



The C.P.I. resolved to launch a campaign to persuade China to accept the Colombo proposals.

## MUSIC

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### Lay Thoughts On 'Laya'

ONE of the basic differences between Hindustani and Karnatak music systems lies in the conception of 'laya.' While in Karnatak music the idea of 'kala' is based on a geometrical progression of frequency within a given time span, in Hindustani music the progression seems to be arithmetical. In Karnatak music the basic structure of the 'tala' is geared to a constant time span, and does not vary except when, in the 'pallavi' exposition, the singer resorts to the principle of 'pratiloma.' In Hindustani music the structure of the 'tala' itself changes, according to the 'kala,' so that at any given degree of speed the frequency of the beat remains the same. Again, in Karnatak music, the 'laya' improvisation on the percussion instrument calls for complicated calculations. For instance, if a pentasyllabic phrase like "Tadhin-gi-na-thom" should be repeated thrice in the primary frequency of four 'aksharas' to a beat in a 'tala' of eight beats like 'Adi tala,' the percussionist has to take off at the second 'akshara' after the fifth beat, in order to arrive at the point of

commencement of the 'sahitya' exactly at the first beat. In the secondary frequency, each beat will have eight 'aksharas' instead of four, and hence for the same phrase, repeated thrice, to arrive at the commencement of the 'sahitya,' the take-off has to be arranged at the second 'akshara' after the seventh beat, in the new frequency. The calculations become correspondingly more complicated when the frequencies are converted or when the commencement of the 'sahitya' is elsewhere than exactly at the first beat. In Hindustani music, there is no such complication. Since the 'tala' structure itself is varied to keep the frequency constant, the take-off of the thrice-repeated pentasyllabic phrase will be at the same place, whatever the 'kala.'

Speed, then, is a skill in Hindustani music, whereas in Karnatak music it is an aspect of musical imagination. There are obviously certain advantages in keeping speed merely as a skill. For one thing, in the total effect

of a concert, the percussion instrument is duly subordinated to the vocal or instrumental music, and the chance of conflicting purpose in the musical imagination of the percussionist and the main artiste is avoided. Secondly, the attention of the percussionist is directed more to the 'sruti,' since he is not called upon to undertake improvisations of the kind one finds in Karnatak music. Thirdly, the phraseology of the percussionist being more limited, there is greater fineness in execution. If the richness of 'laya prasthara' that one finds in Karnatak music is absent in Hindustani music, that is a price which must be paid.

There was an oblique commentary on this subject in the 'layakari' duel between Ravi Shankar and Santa Prasad in the 'Sankar Lal Music Festival.' Ravi Shankar would play a 'swara' sequence on the 'sitar' and Santa Prasad reproduce it on the 'tabla.' The 'swaras' at first covered four beats, then two and so on until Ravi Shankar

progressively halved the phrases to half and quarter beat. Santa Prasad got nonplussed at that stage, and had to be helped out by Ravi Shankar who gave out the 'layakari bol' to make explicit the pattern of the 'swaras.' Now, this is a kind of passage-at-arms for which every 'mridangam' player in Karnatak music is fully prepared. In the percussion passages between the 'mridangam' and the 'ghatam' or between the 'mridangam' and the 'kanjira,' such alternating sallies are a regular feature in every Karnatak concert. There is only one explanation for Santa Prasad's inability to work out the rhythmic pattern of Ravi Shankar's phrases, on the 'tabla.' It is that 'laya prasthara' does not form so integral a part of musical imagination in the Hindustani system as in the Karnatak. Hence the speed on the 'tabla' remains merely an expression of skill.

Yet, even as skill, Santa Prasad's tabla-play was a breathtaking display. He sits frozen into a statue-like immobility up to his elbows. The only parts of the body that move are the forearm and, of course, those

incredibly deft fingers. Out of these pour sounds and phrases of extraordinary clarity and speed. Phrases merge into one another, disappear, and are re-born, they coil and uncoil themselves with such amazing rapidity that one wonders whether it is music or magic. One of the favourite expressions of Santa Prasad seems to be the reversal of the familiar "na-dhin-dhin-na" into "dhin-na-na-dhin." This is perhaps an elementary exercise in the art of 'tabla' playing but what makes it a prestidigitation is the fact that Santa Prasad does not so much as shift the position of his wrist nor allow his fingers a moment's pause to adjust themselves to the changed articulation.

Santa Prasad's phrases are not obstreperous. They have an uncommonly soothing quality about them. They fall on the ears like distant echoes. Behind such softness of articulation lies a sense of control which can only be likened to a surrealist spectacle of a sledge-hammer gently stroking the wings of a butterfly.

It is a mystery how Santa Prasad achieves this softness. By any count of logic, the energy which flows through the forearm of Santa Prasad must be enough to break the instrument into pieces. Yet all this surging energy is somehow controlled at the wrist, so that what passes into the fingers is only a gentle ripple. It is this that describes the delicate tracery of rhythmic patterns.

Chatur Lal, on the other hand, has a wider knowledge of rhythmic patterns and a more copious vocabulary. He can be more spontaneous in his improvisations than Santa Prasad. But he lacks that perfection, that deceptive ease of Santa Prasad. Consequently the phrases seem laboured and tortuous. Again Chatur Lal has speed but without the control which, in Santa Prasad, gives a graceful and soft articulation to the phrases.

Such comparison is likely to be invidious since we would in a way be comparing virtuosity

and talent. Virtuosity marks the maximal limit of talent, and is the outcome of perseverance and practice. Talent, on the other hand, is wayward and temperamental. There is, of necessity an unevenness in the creativity of talent. But the countervailing factor in talent is its spontaneity which, with a gift of imagination and a discipline of sincere self-expression, might lead to the making of a genius. Chatur Lal has not arrived in the sense that Santa Prasad has, but what is of interest is that there are more points of arrival than one.

The remark about speed being an aspect of musical imagination in the Karnatak system needs a closer examination, if some other differences between the Hindustani and the Karnatak systems are to be elucidated. It is a common charge against the Karnatak system that it does not give to the 'vilambit alap' that importance which it enjoys in the Hindustani system. The nostalgic old timers among the Karnatak musicians lament the disappearance of those spacious times when musicians devoted hours to the exposition of a 'raga' and devoted a large part of it to the 'vilambit alap.' The modern generation, by which most people have in mind only the post-G.N.B. singers, or in some other cases, even post-Ariakkudi musicians, is accused of supplanting spaciousness and grace with speed and gimmicks.

It is indisputable that Karnatak musicians are today more hurried in the elaboration of a 'raga' and more given to 'brikas' than the musicians of a generation ago. There are several factors contributing to this new development. One is that since the time Karnatak music came to be supported by popular patronage, it has had to evolve forms which would suit popular taste and convenience. In the place of a select audience picked out of the leisured classes which could find time enough to sit through a two-hour programme of 'vilambit alap,' the modern audience of office work-

ers and other professional groups has to satisfy itself with a two-and-a-half hour programme for the concert as a whole. Even so, it might be suggested the musician can limit himself to two or three songs during the whole programme, and make up for limited time by a greater limit in the number of 'ragas' taken up for elaboration. But the advocates of such a course would be reckoning without a full grasp of the psychology of the ordinary people who make up the audience in a Karnatak music concert. These people have an interest in music, but feel frustrated in the cultivation of their taste by lack of opportunity to listen to as many concerts as they would like. If they could afford to pay for three concerts in a month, perhaps, they would without grudge sit through a 'vilambit alap' for two hours. But they cannot afford to do so, and hence they feel that they should get as much out of a concert as they wish to have. If a musician has to satisfy them, he will necessarily have to abbreviate the elaboration of the 'ragas,' and give within the duration of a concert as much as he can without making himself a juke-box in the bargain. The choice is really between allowing Karnatak music to disappear completely by insisting on the right type of audience and the right type of elaboration of a 'raga,' and allowing it to live even if under the patronage of a semi-informed public. Hindustani music does not wholly depend upon popular patronage as Karnatak music. Hence, it has been able to keep to its leisurely ways, unimpaired by the pressure of public demand. Even there, the growing popularity of 'khyals' and 'thumris' would indicate which way the wind is blowing.

But popular convenience provides only one half of the reason for the new form that Karnatak music has taken. The other half is to be sought in the musical imagination itself. The period of the change in Karnatak music is also the period when the 'laya' aspect of music has come to be increasingly appreciated. The revelation of the possibilities of 'laya prasthara' has affected the musicians and their audience equally. The highbrow critic is apt to dismiss 'laya' as an adventitious aid to musical form. He is likely to frown upon the kind of imagination that finds a frank delight in the improvisations of rhythmic patterns. Of such is the vulgar artist made, he would say. But he would be uncharitable if he refuses to give to this imagination its rightful place.

If 'laya' is pursued only as an external value, if speed is achieved as a mere skill, there may be some justice in the contempt of the highbrow critic. But where 'laya' is woven into the texture of musical form, where speed is pursued as a means to the liberation of musical form itself from the two narrow confines of conventionality and formalism, there is no reason to be contemptuous about it. If the secrets of a musical mode can be stormed into instead of being laboriously coaxed out, I would say there is no justification for not doing it. In Karnatak music at any rate, and even in Hindustani music, speed brings a dramatic element of conflict and passion which vivifies a 'raga' in some of its essential features more effectively than a leisurely handling of it. I am not unaware that I would have to meet the charge that storming into the secret of a 'raga' might altogether blow it up. My only defence can be that the Karnatak ragas are not such brittle stuff that they cannot stand being stormed into.

The way in which 'laya' enters the musical imagination in Karnatak music is best exemplified by the compositions of Syama Sastry. As the lecturer at the 'Syama Sastry Day' function arranged by one of the numerous 'sabhas' in the capital, pointed out, there is a fusion of 'raga,' 'sahitya' and 'laya' in Sastry's compositions that makes his songs unique. To Syama Sastry a 'tala' was a total entity. Its subdivision into the various 'angas' did not prevent him from conceiving the time span of a whole 'avartana' as a single rhythmic unit. Where other composers had set their compositions to a 'tala' in such a way as to correspond to the dominant stresses of 'laghu' and 'dhrutam,' Sastry set his compositions to the larger and more sparsely distributed stresses of the 'avartana' itself. The result of this kind of rhythmic pattern is a subtle syncopation which, though it does not have the symmetry of the properly accented compositions, communicates to the compositions of Syama Sastry the quality of an undulating topography.

The beauty of Sastry's compositions lies precisely in the principle of asymmetry. Though they seem to be disarmingly simple to the listener, his compositions are so artfully contrived that the central stress of any line or any section of the composition is distributed over a number of feet sometimes even across two feet. This is an achievement in musical technique hardly attempted by any other composer.

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