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## THE "GRACES" OF INDIAN MUSIC

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"A melody devoid of embellishments is like a moonless night, a river without water, a creeper without flowers, or a woman without a *sāri*."—RĀGAVIBODHA.

IN the dim recesses of the Ajanta caves there is music painted—dark melodies that sound with tuneful notes for a short while as the sun sets. The Buddhist artist-monks understood that ephemeral beauty should not be gazed on, but glanced at: a tint in mural decoration, like an ornament in music, should glow for an instant in full loveliness, then melt into its neighbour. Such is the movement of art, and of nature itself: a blending of one ornament with another.

We, who watch and dream, see each blue-stone cave of Ajanta's hill, a crevice in a crescent moon, yield its shining secret. One by one the figures of the elusive frescoes emerge, warmed into life by the reflected rays of the descending sun. The twilight falls, and all is sunk in silence and darkness until the new rising. We wake, speechless, yet aware.

An ornament in Indian music is as mysterious and ineffable as the merging tints of Ajanta's frescoes. It radiates happiness for a moment, and then vanishes, leaving us uncertain of what tones it passed through, of the scientific divisions and vibrations that gave it physical life. We are content if we have caught its fleeting spirit of delight, and may retain in our hearts its musical significance.

Let an Indian speak :

"The *gamaḱā* ('graces' or ornamentation) has come to occupy a vital place in our system of music. It is not simply a device to make melodic music tolerable, and it is not its function merely to beautify music. It determines the character of each *rāga* ('melody type'), and it is essential to note that the same variety of *gamaḱā* appears with different intensity in different *rāgas*. The function of the same *gamaḱā* in different *rāgas* varies subtly and establishes all the fine distinctions between kindred melodies by an insistence, which is delicate but withal emphatic, on the individuality of their constituent notes. The *gamaḱā* makes possible the employment of all the niceties in variation of the pitch of the notes used and is therefore of fundamental importance to our music. If the personality of any *rāga* is to be understood it cannot be without appraising the values of the *gamaḱās* which constitute it."\*

The instinct to embellish a melody is as universal as music itself, yet nowhere is it so pronounced as in the non-harmonic music of the East. Melodic decoration is natural and necessary to all systems that employ no polyphony. The delicate brush-work of the Indian *gamaḱās* ("grace notes") limns the light and shade of a picture in sound, just as the consonance and dissonance of harmony do in Western composition.

Indian music (both the Hindustani style of the North, and the Carnatic of the South), elusive as it is of exact analysis, may be said to consist of melody, drone, and percussive (usually drummed) counterpoint. Its melodies are built of single note progressions that are necessarily significant for their own sakes. While we of the West seldom contemplate melody without attaching harmonic implications to it, the Indian musician supplies not harmony, but *gamaḱā*. For him, the passage from one note to the next becomes an adventure in subtle *portamento* glidings and vacillating variants in microtonality.

Instrumental *gamaḱās* vary from a kind of wail, produced by deflecting the wire of a *veena*, for instance, to elaborate fingered phrases that would require an aural microscope in order for our uncultured Western ear to grasp them in detail. The seventeenth-century *Rāgavibodha*, by the Carnatic musicologist Somanātha, gives examples of fifty "graces," but three times as many more baffle notation, Eastern or Western. Advanced *gamaḱās* must be heard to be believed.

It would be roughly true to say that the technical quality of an Indian instrumentalist or singer is judged by the ability to decorate the bare bones of melody. This goes deeper and further than our European pre-nineteenth-century tradition of embellishment, a convention that survived from Plainsong to Mozart. The Indian performer is frequently expected to develop the composer's original matter with improvised additions, and usually with a prelude, *ālāpa*, in the *Rāg* or *Rāgini*† of the piece. Thus,

\* *The Rāgas of Carnatic Music*, by N. S. Ramachandran. (University of Madras Press, 1938.) The translations in parentheses are the present writer's.

† See my "The Philosophy and Modes of Hindu Music," which appeared in *The Asiatic Review*, April issue, 1941.

the function of the composer is rendered less autocratic than with us: his ideas are elaborated and expanded by the performer in a most democratic manner. Unless he is himself an executant, he has little chance of creating a tradition of finished performance for posterity; and, even so, time is apt to play tricks with mortal memories.

In Indian art, ornaments are as important as "realities" (we use the word in the narrow Western sense). At Sanchi's Great Stupa, the elephants bathing the Mother of Buddha, the winged lions, the fantastic *coiffures* of the women, the borders of symbolical flowers—in fact, all the sculptured animal, half-human, and floral decorative motives—are inseparable from the main theme. It is almost impossible to tell where ornament ends and "reality" begins. So, with Indian music, the "graces" and melodies are coalescent. Many talented Hindustani musicians cannot play a simple scale without embellishing it. Fox Strangways goes so far as to say that, in India, there is no such thing as the tune of a song; there is merely a way of singing it.\* This is true, of course, in the spirit rather than the letter. The music of India offers us longer and lovelier melodies than, perhaps, any other music in the world.

*Gamaḳās* are as integral a part of Indian melodic expression as the lips are to the face. Without them a melody cannot smile. Ornaments are never imposed upon a tune; they grow there as the spontaneous expression of emotion, an indication of spiritual emphasis. Fox Strangways rightly insists that

"There is never the least suggestion of anything having been 'added' to the note which is graced. The note with its grace makes one utterance."†

We have already seen that *gamaḳās* are not ornaments in the superficial sense, mere survivals of elegant days, trite "baroque" conventions. It remains for us to sum up their function: we could not do it better than in the illuminating words of Bhagavan Das:

"The sole business of an ornament is to put a circle round a special feature; thus to direct attention to it and intensify the consciousness thereof, and thereby define and intensify the special beauty of that feature—for, enhancement of beauty here is literally nothing else than enhancement of the consciousness of that beauty."

The gliding *gamaḳā* is a source of irritation to many Westerners who listen to Indian music. This is partly because the stress is put on the beginning instead of the end of a *glissando*, and it therefore strikes the uninitiated ear as being topsy-turvy. Aversion is aggravated by the frequent recurrence of the device. Furthermore, some of us consider it a hindrance to grasping the melody harmonically—something that we should not, of course, be attempting to do. The *portamento*, or slide, is a vulgarity in Western music largely because it is foreign to the harmonic system. In Indian music there cannot be too much of this "substitute" for harmony.

Western listeners sometimes have difficulty in distinguishing a good

\* Essay on music in *The Legacy of India*. (O.U.P., 1937.)

† *The Music of Hindustan*. (O.U.P., 1914.)

Indian singer from a bad one. All too often the charlatan is at first enjoyed better than the accomplished artist, simply because he does not attempt complicated *gamaḳās*. It is worth mentioning in this connection that voice production is not considered so important a part of an Indian singer's technique as musicianship. The great artist may have inferior vocal quality of tone to a second-rate one.

Indian *gamaḳās* are closely related to the *zawā'id* ("glosses") of the Arabs. The reader will doubtless recall the frequent references to the "trillings" and "modulations" of the singing-girls in *The Arabian Nights*. Arabia and India have long been lovers of the art of "gracing." The Muslim and Hindu musical cultures have mingled for nearly a thousand years. Ja'far observes in his *History of the Mughal Empire*:

"Indian music, like other fine arts, proved a new channel of intercourse between the Hindus and Muslims. The process of co-operation and intermutation was not a new thing in the time of Akbar. It had begun centuries before. In the domain of music it became distinctly perceptible how the two communities were borrowing from each other the precious share they possessed in this art, and thereby enriching each other."

Dr. H. G. Farmer\* has argued that the Arabian *zawā'id* provided the medieval Christian Church with its early conception of harmony and counterpoint, the *organum* and *descant*. This interesting theory was supported by George Underwood:

"The (Arabian) 'gloss' itself which converts the melodic outline, or pattern, into an arabesque of sound by surrounding it with a delicate festooning of grace notes and roulades, is, when two or more instruments are playing, a primitive counterpoint; and when it is admitted that, at times, some of the instruments sustain a note, and the drums, tuned to different notes, enforce the rhythm, I do not see how it can be denied that we have here the beginning of the harmonic system."†

While not wishing to debate the question, it must be observed that, supposing the above contention to be true, no harmonic implications were intended by the Arabs, and still less by the Indians and Persians, from whom the Arabs in pre-Islamic times largely derived their music. It must be added, however, that undoubtedly modern Western composers have received harmonic inspiration from listening to Oriental airs and "graces." The sympathetic European musician, who knows that it is "unIndian" to supply harmonies, often cannot avoid doing so mentally. In the mind of a genius such nebulous impromptus may take the form of highly original harmonic invention.

It is well known that Spanish composers have inherited arabesques from the Moors, and that the French Impressionist school received stimulus from the exotic embellishments of the Far East. There is every reason to believe

\* See his paper, "Arabian Influence on Musical Theory" (*R.A.S.J.*, Part I, 1925); and his book, *Historical Facts for the Arabian Musical Influence*. (Reeves, London, 1930.)

† Review in *Freethinker* (February 6, 1916).

that modern Western composers will obtain deeper and more permanent benefits from Indian *gamakās*. Some of our contemporary veterans have already taken the lead. A distinguished Indian critic, who visited Sibelius, discovered in the Finnish composer an enthusiastic student of Hindustani and Carnatic music; that fact was already evident in the melodic pattern and modal structure of Sibelius's works. The late Albert Roussel, a sensitive French pioneer, was inspired by the music he heard during his travels in the Orient; several compositions, notably the three *Évocations* and the opera-ballet *Padmāvati*, were a direct result of Indian influence.

We might mention, too, the British composer, Gustav Holst, who in his "Sanskrit" period produced the operas *Sita* and *Savitri* (based on the Hindu *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* respectively), *Hymns from the Rig-Veda*, and *Two Eastern Pictures* (settings of the Indian poet Kalidasa). His experiments with original Arabian melodies in *Beni Mora* Suite are, perhaps, the most successful excursion yet made by a Western composer into Oriental music. The final movement, *In the Street of the Öüled Nails*, translates the sinuous *zawā'id* "graces" into terms of Occidental instruments in a remarkable manner. Here, one feels, Holst has established a real point of contact between Eastern and Western musical art.

How far such contacts can be sustained depends largely on the attitude of the artists concerned. A friendly relationship between the best European and Indian composers might yield ripe and abundant fruit; with a little encouragement from official cultivators—All India Radio, for instance—the resultant harvest might be rich and extensive beyond British or Indian dreams. E. Clements has said well that "the music of Europe and the music of India belong to the same family . . . each has something to gain from the other."\*

Let artists set an example to this divided Aryan family. The Western musician may regard the Indian with respect as his elder brother. Indian classical music was a flourishing concern of glorious *gamakā* long before our comparatively young European ideas of harmony came to mind. The Dravidians, who possessed a high degree of culture prior to the Aryan invasion of India, also contributed a great deal to the musical art. Today, their Carnatic music is flourishing and growing as much as any music anywhere. After a recent tour of the South, A. S. Bokhari, Controller of Broadcasting in India, made the following corroborative statement:

"I have been particularly impressed with the high and pure tradition of music that is so widely respected and understood in this part of the country. One cannot but admire the spirit of high seriousness that informs both practice and appreciation of the art."†

The "graces" of Indian music have been a book of uncut pages for too many of us in the West for too long. Let us open those pages and reveal their lovely secret to this modern world of ours that needs spiritual beauty, that seeks its unborn soul. There is much that we may learn of aesthetic truth from the wise old East, and the new.

\* *The Rāgas of Tanjore* (Gayan Samaj, Dharwar, 1920).

† Article, "Art and Culture of the South" (*The Indian Listener*, Vol. VI, No. 10, May 7, 1941).