



Sufi Volume 2 The Mysticism of Sound and Music

8. The Ancient Music

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When one looks at this subject from the Eastern point of view one finds that the Eastern idea of music originated from intuition. But the tradition of any art, or even of science, will tell the same thing. It is only later on that man begins to believe in the outer things and forgets the origin, which is intuition.

Music, according to the ancient people, was not a mechanical science or art: music was the first language. The proof of this can be found even now in the language of the animals and birds, who express their emotions and passions to one another without words, only in sounds. It is the combination of the different sounds of animals and birds which also has an effect upon the numberless multitudes of the lower creation. If music was the first expressive thing in the lower creation, so it was also in the human kind. And since it was the first expression of the emotions and passions of the heart, it is also the last expression of the emotions and passions; for what art cannot express, poetry explains, and what poetry cannot express is expressed by music. To a thinker, therefore, music in all ages will stand on the highest pedestal for the expression of what is deepest in oneself.

When the ancient music is compared with the modern, one will no doubt find that there is too vast a gulf between them. If there is anything which gives one some little idea of the music of the human race, it is Eastern music, which still has traces of ancient music in it. Had it been preserved in the East only as music, it would perhaps not have been kept intact as it has been. But it was kept as a part of the religion, and that is the reason why it has been continued through the tradition for thousands of years.

One might ask: How can the music of ancient times be kept pure, as there is always a tendency in human nature to alter things? It was always difficult for the human race to change religion; anything else might be changed, but there was one thing that was always kept, and that was religion. In the religion of the Hindus one aspect was music; it was called Sama Veda. In the Western world there came a time when translations were made of the Vedas, but there is a part of them of which the translation is not to be found: it is of that

Veda. The reason is that, being musical, this Sama Veda could not well be regarded as being language.

From a study of the music of the Hindus one can trace back in the traditions that thousands of years ago there was a time when musicians knew as fine a distance between tones as quarter tones. It was not only the degree of the sound that was considered in that way, but also the nature and character of the sound was analyzed, just as in chemistry. We can find today in ancient traditions the different effects attached to the different notes, whether dryness or liquidity, whether cold or heat. No doubt it is difficult today to distinguish the sounds which express these different effects, because the distinguishing is now done from the instruments, and in those times it was done only from nature. Yet it is most interesting to know that we find today in Sanskrit scriptures the different pitch of sound distinguished in ancient times. In the absence of a piano or of a tuning fork the musicians had to determine the pitch by the sound of different animals and birds.

One might ask in what way the art developed among the ancient people, reference of which is to be found even now in the East. The idea was that they attached different themes of music to different seasons, and different strains of music to different times of the day and night. And as there is nothing in the world which is without reason, that also was not only an imagination or a fancy: there was a reason behind it, a logical reason for attributing certain melodies to certain times. Had it been a poetic fancy, it would have lasted for a short period, and would have influenced a little circle only. But it has lasted for ages, until now, and has influenced the whole country of India. It is a usage which was carried on for thousands of years, and today one finds in the East or the West, the North or the South, that the same Raga is sung in the same times. When sung out of these times, then it is not appealing.

When we look at it from the metaphysical point of view, we shall find that the realization and knowledge that science has today - and will ever have - that vibration is at the root of the whole creation, was a certainty to the ancient people; it was the basis of their whole science. They knew that that which has created, and which is holding, and in which is held the whole manifestation and the whole cosmos, is one power, and that is vibration. It is because of this that astrological science, which had much to do with the way human beings and different countries were influenced, also arose out of that science of vibration. Thus music, as a science, was known by them to have a great deal to do with the influence of the planets. And the continual moving and working of the planets, and their action upon the earth, were the basis of the Ragas on which their music was founded.

In the Sanskrit tradition of ancient times there were verses to be found having relation to certain planets. The musicians therefore made their programma according to the influence of

the planets of the cosmos, and that programma was carried out throughout the whole year. One might think that the influence of the planets is too vague to perceive, and that one could not make a programma upon it, but in all periods the whole of humanity has arranged its life according to the planetary influences just the same.

In order to keep their music akin to nature, it was necessary to give liberty to the singer and player to sing and play as he wished. Naturally, uniformity was lacking, and a standardized system could not be made. That is why this music a ways remained an individualistic art only - not an education. For this reason the music of the ancient people had its advantages and a great many disadvantages. The advantages were this: a musician - a singer or player - was never bound to sing in a particular way in order to execute properly the music he wanted to play before the public, but was always free to give the music according to his inspiration at the time. It gave him full liberty to express his emotions, his passions, without any outward restrictions which he should obey. When there were a number of singers or players, no doubt it was then necessary to set a certain standard - yet that standard did not restrict them very much. It is this order which was called music.

The word music, or sangita in Sanskrit, has three aspects. One aspect is language, the other aspect is playing, and the third aspect is movement. Hindus have never separated the science of movement or dance from music; they have always combined the three aspects of what they called music. As the music of the Eastern people developed, each of these three aspects developed also. For instance, the way of singing of the more refined people was quite different from the way the peasants sang. The song of the temple was altogether different from the song of the stage. These differences were great. Not only were there particular rules and regulations to be followed, or more mechanical differences, but there was a natural difference.

The most important or valuable thing that the music of the ancient people produced, and which greatly benefited humanity, was that they distinguished the different aspects of music, and thereby came to realize that there was a certain way of expressing the tone and rhythm which brought about a greater emotion, or an inclination towards action. Together with it they found out that there was a certain use of time and rhythm which brought about a greater equilibrium, and a greater poise. This science, developing after many years of practice, formed in itself a special psychological science or art called yoga, and the special name for this science was mantrayoga.

The meaning of the word yoga is unity or connection, and mantrayoga means the sacred union between the outer life and the deeper life. For the Yogis found out that there are psychological indications: one of the tendencies of the breath is to go outward, the other

inclination is to go inward. These two tendencies are to be found in nature also: in the ebb and the flow, in the sunset and sunrise. One sees this difference in oneself: the vibrations of one's own body and action are very different in the morning and in "the evening. The Yogis therefore regulated the rhythm of the circulation, of the heart and of every action of the breath, with the help of vibration, of music, of both tone and rhythm. This brought them from the audible vibrations to the inward vibrations, which means: from sound to breath, which in the language of the Hindus are one and the same. It is sura which is a name for sound and for breath. The one blends into the other, because it is the same thing in the end. It is the breath of an object which may be called a sound, and it is the audibility of the breath which may be called voice. Therefore breath and voice are not two things. Even breath and sound are not two things, if one can understand that both have the same basis.

Is there an explanation of why man rejoices, or why he is impressed by the music played to him? Is it only an amusement, or a pastime? No, there is something else besides it. The principal reason is that in man there is a perpetual rhythm going on, which is the sign of life in him, a rhythm which is expressed in his pulsation and in his heart-beats, even in his heart. Upon this rhythm depends his health - not only his health, but his moods. Therefore, anywhere, a continued rhythm must have an effect upon every person, and upon every person its effect is distinct and different.

It is amusing and interesting to know that when the jazzband came into existence everyone said to his friends: "Something crazy has come into society." Yet one has not resisted it! It has come more and more into fashion and, however much a person hates it and is prejudiced against its name, he at least likes to stand and listen to it for five minutes. What is the reason? The reason is that, in whatever form the rhythm is emphasized upon the body and the mind of man, it has a psychological effect.

It is said of a very great Persian poet, who was also a mystic, that when he got into a certain mood he used to make circles around a pillar that stood in the middle of his house. He then began to speak. People would write down what he said, and it would be perfect poetry. And what is most amusing is that I have known of a lawyer who, when pleading at the bar and being unable to find an argument, would turn himself around. After that he would find the right argument.

But in order to find a mystery we need not go to such cases. A person who cannot find an idea beats or taps with his fingers on the table, and the idea comes. Many who cannot get hold of their thoughts, begin to walk about the room. When they have made two or three turns, their thoughts become clear. If this is true, we come to the realization that the human body is a kind of mechanism which must go on regularly. If it is stopped in some way, there

is something stopped in the body or in the mind. This brings us to understand that upon the rhythm the mood, health and condition of man's mind depend - not only upon the rhythm which he gets from music, but also upon the rhythm of his own breath.

This rhythm has also a great deal to do with the rhythm of man's life. There are certain kinds of sound which irritate man and have a bad effect upon the nerves, and there are other kinds of rhythm which have a soothing, healing and comforting effect upon the mind. Music is sound and rhythm, and when sound and rhythm are understood in their nature and character, then music is not only something used as a pastime, but then music will become a source of healing and upliftment.

The Sufis of ancient times, the great mystics, used to develop this art in order to bring about poise in life after their everyday activity. They called this art sama, and sama has been the most sacred thing for the Sufis; it has been a meditation for them. They meditated by the help of music, by having a certain music played which had a certain effect upon the development of the individual. The great poets, such as Rumi of Persia, used to have music for their meditation, and by the help of music they used to repose and to control the activity of their body and mind.

We see today that there is a greater and greater tendency to nervousness. It is caused by too much activity in life. Life is becoming more and more artificial every day, and with each step forward man is missing that repose which has been as yeast to the human race. Therefore for the betterment and education of humanity today the art of repose, which seems to be lost, greatly needs to be found.

Many people in the Western world, who have read about the traditions of the ancient people, have often thought that there was an art that seemed to have been lost, and that they should go to the East in order to find it. So as to make it easy for those who are in search of that art and science which are most necessary in the evolution of mankind, the Sufi Movement has made a facility for those who wish to study and practice it, to do so here, instead of going so far to the East for it.