are really interested in musical art.

As an example of the characteristic quieting influence music has on unruly natures I may mention an experiment tried and found effective in a school of Madame Montessori. A teacher who found one class particularly turbulent started giving music and dancing lessons to the pupils. The result was remarkable; they gradually became quiet and well-behaved. When one of the pupils was asked why she left off jumping about she simply looked up and said, "It isn't nice to jump." That small phrase of the pupil sums up tersely the potency of music.

It may also be mentioned here that "in prisons, too, some remarkable results have been achieved with music. Prisoners have been turned from a resisting attitude toward a willing and co-operative frame of mind."

Why human beings only! Even computing machines relax to music. Dr. B. J. Goldacre and Mr. D. Bean of the Chester Beatty Research Institute in London have evolved an ingenious apparatus in which artificial electronic cells are linked together in such a way that each can communicate electrically with every other cell. A cell roused for the purpose causes an oscillator to give off a musical note. By this arrangement relief can be given to "nervous breakdowns" in the machine. The press article from which this information is extracted says, "Human beings can't claim a monopoly in nervous breakdowns. Expensive electric computers too can suffer from the sort of tension that leads to break-

down; and one of the most surprising possibilities of a new piece of machinery.....is that it can prevent computers from breakdown by enabling them to compose and sing their own music for relaxation."

Musical therapy has come to stay; experiment after experiment has been made and it is now definitely established that music can cure diseases. Muhammad Shafi, centuries ago, was practising musical therapy and was prescribing certain musical melodies for certain diseases. We are now told that a Russian Professor claims that "music is capable of improving the sight as much as 25 per cent." It has also been reported that bag-pipe music saved the life of a wounded Scotsman.

They have been able to cure certain specific ailments like headache and so on by the use of music. Time is not far off when doctors will prescribe music instead of medicines for at least some of the common ailments. It has, however, been pointed out that in adopting musical therapy the doctor should make himself familiar with the patient's temperament and environment.

Thus we see what all powers are inherent in music. Who knows what the future will reveal to us of its further possibilities! It may be that in future years wider and greater powers and deeper potentialities will be revealed and they will be recognised and also put to good use by the people at large.