

## The Spiritual and Hindustani Music

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Indian music is said to be spiritual, often quite glibly. Our best-known musician of the day, Pandit Ravi Shankar, is convinced that “the highest form...of music is spirituality”<sup>1</sup>. To the question if he had ever experienced a divine touch while creating music, his answer to (at least) one interviewer has been categorical:

Oh, many times, It just happens. The atmosphere, my own mental condition, some good vibrations — all play a role. I have had this experience playing for a single person also... [namely,] Paramchārya Kāmakoti Shankarāchārya. Sometimes I also have this feeling while playing in Albert Hall, London... [Even generally,] if you listen to a finely tuned *tānpurā* in isolation and with a quiet mind... [or] with absolute concentration to a church organ or Bach or a truly good musician performing any *rāga*, you shall have a fantastic sense of peace.<sup>2</sup>

Nor are our Carnatic musicians slow to voice such a view. See, for instance, the following remarks by the violin *vidwān*, Narayana Iyer, who has given us virtuosi of the calibre of T.N. Krishnan, his son, and N. Rajam, his daughter:

Our music has a divine origin and it will assert itself out of the present turmoil. Spoken languages... are prone to create... divisions. But not *sangeet which is the language of the soul*. It cannot die, you see!<sup>3</sup>

It would, however, be wrong to suppose that it is only in India that music has been related to the life of the spirit. Beethoven does the same, if (or rather necessarily) in his own way:

It takes spiritual [*geistigen*] rhythm to grasp music in its essence... All genuine [musical] invention is moral progress. To submit to its inscrutable laws... to overcome and control one's own mind, so that it shall set forth the revelation; that is the isolating principle of art... Every true creation of art is independent, mightier than the artist himself... Music gives the mind a relation to the [total] harmony...<sup>4</sup>

It is not easy to make sense of the extract just cited. But, on the other hand, in so far as it issues from the mind of one of the greatest composers of the world, we *have* to struggle to see what it could possibly mean. Anyone who looks at a maestro's utterances critically is indeed faced with a challenge here. My own humble attempt may roughly run as under:

The essence of music can be seized only by means of *spiritual* rhythm. Such rhythm is no mere disposition of beats but is rather an intense focusing of the mind on the effort

to invent or produce new music. The focusing is at once a curb on the mind's natural tendency to flit from one thought or image to another; and may therefore be said to be a step in self-control or moral progress. Yet *the effort to create*, however intense and focused it be, cannot quite predetermine the ways to necessary fruition; and though it is surely required, it has to keep itself reverentially open to the emergence of something which outstrips anticipation. This is why the creation of a new musical work, or of the 'total harmony', strikes the composer as a kind of *revelation*, and makes him bow to the exhaustless mystery of music-making. This is how the creation of art may be said to be "mightier than the artist himself", and this is how music is seen to put the mind in a relation of happy subservience to the 'total harmony' of the work.

In the Indian tradition, however, music has been related to man's spiritual *destiny*. In his well-known work, *Sangeeta Ratnākara*, Śārngadeva goes to the extent of saying that even by merely looking at or touching the Veena one attains emancipation of the spirit and redemption from heinous sins<sup>5</sup>. According to one legend, if out of the two wives of the sage Yagnavalkya, Gārgi and Maitreyi, only the former needed her husband's assistance in attaining *moksha*, it was essentially because Maitreyi could achieve the same supreme objective quite on her own, *because of her expertise in playing the Veena*<sup>6</sup>. Another similar story relates to the Buddha. There was a Veena in his chamber, we are told, the strings of which would emit such an ethereal sound on being touched by breeze that it "aroused in him that great dispassion which led to his renunciation of earthly pleasures"<sup>7</sup>.

Finally, to turn to contemporary musical practice, Ustad R. Fahimuddin Dagar is fond of singing a Dhruvapad in *rāga Bihāg*, the opening line of which runs thus: *Sur tattva gyan tab pāve jab jeevan mukti ko roop sādhe*<sup>8</sup>.

Now, views (and compositions) such as the ones referred to above fascinate me; and they are very likely to impress the traditional Indian mind because of its ingrained interest in spiritual matters. But, on the other hand, I cannot ignore the evidence of the present either. Today, indeed, the fact is that a considerable amount of our music — of Hindustani music, I mean — is pretty good without having anything to do with *mukti* or *nirvāṇa*. And as for the references I have made to traditional views and beliefs, the way they relate music to life's nobler values or its surpassing end is surely not pellucid. To the critical eye it may even suggest some immediate questions such as the following:

What exactly is meant by *spirituality*? Is it an invasive orientation of one's whole being and attitudes or just an occasional though very satisfying experience? If it is the latter, is it to be *identified* with the feeling of a *peace* that passeth understanding? Could it not occasionally take the form of an intense yearning for the divine? And if it is the former — that is, a pervasive colouring of one's whole being — and if the act of music-making always calls for *tādātmya* or intense (if ideal) oneness with the act in question, should not the *lifelong* practice of this art of melody and rhythm be expected to make for the visible spiritualization of one's conduct and attitudes in daily life? But how many of our top musicians can fairly claim to have *become* spiritual, as against the mere having of a passing experience of peace, through the practice of music? Do their lives and personalities appear to be blessed with what the Bible speaks of as "fruits" or "riches of

the spirit" and the Gita as *daivi sampadā*? Is the craving for ever higher fees and awards of honorific titles a mark of spiritual growth?

Questions such as these cannot be answered straightaway. I must first carefully determine what exactly *the concept of spirituality means in relation to music*, and how this meaning is to direct our thinking from now on. The word music, of course, does not present any semantic problem. We all know what it means. We may not find it easy to *define* music. But, in a general way, it is known to us all as the art of melody and rhythm. It may also be generally agreed that what we are here concerned with (in principle) is not music as merely notated or recorded, but live music — that is, music in the process of being made, and also as being heard, at least by the musician himself (or herself), say, during the course of *riyāz* (private practice) at home. In my view, it would be a clear error to reflect on the subject without keeping the *rasika* too in mind. After all, music which claims to be *spiritual* must in fact *appear* so to knowledgeable listeners. The full truth indeed is that *the precise spiritual significance that a work of art may be said to reveal depends also and importantly on what kind of a person the individual contemplator is and not only on what the work itself may appear to contain*. On this subtle point, however, I will focus a little later; and presently I may deal with a more obvious question.

What do we mean by the word *spiritual*? Quite a few things, one may say. Some of these meanings are clearly religious, others quite secular. The *non-secular* meanings of the word in question are:

belonging, referring, or relating to the spirit or soul rather than to the body or to physical things;

belonging, referring, relating to religion; or sacred, holy, divine.

The *secular* meanings are:

belonging to or arising from the mind or intellect; or highly refined in thought or feeling.

Now, the secular meanings are easy to deal with. Our music may indeed be *spiritual* in the sense that it is importantly a matter of the artist's independent thinking, recall, integration and imagining during the actual course of performance and not merely of following any pre-fixed notational plan. *Thinking* is there because the raga being sung has to be saved against intrusions of the idioms of allied ragas; and also because the distribution of time over the *vilambit* and *drut* compositions has to done (generally) in conscious accord with audience-response. *Recall* is present because the *sthāyi* has to be repeated (as an anchor), say, after every two or three *tāns*. *Integration* may be seen in the way different phases of the singing — say, *sthāyi-antarā*, *barhat*, *tāns* (and again *sthāyi* — are proportioned to one another. And *imagining* obviously helps the vocalist in determining what is to come after, or is rather demanded by, the present detail of creation. During the act of singing or playing (I repeat) one has to take great care to ensure that the treatment of the present rāga is not at all disturbed by glimpses of those rāgas which employ the same *swaras*, if in a different way. Thus, while singing rāga Bhoopālī one has to guard against the influx of alien idioms of Deskār and Shuddha Kalyān. What is more, when after a lucid and elaborate treatment of the opening melody-mode, the musician has

to switch over to a quite different rāga, perhaps in response to a request from a respectable rasika in the audience, the transition is surely a strain on the vocalist's intellectual powers. *It is like adapting oneself suddenly, quickly, and agreeably, to a quite new neighbourhood.*

Let me turn now to the other meaning of the word *spiritual* — the spiritual as relating to matters of the spirit, the religious, holy or divine. How *exactly* does our music appear to be spiritual (in this sense) *where it really does*? Here, I have to make four points by way of an answer:

a. First, the text of the composition — I mean the words which it builds upon — must speak of matters relating to the spirit. Thus, the *bandish* or the composition may be an invocation to some god or goddess; or it may glorify the attributes of the Lord, or sing of the value of reciting His Name. It may even be a prayer of the musician himself for a fuller insight into the mysteries of music. There is a Dhruvapad composition, passed on to me by my mentor in music, the late Ustad Rahimuddin Khan Dagar, the text of which runs thus:

तू ही है सुमिरन जोग मोरे दाता  
किरपा करो मोपे  
दीजे स्वर ज्ञान...<sup>9</sup>

b. But, however rich and significant be the verbal content of a composition, the music will not actually appear spiritual to a rasika, unless it is sung *sweetly* and in a *tranquil, yearning or ecstatic* manner. But I must explain why I pick these three particular adjectives, besides the adverb *sweetly*. Melodic charm is, of course, the basic requirement. A good many Dhruvapad-singers commit the mistake of believing that if they only pack the sthāyi-antarā twosome with high-sounding words of ethico-religious significance — or with the names of gods and goddesses — their singing will impress the listeners as spiritual, and so respectable, even if sweetness is sacrificed for the sake of emphatic utterance. This is, I may add, one of the main reasons because of which the Dhruvapad form has gradually lost its pristine appeal. The loss is also due, of course, to the average Dhruvapad-singer's penchant for wayward and hectic *layakāri*, which often only shows how the singer can (somehow) arrive at the *sama* after (randomly) improvised variations in rhythm, not how beautifully the pace of *singing* can regulate itself.

To turn now to the three aesthetic predicates I have listed, the word *tranquil* is important because tranquillity or serenity and humility have been commonly regarded as the essential marks of a man who is truly spiritual. In his *Epistle to the Galatians*, St Paul includes *peace* in his list of the *fruits* or *riches* of the spirit. And the Gita, in its 16th chapter, speaks of *patience* and *humility* as important marks of *daivi sampadā* or *spiritual* plenitude. It is, of course, very difficult to fix the precise *laya* required by a look of serenity in singing. But it is possible to make two general remarks in this context. On the one hand, *laya* cannot be too slow here; indeed, I have not heard any Bhajans in Jhoomrā/Tilwārā tālas. On the other hand, in our classical vocal music where a manifest structure or form is of pre-eminent value, the semblance of a spiritual look cannot coexist

with a pace so quick *and so assertively used* that the singing may appear hectic. The laya chosen should rather appear unhurried all along, of course, without seeming wobbly or anaemic at any stage.

c. Further, and this is a point which is relevant to *live* music alone, the manner of singing has to be such that the vocalist may become and appear truly lost in contemplating the glory of divinity of the deity or of the Name to which the composition relates. This is necessary because where the singer wears a look of *tādātmya* — or appears quite absorbed in the act of (sweet) singing — the *rasikas* also tend to get imbued with the lofty import of the song. Such transmission of a mood is indeed easy where the listening is marked by what has been called an attitude of wise passiveness.

d. But, we may note, the attunement of the singer himself (with the ongoing music) depends upon quite a few different factors: first, the individual quality of his own personality and *set* attitudes, chief of them being his religious orientation; second, his *present* ability to focus on the singing; and thirdly, the *structural cohesion* of the composition itself. How exactly this quality counts here can be easily explained. If the fabric of the rhythm, the structure of the *sthāyi-antarā* twosome, and the verbal content of the composition all seem to share a common character, the entire *bandish* will appear gathered, and easy to handle, so to say, and the singer will be able to focus his attention quite without effort.

Here, as illustration, I may refer to a *Dhruvpad* composition<sup>10</sup> which is set in *rāga* *Gurjari Todi* and in a rhythm-cycle of 11 beats, the syllabic structure of which runs as follows:

धा धिन्ता, तिटकतागदिगिन धा, तिटकतागदिगिन धा, तिटकतागदिगिन धा  
1 2 3 5 6 8 9 11

The identical bunches of *bols* that follow the first two beats are clearly *three*; and the text of the song too (as given below) projects the concept of three, in the way of a *triple* recitation of His Name, or by referring to the *three main deities*, *three basic functions of God* — namely, creation, preservation, and dissolution; and also to the *three kinds of suffering* and the *three guṇas* distinguished in traditional Indian philosophy. Here is the full text of this composition:

सुमरौ तेरो नाम, तेरो नाम, तेरो नाम  
अन्तरा : तू ही ब्रह्मा, तू ही विष्णु, तू ही है महेश  
तेरो ही गुन गावें, गुन गावें, गुन गावें सब  
अन्तरा : जनमदाता, पालक तू, संहारक तू ही  
ताप त्रिविध गुनातीत पारब्रह्मा तू है  
तेरो ही गुन...सब  
अन्तरा : सुखः दुख, राग द्वेष, जनम-मरण द्वन्द रहित  
निराकार, निरालम्ब, निर्विकार तू है  
तेरो ही गुन गावें...सब  
सुमरौ तेरो...

Tranquillity of pace and manner is, however, by no means indispensable for a spiritual look in music. Where the text of the song permits it, even a yearning manner too can make for the look in question. It may even be necessary in some cases. Thus, if the vocalist has chosen to sing that well-known Bhajan of saint-poet Surdas which opens as follows — say, in *rāga* Sohni and *madhya-laya* Tritāla — a yearning way of singing (at the *tār swaras* in particular) would be both apt and requisite:

प्रभु मोरे अवगुन चित न धरो<sup>11</sup>

The whole composition is a soulful blend of the prayers of praise and petition, and some devout argument; and so, though the aesthetic pace cannot be hectic here too, the overall manner of singing has to be impassioned (though not frenzied) rather than tranquil. Be it noted that an impassioned utterance is not necessarily a loud one. Even where it wells up from the very depths of one's being, a woebegone sigh may just kiss the ear delicately; and, in the instance we have taken — of a Bhajan sung in *rāga* Sohni — where it occurs in singing words like 'न धरो' or 'पर करो' — the *rishabh* in *tār saptak* is often a mere line of longing for pardon or release, quite gently perceived by the *rasika*, but very satisfying.

The question of pace as related to a song's spiritual look is, however, a tricky one. Much would depend, here, on the text of the song and on the vocalist's ability for modulated utterance as demanded by verbal meaning. But a fairly safe remark can be made in the context of the point in question. Aesthetic pace (or *laya*) is surely as vital a determinant of the semblance I am talking about as the number of beats in the rhythm-cycle chosen. I must, however, explain the point. *Ektala* comprises twelve beats and *Sool-tala* only ten: yet the pace at which a *drut Ektala Khayal* is generally sung does not seem to admit of a spiritual look, whereas *Dhrupads* in *Sool* are not so commonly handicapped. At this point, however, I cannot claim to be perfectly sure; for I have heard some *Sool-tala Dhrupads* sung so hectically by some members of the illustrious Dagar family that, quite apart from *layakāri*, even the basic composition would appear helter-skelter rather than the patient and careful laying of a melodic foundation. In such cases it is impossible for the music to appear spiritual. On the other hand, in the *Dhrupad Samaroha* of 1998 I was gratified to listen to a duly serene presentation of a *Shankarā Dhrupad* in *Sool-tala* by a pupil of *Ustad Fariduddin Dagar*; and the singer here was not a member of the Dagar family<sup>12</sup>. I could also here refer to a *rāga Bhairav Dhrupad* in the same *tala* presented by me as far back as the year 1970, at the *Sangeet Natak Akademi's* seminar on 'Science and Music'. The *sthāyi* of this composition is a duly reposeful singing of the following words:

प्रथम नाम लेत, शिव, शिव, शिव<sup>13</sup>

But is the semblance of spirituality in music inseparable from appropriateness of the meaning of its *verbal* content? If yes, what shall we say of the *ālāpa* of the *Dhrupad*-

singer? It is clearly quite without any filling of (meaningful) words. Is it therefore to be taken as intrinsically incapable of appearing spiritual? Finally, where music does in fact look spiritual, what is that which it demands and draws upon in those to whom it looks spiritual?

Before, however, I begin to address these questions, let me quickly distinguish the different feelings or states of being which are commonly thought to characterize experiences which are generally called *spiritual*. The feeling of tranquillity is perhaps the best known of these. It is, in this context, instructive to note that whereas poets who are fond of contemplating nature claim to experience, at times, a 'peace that passeth understanding', *mantras* in our sacred texts freely link the sacred syllable, *Aum*, with *shānti* or peace.

This peace is, of course, not kept confined to our inner being; in some Vedic prayers even the vegetable kingdom is devoutly petitioned to be kept free from disturbance in the natural processes of growth. But, on the inner side, the experience is not *quite* the same in the two cases. I admit that, as in the case of a sensitive poet, habitual communion with nature may well instill into our inner being a calm that is too deep to be ruffled by thoughts of variety and divisiveness, and may even quicken in us the elevating sense of a profound underrunning unity. This is indeed the message of poetic utterances such as the following:

... And I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts, a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused  
A motion and a spirit, that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of thought,  
And rolls through all things ...<sup>4</sup>

But this inner *peaceableness*, desirable though it admittedly is, issues only from what has been called "a wise passiveness", that is, from the attitude of just being with nature, moving about in its ample stretches, and remaining open to the sights and sounds, and to the feel of the gentle winds and moonlit waves that it offers. It is not the fruit of any active regulation of our innate psychic propensities, and so it differs from the *equimindedness* of which the Gita speaks in its account of the man of steadfast wisdom. Yet the two forms of tranquillity are not quite dissimilar either. They alike seem to rise above that facile sense of plurality which often clouds for us the underrunning unity of things and persons. Where it is heartfelt, the prayer (of which Gandhi was fond) that *one and all* may be granted *sanmati* or the right sense of discrimination is an index of authentic spirituality. Nor is the poet merely using words when he records his intuition of a "sense sublime/Of something far more deeply interfused..."

Turning now to our music, I may venture to express an opinion which may seem to be merely subjective, but which I find it difficult to shake off. It seems to me that in the



opening stages of ālāpa on the Veena — that is, so long as the music is (at least) as much a flow as abidance at individual notes — when a competent musician builds upon swaras in the *mandra saptak*, the raga's unitary form appears to wriggle out, so to say, from the discreteness of the notes that are commonly taken to make it, and to help us identify it; and that, what is more, the manifest depth and power of playing (at notes in the *mandra*, I repeat) evoke an *awesomeness* that is commonly regarded as a mark of the sublime, and may even make the music appear "like a god yearning in pain"<sup>15</sup>. If this awesomeness is also a feature of intense religious experience — as indeed it is said to be in Otto's well-known work, *The Idea of the Holy* — the kind of instrumental music I have just referred to may also be said to be somewhat spiritual. By way of illustrating the point, I may here cite the following from one of my 'critical' pieces written long ago, on Ustad Dabeer Khan's Bilāskhāni ālāpa on the Veena in his (A.I.R.) National Programme of May 1956:

[I was struck by] a consistently immaculate rendering of *re* as emanating from within the ground sa...deeply bestirred, sweet and soulful...Here, at once, one feels impelled to compare...*veenā-ālāpa* with the quivering sensuousness of touch seen [at times] in *sitar*-playing, as in the hands of... Wilayat [Khan] or Halim [Jaffer]. The secret of the difference seems to be this. A note which turns and twists before it has steadied itself seems flippant... The vibrant trail of a steadily rendered [Veena] *swara*, on the other hand, produces, specially when the tone is... [emphatic]...an irresistible impression of deep inward feeling [and] power.

In vocal ālāpa, on the other hand, a semblance of spirituality can be evoked by an unremitting austerity of manner coupled with, say, the following: quintessential sweetness — that is, a melodic charm which is *very easy* on the ear, but does not weaken anywhere; tranquillity of pace; and such a manifest inwardness of manner that the swaras appear to well up on their own, without any effort on the part of the vocalist. I cannot decide which of the qualities I have listed is most important for an evocation of the semblance of spirituality in music; but I do find it possible to offer some argument in support of the one which opens the list, namely, *austerity of manner*. I believe that, quite as truly in music as in a person's way of living, abstention from mere ornament is one of the surest marks of spirituality. As I speak thus, I have in mind an unforgettable treatment of Gurjari Todi by Ustad Rahimuddin Dagar in the Radio Sangeet Sammelan of 1956. The music critic of the *Times of India* came out with a very apt comment on this recital:

The finest recital of the day came from Rahimuddin Khan Dagar whose treatment of Todi was an *embodiment of repose and tranquillity*.

Here, I think it necessary to add that, along with the general manner of musical utterance, the *specific* visual or emotive hue with which *individual* notes may be sometimes invested can also play a vital role in evoking a spiritual look in vocal music. The Sohni rishabh in tār, to a specific way of singing which I have already referred, can easily wear a faraway look. But how exactly this look strikes a particular rasika would depend largely on his individual make-up. If the interests which dominate his life are only



mundane, what the note in question makes him visualize may be physical distance merely. But if they are religious or spiritual, the same note would tend to suggest not mere remoteness, but qualities like *transcendence*, *detachment*, *renunciation*.

Here, at once, some comment on three distinct points seems demanded by the context: first, the relation of an aesthetic appearance of singing to strength or gentleness of utterance; second, the need for using aesthetic, and not merely grammatical, terms in our talk about music; and, thirdly, the part played by the *rasika* in determining the overall, emergent look of the music he is listening to. In respect of the first point, I may make only one simple remark—just one, because the other determinants of the look of a *swara* as sung, as the precise quality of voice and measure of involvement with the making of music, are peculiar to every singer, and so defy a thorough estimation. I may only say that the look of transcendence (or detachment) is by no means inseparable from gentleness of utterance, though so far, it may seem, I have taken this relation to be necessary. In some *Bhajans* presented by Kumar Gandharva, the *komal re*, appearing quite early in the singing of *sthāyi* itself, would be quite full-throated; but it would yet seem (to me) as suggestive of detachment, though not quite without assistance, of course, from the meaning of the text of the song. On the other hand, in *ālāpa* which is done without the aid of words, the same note may be sung as just a slender, luminous line (in *tār*), as Rahimuddin Khan used to do, and be yet quite evocative of a look of transcendence on its own, though not without being quietly perceived as being a little higher than *shadjā*. I hasten to add, however, that though the two cases of the use of *rishabh* I have just adverted to may both be said to look ‘detached’ (or to suggest renunciation), the semblance as it appears to a watchful *rasika* is *not exactly* the same in the two cases, though (I repeat) both are *generally alike* in suggesting what they do. The thing is that the state of renunciation (or *vairāgya*) itself admits of a distinction. If the state in question arises automatically from a moderately watchful journey through the course of life—which may itself make one aware of the fickleness of the common sources of worldly joys, as also of human relations—the feeling of moving away from attachment to the world and its contents is likely to be tinged with a little sadness at what one has for long been fond of, but is now about to turn away from. For such a slightly nostalgic and not quite settled state of renunciation, a sylphlike singing of *komal re* would do, as an apt melodic image. But where the state in question is a firmly established one, by virtue of being the fruit of some hard but purifying lifelong discipline; and is, in addition, aglow with a feel of the higher reality against which the joys of the world easily pale into vapidity<sup>16</sup>, a rich and vibrant *rishabh* would be needed as a melodic index.

As I recall my actual experience of the two aesthetic shades of *komal re* which I have just distinguished, I feel impelled to dwell upon a thought which has just dawned upon my mind, during the very course of writing these words. The thought issues from a careful phenomenological analysis of an experience (which I now recollect) of listening to a bit of *ālāpa* in *raga Shree*. The note *pa* is clearly more distant from the *mandra ni* than the adjacent *rishabh* — adjacent to *sa*, I mean. Yet, whereas the *ni-re* twosome, in case the second note is elongated a bit, does evoke the suggestion of ‘moving away from or rising

above', both everyday ways of referring to what I have called the semblance of transcendence or detachment, the shift from re to pa is not so suggestive, though the melodic distance traversed is here greater than in the ascent to re from ni. This is a clear instance of how the aesthetic semblance of distance can be quite different from the literal remoteness of two widely apart swaras.

A cognate point to be noted here is that the language that we commonly use in identifying and remembering the notes that go to make a rāga is not quite adequate to show how the same notes actually appear in a bandish or in a passage of ālāpa; and I can only wonder why the inadequacy has not been noticed by our musicologists so far. A parallel should make the point clear. To distinguish colours as red, blue or green is to take *them merely as they are before being mixed on the palette*, and also much before they come to appear as determinants of the overall look of a picture where they may appear and be said to be *warm or cool, recessive, or vibrant*. None of these qualities is or can be *actually* there in the picture; yet the trained contemplator would insist that they really appear to be there in the work. Similarly, though it may be difficult to accept the following remark of Tagore —

Indian music concerns itself more with human experience as interpreted by religion, than with experience in an everyday sense...Our music...takes us to...[the] lonely region of renunciation...<sup>17</sup>

— in respect of the bulk of our music as practised today, it should not seem improper to use aesthetic terms in respect of individual swaras as they appear in the living course of music. To illustrate, one may well characterize the *pancham* of Shree as '*kamalyat*' if the singer's voice rises from re to pa with the slenderness of the stem of a flower and then opens and gathers itself at pa in one undivided instant of audio-visual charm! And if the komal rishabh of Bhairava is, in *avaroha*, visualized as offering *arghya* (sanctified water) at the shadja, what would be the harm in calling it rishabh of the *arghi* variety? Similarly, if in a Sohni recital the rishabh in *tār* appears to look detached and satisfying in itself, why should we hesitate to call it *sanyastha*? My own view is that if, during the course of singing, the vocalist contemplates the raga-swaras used in terms of such images, his attunement with the ongoing music will only deepen; and, what is more, he will be saved from letting the recital lapse into a merely technical exercise in keeping to the grammar of raga and tala.

But it is obvious that the way of looking which I am pleading for can be adopted only by those who prefer to look on music as an art, rather than as only a matter of working at melody and rhythm in predetermined ways. I admit that there are works of art, as some of the creations of Mondrian, which only tease perception and may not be said to mean anything; and that, what is more, attention to every work of art exercises and so puts an edge on percipience. But most works of art have a meaning — or rather *import*, because the meaning is here inseparable from what meets the ear or the eye, or from the word-bound images that a literary work, say, a poem, may directly evoke — which is surely not confined to the work as it appears to the untutored eye or intellect, and has to be filled in,

importantly, by the *rasika*'s individual ability to perceive and integrate — and to visualize on the basis of — what is directly presented to sense or to literal understanding.

I may buttress the point I am seeking to make by citing an instance which I have found irresistible. I acclaim it because of two reasons. First, it convinces me of the sanity of the traditional Indian emphasis on the role of the *rasika* in art contemplation. Second, it makes me realize that what has been spoken of as *tādātmya* by our ancient theorists of art is not the mere coincidence of two inert points, but an imaginative growing one with the essence of the other; and that in so far as both imagining and getting at the core of what a work of art signifies are processes—and alike never-ending, because they are both determined (if in part) by the *rasika*'s own growth in respect of both experience and capacities — we can never circumscribe the meaning of a (great) work of art. But let us now turn to the work, a picture, I have in mind.

*The Return of the Prodigal Son* is one of the best-known paintings of Rembrandt. Many have reacted to it in their own individual ways. But if a particular *rasika*—Henri J.M. Nouwen, a Dutch Roman Catholic priest who has authored a remarkable book on the Biblical parable<sup>18</sup>—sees in the painter's depiction of the powerful Gospel story three distinct states in Man-God relationship (such as the errant soul's turning anew to God, restoration of sonship, and the Holy Father's compassion) by means of a deeply personal and resonant meditation, the interpretation cannot be dismissed as a mere imposition on the work, because the intense reaction proceeds all along on very close attention to the minutest perceivable details of the masterpiece, that is, not only its larger-than-life size, and "abundant reds, browns, and yellows"<sup>19</sup>, but even the subtle tenderness of the way in which the Father is seen to embrace the son in the picture<sup>20</sup>. But if all this can happen in contemplating a picture, what is the warrant for believing that the meaning of music is *confined* to its sensuous elements? Why should the *rasika* be denied freedom to react to art not only on the basis of its grammatical norms, but also in accordance with his own intellectual and moral equipment as a person? In practice, however, the *rasika* does not have to ask for this freedom; he has it already, and exercises it.

To conclude, the look of spirituality in music depends not only on what is objectively there in the play of melody and rhythm, but on how the given directs, and appears to, the uniquely trained (and burgeoning) sensibility, imagination, and value-sense of the *rasika*.

#### NOTES

- 1,2. These are both extracts from Saurabh Bhattacharya's conversation with the Sitar maestro, reported in the June 1999 issue of *Life Positive*, pp. 34–35.
3. From Mohan Nadkarni's interview with the *vidvān* as it appeared in the *Economic Times*, Delhi, on 27 March 1983.
4. Cited by Susanne K. Langer in her book *Feeling and Form*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 3rd Impression, 1963, p. 131.

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5. S.C. Anantapadmanabhan: *The Veena — Its Technique, Theory and Practice*, Gana Vidya Bharati, Delhi, 1954, p. 5.
6. Ibid., p. 8.
7. Ibid.
8. As sung by Ustad Fahimuddin Dagar, this composition was one of the many Dhruvapads recorded by me at the Central Production Centre (CPC) of Doordarshan (New Delhi, 19, 20, and 24 July 1999) on behalf of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts.
9. This composition too was included in the recording just referred to.
10. This Dhruvapad was presented by me, first on 1 December 1998 during the course of my Bhatkhande Memorial Lecture (on Hindustani music) at the University of Delhi; and, again, as a part of my talk on 'Spiritual Dimensions of Indian Music' at India Habitat Centre on 3 June 1999, while participating in a seminar organized by Swaralaya, an association devoted to the promotion of Indian music. In the first case, the composition was sung jointly by me and Pooja Srivastava; and, in the second case, by Pooja and her elder sister, Smita.
11. I have here in mind the way this Bhajan used to be sung by the late Ustad Rahimuddin Khan Dagar, or as it is sung today by Ustad Iqbal Ahmed Khan, the present doyen of the Delhi *gharānā*.
12. The vocalist in this case was Dr A.K. Sanyal of Benares Hindu University.
13. This Dhruvapad was presented on 28 March, in the morning session of the seminar referred to. For the full text and exhaustive notational analysis of this composition, see Dr Anjali Mittal's *The Concept of Form in Hindustani Music*, D.K. Printworld, 1990.
14. Wordsworth: 'Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey', lines 95–104.
15. Keats: 'Eve of St. Agnes', 56th line.
16. Here, I am thinking of the following profound couplet of saint-poet Kabir:  
हम घर जारा अपना, लिया मुराड़ा हाथ  
अब घर जारु तासुका, जो चले हमारे साथ
17. Such a view is obviously not true to ragas which are *chanchal* (or lively) in temper; and to compositions the texts of which aim at evoking *shringār* rasa.
18. *The Return of the Prodigal Son—A Story of Homecoming*, St. Paul's, Bandra, Mumbai, 1998.
19. Ibid., p. 13.
20. Ibid., p. 10.