

EDUARD HANSLICK'S AESTHETICS OF MUSIC AND THE CONCEPT OF NADA-BRAHMAN

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Eduard Hanslick has not been given the due importance he deserves, in the field of musical aesthetics, not because he is an infamous opponent of the famous Wagner, but due to the fact that he has been misunderstood as a staunch autonomist denying the relationship of music, either with human feelings and emotions, or with nature.

The popular concept of music is that it is a language of emotions. Herbert Spencer, the proponent of the emotionalistic theory, firmly believes and preaches that music is nothing but human emotions expressed in the medium of sound, or rather it is a more improved stage of the vocables we use in our everyday speech. In his words :

"Every one of the alterations of voice which we have found to be physiological result of pain or pleasure, is carried to its greatest extreme in vocal music."¹

Why, Herbert Spencer alone, every human being, a seat of emotions, will support, at the first hand, the emotionalistic theory of music. When an artist fails to impress the audience we denounce him as a mere craftsman-singer devoid of emotional appeal. Eduard Hanslick, on the other hand, says without the least doubt:

"music represents no feelings, either definite or indefinite."²

Another point, i.e., the relationship of music with nature, is also taken for granted, not only by musicians but by all music-lovers and by most aestheticians. Beethoven has his "Moonlight Sonata", "Pastoral Symphony."; various composers of all countries have their seasonal songs; we in India sing *Malhar*, *Megh* etc. during the rains, *Paraj*, *Basant Bahar* in the spring season, *Bhairab*, *Yogia*, *Lalit* at daybreak, *Purabi*, *Maroya* during sunset; *Sarang* has

been associated with midday, *Malkaus* and *Kanada* with the still midnight. We have been maintaining from ancient days that nature has her obvious influence on music. So, quite naturally we are severely shocked when Hanslick declares that there is no link between music and nature and says further :

"There is nothing beautiful in nature as far as music is concerned."³

We might even take Hanslick as a non-musician materialist when he says that nature has nothing to contribute to the cause of music except the crude materials like metal ore, wood of forest, skin and gut of animals for making musical instruments.

So, we find that the subjective elements of the human mind and the objective manifestations of nature, both are rejected downright by Hanslick while establishing his musical aesthetics. Obviously the question, arises in our mind, — what is, then, the beautiful in music and what constitutes the essence of music? Hanslick's thesis is :

"The essence of music is sound and motion."⁴

This requires a clear explanation in order to draw out its genuine merit.

The New Encyclopaedia of Music and Musicians says about his theory:

"...beauty in music inheres wholly in the content of the tone-fabric itself."⁵

Probably Hanslick is indebted to Johann Friedrich Herbert⁶ for his thesis as it is Herbert who first says that music has no subject at all and a good musician does not travel beyond the limit of the art of music but penetrates deeply into its "inmost recess". It is Herbert who first holds that to adhere to meaning is just to lose the inner aspect of music and to cling only to its superfluous associations which may vary from person to person in accordance with the listener's personal temperament.

After going through Herbert, as mentioned by Hanslick, he proceeds to write his book *Vom Musicalisch-Schönen* which should not be mistaken as meant for only western music but which should be merited and regarded as the discovery of the true spirit of the art of music in general and should be applicable to any style of art-music, especially absolute music of any country. Titles, conventional associations and fanciful ideas stand in the way of the desired perspective of enjoyment of the real beauty in music, i.e., the aural art of sonorous sounds, in the spectrum of pitch and motion. Hanslick's focus is on that point.

One more important reason why Hanslick has not been able to earn sincere recognition of the musical aestheticians is that he thinks that song is a bit lower graded art than pure music because the union of poetry and music is a sort of "morganatic union".⁷ In his opinion, musical beauty is of a divine character⁸ in the sense that it has little connection with worldly experience; while poetry, however transcendental it may be, deals with some definite thought or idea. A layman in the technicalities of music or rather an interested listener without musical literacy can enjoy a song more than pure music. A poet composer like Rabindra Nath Tagore believes that a perfect blending of poetry and music gives birth to a separate form of art which is much more humane than pure music. Pure music may have cosmic appeal due to its impersonal spirit, but a song easily gets much closer to human feeling. Susanne K. Langer's view on this point is noteworthy. She does not devalue song as Hanslick does, nor does she lay undue emphasis on the literary appeal of a song. Her study is that, words in a good song give up their literary status and turn into a purely musical element. A music-minded listener need not be aware of the meaning of the words of a song. Semantic understanding may not be an added advantage to the listener but the quality of the tune is a must in the art of composing or singing a song in order to satisfy the listener. Therein lies the musicality of a song. In Langer's words :

"When words and music come together in song, music swallows words; not only mere words and literal sentences, but even literary word-structures, poetry. Song is not a compromise between poetry and music, though the text taken by itself be a great poem; song is music."⁹

So, Langer places song in the same category as pure music.

Helmholtz, on the other hand, while investigating the sensations of tone, assumes that pure music, though an independent art now, has evolved from song. Historically all music was developed from song.¹⁰ Afterwards, absolute music was attained by instruments having compounded tones resembling the human voice.

So it is clear that while Langer promotes the status of song to that of music, and Helmholtz historically values song as the origin of pure music, Hanslick declares it as a morganatic union of poetry and music, and it is degrading for the art of music to corroborate words in itself.

Everyone's angle of vision may be different, but it is evident that Hanslick has been able to plunge deep into the essence of music to find the gem in it.

In one point Hanslick and Ferruccio Busoni¹¹ are alike. Both find little connection in the art of music with worldly feelings. Busoni was acquainted with Indian theology, especially the concept of *Nirvana* of Buddhism. But,

whereas Hanslick's total emphasis is on form, Busoni says that a definite form is quite insufficient to express the celestial and unending felicities of the paradise of music. A performance, however artistic it may be, cannot excell the probability of more and more beauty of the etherial art "music", the Sun of the universe of sonority. Thus, being too romantic, Busoni finds nothing to grasp as an object. He is in search after the unperformed which might be more excellent than the performed. In Hindu belief, music is the medium of salvation. But Busoni is so overwhelmed in music that he finds himself nowhere in the midst of the infinite joy of music. Thus he draws a parallel analogy of the Buddhistic *Nirvana* and the realm of music. But Hanslick, on the other hand, is a practical aesthete, depending on reality. In his belief, music is not a means to anything but an end in itself. Music, a configuration of sound and motion is the object of enjoyment, a quite different entity in the field of creativity.

But, how is total identification possible between music and a music-lover? Hanslick says that it is acquired by virtue of musical contemplation. By eliminating all kinds of emotion this contemplation should be based on the intellectual faculty of a genuine listener. In this point also Hanslick might be misunderstood. Musical intellect is quite different from ordinary intelligence. Musical intelligence is pointed to the power of minute observation of each and every moment of music, each sound-pattern, intricate combination of notes, motion upwards and downwards, *i.e.*, ascending and descending, consonance and dissonance, each modulation in the form of crescendo and diminuendo along with the time-factor consisting of variety of movements in the regular unity of a particular rhythm-structure. In short, the attention of the listener should be directed to the tune and rhythm, which constitute the subject of music. In other words, there is no subject in music beyond its specific form. Due to this intrinsic exclusiveness and lack of extrinsic reference, one may call it an abstract art in the same sense of abstract painting consisting of the play of colour and form without clearly depicting any particular object. But Hanslick clearly declares that music is not an abstract art since it has its concrete form of successions of sound. In spite of all irrelevant fancies in a composition he emphasizes the definite form, which is the embodiment of "sound in motion."

Romain Rolland, though not a musicologist, yet a keen lover of music and a thinker too, is against the autonomy of music, nay, any kind of fine arts. He says that music has not such an abstract character as it has its obvious relationship with all other arts.¹² But Hanslick's opinion is that the relationship of one art with another is the discourse of the history of music rather than that of musical aesthetics. Hanslick does not confuse philosophy of beauty with history of art. His discussions are concentrated on the peculiar beauty of music.

But, despite rejecting all kinds of extra-musical elements in music, it must have some relationship with the human mind. Hanslick says that though

music cannot represent human feelings, it is closely associated with the dynamic properties of human mind. In his own words —

“It [music] may reproduce the motion accompanying psychical action, according to its momentum : speed, slowness strength, weakness, increasing and decreasing intensity. But motion is only one of the concomitants of feeling, not the feeling itself.”¹³

Due to this concomitance of musical motion and psychic dynamism, it has been possible to exploit music in the background of theatre and cinema to heighten the effect of action at the moments of tension and relief. As music has no definite subject-matter, it can be employed to any subject whether of a lyric or of a drama. In spite of this, Hanslick opines that the limits of music are not widened. These are the secondary roles of music. In Hanslick’s science of beauty music is rather an effect than a cause, a product rather than a material. Hanslick says in a clearcut way —

“Music consists of successions and forms of sound, and these alone constitute the subject.... It has no subject beyond the combinations of notes we hear, for music speaks not only by means of sounds, it speaks nothing but sound.”¹⁴

Sound is all in all in music. Sound is both the substance and form. Music has no extrinsic subject. Of course, this does not necessarily mean that it has no intrinsic quality.

A good piece of music has its own character, individuality and excellence. It is the creation of the musical talent of a composer. A true listener listens to it with all his musical intelligence, surcharged with aesthetic enjoyment all alone.

Hanslick objects to the opinion that the spirit of music is impersonal because the subjective mind which composes music is essentially personal. So, his point of view should not be called absolutism or autonomism since he hints at the dependence of music upon musical personality. Hanslick may discard any definite meaning of musical notes, he may not accept any associative power of sound in music, but he clearly points to the significance of music, an unadulterated sonorous configuration which is made by man and made for man in the realm of aesthetic creativity and enjoyment.

Yet, to a critical reader, Hanslick has left a few points of ambiguity, which must be dealt with carefully.

Firstly, Hanslick discards the representation of feelings in music, yet he admits of the representation of the dynamic properties of feelings. But is dynamism or “the motion accompanying psychical action” at all possible

without the help of feeling? Does it not determine the subtle and intangible relationship between music and feelings?

Secondly, he asserts that music has a subject, but the subject is a purely musical one, intrinsic and identified with its concrete form. But, is it at all practicable to strain only the musical faculty out of the composite structure of the human mind? Does not music belong to the complete whole of the human mind? Does not music belong to the complete whole of the human personality? A specialist or a professional may drive at the form only. But, does it prove that this has no connection with the extra-musical counterparts of our being?

In these two sets of enquiry, we should be aware of the fact that during Hanslick's time, the science of the human mind, *i.e.*, psychology was not adequately advanced with its modern findings of gestalt and synesthesia. So it was impossible for Hanslick to acknowledge the relationship between musical tempo and psychic motion. Gestalt psychology has revealed that any kind of understanding is not a matter of responding to a single stimulus. Synesthetic experiments have exposed that each and every sense-organ is correlated with the others. So, music, as well as all art, owes its origin and existence to the organic unity of human life as a whole. The essence of feelings and the essence of music are somehow alike so far as motion of human mind is concerned. Similarly musical experience is, in a strict inner sense, akin to extra-musical enjoyments. That is why Susanne K. Langer says :

"Music is a tonal analogue of emotive life".¹⁵

What Langer finds out after methodological analysis, Hegel declared long ago with his realization —

"In musical tones the whole scale of our feelings and passions not yet defined in their object, can echo and reverberate."¹⁶

In the same point Schopenhauer differentiated other arts with music due to the truth that other arts are associated with the ideas of the human mind, while music is the *copy of the will itself*.¹⁷ By *will*, Schopenhauer meant the undefined and unmanifested aspect of human will in the form of sonorous sounds. Hanslick should have availed of the scope of analysing these remarks by Hegel and Schopenhauer. Thus, he might have overcome his deficiency of the much-wanted explanation of a recognizable link between music and the human mind, and between music and the natural world around us.

A man, interested in life as a whole, balanced in all the spheres of wisdom and enjoyment, free from any kind of prejudice, can hardly confine himself in the Formalism or Absolutism of music or any kind of art. Specialization is not a guarantee of the highest degree of pleasure of listening to music.

Rather a sensitive amateur with open mind often identifies himself wholly with the truly beautiful in music. Hanslick is unnecessarily over-cautious of an amateur lest he should be too carried away by emotional influx. Aaron Copland, in his Charles Norton Lecture delivered at Harvard University in 1951-52, says :

"The ideal listener, it seems to me, would combine the preparation of a trained professional with the innocence of the intuitive amateur."¹⁸

Hanslick's is not such a generous outlook. Music is not necessarily meant for professionals only. Benedetto Croce is quite right when he assesses Hanslick's acute penetration into music in the following sentence :

"Hanslick thought he was dealing with peculiarities of music, instead of with the universal and constitutive character of every form of art, and this prevented him from taking larger views."¹⁹

Morris Weitz, who does not take Hanslick as a pure autonomist, values Hanslick's theory as —

"...the soundest compromise between the autonomous and heteronomous positions in musical aesthetics...."²⁰

Morris Weitz argues that according to Hanslick's observations, music obviously represents certain kinetic, kinaesthetic and psychic characteristics of human experience in their dynamic dimension.

Hanslick's total absorption in music led him eliminate the emotional type of response and contemplate the form only. Every kind of emotion, very difficult to avoid, is actually associated with the unsophisticated aspect of our nature. A thinker like George Santayana holds further —

"Values spring from the immediate and inexplicable reaction of vital impulse, and from the irrational part of our nature. The rational part is by its essence relative; it leads us from data to conclusions, from parts to wholes; it never furnishes the data with which it works."²¹

Now, the origin or the creation of music may be from the emotive life of the composer in the sense that every kind of inspiration is some sort of emotion. But creation is possible only by subduing the instinctive emotion and turning it into a component part of serious discipline of the creative process. Attentive listening also requires a disciplined mind so that every passing moment of music may be enjoyed to the fullest extent rather than taken as mere pastime entertainment. It can be safely inferred from the listener-cum-learner's point of view that Hanslick is the most rational in intaking a performance in details.

But the distinguished art-philosopher Virgil C. Aldrich has argued against Hanslick on the point that pure listening, being selective attending to formal features, would miss much of the significance of music which combines a broader aesthetic appeal than a specifically auditory phenomenon. Aldrich indulges such ideas as "a musical work is as visual as it is auditory", "music aspires to the condition of all art etc.". Hence comes the question of synesthesia. *The Ragamala-paintings* of India are prone to this visual aspect of auditory phenomena. Moreover(Aldrich cannot overlook, unlike Hanslick, "music with verbal and histrionic accompaniments", e.g., *lieder* and operas.²²

In spite of unfolding the central force of the art of music Hanslick's *Vom Musicalisch-Schönen, i.e., The Beautiful in Music* has become more an anathema than a guiding principle in musical aesthetics only due to the age-old convention that music is an expression of emotion. People have not yet been able to sustain the blow of the attacks of Hanslick. In the preface of the seventh edition of *The Beautiful in Music*, Hanslick says —

"I take up the cudgels against those aesthetic enthusiasts who, though presuming to teach the musician, in reality only dilate upon their own tinkling opium dreams."²³

Herein rings the warning bell for the over-enthusiasts.

Hanslick has left a clue to the solution of the debate between the autonomy and heteronomy in the same preface which is also worth-quoting here :

"I am quite at one with those who hold that the ultimate worth of the beautiful must ever depend upon the immediate verdict of the feelings."²⁴

The boundary of music-appreciation should not surpass this immediacy of feeling, feeling unmanifested by worldly experience, so that the "vital spark of the divine fire" and the "spiritual force" of music may not suffer by adulteration of our sentimentality. This very "immediate verdict of the feelings" is called "pure sensation" by Helmholtz, "will" by Schopenhauer, and proceeding a few steps beyond, as *Nada-Brahman* by old Indian sages.

Despite total emphasis on the immediacy of feeling in music appreciation, Hanslick warns again —

"But at the same time I firmly adhere to the conviction that all the customary appeals to our emotional faculty can never show the way to a single musical law."²⁵

The Encyclopaedia Britannica has called music a "protean art"²⁶

because it can easily mix with the words of a song, and with physical movements, as in dance. Words and physical gestures are closely associated with the customary appeals to our emotions. Consequently, music has also been indirectly connected with our emotions. On the part of the common listener, the renowned psychologist Carl E. Seashore says :

"the listener may put a great deal more into the music that was originally intended or is actually present in the musical form."²⁷

Moreover, he adds :

"there is not a one-to-one relationship between music as performed and music as experienced".²⁸

J.W. Sullivan says a step further :

"Amongst musical phrases are some which do more than please our musical faculty. They stir other elements in us; they reverberate throughout a larger part of our being."²⁹

It is a fact that the effect of the art of music is permeated in the total human life, personal, institutional or social. Hanslick has not dealt with the whole span. That is the reason why Hanslick's thesis is not much cared for by musicians and music-lovers.

The conflict between autonomy and heteronomy will not easily come to a conciliation to lead us to a definite conclusion; but we should keep in mind that Eduard Hanslick will always remain the pointing yardstick to the keen inquisitiveness about the nature of the essence of musical beauty in the realm of aesthetics. Since he declares that music has a subject, purely musical one; and it is not an impersonal and abstract art, he can be classified neither as a staunch autonomist nor as a balanced heteronomist. He is in a class by himself, having realized the celestialty of "sound in motion". In this judgment, his realization is akin to the Indian concept of *Nada-Brahman*, for he cannot but characterize the subject and the "spiritual force" of music as "no less a vital spark of the divine fire,"³⁰ The phrase being identical with *नादरूपं परं ज्योतिः*.³¹ i.e., the divine radiance manifested as sound, as stated in *Sangit-Damodara*.

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