

Aesthetic Value and Hindustani Sangeet as A Vehicle of Culture¹

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Quite a few important concepts have to be clarified in dealing with the subject chosen. So it would duly serve to project what these are, as also the order in which they are to be thought about, if I listed them succinctly as follows:

As it relates to Hindustani *Sangeet*, *aesthetic value* is the *agreeable feeling* (in its various *degrees* of intensesness and emotional colour) as it may *accompany* or *result from* our *percipient* (discriminative), *determinate*, *disinterested* and *open-minded* attention to what *is* or *appears* to be there as a *local* or *regional* feature of the ongoing *flow* and overall *form* (as against *content*) of the music, dance or rhythm contemplated. Culture, on the other hand, may here be taken (in the specific yet widely acknowledged sense) as *appreciation of art, music, literature* etc.²

Now, in respect of the very opening concept, two questions may be put at once. Why do I preface the word *sangeet* with *Hindustani*, and does it not look a little venturesome to try to deal (in just a single essay) with such a big concept as *sangeet*, as against music alone which could facilitate pointed attention because of its relatively narrow compass? To both questions, however, my answer is ready. I focus on Hindustani music alone, because I am still very far from becoming an authentic contemplator of Carnatic music which abounds in subtleties; and I feel justified in speaking of *sangeet* quite generally because, however distinct be their individual character, vocal and instrumental music, Tabla rhythm, and Kathak dance all partake of a common element, that is, *laya* or aesthetic pace. What we speak of as *tāla* is nothing but *laya*³ as measured and made articulate with the help of beats, *bol*-s, segments, emphases and determinate moments of vacancy (ख़ाली). I may add that tonal sweetness is a prime requirement of Tabla-playing too, and that the *nritya* part of a Kathak dance recital freely avails of 'accompanying' vocal music as well.

As for the next key concept, *aesthetic value*, it would make for clarity if I dealt individually with the two words it comprises. Now, the *aesthetic* is not the same thing as what we call *artistic*, and it is easy to distinguish the two. One admitted meaning of the word *aesthetic* is: 'related to the theoretical discipline known as aesthetics'. The word *artistic* is never used in this sense. Further, as Roman Ingarden has pointed out, the word *artistic* means 'relating to the *making* of a work of art'; and *aesthetic* means 'relating to the *contemplation* of a work of art'. Thus, whereas on the one hand we speak of *artistic skill and devices*, on the other we speak of *aesthetic attitude*, *aesthetic experience*, and *aesthetic point of view*—all signifying such ways of being concerned with works of art as are not importantly or

directly related to the process of *creating* art. However, in spite of all that distinguishes them, the two freely go together. A sculptor's attempt to so refine his material—be it wood or marble—that it may become smooth enough to look winsome in the completed work, is clearly an artistic *device*; but if, as incorporated in the completed figure, it appears to us like living feminine flesh, the look will be an *aesthetic semblance*⁴.

The world of art, I may add, abounds in such aesthetic semblances or virtual elements. Before, however, I exemplify them I think it necessary to pose and address a question. Why am I taking pains to be so particular about the precise meanings of words such as *artistic* and *aesthetic* which are freely used in our daily talk about art? My answer is: they are often used glibly and this bars the way to clear understanding. I want this article to be an essay in philosophical aesthetics which dominates the West in its theoretical concern with the arts today, but which is yet to burgeon in our country. There, they are serious even about the aesthetics of rehearsals. Here, even our classical dances, all alike replete with beauty of posture and movement, are yet to be subjected to aesthetic analysis⁵; and if it be wondered as to why such analysis has to be philosophical, the answer could easily be that, following the well-known dictum of William James, philosophy today is very much more a determined attempt to think clearly than anything else.

To turn now, at some length, to semblances in the world of art, it is easy to give examples. The distance or recessiveness that we may (seem to) see in quite a few landscape paintings—that is, some figures' appearing close to us and others looking far away—is surely not actual. We never think of measuring this seeming (or virtual) distance with the help of a tape. Quite a few paintings relating to the Resurrection of Christ have been so deftly made that the lean graceful figure really *seems* to be off the ground and aloft. In an Odissi presentation, now and then, the *tribhangi* is statuesquely still, but it never fails to *suggest* movement, because of its curvilinear stance. Nor is our vocal music deficient in the kind of semblances we have been talking of, though as things stand today, they are, as a rule, only heard and appreciated, not *understood* as semblances. What is more, here too—that is, in the region of music—the aesthetic and the artistic tend to go together. Making the vocal volume surge and ebb very gently is an *artistic device*, but the concomitant look of a rise and fall of feeling is clearly just an *aesthetic semblance*, for the locus of real feeling is the human heart, not any quiver of strings or vocal intonation. But whatever be the way (or device) of their evocation, it is mainly such semblances that make a music recital memorable, and not merely acceptable. As I say so, I cannot help recalling two powerful instances of music's amazing capacity to conjure up appearances that seem to be there overpoweringly, but are not—and cannot be—there literally. One of these is Ustad Dabeer Khan's (Veena) playing of Bilaskhani Todi, as a National Programme of All India Radio in May 1956; and the other is the 'senior' Dagar Brothers' (that is, of Ustads Nasir Moinuddin and Nasir Aminuddin Dagar's) vocal rendering of *soordāsi malhār* in the Vishnu Digambar Jayanti of 1957. Of the first of these, the first fifteen or twenty minutes of (opening) *ālāpa* struck me as an awesome torrent of melodic *billows* (not mere *waves*) that surged up and receded in the depths of the

melody, instead of merely skimming the notes of the *rāga* in varying successiveness; and, to turn now to the second one, when the elder brother (Moinuddin) began laying out the canvas of his *gamak-ang ālāpa*, the impact was sublime unmistakably, that is, such a mix of wonder, rapturous delight, and a little strain on my apprehending powers that I at once felt subdued *and* upraised, as one may do in contemplating God's surpassing attributes during moments of soulful prayer. Surprisingly, the impact was (more or less) similar on a friend sitting by my side, though he did not know even the names of the basic svaras, as *sa, re, ga, ma*. When I asked him as to how he was feeling, his ready answer was: "I feel like standing by the vast spread of an ocean or at the foot of a towering mountain".

Here, at once, I find it relevant to go back to the following words in this article's very opening para: 'aesthetic value is the agreeable feeling *in its various degrees of intenseness and emotional colour*'. Value is the quality of being desirable—desirable not in the sense of *capable* of being desired, for even ignoble objectives *can* be desired, but as *worthy* of being aimed at and striven after. Now, to speak quite generally, whatever appears *thus* desirable to us is at once felt as likeable: hence the words *agreeable feeling* in the extract just cited. What, however, is more noteworthy for the purpose of this essay is that our positive reaction to ongoing music can either be *mainly cognitive* or *patently emotive*⁶; and that where it is emotive it can either be simply joyful or one of sublime or exalted satisfaction as already explained in my reference to the Veenā and *ālāpa* recitals. By a merely cognitive reaction of approval, on the other hand, I mean the feeling which accompanies the quiet awareness that the chosen *rāga-tāla* fabric is duly kept to, or that the vocalist is adhering duly to the distinctive *gāyaki* of the *gharānā* which he claims to represent. Such a recital is just acceptable, not admirable. On the other hand, though one cannot accept the extreme definition of art as mnemonics of the beautiful, it is unquestionable that music which is of the very best quality often keeps reverberating in our memory, and so exalts us during actual contemplation that as we step out of the auditorium and re-enter humdrum life, we feel a little maladjusted, if momentarily. In either case, however, our attitude has to be *disinterested*, surely not in the sense of being *indifferent* to what meets the ear, but rather as being free from determination by any self-referent concern. Here, thoughts such as the following have to be firmly put out of court: "Is such listening going to help *me* at all in improving the research thesis I am presently working on?"; "My daily work schedule is already so packed with business engagement which may lead to some solid profit; why should *I* waste time in attending to something so ephemeral as a mere ninety-minute mirage of sheer tonal jugglery and reiterative taps?". Aestheticians put the matter thus: "The aesthetic attitude is quite independent of considerations of both utility and actual existence"⁷. The view is widely accepted, but some remarks still seem necessary to make it look plausible to the average reader. Why do aestheticians insist that the aesthetic attitude is independent of considerations of both utility *and actual existence*? The answer simply is that whatever we regard as useful in the everyday sense is either actually there or *can* come to exist. And, keeping the general run of our lives in view, if it be contended that an attitude which cares

neither for utility nor for actual existence is simply bizarre, our reply could readily be that real life actually abounds in moments when we adopt the attitude in question; and that to ignore them is simply to take a truncated view of life. When we happily mimic the lisping intonations of a child who has just begun to speak, do we ever wonder how it is going to help us? And when we look at a rainbow enraptured, is our delight in any way blighted by the scientific explanation that what appears to be hanging in the heavens is no real existent, but just a mirage produced by some meteorological laws?

This experience, however, is not wholly similar to our listening to music absorbedly; and how the two differ can be easily brought out. In looking at the rainbow we never take the trouble of checking if the different colours are correctly placed. But when we listen to music, so percipient and discriminative is our attention all along that if any particular *svara* is even minimally off-key, or if the melodic flow shows just a minuscule deviation from the chosen rhythmic pace, the blemish feels like a jab at the *rasika*'s heart. Such percipience or acuity of perception which we call *nigāh*—and which, as I later hope to show, is the main factor which makes music an effective vehicle of *culture* as we have chosen to interpret the word—cannot be secured through an immediate effort of the will; it is rather the cherishable fruit of a long and loving, even reverent communion with the art over a period of years. Further, though attention never keeps riveted to a single, changeless point, the little shifts involved are much more explicit in listening to music, and are importantly determined by the art's own nature as patently occurrent. We follow the course of music as it runs; and it is essential to remember that what has been called *tādātmya* by our *rasa* theorists is no mere coalescence of two inert points, nor just a confluence of two parallel, but separate passages, but an intensely watchful exchange of what the art object has to offer progressively, and how this aesthetic offering is seized, partly contributed, and even anticipated by the *rasika*'s tight pursuance of the melodic flow or of the *bandish* as set in both *rāga* and rhythm. Finally, our listening to music is *determinate* also in the sense that here we all along care for the definiteness with which what meets the ear agrees with the grammatical demands of the *rāga* chosen *and* abstains from crossing over into the domains of 'neighbouring' (आस-पास के) *rāgas*. No such circumspection is needed when our heart 'leaps'⁸ up on beholding a rainbow in the sky. However, in spite of all its determinateness, our attitude in listening to classical music has to remain unhardened or open to new impressions too, because a highly gifted and creative musician can always conjure up effects which are quite new to us.

The way is now paved to see how the percipience we have been talking of—that is, unrelaxing focusing of attention on the details of a presentation of Hindustani *sangeet*—can make for better appreciation of the beauty or significance of works in the region of other arts, and so justify the view that music may well be regarded as an effective vehicle of *culture* understood as refinement of our aesthetic sensibility generally. Only one art may be chosen for illustrating the point in question, say, the art of poetry, not only for the sake of brevity, but because no specimen of any other art can be presented in writing. Consider, to begin with, the following collocation of *bols* (or mnemonics of rhythm):

(तकित) (तकितधिन) (तधिगिन धाधागिन) (तधिगिन तधिगिन तधिगिन धाधागिन)

3

5

8

16

Here, as indicated, the first of the four segments (all bracketed individually) contains just three *aksharas* (letters); the second, five; the third, eight; and the final one, as many as sixteen. Now, if all the *bol*-s are properly recited as one running yet gently segmented collocation, the whole string of *bol*-s will *seem* to be *elongating itself*, just because of the rising extent of every successive segment, though its actual length will of course remain quite unchanged.

Now, with such a disposition of elements in mind, let us take a look at the following lines of Wordsworth:

And I've felt
 A presence that disturbs me with the joy
 Of elevated thoughts, a sense sublime
 Of something *far more deeply interfused*
 A motion and a spirit that impels
 All thinking things, all objects of thought
 And rolls through all things⁹

Keeping the (preceding) poetic context of these words in view, the poet may here be taken to say that whereas in his younger years he used to be fascinated by the eye-catching beauty of form and colour in the bosom of nature, as a mature person presently what he is struck by is an intuitive feel that all this visible diversity is held as one by a *very very deeply* embedded underrunning reality. Now, to convey this sense of intense or surpassing internality, the poet does not use the words which I have put in italics, and which say what they mean rather banally, but conveys the same sense with a subtle indirectness, by using the four following words with an increasing filling of letters:

<i>far</i>	<i>more</i>	<i>deeply</i>	<i>interfused.</i>
3	4	6	10

even as, in dancing a Kathak *todā*, the suggestion of *ascending to*, instead of just *arriving* at the sama may be evoked simply by gradually increasing the power of the *padchāps* (sounds of footfalls) of some *bol*-s preceding the focal beat, or as the seriousness of an utterance may be heightened just by the directed intentness of how one looks at the person addressed. What is more, the artistic device I have tried to highlight can also be used oppositely and yet bear out the point I am seeking to make. This happens, for instance, where another poet, Matthew Arnold, chooses to speak of *recession* of the "grating roar of pebbles" at Dover Beach with

<i>'tremulous</i>	<i>cadence</i>	<i>slow'</i> ¹⁰
9	7	4

My own experience is that if, by listening to recitals of rhythm frequently, the mind gets

imbued with even such simple distinctions as the one between open (खुले) and closed (बन्द) *bol*-s such as वा and धि, or that which obtains between *bol*-s that call for some वजन (emphasis) and those that are to be marked delicately, though not cursorily, we may well be helped in sensing the magic of some poetic lines with a little extra finesse. Consider, for instance, the following couplet of Kabir:

भगति भजन हरि नाऊं है, दूजो दुःख अपार
मनसा वाचा कर्मना, कबिरा सुमिरन सार।

What the whole couplet may be taken to say simply is that (as rightly understood) *bhagati* (or devotion) is nothing but such a devout commitment to the Name as may infuse all the three aspects of one's life and being—that is, thought, speech and action (मनसा, वाचा, कर्मना); and that all other ways of being devoted to the Lord are susceptible to infinite (or अपार) suffering. However, what here deserves notice is the fact that whatever is infinite is necessarily असीम or limitless; that whatever is such has got to be taken as *open* (or unbounded); and that, therefore, the three words that follow *अपार*—namely, मनसा, वाचा, कर्मना—are all very rightly chosen because, in so far as they all end with a *khulā* (open) *bol* (see सा, चा, ना), they duly reinforce the sense of openness implicit in the very meaning of the word अपार. It is hardly necessary to add that the triplet of such sounds not only heightens the words' semantic significance but their very sonant openness.

Music makes us sensitive to the individual character of diverse sounds; words (as recited) are sounds as well, besides being vehicles of meaning; and so it is no wonder that long and loving experience of listening to music enables us to see how poets take care to choose words that sound as they should, to chime with their poetic purpose. Thus, because he is going to open his Ayodhyā Kānd with an account of the happy events that came in the wake of Rama's marriage, this is how Tulsidas begins by making our ears receptive to the very *sound* of the word Rama by using the letter *r* (र) in devout unrestraint:

श्री गुरु चरण सरोज, निज मन मुकरि सुधारि।
बरनऊ रघुबर विमल जस, जो दायक फल चारि।।

What is more, even a single word may serve the poet's purpose duly if one of its letters *sounds* as it should, to give due vent to what the poet wants us to visualize: Thus, though the word that is commonly used with बर्क (or बिजली) is चमक, not तड़प, the poet may prefer to use, as he does in the following couplet, तड़प to convey, *in part through the heavy sound of ड*, the agony and writhing (*side-shuffling*) in unrequited love:

परदए शौक से एक बर्क तड़प कर निकली
याद करने की तरह जब उन्हें याद किया।

Intenseness, however, is not the only sensed quality of letters as uttered. Their sound may even seem to incline or upgather itself; and this very appearance may serve to buttress the overall image, effect or feeling which a whole poetic line seeks to evolve or express. Thus, where Keats uses the following array of words in his famous poem, *Eve of Agnes*:

St. Agnes' Eve—ah! bitter chill it was!
The owl for all its feathers was a-cold;

the very way in which the sound of *owl* accomplishes itself, as an आ-उ-ल gathered up together, reinforces the image of the owl's being ensconced in its feathery opulence. In very much the same way, by virtue of the sonant *incline* of its closing letter, दी, the word बन्दौ in the following poetic line of Surdas heightens the poet's own devout self-surrender:

चरन कमल बन्दौ हरिराई

Be it noted that if the word बन्दौ is avoided by replacing the present line with the following one: बन्दन करं हरिपद सुखदाई, the effect in question will disappear forthwith, though the rhythmic stretch will not suffer *any* change, and the net meaning will remain *almost* the same.

I hasten to add that the impulse to such thinking arose from my repeated contemplation of the Kathak pattern which opens as follows:

ताऔ थुंगा तकिट थुंगो

Sangeet also makes us realize the need to harmonize the basic *laya* of rhythm with the specific mood or emotions that go with its verbal content; and this specific awareness can make us choose the proper pace at which a poetic piece is to be recited. The following well-known couplet of the Urdu poet Mir easily admits of reading at the swinging *madhya laya* pace of *tritāla*; but if this particular *laya* (pace) is here chosen for recitation, it will only serve to blight the languorous forlornness which the poet here visualizes:

पत्ता-पत्ता, बूटा-बूटा हाल हमारा जाने है
जाने न जाने, गुल ही न जाने, बाग तो सारा जाने है

Such riches of aesthetic sensitiveness may not be as widely recognized as 'riches of the spirit' embalmed in Biblical lore or as *daivi-sampadā* in the Gita; but they are surely cherished by *rasikas* as a kind of inner plenitude. Like spiritual ones, the riches occurring from a loving communion with art do not come about suddenly or at our beck and call; but whereas the former demand the long prior practice of ethico-religious discipline, the latter result from a meticulous exercise of percipience over a number of years. This attitude is nothing but acuteness in perceiving the minutest detail of whatever is heard or seen,—say, in the visual

arts. It is precisely this exercise which has enabled me to seize *the very running process of abstraction which is nowhere directly observable* in the region of art except in that Kathak number which is called *bhāva-batānā*, and which is now facing virtual extinction.

I may illustrate the point by making a comparative reference to two different arts which are, however, both alike occurrent, namely, film and dance. Both are watched by us a confluence; but whereas the former is admirably suited to show the gradual *exaltation* of a man's popularity or moral stature, the latter alone can present to us, directly *and by degrees*, the *distillation*, so to say, of the way of expressing the meaning or *bhāvā* of a particular text. In Attenborough's *Gandhi* the Mahatma is first addressed (by British agents) as *Gandhi bakrā* (goat, to be sacrificed?); then, in subsequent appearances, as *Mr Gandhi*, *Gandhi Sir*, until it all culminates in the court scene which shows the judge, along with all others there in the room, rising in orchestrated deference, as it were, when the great man steps in—uprightly, unperturbed. The Kathak number, to which I now turn, formed the afternoon session of a seminar at Kathak Kendra (in New Delhi) many years ago. The artist was the Kathak maestro, Lacchu Maharaj, and the text that he set out to explicate through a variety of postures and gestures began as: काहे रेकत डगर (ओ श्याम). Now, the opening gestures, used as vehicles of expression, were all quite ordinary, such as the *curvilinear* wave of a gently projected arm to serve as the index of a *winding* way, or the incurving jerk of some protruded fingers, to signify 'why'. But, after a deft, gradual whittling of such visible means of expression, the Maharaj rose to signify 'why' through a gentle upward jerk of the eyebrows, frowning the forehead visibly, if slightly; and the way—डगर, which is to be *traversed*—through a quick, little left-right *rolling* of the eyeballs.

In the end, I may clear a doubt which is likely to linger in the reader's mind in spite of all that I have said about my memorable experiences as a listener. Am I justified in pressing the real-apparent or actual-virtual distinction in respect of music? My ready answer is: the distinction is implicit in the way we talk about the very basics of music. Consider, for instance, the way in which the individual *svara* has been taken traditionally. It has been defined as that which shines or reigns over our minds wholly by itself: *svameva rājate*. At first sight it surely seems fair to say so. If one's voice is good and a single *svara* is intoned tunelessly, it will surely *appear* to be beautiful in itself. But this mere appearance is not reality at all; for howsoever good be a singer's voice, a note cannot appear beautiful unless it is placed at the right intervallic distance from its melodic neighbours on either side. In other words, it is not *actually* beautiful *entirely by itself*. Its *existence* is relational; only its *aesthetic look* is independent. So the actual-virtual or real-apparent distinction truly holds here. Analytic thinking, on which philosophical aesthetics is so emphatic today, need not be out of bounds to our own music, rhythm, and dance.

NOTES

1. This essay is modified and enlarged version of the talk that I have on 16.11.07 as a participant in the Keshav Smriti Adhyaya 2007, organized jointly by Sangeet Natak Akademi and Kaladharmi (New Delhi, Nov. 16-18, 2007). I must thank Mrs. Rita Kothari for inviting me to speak on this occasion.
2. As we know, the other widely acknowledged meaning of *culture* is: 'the customs, ideas, values etc., of a particular civilization, society, or social group, especially at a particular time'.
3. *Laya* may be translated as *aesthetic pace*, that is, pace as regulated with a view to produce effects of even flow, steadfastness, or variform but designed passage generally.
4. The particular semblance has been found to distinguish some works of the famous French sculptor Auguste Rodin, noted for his portrayal of the human form. His works include *The Kiss* (1886). *The Thinker* (1905)
5. I say so because, to the best of my knowledge, my book: *Swinging Syllables: Aesthetics of Kathak Dance* (Sangeet Natak Akademi, 1991; Reprinted in 2006) is the only book so far on any Indian classical dance written in the way of contemporary philosophical aesthetics.
6. I may add, at this point, that according to such a great vocalist of yesteryear as Ustad Alladia Khan Saheb, 'only that music is *saccha gana* (true singing) which moves the listeners to tears'. S.K. Haldankar: *Aesthetics of Agra and Jaipur Traditions*, Popular Prakashan, 2001, p.69.
7. This indeed is the view of quite a few philosophers of art from Kant to Jerome Stolnitz.
8. The reference here is to Wordsworth's well-known poem on 'a rainbow'.
9. These lines have been taken from Wordsworth's poem, *Lines composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey*, lines 95-104.
10. Here I refer to Matthew Arnold's poem, *Dover Beach*. The words here cited occur as follows:

... the grating roar
 Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling
 At their return, up the high strand,
 Begin, and cease, ...
 With *tremulous cadence slow*, and bring
 (9) (7) (4)
 The eternal not of sadness in ...