

Hindustani Rhythm and an Aesthetical Issue

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In this essay I propose to discuss just one aesthetical question, in brief. Is the (semblance of) time that we find in Hindustani (or North Indian) rhythm¹ similar to or different from time as we experience it in daily life? I cannot, however, proceed without first giving an account of what the rhythm that I speak of is and what it does. My reference, I may add, will be throughout to rhythm as an independent art, and not to rhythm as a mere component of music. The question, if it is proper to regard rhythm as an autonomous art, has been already discussed by me elsewhere²; and here it should serve if I simply mention the fact that, in India, a solo exposition of rhythm by a competent drummer — be it on a single drum or on a pair of drums³ — has always been regarded as a work of intrinsic aesthetic value.

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Now, to the question, what is Hindustani rhythm, I may straightaway give the following succinct answer:

The essential purpose of Hindustani rhythm (as an independent art) is to establish a basic *cycle* of steadfast pace, and to create patterns of infinite variety within its bounds, both with the help of beats and *bols* (or mnemonic syllables⁴) which not only christen the beats (so to say), but provide a decorative filling between and across them, yet never suchwise that *the regulative and formative character of the focal beat* (of the cycle) may be wantonly disregarded, they (or the syllables) themselves — and so also the patterns which they go to make — being quite capable of being memorized and winsomely recited.

Let me now bring out the key ideas implicit in this summary characterization of rhythm:

a. To begin with, we may note that the matrix of all trellis-work in Hindustani rhythm is a cycle. It comprises a specific number of beats. But these beats are not alone here. Tied to every one of them, and often spread over them, there is a letter or a bunch of letters — such as *kā*, *dhī*, *tirkī*, *dhā*, *ā* — which are all without verbal meaning, and which only resemble, more or less, the sounds of the beats (as played⁵). It is this linkage of beats with specific letters⁶ which makes it easy for us to recognize and remember the different sounds which the playing of the cycle (and the patterns) produces. Even the offbeat, which is not

actually sounded on the drum, but only gently hinted at or visualized, carries a syllable as its indicator.

b. It is important to see how exactly the matrix of Hindustani rhythm is *cyclic*, and how this character determines all creation in the region of this art. In following the rhythm that the matrix in question embodies and projects we not only set out from the first beat, but return to it, completing a round, so to say, and making the first beat appear focal. This beat is, indeed, of special value here. The cycle, and the patterns that may be woven across it — and ultimately within it — have all to attain to the focal beat (called *sama*) with split-second accuracy. This is something which the drummer has to bear in mind all along, as a basic requirement. Further, the *sama* is the beat where the cycle and the patterns all attain to completion of their individual forms.

c. Above all, a pattern owes its excellence as such also to the *general shapeliness* of the way in which it realizes the *sama*. Every pattern is a configuration, an organized whole. In some cases, however, it is distinguished by a specific *terminal segment*⁷ where, because of its orientation, the pattern appears to gather its beauty, and to proceed to deliver it at the *sama*. Yet the *sama* is not only the target of patterns, but their apex where they themselves appear to flower. This suggestion of (what may be called) efflorescence⁸ is irresistible where the pattern's overall shapeliness is capped with such a playing of the *sama* beat that the sound produced may seem to accomplish itself instantly. The beauty here arises, so to say, from an electric chipping of the *sama*-instant (or stroke) itself. No other art, I believe, provides a better instance of the aesthetic divisibility of minimal time, or of the power of a mere point to lend both beauty and wholeness to what paves the way to it.

d. A very interesting feature of *bols* is their audile character. It is so rich in variety that it can easily hold discriminating attention for long. Some *bols*, indeed, appear to sparkle like a star, and others engage the ear with their wedge-like alacrity in saving two adjacent syllables from collision. Coupled with due accentuation of some syllables and regulated variation of the pace of the segments that they generally go to make, this fascinating diversity of their character as sheer sounds makes Indian rhythm⁹ a quite uncommon object of aesthetic contemplation. Its content is neither meaningful speech nor a mere medley of indistinct sounds, such as may be produced by the jostling of utensils in a big bag, but series of differently ordered, but all identifiable alphabets of our native languages. Form is perhaps *more manifestly articulate* in Indian rhythm than in the other arts.

e. Further, what shapes the essential features of form — that is, the run and inner knitting of patterns — is a necessary orientation. As a rule, patterns have to terminate (I repeat) in a clear and accurate show of the *sama*. Further, it is desirable that before they actually hit the target, so to say, they may appear to be *making for* it. The critic judges their quality (as patterns) largely by checking if these two requirements are met.

Conjointly, they make a very clear criterion indeed¹⁰. But, I hasten to add, some patterns—that is, those which represent the *ateet* and *anāgat* kinds—are so *designed* that they end expressly—and, therefore, not wantonly—a little *after or before* the focal beat. In such cases, the beat in question is, of course, not played; but in so far as the drummer's adroit avoidance of it is intentional, it is duly kept in mind, if quietly. Such "giddy cunning"¹¹, in fact, only heightens our awareness of the form of both the cycle and the pattern¹², assuming of course that we are able to follow, in due accordance, the course of the pattern—which can sometimes be pretty intricate—*without* losing our hold on the basic pace as embodied in the cycle¹³.

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The onward flow of the pattern, brisk or leisurely, is of course not the same thing as the felt passage of life as lived; quite unlike the latter, the former is a decorative run directed towards a mere moment—the moment of the focal beat. Yet, the sense of time (or a semblance of it) may be said to be there not only in our everyday experience, but in our contemplation of rhythm. But are the two appearances of time essentially similar?

We cannot at once say no. Patterns in rhythm are not only serial, but occurrent. They comprise beats (and bols) that we see running as a series. But successiveness, or the before-after order, is not the only feature of lived time that the art of rhythm builds upon. Simultaneousness is another. As a rule, we have seen, the terminal syllable of a pattern is also a moment of perfect *coincidence* with the sama-instant. Further, when it has been perfectly established¹⁴, the cycle appears to *endure* as a stable frame of reference in relation to which the quality of patterns is largely discerned. But if the formal features of time *as ordinarily experienced* all serve as the material of time *as it appears in rhythm*, is there no essential difference between the two?

Aestheticians are divided on this issue. Thus, whereas Langer¹⁵, M. Sauvage¹⁶, and Basil de Selincourt¹⁷ take pains to distinguish time in music (or rhythm¹⁸) as "virtual" and "special", or as an "ideal substitute" of ordinary time, Philip Alperson sees no essential difference between the two. He admits that music gives rise to a specific class of tensions. But, he continues, what is there to prevent us from saying that the build-up and release of musical tensions is experienced in the same way as the rise and ebb of life-tensions, that is, in a before-after order? And if the two kinds of tension are experienced *in the same way*, how is it warranted to say that music creates an order of *virtual* time? Generally, it is as an important element of music that rhythm makes its presence and power felt; and in so far as the same "mental functions of attention, memory, and expectation which are characteristic of musical perception seem to apply to the perception of noise" too in daily life¹⁹, it seems improper to hold that the experience of the temporality of specifically

musical phenomena . . . [is] *sui generis*²⁰.

This argument, however, is not likely to convince one who takes rhythm as it is freely regarded in India, that is, as an autonomous art too, with its own unique material, creative devices, and criteria of evaluation. And he could put his dissent quite simply, say, as follows:

Suppose two essentially dissimilar orders of time are really there. Where could the difference lie? Not in the (alleged) absence, in one of them, of the formal features we have distinguished, like continuance and successiveness; for without these features, time would be a mere word. Nor could we say that one of them is quite without content. Such a time too would be a sheer abstraction. Even our moments of vacancy have a filling of some discontent or ennui. Therefore, the difference we are seeking could only lie in the *specific* character—and some inner arrangements—of the *content* of the two temporal orders. But if this conclusion is accepted—and I do not see how it can be refuted—the time that we find in rhythm must be said to be quite different from the temporality that makes the fabric of our daily living; for, whereas the content of the former is provided (we have seen) by beats, bols, and varying pace, that of lived time comprises *sequences of events* in the outer world which a person may only notice detachedly, and his own doing and suffering. As for the argument that the two temporal orders, *rhythmic* and *everyday*, cannot be regarded as being quite *dissimilar* because the *same* mental acts or attitudes are involved in our experiencing them, it is, in my view, *unavailing*. Would it make sense to deny the distinctness of sweet from salted food on the ground that they are both known by tasting? It is, I repeat, *not how* we experience them, but *what* exactly we experience in them that makes the two orders of time quite different from each other.

Indeed, the time that we experience as rhythm forms a world of its own, with features that are not to be found anywhere else. A Tabla maestro dwells in the world of rhythm — comprising beats, bols, and regular patterns—with as perfect a sense of encompassment as a scientist in that of symbols and formulae. And ‘happenings’ in the drummer’s world can be quite out of the ordinary. Where, for instance, in the everyday world do we create beauty, as we may easily do in the region of rhythm, by deviating (for a while) *designedly* from a set course, with meaningless letters alone as our material of creation? Even generally, the time that we regulate and beautify purposely cannot be the same as the time which is only *given to us* and is so often the locus of unforeseen events.

NOTES

1. I may add that a good deal of what I have said in this essay is true of South Indian rhythm as well.
2. In my essay ‘Aesthetic Theory and Hindustani Rhythm’, BJA, Summer 1976, Vol. 16, No. 3; reprinted in my book *The Winged Form : Aesthetical Essays on Hindustani Rhythm*, Sangeet Natak Akademi, Delhi, 1979, pp. 1–17.

3. The single (or one-piece) drums I am thinking of are the Pakhāwaj and the Mridangam; and the best-known two-piece drum in North Indian art music is the Tabla.
4. A bol is a single letter or a small group of letters, quite without verbal meaning. Every bol is not strictly a syllable, for it may not be utterable by a single effort of the voice. But I cannot think of a better English word for what is called bol in Indian rhythm. Further, as a verb, 'syllable' means to utter articulately; and the utterance (or rather *recitation*) of bols in Indian rhythm is, in general, quite articulate. 'Mnemonic' means 'helpful to memory'; and this is an admitted quality of bols. They enable us to memorize and repeat the (corresponding) sounds produced in drumming.
5. What the Indian (classical) drummer plays is not mere beats, but bols which are tied to, and spread over, beats. So an ensemble which presents both Western and Indian drums is not really conducive to a proper appreciation of Indian rhythm; for it generally highlights only the parity of *beats*—in respect of number and disposition.
6. Mere letters, I repeat, not (meaningful) words.
7. Corresponding to what is called *āmad* in Hindustani music, meaning a segment which strikes the discerning listener as an orderly approach to the focal beat.
8. The Hindi/Urdu word, here, is *khilnā*, meaning 'to flower'.
9. Not merely North Indian rhythm.
10. Clear, however, only to those who can follow the extent and distinctive idiom of the cycle.
11. I have here in mind Milton's reference to the "wanton heed and giddy cunning" of good music.
12. Cf.: "Form does not lie simply in the correct observance of rules. It lies in the struggle of certain living material to achieve itself within a pattern. The very refusal of a poet to sacrifice what he means to a perfectly correct rhyme, for example, can more powerfully suggest the rhyme than correctness itself would." Stephen Spender: *World within World*, Hamilton, London, pp. 313–14.
13. Because of this dual engagement of attention, contemplation of patterns in rhythm may be said to be bifocal, in a way.
14. After a few rounds of proper playing, a cycle comes to look firmly set or unwavering. 'Establish' is the right word for what is called *quāyam karnā* in Urdu.
15. S.K. Langer: *Feeling and Form*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, New York, Third Impression 1963, pp. 109–110.
16. M. Sauvage's essay 'Notes on the Superposition of the Temporal Modes in Works of Art', in *Reflections on Art*, edited by S.K. Langer, The John Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 2nd printing, 1960, p. 162.
17. Selincourt's essay 'Music and Duration', in *Reflections on Art*, p. 153.
18. Not as an autonomous art.
19. Philip Alperson's essay " 'Musical Time' and Music as an 'Art of Time' ", in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Summer 1980, p. 411.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 412.