

ESSENTIALS OF HINDUSTANI MUSIC

My purpose in this article is to bring out the basic features of Hindustani music—the music¹ of North India. Karnatik music, or the music of the South, is different. Fortunately, however, some basic concepts are common to both the styles. More important of these are: *alāpa*, *rāga*, *tāla*.² So, a treatment of Hindustani music is not to be regarded as throwing no light on the Karnatik style. The bases of my attempt are provided essentially by my own experiences as a listener. But I have also drawn upon established musicology; and, what is equally important, upon the aesthetic insight revealed by our master musicians in intimate conversation.

In their conception of the ultimate aim of music, the two systems of Indian music agree entirely. Traditional Indian aesthetics conceives of every art as a pathway to the Ultimate. Music is no exception to this. Only its approach is specific—the

¹ The technical Indian word for music is *Sangita*, which originally included dancing and drama as well.

² *Tāla* is rhythm. *Alāpa* is a style of performing. *Rāga* or melody-type is a basic concept pertaining to the euphonic aspect of Hindustani (and Karnatik) music. These terms are explained later in the essay.

disciplined cultivation of sound. The Absolute as sound is *Nād Brahma*.³ It is admittedly difficult to bring out in detail the theoretical possibility of realizing the Ultimate in this way. Yet the idea cannot be dismissed summarily. Tradition has it that both Swami Haridas in the North and Saint Tyāgrāja in the South attained salvation through the worship of *Nād Brahma*. Their compositions, frankly devotional in character, are revered all over the country even today. I know of a *dhrupad*⁴ song which describes the way in which the vital breath can, through singing, be made to pass gradually through the six psychic centres, the passage through the uppermost of these securing the individual's liberation.⁵

This idea as to the ultimate aim of music appears less unintelligible when we reflect, as I propose to do presently, that it serves as the basis of quite a few important concepts and stylistic features of Hindustani classical music. Devotional and contemplative effects are even today regarded as the hallmark of great art by the more serious and trained among our music-lovers, though the average listener's temper is often unresponsive to them. Now one important way in which the effect of pensiveness can be produced is by slowly bringing out the diversity hidden within a limited orbit of apparently undifferentiated sound. This explains the importance that is attached to the use of *srutis*⁶ or microtones in Indian music. An allied device, which serves the same purpose, is the leisurely and reverent gliding of voice across two closely adjacent *svaras* in such a continuous—and, of course, tuneful—way that the sug-

³ *Brahma* stands for the Absolute. *Nād* means sound, heard and unheard or *āhata* and *anāhata*. Sound becomes manifest in the human body. This perhaps explains why in *Sangit Ratnakar*, which is a classical work on music, the human body too is described. Vide *Sangit Ratnakar*, English Translation by Dr. C. Kunhan Raja, The Adyar Library, 1945. Vol. I, Chapter 1, p. 10.

⁴ *Dhrupad* is a distinct style of singing.

⁵ I owe this bit of knowledge to Ustad Rahimuddin Khan Dagur. The song referred to here is a *dhrupad* describing the way to success in Yoga, the concept of six psychic centres being central to this system of psycho-ethical discipline.

⁶ A *sruti* is an interval smaller than the semi-tone, not necessarily an equal division of the latter.

gestion of their being separate of individual is wholly transcended.⁷

Again, if music is conducive to God-realization is should (at least) serve to steady the mind. This at once gives us a clue to the Indian conception of *svara*⁸ or the musical note as the beautiful-in-itself⁹ (*Svayameva rajate*). That is, according to the Indian point of view, the ideal rendering of a note is that which makes the latter appear winsome without a support. Most of the living Hindustani musicians, it is true, ignore this generally. They have neither the patience nor the required imaginative vitality to bring out the intrinsic charm of the single note; and in their music it is only as woven into the setting provided by other notes that an individual *svara* appears beautiful. This, however, only shows that our practice has moved away from the ideal. It does nothing to detract from the practicability of the latter; for, even today there are some singers who seem to pour out their all into the articulation of one single note, and make it appear veritably self-dependant in its charm.

This, when actually achieved, is a very satisfying effect. I cannot imagine any other way in which, *independently of language*, the effect of spirituality could be worked up in music. It appears that here, as in life, spirituality consists in abstention from mere ornament. This perhaps explains why some compositions of our saint-musicians of the past ask us explicitly to keep the *svara* "naked".¹⁰

⁷ This explains the distinctive charm of two *madhyams* (F and F sharp) in *rāgas kedar* and *lalit* and of two *nishāds* (B and B flat) in *rāga miān ki malhar*.

⁸ A *svara* is one of the seven notes of the gamut.

⁹ This one definition should be allowed to qualify the impression that Hindustani musicians are indifferent to the quality of tone. Most of them, admittedly, are *in practice* deficient in this respect. But they all accept the *principle of shuddha akāra*, which means "quality of tone production." And our most popular classical singer today, Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, is admired throughout the country for the "pulpy luminosity" and the delightfully even texture of his tone.

¹⁰ Or *digambar*; that is, having nothing between its being and the four sides. This, however, does not mean that the note is to be stripped of all charm. All beautification is not ornamentation from outside, and the Indian *ideal* is (also) to present the note as beautiful from within. But this is a point which can be understood only in the context of actual musical performing.

But can any note be actually independent of its setting? It appears difficult to say "Yes." Grammatically, the correctness of a note depends on the propriety of its euphonic distance or "interval" from adjacent notes. Even outside the scale a sound cannot be said to be beautiful wholly in itself. The note in the midst of other continuing sounds will appear differently sweet (if at all) from the one which just punctuates enveloping silence and is then no more. The *svara* is not really beautiful *in itself* unless it has become the symbol of the All. There is then no setting to, because nothing other than, the *svara*, and the charm of the latter appears truly self-dependent. We may today find it impossible to accept this suggestion. But the fact remains that Swami Haridas, the patron-saint of Hindustani music, is said to have been remarkably capable of losing himself in the unwavering contemplation (*Samādhi*) of one single *svara*, treating it as such a pregnant symbol of his subjective attitudes that it appeared to him the quintessence of both existence and value.

The theoretical question here involved is obviously the formation of symbols in musical imagination. On this difficult point I propose to say something later in the essay. Here I would only insist that what has been called "indwelling" is, as it were, visibly possible in the rendering of a single note. The vocalist, in such cases, appears unfolding the beauty of the *svara* from within it, and the net effect worked up is that of contemplation in the midst of creativity. The possibility of this aesthetic device is not only borne out by the actual performing of some of our living masters, but can perhaps be *argued*. The tuneful rendering of a note can be done in a broad, full-throated way. Or, a thin voice may, as it were, pierce the very core of the *svara* equally tunefully. In point of effect, it would be a case of grandeur contrasting with quintessential fineness. This clearly suggests that a *svara* has some extent, and is not a mere point. But, if that is so, surely it can be unfolded from within.

The conception of *svara* as the beautiful in itself gives us a clue to many important features of Hindustani music. First, if the note is to appear beautiful in itself it is obvious that it should not be swamped in the simultaneous playing of other notes, howsoever concordant. That is probably why in Hin-

dustani music we have little use of harmony.¹¹ Yet, it would be wrong to say that there is no harmony at all in Hindustani music. The *tānpūrā*¹² provides a continuous sounding of some of the important notes of the *rāga* as the musician goes on performing. Moreover, the drum is attuned carefully with the tonic of the main performer, and this sound, as the drum is played, repeatedly occurs *along with* the other notes of the octave as the main performer traverses them.

Secondly, if the emphasis of the mind is on unfolding the beauty hidden within the same individual note, the artist's growth in respect to intellectual penetration seems possible right in the midst of aesthetic creativity. The orthodox Hindustani musician may not be able to say it in so many words, but he certainly has this faith that the lesser the orbit of the object of attention, the greater is the necessity, or possibility, of intellectual penetration. While singing all alone, or to a coterie of trained listeners, our best vocalists even today take delight in trying to perceive ever newer charm¹³ within what is commonly regarded as one simple note, and the attempt not only transports, but humbles and chastens them. It is important to note that such concepts as "contemplation" and "meditation" are to be found not only in the ethico-religious thought of the Hindus, but in their musicology even as (imperfectly) expressed in the free conversation of their orthodox musicians. I may also mention in passing that such eminent Hindustani musicians of the past as Tānsen have confessed to it in their compositions that the span of one human life is hardly enough even for the mastery of one or two individual notes. This Indian emphasis on the individual note is often missed by western writers on the

¹¹ Some scholars insist that in ancient India we had a free use of harmony. But the characteristic feature of Indian music today is clearly melody or monody, rather than harmony or polyphony.

¹² It is a musical instrument which is used in every performance of classical music to provide a kind of drone built upon some important notes of the *rāga* or mode. Generally, three of its strings are attuned with the tonic, and the fourth one with "sol," so that when the singer articulates "mi," we hear do-mi-sol, the common major chord.

¹³ The orthodox Indian ideal is to perceive infinity within one note.

subject. Here, in India, the listeners often keep on waiting to see if the performer renders a *particular note* in a tune (or *rāga*) correctly. The *gandhār* of *rāga darbāri*¹⁴ is one such note. The slight “swinging” with which it is commonly rendered invests it with a distinctive charm. The beauty of this note nestles in tentativeness; it now weakens, now blooms—a delightful, euphonic transcript of suspense itself. The *alāpiyā*¹⁵ of the orthodox variety may not at all change the position of the *svara*, but only fade its tint, or weaken its pulse; in which case the note does not move, and yet suggests oscillation, even like a prospect which both is and is yet to be.

Thirdly, if the note is to be regarded as something which is beautiful in itself, it is obvious that the greatest amount of attention is to be paid to the rendering of the single *svara*. Whether the note is to be thrust full-blown into the consciousness of the listener or whispered gently into an interval of silence; whether it is rendered long enough to be satisfying or cut out in the mid, leaving our aesthetic sensitivity “half-fed,” as the orthodox *Ustads*¹⁶ say; again, whether it is to be presented clearly as isolated, or merely suggested, *not marked*, as the stilling of a luminous flow; and what particular suggestiveness—ideal, emotive or pictorial—the note is to be invested with,—all this receives thoughtful recognition at the hands of the orthodox Hindustani singer even today. This should become clear as we later turn to examine the nature and function of *alāpa* as a distinct form of musical performing.

But one observation, applicable essentially to *alāpa*, may here not be withheld. Whether the note is winsome or not, and what exact shade of aesthetic suggestiveness it possesses, all this depends also upon the duration of time for which it is played. Always the element of time enters into a musical note, contributing vitally to its net effect. A simple example will here serve. If we render a particular note for a mere instant and then immediately pass on *without a break* or jerk to the adjacent

¹⁴ Grammatically, the E is *atikomal*, that is, a microtonal double flat, one *sruti* lower than *komal* or flat.

¹⁵ *Alāpiyā* means an exponent of the *alāpa* style of singing.

¹⁶ An *Ustad* is a Muslim master musician of the orthodox variety.

note, the aesthetic effect would be one of continuity *which is straight*, but if the transition from the first to the second note is accomplished in a *leisurely*, continuous manner, the (pictorial) effect¹⁷ worked up would be one of not mere continuity, but of an *elastic* continuity which dives gracefully down before rising up to touch the second *svara*.

We often forget this while trying to understand the concept of *rāga*, so basic to Indian music. Every *rāga* has a *vādi* or dominant note. The other notes contribute visibly to the beauty of this *svara*. The aesthetic centrality of this *svara* also requires that, like the other notes, it is rendered tunefully and—may be, unlike them—rendered steadily, that is, *long enough* to be effective. The truth that the element of time enters into the concepts pertaining even to the euphonic aspect or Hindustani music is often ignored, though it is common knowledge that here even a slightly exaggerated tarrying of voice onto a particular *svara* can mean a clear outrage upon the grammatical character of the *rāga* being rendered.

The concept of *rāga* is to be carefully understood. First, singing a *rāga* is generally very different from traversing its notes in the simple ascent-descent manner. The *svara* are to be rendered in a particular way, different from their given manner of existence in the scale.¹⁸ The same notes may not be used in both ascent and descent; and they may be used in different sequences. Again, specific formal graces may be employed in treating some of the *svaras*. *Rāgas* generally employ intervals subtler than whole-steps and half-steps.¹⁹ Secondly, a *rāga* is a type. Like a concept, it subsumes many particulars, but is not

¹⁷ It is certainly true that for the classical Hindustani musician "the passage from one note to the next becomes an adventure in subtle portamento, gliding and vacillating variants in microtonality." (H. A. Popley, *The Music of India*, The Heritage of India Press, 1950, p. 87.)

It is, however, not only such transitions, but the tuneful and suggestive renderings of individual notes that constitute the test of a Hindustani singer's skill.

¹⁸ The Hindustani scale, in its sol-fa initials, is as follows: Sa, re, ga, ma, pa, dha, ni, sa. In its standard (or pure) form, it is the European Major scale.

¹⁹ In the common European scale, we may note, we have whole steps between do-re and re-mi, but there is a half-step between mi and fa, all other steps being whole, except for si-do.

exhausted by them. Different musicians may sing the same *rāga* in the same session of music; and yet no individual exposition may appear a mere imitation of the others. Grammatically, of course, they will conform to the same pattern (of the *rāga*), but their aesthetic effectiveness could vary profoundly. Thirdly, every *rāga* is supposed to have a specific emotive content, and to suit a specific hour or season. The general principle is that a grave or plaintive *rāga* is to be sung in *vilambit laya* or *adagio* and a sportive *rāga* in *drut* or *allegro*.²⁰ Above all, every *rāga* has a distinct individuality—grammatical and aesthetical. As already pointed out, it uses specific *svaras*²¹ in a specific way. That is why a trained listener can easily mark it off from another *rāga*. Its *vādi* note (or the sonant) also helps us in identifying a *rāga*.²² Other notes in the latter are *Samvādis*²³ (or consonant), and aesthetically consistent with the sonant in different degrees. The specificity of a *rāga's* character serves as a criterion with which its exposition by a particular artist is to be judged. This is the theoretical usefulness of the *rāga*-concept in the field of aesthetic creativity and evaluation.

The essential beauty of the *svara*, demanded by its very definition, is of course not to be left out of our understanding of a *rāga*. The latter only reinforces the charm of the individual note with a musical setting provided to every one of them. That is why the *rāga* is generally described as something which charms. It is a synthesis of *svaras* which may appear self-assertive or coy, faded²⁴ or luminous, and which seem to “demand” one another. In the hands of a great master, a *rāga* appears an original complex of some accents of experiencing; and it would not be

²⁰ *Moderato* is called *madhya laya*.

²¹ Rarely less than five in number.

²² A top-class *rāga*-rendering can fill up the very atmosphere, as it were, with the *vādi* note, which may continue to haunt the listener long after he has left the concert hall.

²³ *Svaras* between which there is an interval of nine or thirteen *srutis* are *samvādi* with each other.

²⁴ *Rāgas* which are sad in effect use more flat notes than the relatively joyous ones.

improper if we speak of it as an "euphorganism." Some of the best Hindustani musicians living today are wedded to the view that a *rāga* is a living entity and that it is to be handled with the care and daintiness which a living organism demands.

Normally, a transgression of the grammatical limits of the *rāga* is not permitted. Some great singers, however, occasionally take the delightful liberty of incorporating a (grammatically) dissonant note²⁵ within the rendering of a particular *rāga*, *thereby heightening the total effect perceptibly*. This is naturally possible not in the very beginning of a recital but only when a spell has been worked up after some performing of sustained effectiveness. The theoretic justification here would be something like this. The grammatical structure of a *rāga* is itself based on the fact of aesthetic consistency or *samvāda*. So, effects which are *in fact* distinctly agreeable to the ear may sometimes well be allowed at the expense of the grammatical (or theoretical) structure of the *rāga*. The alien note here does not appear an intruder; rather, it becomes the material of beauty. Acquiescence in a beauteous transcendence of law is a remarkable thing about the devotee of Hindustani music, and he is certainly no mere grammarian. This will be further confirmed by our analysis of the Indian system of rhythm.

On its rhythmic side, the main concepts of our music are *laya*, *tāla*, *mātra*, *bol*, *thekā*, and *Layakāri*. *Laya*, grammatically speaking, is the interval of flow of time between (two) time-beats.²⁶ What it means in the actual practice of Hindustani music is, however, to be carefully thought out. The interval *between* two time-beats is (during a recital) not mathematically measured by the singer. Yet, he must keep the time-gap between any two beats absolutely equal. So *laya* does imply some steadying; only it is ideal, and is done essentially by the musician himself. It is like holding onto the flow of time in comparative independence of a watch, and improvement in respect of this capacity is certainly an exercise in mind's self-dependence. The

²⁵ To be precise, the reference here is to the *vivādi svāra*, that is, a note which though not expressly forbidden, is yet not commonly used in the *rāga*. Such a *svāra* is at an interval of two *srutis* from the *vādi*.

²⁶ *Sangit Ratnakar* cit., p. 9.

trained Hindustani musician can remain indifferent—not opposed—to the normal playing of the drummer for long spells without for a moment losing his subconscious grip over the precise flow of *laya*. And a listener duly saturated with a sense of *laya* is here quick to raise his finger when he perceives an involuntary acceleration or slowing down of *laya* between any two beats in the playing of the drummer.

So far, however, our analysis does not reveal anything very aesthetic about *laya*. Keeping the flow of time even does certainly ensure a kind of regularity, but even a watch does that. Aesthetic creativity demands that we heighten or variegate the effects of beauty *deliberately* as we maintain the evenness of *laya*. This dual end is accomplished by weaving well-designed, and often wayward, patterns across the basic timing-cycle steadily played. Here the effect is distinctly beautiful, because patterns appear flitting across, and variegating a set ground or matrix. And the delight which accrues is, in a way, one of non-indulgence—of remaining self-possessed within the embrace of abandon.

But the most significant superiority of *laya* as imaginatively apprehended and aesthetically regulated over the relative extroversion of *counting* is seen in *ālāpa*, the most respected of all the styles of Hindustani music. Here, there is no drum accompaniment, no counting of beats; and the musician regulates the time taken in articulating one note, or in traversing many notes, solely with an eye on the production of effects. How this is actually achieved will become clear when we pass on to discuss the nature of *ālāpa* as a distinct form of musical performing.

The main meanings of *laya* may now be brought together. First, as the mere flow of time, it means the continuity of “processence.” Secondly, as the flow of time *between* two beats, which alone here brings in diversity, *laya* is flow as yet undifferentiated. Thirdly, in the sense of regulated evenness of time between two beats in musical performing, it implies mind’s active unison with the flow.²⁷ Fourthly, as illustrated by *ālāpa*, *laya* is the flow of time as made subservient to the needs of

²⁷ The first and the third are, in fact, the derivative meanings of the *laya*.

beauty. In the practice of Hindustani music *laya*, therefore, means that the artist identifies himself imaginatively with the flow of musical time, with a view to steady it, or to transmute it into the material of variegated beauty, without leaning onto the recognized diversities (or beats) of the rhythmic cycle. When we pass from *laya* to *tāla*, it is a transition from what is ideally and personally judged as proper to what is mathematically and objectively accurate, from that which is appropriated freely to the artist's aesthetic needs of the moment to something objective, the latter being the timing-cycle with its fixed sub-sections, to which he has to conform his creativity continually and which, though by no means felt as unduly constraining if he is any good, is not primarily self-wrought.

Measurement of *laya* in terms of extent, speed and manner of movement gives us *tāla* or rhythm. *Tāla* is to *laya* what a yard is to distance: the one is a measure of the other. That which makes this measurement possible is the unitary timing-beat or the *mātrā*. The measured and inwardly differentiated cross-section of *laya* or flow of time as played on the drum (or as recited) is the *thekā* or the time-cycle. Some observations with regard to both *mātrā* and *thekā* here appear essential. Suppose a timing-cycle has sixteen beats. Now, to say here that a *mātrā* is 1/16th of the whole is to describe only the grammatical,²⁸ not the entire, significance of the *mātrā* in the timing cycle. As *experienced*, the *mātrā* has a distinct psycho-aesthetic setting, which really gives it the value it has. First, it signifies a distinction which thought everywhere needs. To think of something is at once to hold on to, or to interject, a distinction therein. A *mātrā* is the recognition of this primal affirmation of thought while dealing with a flow. It gives the mind a foothold, as it were, into the being of *laya*. Subjectively, the mind as pecking the flow of *laya* is called *zarab*. Secondly, the *experience* of a *mātrā* is at once one of beauty, of the accents of a flow of *laya*, and not of the mere succession of detached units. A flow that affirms as it slides, and slides over what it

²⁸ Grammatically, a *matra* is a syllabic instant—the shortest time in which a syllable could be properly pronounced. Its approximate equivalent in European music is a half a crotchet.

affirms—this is the basis of our experience of rhythmic charm in Hindustani music, both grammatically and aesthetically. The numberless manifestation of rhythmic charm only shuffle and reshuffle the constituents of this original experience. Discreteness within or against continuity—this is to my mind the very breath of our rhythmic manipulation.

Now, to the structure of a timing cycle. As the ground of all *layakāri*,²⁹ it must have a character of its own. It is, in fact, a structural unity with a distinctive center. It has its quota of *mātrās*, its off-beat which is called the *kbāli*,³⁰ and, of course, its first beat which is called the “sum.” Quite a few subtleties of Hindustani rhythm consist in highlighting, during actual performing, *any one* of these units of the *thekā*.

The first beat or the “sum” receives the greatest emphasis: it is the “stressed” beat. Here, it does not merely come first in the *thekā* but is its focal point. The “sum” is the aesthetically central;³¹ it is a fount of value. It does not merely have a specific location in the timing cycle, *but must appear as determining the beauty of that which encompasses it*. Now, if the “sum” is to reveal its true character as an aesthetic center, it must appear distinctive in two ways—as an existent and as a determinant. First, it must have an unmistakable sharpness and/or definiteness about it, whether this suggestion is conveyed through a decisive stroke of the plectrum or, in dance, through a sharp turn of the neck or stroke of the foot. Secondly, it should appear not merely as the last stroke or *mātrā* of the *thekā* or the temporal pattern, but as the logical culmination of a self-evolving movement.³² Putting the two together, the “sum” should not merely come, but *emerge*.

Hindustani music is very emphatic as to *the proper designing of our manner of approach to the “sum.”* From a particular point in its being, the *thekā* begins upgathering its loveliness, as it

²⁹ *Layakāri* is rhythmic manipulation.

³⁰ It is a beat which is marked not on the drum, but often by a wave of the hand.

³¹ In actual performing, the centrality of the “sum” is also heightened by the fact that it often coincides with the *vādi svara* of the *rāga* in point of time.

³² Even literally, the word “sum” means “composure after agitation.”

were, to deliver it finally to the "sum." The shapely upgathering is called *āmad* and the precise point—the location of which in the time cycle may be shifted freely by the musician—of the origination of this movement may be called *nikās*. The orientation of the approach at once underlines the pivotal quality of the "sum," which appears to determine the movement from the end-side. So the *āmad*, besides delighting the listener with the shapeliness of its approach, brings out the aesthetic centrality of the "sum," and that in the very act of unfolding itself, or outlining the manner of approach to the "sum." Generally, the *āmad* takes off from the off-beat. Some consummate instrumentalists such as Ravi Shankar and Ali Akbar, emphasize the off-beat itself by making it appear as the completion of a well-designed pattern.³³ It may, in fact, be stated as a general truth that the Hindustani musician is clearly susceptible to the individual spring of charm, whether it be a note or a beat. Musicians and dancers in India revel in working up well-designed accesses to the "sum" from the most unsuspected recesses in the fabric of the *thekā*. Sometimes the temporal pattern is made to evolve itself from the unmeasured time-space between two recognized *mātrās* or beats.

While performing, the classical Hindustani musician must keep the flow of the cycle—its manner and speed—continually in mind. Yet, at the same time, he is expected to flow freely along with patterns which cut across the basic timing cycle at the most wayward angle; and, what is more, to return to the "sum," at suitable intervals, with split-second accuracy. And the listener who is trained in the subtleties of Hindustani rhythm enjoys every detail of this movement: the unwavering steadiness of the *thekā*, the intricacy and design of the temporal pattern, the waywardness of the angle at which it is made to deviate from the normal flow of the *thekā*, and, finally, the impeccability of the musician's periodical return to the timing cycle which is the aesthetic matrix of all rhythmic manipulation.

The subtlety of the temporal patterns in Hindustani music can be truly amazing. Some of them include, as they unwind themselves, moments of a *deliberate* slackening and upgathering

³³ Here, of course, the music continues till the "sum" is arrived at.

of speed. The challenge of waywardness is, in such cases, almost irresistible; and the listener who tries to keep himself firmly glued to the timing cycle, in spite of the provocation, finds the struggle a positive delight. Specially skillful are those temporal patterns which deliberately end "away" from the "sum" and which are, therefore, called *visham* or displaced. They provide us with another instance of the transcendence, in Indian music, of the merely grammatical in the interest of beauty. If the pattern is so designed that it ends a little *before* the normal location of the "sum" in the *thekā*, it is said to belong to the *anāgat* sub-class; that is, here, when the movement has ended, the real "sum" is still to come. And if the last accent of the pattern comes slightly *after* the normal "sum" has gone, we have a pattern of the *ateet* sub-class, *ateet* meaning "past" or "has been," the reference again being to the focal point of the timing cycle. Here it is important to note that merely stopping this side, or landing that side, of the "sum" is only to be able to time a stroke correctly. It does not become an *aesthetic* act unless it is done according to a design. What has been called the "wanton heed and giddy cunning" of great music is very effectively, even nobly, illustrated by these subtleties of Hindustani rhythmic system.

I have a definite feeling that a greater part of Hindustani music so far presented to the West has been of the merely obvious kind. This may well have secured for it a ready acceptance and a larger sympathy, but the best, in this process, has only been held back. Unless they spend some time in getting used to the Indian scale and to the more important rhythmic cycles of Hindustani music, our friends in the West cannot be expected to admire the best in our music intelligently, and the best in our music, I repeat, is the essentially *formal*³⁴—*alāpa* which uses no language and no rhythm; and rhythmic manipulation which, though certainly heard by the ear, far outgoes the merely perceptual, and is essentially to be *understood* through imaginative identification with both the timing cycle

³⁴ "Formal" not in the sense of "having no content" but in that of being a perfect identity of form and content, or in the sense of being directly expressive, independently of language.

which plods steadily along and the pattern which frolics sportively athwart it. Once this identification with the cycle's design is achieved, almost any stroke against it can appear positively winsome, whatever be the angle of displacement at which it cuts across the time cycle. It is like a look of love sweetened by its sheer slant.

Not many people in the West know that in India a very elaborate and effective attempt has been made to identify the different sounds produced by the drums when their particular (skin-covered) parts are struck in specific ways. These sounds have been given names—in terms of mnemonic syllables or *bols*. The latter are supposed to resemble, not to describe or explain, the character of the sounds. Thus, whatever is played on the drums can (also) be recited. In fact, the verbal recitation of the timing cycles, and specially of the temporal patterns woven across or within them, is looked upon almost as a distinct art in India. It may be easier to understand the subtleties of Hindustani rhythm in the light of its aspect of *bols*. Some of the *bols* such as *dir, dir* have about them a repetitive and tremulous fluency. Others are weighty and elongated, such as *dharbanna*, in articulating which the underlined portion is prolonged. The suggestion of radiation from a common center is provided by such fragments of a *bol* as *trae*, where the 'r' follows immediately upon, not loosely after, the 't'. Not every drum is regarded as suitable for producing every kind of *bol*. Take, for instance, the popular Indian drum, *tablā*, which comprises two pieces named literally after the manner in which they are placed by the drummer—the right one and the left one. The "right one" is expected to contribute sound—syllables which are crisp, fluent, successive, light and sliced. The left one contributes weight, depth, inwardness, continuity and resonance. Perhaps its most likeable contribution is the effect of "a breathing depth." When the two are played properly together, some of the lighter effects of the right one may acquire a shapely roundness within the depth of the left one; and if what is being truly played is the basic timing cycle, it would appear not a mere succession of detached strokes, but a continuity differentiated. Not *any* two *bols* can be put together. The juxtaposition is governed by the expert's instinctive grasp

over such perceptual laws as those of "figure and ground" and "common destiny." An important mark of rhythmic efficiency is the musician's ability to put in a great number of *bols* between two beats without, of course, damaging the shapeliness of the whole pattern. Sometimes, during verbal recitation or drum-playing, a short, sparkling syllable is so wedged in between a close cluster of *bols* that *by its very manner of sound* it appears to couple them *apart*. I can think of no better way to demonstrate the infinite divisibility of time *aesthetically*.

On the whole, the Hindustani rhythmic system has many interesting features. Here, a lot of thinking and arranging is done without the use of language. Pure sound is studied in all its aspects of form, content, speed and accent; and the *bols* are woven into patterns (and recited) with an unremitting care for beauty. Thus, if in articulating the *bol tak* the "k" is made to come stiffly and closely along with, rather than loosely after, the "t" sound, it would be regarded as an aesthetic mistake. The given raw material is scanty here. We only have distinctions interjected into ideally apprehended motion. These units are christened and grouped; and they are made to shuffle, flit across, and variegate the flow of time in numberless ways. Time, thus manipulated, truly appears as a fount of infinite beauty. It should now be clear that *layakāri* or "rhythmic" manipulation is not a matter of mere calculation. Shapeliness and diversity of manner, figure against ground, daintiness and deliberate abandon of deviation,—these surely are some of beauty's own hues.

From the concepts of Hindustani music we now turn to its more important styles of practical presentation. Here *alāpa* comes first. It means the musical delineation of a *rāga* which is done without drum-accompaniment and which can yet be infinitely expressive. The chief effects commonly associated with it are those of leisureliness, repose, dignity, inwardness and sublimity; but, as we shall presently see, *alāpa* is quite capable of working up many other effects.

Alāpa as done by an orthodox singer of the *dhruvād* style is as distinctive of Hindustani music as the subtlety and infinite variety of its rhythmic manipulation. Employing no language, but only a few mnemonic syllables, it yet works up effects of

a remarkably varying hue. Let it not be thought that singing without language cannot work up any effect. Effects can be worked up in music not only without language—instrumental music providing a clear instance of this—but without the aid of musical notes.³⁵ Our vocal *alāpa* is a vindication of the former, even as our rhythmic system stands witness to the latter. Language not only conveys meaning: it may, *when spoken*, even broaden and disfigure a dainty breath of sound. Thus, if musical sound takes the form of a lingering line of luminosity, the simultaneous articulation of a word will surely blight and blur the effect of quintessential fineness and continuity. The diversity of letters will ruffle the continuity; and the breadth of their sound will disturb the fineness. *Alāpa* is grounded in the faith that language can only blight the most consummate effects of pure music. Here, as in the case of rhythmic manipulation, the linguistic minimum is the aesthetical absolute, and effects are worked up with the bare use of mnemonic syllables.

As already pointed out, one important determinant of the effectiveness of *alāpa* is *laya*, that is, the flow of time as measured by its conduciveness to effect,³⁶ not with the help of timing beats. Some instances may be taken to illustrate how this is actually done in (sonant) *alāpa*. Suppose the vocalist sings the tonic for a mere instant and then immediately provides a steady, elongated rendering of the adjacent note, say D flat. The effect worked up would be one of mere emergence if the transition from the tonic to the other note is accomplished quickly, though continuously, and with a slight jerk; and it may be one of *emergence from within something* in case the passage is smooth and relatively slower. That is, in the latter case there would be the extra suggestion of inwardness. The point to be noted here is that the time taken in passing from one note to another, or in rendering any single note, contributes

³⁵ Drumming can work up many effects, though the musical note here involved is only one—the tonic.

³⁶ It is thus incorrect to say that in "*alāpa* the notes of the *rāga* are sung in a loose kind of rhythm, regulated *simply by convenience*." Vide *The Music of India* cit., p. 88.

vitality to the net effect. To me it appears that the element of time, thus incorporated, stimulates a kind of linear imagining, and that the two together, aided by his feeling imagination, enable the musician to invest the *svara* with an emotive or ideal hue. In the effects of *alāpa* many different factors cooperate, though it would be difficult to isolate and determine the individual contribution of each. Thus, reverting to the instance cited above, if the D flat is steady and broad and is like the tonic, located in the middle register, the effect would be one of emergent effluence; but if the note in question is rendered very finely (or thinly), yet very steadily and tunefully, and if it is located by the side of the tonic in the higher register,³⁷ the effect would be one of looking far into the distance, or one of detachment, provided the D flat comes smoothly, yet quickly, after a flitting touch at the *sa* (tonic). Or again, if proceeding steadily from "B" in the lower register, the voice touches the D flat (in the middle register) with the daintiness of an instant, and then lapses back immediately to the preceding note in a kind of an elastic curve, the effect would be one of drooping.

That is why, in the terminology of *alāpa*, some notes are described as *lajjit* or coy, and others, *sanyastha* or "renounced." In identifying and cultivating the exact aesthetic character of a note, an appropriate terminology is obviously of great help. The names attached to the notes enable the artist to identify himself with, and to work up, the emotive or ideal character of the latter. And if this is effectively done, three desirable consequences at once follow.

First, the *rāga* comes to appear as a living experience. To sing a *rāga* is, in fact, essentially to live the experience it permits, suggests or demands. Merely skimming the printed words of a poem is no real reading of poetry, and the musician who merely traverses the notes considered as points in ideal space is not really singing a *rāga*, because the aesthetic content of the *svaras*, and so of the *rāga*, is not being lived. Secondly, the time theory of the *rāgas*, by no means easily intelligible, comes to receive

³⁷ The three voice registers, treble, middle, and bass are in Hindustani called: *tār*, *madhya* and *mandra*.

some point. There is little sense in maintaining that every *rāga* is meant to be sung at a particular time of the day³⁸ if its rendering does not work up, through specific formal graces, manner of movement, and regulation of *laya*—besides, of course, the text of the songs—ideas and emotions which are normal to the occasion or season.

Thirdly, in the light of the remarks made above with regard to the way in which *alāpa* works up its effects, the evolution of symbols in musical imagination comes to appear as a tenable idea.

Imagine a devotee hallowing the morn with *svaras* of the *bhairava*³⁹ mode. Steadying himself with the basic *sa* (tonic), he sings to saturate himself with images and attitudes that suit the hour—the rising sun, yearning in prayer and chastening of self, pouring *argha* (holy water) on the Deity,⁴⁰ and non-attachment towards the things of the world. A brief but sure touch at the tonic followed immediately by *komal re* (D flat) prolonged firmly and sweetly, at once blends the mind with the sunrise outside, by suggesting effulgence. The same note (D flat) touched while descending from *ga* (E) provides, in manner, a euphonic transcript of the downward slant of pouring *argha* on the idol. As attunement increases through the aid of the *svaras*, detachment deepens, and the singer co-operates by possessing the *sa* (tonic) merely ideally and lingering repeatedly at the *re* (D flat), now *faintly*, though sweetly—the note suggesting transcendence. The *re* thus becomes a symbol of devotion and the elevation of the self.⁴¹ Surely, the purpose of *alāpa* is not merely to indicate the constituent notes of the *rāga*. And it would be outrageous to maintain, as in sometimes done, that *alāpa* is merely perceptual in its appeal.

But the variegated effects of *alāpa* are also worked up by

³⁸ As it certainly is, according to the Hindustani viewpoint.

³⁹ *Bhairava* is a devotional *rāga* meant for early morning.

⁴⁰ This religious practice is fairly common among the Hindus. The hands which reverently pour water over the idol are at a *higher* level than the latter.

⁴¹ Cf. Tagore's remark: "... Indian music concerns itself more with human experience as interpreted by religion, than with experience in an everyday sense... Our music... takes us to that lonely region of renunciation..."

employing specific formal devices, called graces, which have, each of them, been clearly identified, so that in case we want to see whether or not they really produce the specific effects commonly associated with them, they can be presented in isolation from continuous musical performing. The foremost living *alāpīya*,⁴² Ustad Rahimuddin Khan Dagur, can do it with consummate ease. These formal subtleties are ways of producing voice in particular ways. Thus, the effects of depth and inwardness, fineness with vivacity, sudden upward ascent, and of buoyant sparkle, are worked up respectively by *ganak*, *labak*, *budak*, and by *dyut* and *vedāng*. Sometimes, the very likeable effect of a soft and vibrant background of a nasal kind of resonance is conjured up by the formal subtlety known as *anuranātmaka*. The effect is that of the subdued tinkling of a bell which now comes close to us and now recedes.

Along with *alāpa*, *Dhrupad* is another very old style of vocal music existing today. It is not popular, but even now it is looked upon as remarkably capable of working up effects of structural dignity⁴³ and loftiness, massiveness, contemplativeness and even sublimity. Only those decorative movements of the voice are here employed which do not, nay cannot, suggest any cheapness and flippancy. Conversely, specially in the hands of a poor performer, a *dhrupad* song can easily appear stiff and uninteresting. The timing cycles it employs are also those which do not permit light-hearted rendering. Literally, the word *dhrupad* suggests fixity of the various sub-sections of the song. As a general style of singing, however, it stands for creativity which is a continual, and perennially newer, affirmation of certain basic principles. The rules of *rāga* and *tāla* are here carefully observed. Yet, it would be a mistake to suppose that a *dhrupad* rendering permits of no imaginative fineness. First, rhythm here is to be adroitly handled. Secondly, the single note may be made to appear as having a variform appeal. Finally, variety of effects is secured by bringing in many such formal devices of rendering as are characteristic of *alāpa*. The orthodox practice is that the artist begins with a

⁴² An *alāpīyā* is a musician who specialises in the *alāpa* style of singing.

⁴³ This is clearly so in the singing of the Dāgur brothers, two of our best known vocalists.

detailed exposition of *alāpa* and then passes on to the *dhrupad*, which means singing a song with proper accompaniment by the drum, here the *pakhāwaj*—a single drum which produces deeper and more resonant effects than are worked up by the *tablā*. So we speak of *alāpa-dhrupad* as one style of singing.

I would insist in protesting against the popular assumption that *dhrupad*-singing lacks imaginative quality. Vocal movements here may, in fact, be very daintily conceived. Thus one of them is called *kamalvat* which means “like a lotus.” Its significance, in terms of actual singing, is that the voice first rises from the tonic to say A flat with the slenderness of a stem, and then turns to, and opens up at G in a bloom of self-possession, completing the pictorial suggestion of the efflorescence of a lotus. Imagination in art consists in investing the simplest detail of material with a texture of feeling thought. And here, in the *alāpa-dhrupad* style of singing, the single note may be made to appear as a speck of life touched gently into a throb, or as a fount of feeling; it may even be presented as a halo of infinite luminosity which is not so much rendered as lived and explored from within. And in those *dhrupad* songs which are called *ārābhanāt-maka* or devotional, we have imaginative profundity at its best. Here, the complete text of the song is to be rendered in the *sanyastha* or “renounced” manner; and the whole utterance gives the impression of a musical sigh welling up from the depths of being or of incense borne aloft on the wings of devotion, conjuring up an aura of quiet contemplation around the song. In such *dhrupads* the manner of singing has to be consistently soft as dew, and no variation is allowed. There is, about such songs, a deliberate, spiritual leanness of manner; and the notes are dainty, unobtrusive accents—just enough to help ideal attunement.

The more popular style of classical Hindustani music is, however, the *Khayal*. It permits longer spells of indifference to the discipline of the basic rhythmic cycle than *dhrupad* can afford, though ultimately the “sum” has even here to be attained with unflinching accuracy. Another characteristic feature of this style of singing—one which marks it off clearly from *alāpa-dhrupad*—is the employment of a particular kind of *tān*, that is, a patterning of the various notes of the *rāga* which is sung

out in such a way that one gets the impression of a quick succession of *round* shapely beads unfolding itself at varying speeds. The ideal here is to sacrifice neither the continuity of the pattern nor the discreteness of its constituent notes⁴⁴. This grouping of notes in *tāns* can be done in numberless ways, corresponding to varying kinds of linear imagery. It is the psychological compulsion of this imagery which makes the *khayāl* singer move his arms and fingers in an apparently wild and meaningless way. The average listener responds more quickly to this ideal spread-outness of notes in ever varying and ever more decorative ways than to the regulated suggestiveness, as distinguished from the obvious tunefulness, of the individual note, or of a tiny tuft of two or three notes. This explains why *khayāl* is commonly credited with greater imaginative vitality than *alāpa-dhrupad*. Occasionally, with a view to secure readier approbation, *khayāl* resorts to such turns and twists of voice as have the lightness of fancy rather than the depth effect of profound imaginativeness. *Vilambit* or slow-speed *khayāl* is, however, fairly capable of working up a high seriousness.⁴⁵ *Drut* or quickly sung *khayāl* has a lighter gait: it excels in working up sportive, gay effects. "Accompaniment" by the drummer is an integral part of both *dhrupad* and *khayāl* singing.

A normal presentation of instrumental music, especially if it be one on *sitar* or *sarod*,⁴⁶ has four clearly identifiable movements—*alāpa*, *jorb*, *jbālā*, and *gatkāri*. The first three of these are done without the drum "accompaniment" which is an important source of delight in the case of the *gatkāri*, that is, playing the basic tune, slow or quick, and weaving melodic patterns across, or within it. *Alāpa* here means slow, contemplative playing. It seeks to bring out the aesthetic character of the *rāga* in its dimension of depth. The manner of playing in *alāpa* proper is continuous, deep, and gliding. *Jorb* brings in successiveness, discreteness and quicker speed. The *jbālā* blends the aesthetic character of the first two stages at great speed—the

⁴⁴ Ustad Bade Ghulam does this excellently.

⁴⁵ This is borne out admirably by Ustad Ameer Khan's slow singing in its early stages.

⁴⁶ They are two of our best known (stringed) musical instruments.

continuity of *alāpa* with the diversity of *jorb*, so that the net effect here is one of a vibrant, continuous background against which the sharpness of the plectrum sounds delightfully discrete. The *gat* or the basic tune, which is “accompanied” by the drummer, has its own design. It should not merely have a one-one correspondence with the beats of the timing cycle. Its centre is the “sum” and the instrumentalist delights the trained listener by working up different accesses, varying in respect of note blends and speed and manner of movement, to the “sum”.

A distinct way of presenting instrumental music, made popular by the Ravi Shankar-Ali Akbar⁴⁷ combination, is the duet or *jugalbandi*. Here the two performers, duly accompanied by the drummer from the end of *alāpa* onwards, try to reinforce each other’s effects by matching playing in one octave with similar or simultaneous playing in the other; and by trying to articulate audibly what the partner’s playing, as it ends, demands by suggesting, either as a continuation or as a foil. The one reinforces, completes, or *just caps with the dainty individuality of one single note, the suggestivity, or the manner, of the patterns of the other*. Sometimes it appears as if one heaves a sigh and the other lends a tear to it.

⁴⁷ Ravi Shankar, the sitarist, and Ali Akbar, the sarodist, are two of our best known instrumentalists.