

THOUGHTS ON MUSIC IN PLATO'S REPUBLIC

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It is not the fact that Plato altogether wanted to banish every kind of art including that of music from his republic, called Utopia. He insisted on a proper censorship and so studied closely the nature of music and its effects on man. After all, Plato's aim was an ideal state inhabited and owned by ideal citizens. We shall discuss only that part of the *Republic*, which concerns reflections on music.

Among various editions let us take the bi-lingual one, translated from Greek into English by Paul Shorey.¹ Leaving all other sections, we shall focus on music.

Before coming to music, Plato referred to the art of speech and narration. A propagator of the theory of imitation, Plato suggested that the speaker will have to imitate, for proper effect, claps of thunder, the noise of wind and hail and axles and pulleys, and the notes of trumpets, flutes and pan-pipes and all instruments, and even the cries of dogs, sheep and birds. Suitable pitch and rhythm with necessary variations will add to the correct diction and cadence.² Speeches and tales must resort to a minimum of such kind of music, according to Plato. It will not be out of place to mention that this sort of musical story-telling of the ancient Greeks reminds us of the typical art of *Kathakata* of Bengal.

Now, through the dialogues and conversations of Socrates, Glaucon and others, Plato divided the components of song into (1) the words, (2) the tune and (3) the rhythm. As Plato had wanted to do away with dirges and lamentations in words, so also in song too he did not require any dirge-like mode of music. This shows that Plato could not indulge in any kind of weakness in human heart. The mixed Lydian, the tense Lydian and the higher Lydian modes should be banished and done away with, since they are useless even to women, who are to make the best of themselves, let alone to men. Soft, sloth and lax mode such as Ionian is not also befitting for heroes and warriors. Those modes should be employed in music which

imitate the utterances and accents of a brave man engaged in warfare. Another kind of mode is required for those engaged in works of Peace, behaving modestly and moderately and acquiescing in the outcome. According to Plato, there should be two fundamental temperaments: (1) the swift and energetic on the one hand and (2) the slow and mild on the other. Plato or rather his teacher Socrates did not claim to be an expert in music, he rather wanted to disengage his main principle from the specialist's controversy regarding modes of music and their effects. But Glaucon, who was Socrates's close associate, had sufficient understanding of music and he suggested the Dorian and the Phrygian modes for the desired purposes. Now, the relationship of, or the similarities and differences between, the Greek musical modes and the Indian *thatas* require a separate study, left open for the newer researchers in comparative music.

The next act of censoring may seem discouraging for the growth of the art of music but one must be reminded that Plato's main aim was to moralize the State as well as its arts in an age of chaos and indiscipline. Plato's *Republic*, in this sense, is similar to our *Manu-Sanhita*.

Plato's teacher was Socrates and through Socrates's version he confirmed that the art of song does not require in it many-stringed and poly-harmonic instruments, whose compass includes all the harmonies.³ Do we not find our Tagore forbidding jumbles of instruments in his lyrical songs? Plato forbade the complex flute but admitted the simple piccolo and the lyre for accompaniment with the song.

Apart from the tune, Plato had his fundamental principles on the rhythms which are as follows:

"We must not pursue complexity nor great variety in the basic movements, but must observe what are the rhythms of life that is orderly and brave, and after observing them require the foot and the air to conform to that kind of man's speech and not the speech to the foot and the tune."⁴ Of course, the details were left over for Damon's⁵ consideration. This much Plato asserted that the rhythm and tune should be in accordance with the words and not the reverse. Tagore's contention was similar when he was just twenty years of age.⁶

Nobility, and gracefulness according to Plato, should be the qualities not only of music, but also of painting and similar other craftsmanships like weaving, embroidery, architecture and likewise the manufacture of household furnishings.

Plato downrightly banished gracelessness, evil rhythm and disharmony in art and society. He condemned weakness of head which is very often euphemistically styled as goodness of heart. Should we not condemn the

cheap and shallow film-songs and disc-songs blaring throughout our cities and villages?

But, after all, Socrates and Plato along with Glaucon wanted to introduce music education in the state. Let us quote a little—"Education in music is most sovereign, because more than anything else rhythm and harmony find their way to the inmost soul and take strongest hold upon it, bringing with them and imparting grace, if one is rightly trained".⁷

Furthermore Plato commented that a true musician must be able to recognize the forms of soberness, courage, liberality, high-mindedness and all their kindred and opposites, and all the combinations that contain and convey them, disregarding them neither in trifles nor in great things, but "believing the knowledge of them to belong to the same art and discipline".⁸ On the whole music should bring forth a coincidence of a beautiful disposition in the soul and corresponding and harmonious beauties of the same type in the bodily forms.

The next contention of Plato is that music and beauty lead to the philosophy of love as opposed to extravagant pleasure which leads to ultimate pain. The consummation of music culture is the love of the beautiful.⁹

After music the youths should be educated in gymnastics. While music begets sobriety in the souls, gymnastic training begets health in bodies. Music and gymnastics are as if counterparts of each other¹⁰—as propounded by Plato. But that is a separate discourse which is out of our present context.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Plato, *The Republic*, with an English translation by Paul Shorey (Professor of Greek, University of Chicago) in two volumes, volume I consisting of Books I—V, and volume II, consisting of Books VI—X, Harvard University Press, MCMXLVI, printed in Great Britain, 1935, 1942, 1946, Loeb Classical Library.
After adequate introduction, when the text begins, all the left hand pages are of original Greek version and the right hand ones are of corresponding English translations. Discussions on music are mostly found in sections X—XII, in book III, vol. I, pp. 245-265.
2. *Ibid*, p. 241 (Section IX, Book III).
3. *Ibid*, p. 249.
4. *Ibid*, p. 251.
5. *Ibid*, p. 251. Socrates and Plato often referred to Damon as their musical expert.
6. See the first three articles in Rabindranath's *Sangit-Chinta*, V.B. 1966.
7. Plato's *Republic*, of. cit., pp. 258-259.
8. *Ibid*, p. 261.
9. *Ibid*, p. 265.
10. See section XIII of book III. Also see p. 149 of Book VII in the volume II of the *Republic*.