

# THOUGHTS ON MUSIC IN ARISTOTLE'S POLITICS

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Aestheticians generally take into account Aristotle's *Poetics* in the discourse of aesthetics. The art of poetry in general and the art of tragic drama in particular are the central themes of *Poetics*. Music is no doubt a part therein. According to Aristotle, tragedy must have six components, such as, plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle and music. Music comes here not for its own intrinsic value but just as an instrument to dramatic success. This reminds one of Bharata's *Natayashastra*, in which we find that music is employed only to enhance the dramatic effect.

Rather, in *Politics*, Aristotle gives considerable attention to music. Musicologists have hardly noted this. Apparently it may seem that politics deals with the system of government and there cannot be any discussion of music in it. But in Aristotelian sense, *Politics* means much more. It is the science of man's happiness. In some sense or other, Aristotle's *Politics* is complementary to Plato's *Republic*, as in India we can find that *Yajnavalkya-Smriti* is complementary to *Manu-Smriti*.

Plato's *Republic* had been written in the form of conversation among intellectuals, scholars and experts; while Aristotle's *Politics* is in the form of a well-arranged treatise.

Like Plato's *Republic*, Aristotle's *Politics* is designed with a view to building up an ideal state consisting of ideal citizens. Proper education should be given, according to Aristotle, the utmost importance, for this purpose. Aristotle mentions four customary subjects of education, which are broadly—(1) reading and writing, (2) gymnastics, (3) music and (4) drawing. Plato was too much censorious to recognize the total value of music. Aristotle is much more liberal and he raises the status of the art of music. He categorically counts it as a subject of education.

The discourse of *Politics* is divided into eight books and the book VIII or the concluding book deals with music. Among various editions,

let us consult the bilingual one, translated by H. Rackham and published by the Harvard University Press.<sup>1</sup> The left-hand pages are in original Greek and the right hand pages are their English versions.

Aristotle points to the fact that most people take part in music for the sake of pleasure or harmless amusement. He also thinks that the previous educationists might have introduced it as a noble and rational pastime so that the leisure might be spent in a noble manner. This cannot be denied that music brings forth harmless pleasure and it is also an ideal pastime. But, to Aristotle, it is much more. It is educative and morally beneficial. It exercises, nourishes and refines our emotions. We shall see that Herbert Spencer reasserted this point in his famous essay "The Origin and Function of Music".

According to Aristotle music differs from other customary subjects like reading and writing, drawing and gymnastics on the point that music is, strictly speaking, neither necessary nor useful as these subjects are; but, after all, music is liberal and noble. Reading and writing, apart from their practical utility, lead on to many other branches of knowledge; the learning of drawing makes a man observant of physical beauty and symmetry; gymnastics train the body, which is the seat of the soul. It is clear that such purposes are not served by learning music. Yet, before pronouncing about it, Aristotle finds that it is not easy to say precisely what potency it possesses or for the sake of what object one should participate in it. Amusement and relaxation are demeaning for music according to Aristotle, though Homer, Euripides and other ancient Greeks attributed these to music. Music cannot be classed with sleep, the best kind of relaxation, nor with deep drinking, the cheapest way of amusement. Aristotle argues in such a manner owing to the fact that even in classical literature music, sleep and drinking and banquet are classed together. Good music may have its narcotic effect but this effect cannot be counted as its purpose or positive value.

Like a strict disciplinarian Aristotle pronounces that amusement cannot be the object of education, it cannot go with learning, "learning is a painful process"<sup>2</sup>.

Aristotle carries on by saying that amusement or enjoyment does not require serious training or accomplishment. He cites the examples of Persian and Median kings and the Spartans, who did not learn to perform but could nevertheless judge good and bad music and could enjoy good music correctly. So, music as a curriculum is not merely for its appreciation, enjoyment or judgment. Kings and the Spartans participated in the pleasure and relaxation of music by means of the professional musicians performing it. Those who have taken music as a business and profession must necessarily perform better than those who practice only long enough

to learn. But, the professional's music does not aim at his character-building but at his listener's pleasure, which may, very often, be some kind of vulgar pleasure. Hard labour for learning music cannot be meant for merely enjoying the feats of the professionals. Comparatively we may refer to Pandit Bhatkhande and counter-argue against him over the point that only to prepare *Kansens* (persons acquiring good ear or listening) should not be the main objective of music institutions. Then, what are the objectives of music education or music in education? How does it add to the character-building of the young?

Aristotle does not totally deny the amusement matter or the entertainment value or the relaxation capacity yielded by and derived from music. But instead of festive amusement, royal entertainment and pleasantest relaxation, Aristotle attributes to music its exhilarating effect, its honourable status and its moral value. He refers to the psychological classification of melodies made by the philosophers as (1) ethical melodies, (2) melodies of action and (3) passionate melodies. He also says that music also contributes something to intellectual entertainment and culture. It may be casually reminded that Hanslick is not the foremost aesthetician to pronounce the intellectual contemplation on the realm of music.

Yet, music is not pure reason or mathematics. As a follower of the *mimesis* theory or the theory of imitation propagated by Plato, Aristotle believes that the art of music imitates or represents man in action or the diverse emotions and feelings of man. Moreover, it is joyful. He prefers the term joy, instead of amusement, while discussing about music. He refers to Musacus, the legendary bard, to whom many oracular verse are attributed and quotes from Musacus's sayings—"Song is man's sweetest joy"<sup>3</sup>. This is true of instrumental music as well.

Ordinarily, man makes amusement an end and indulges in it in the milieu of music. It is needless to say that pleasure contained in music is of a natural kind, owing to which it attracts men of all ages and characters. But in the realm of education, music is valued by Aristotle when its influence reaches the character and inmost soul of man. Music makes our soul enthusiastic and enthusiasm is a kind of affection of our soul and character. Enthusiasm is not sheer amusement or entertainment. Among many kinds of music, Aristotle refers to the melodies of Olympus, a Phrygian composer of the seventh century B.C.

We have already mentioned that the theory of imitation was in full vogue at the time of Plato and Aristotle. No question is raised then against the representative capacity of music. It is taken for granted that music dramatically expresses various states of emotion. And, Aristotle believes that everybody listening to and learning these imitations is thrown

into a corresponding state of feeling by the tunes and rhythms themselves even apart from the words. To be affected with virtuous characters and noble actions through the delight of music is definitely needful in education. That is why to learn music and to be habituated in music is more needful than to judge music correctly or to be a professional in this line. We may find that with similar ideals Tagore introduces music in his Vishva-Bharati at Shantiniketan. He believes that music nourishes human mind, generates sense of beauty in man and creates harmony between man and nature.

To come to Aristotle again, he argues that musical representation is actual representation in comparison to the representing capacity of other arts. Melodies and rhythms contain representations of anger and mildness, courage and temperance and all other moral qualities. Musical expression most closely corresponds to the true nature of these qualities, to the true character and soul. Visual art, according to Aristotle, is not representation of character, but mere indication of character by means of forms and colours. There can be diverse kinds of melodies which produce diverse types of affections. Aristotle supplies some examples, such as the mixolydian makes men mournful and restrained, while the phrygian makes men enthusiastic and the Dorian is always ethical. The rhythms also have similar power. Some of the rhythms are of stable character, while some others are of emotional nature, and of the latter some are vulgar, connected with cheap music, which are always avoidable in education.

On the whole, Aristotle pleads for music education as it is in harmony with human soul. He refutes the opinion of those who opine that the practice of music itself is vulgar. But, educationists must be careful about the point that music should never be employed at the cost of civic virtues, nobility of character and serious studies of science and philosophy.

It is interesting to note that Aristotle has some reservation about the choice of musical instruments. He never recommends flute for introduction into education as it is too exciting having little moralizing influence, and playing it prevents employment of words. He refers to the mythological tale of Athene who found a flute and threw it away, likely for the reason that flute has no effect on intelligence, whereas higher sciences and arts have been attributed to Athene.

Aristotle tries to trace back the history of flute-playing in Greece. After the Persian wars, the Greeks became proud of their achievements. Wealth and leisure made them infatuated in every kind of pursuit. Thence the majority of fashionable and free men engaged themselves in flute-playing. But as practical experience in the then Greece has

proved that flute-music is conducive to no virtue and that is why it is being disapproved by Aristotle.

Of course, such a derogatory judgment about flute cannot be taken for granted. At least, this cannot be a universal truth that flute is bad only because it is flute. However, Aristotle's remarks about this instrument carry over to us glimpses of the ancient Greece and the moralist's repercussions. In our culture, the flute is closely associated with Lord Krishna. It is the symbol of divine love. Aristotle's strict censorship on flute proves its intense effect at least. It attracts human soul directly and immediately. Our ancient culture leads it to divinity, while the ancient Greek moralist guardian becomes so much cautious about it.

On the whole, Aristotle is more liberal than his predecessors Plato and Socrates about the uses of the art of music in general. Apart from its educative and ethical value, it also serves, according to Aristotle's opinion, the purpose of purgation. The meaning of purgation (i.e. *Katharsis* in Greek) has been explicitly discussed in his *Poetics*. The tragedy is said to purge the emotions of pity and fear by giving them artistic outlet. Theatrical music eases such purgation. The meaning of purgation will differ in the case of music unallied with theatre. In such a case, purgation means release of tensions, emotional conflicts and unruly passions. Education becomes fruitful only when purgation is caused. The soul can be receptive only if its disturbances are purged out. Good music serves such a purpose according to Aristotle. He criticizes Socrates and Plato on this point owing to the fact that they overlooked such a quality of the arts.

Despite a bit negative attitude towards the flute and some other emotive instruments, Aristotle, on the whole, raises the status of music. He never argues for banishing the arts and artists from the state.

Another point to note, Aristotle is never rigid about any set theory or dogma. Along with guidance in education, he always paves the way for moderation, possibility and suitability.<sup>4</sup> This holds good in music and the other branches of learning as well.

Aristotle's *Politics* or the science of human happiness incorporates diverse discourses by bringing them into a relevance to the main science. In short, it begins with the study of the family, marriage and eugenics and proceeds on to that of constitution, ideal and actual, criticism of Plato's *Republic*, newer lights on the state and the citizenship, forms of government, revolutions—their causes and preventions, the most desirable mode of life, ethics and education etc. According to Aristotle, wealth is just the preliminary necessity of man; it is virtue along with wisdom

which gives him true happiness. Lastly, to conclude with, it is music which adds to his proper refinement if used in a proper way.

## REFERENCES

1. Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), *Politics*, tr. H. Rackham, Harvard University Press (1932). The consulted edition is a reprint of 1950. The most relevant portion for this essay—Book VIII, pp. 634-675.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 651.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 653.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 675.