

Avenues to a Swara

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IN OUR ANCIENT TEXTS ON music the individual *swara* is characterized in a way which is similar to how our philosophies often speak of the Ultimate: *swameva rājate* seems close to *svaprakāśam*. Even from the view-point of practice, a *swara* is at least as important as the unit of aesthetic pace or *mātrā*. Our eminent vocalists never tire of insisting that *swara kā lagāo* is everything. Yet, so far as I know, in our writing on music today we have hardly given any thought to the subject. It is this defect which I here seek to remedy, if in part.

The single *swara*, I suggest, can be looked at from the following different points of view:

1. its grammatical identity;
2. its aesthetic 'look';
3. its relation to the singer himself.

The first two of these concern both the singer and the *rasika*. The last one excludes the listener. So it is proper—and, as I hope to show, needful—to distinguish them.

Now let us turn once again to the definition of *swara*—*swameva rājate*: 'that which reigns (or satisfies or looks beautiful) by itself'. Is this the way our grammarians speak of *swaras*—*madhyam* or *nishād*, *shuddha*, *komal*, or *teevra*? One can hardly say yes. The name that we give to a *swara*, or its grammatical identity, is based on a relation. A *swara* is *madhyam* only if it is at the right interval from *ga* and *pa*; it is *komal* as against *shuddha*; and *vice versa*. So in all such talk we do not really speak of the *swara* *by itself* or alone. And yet where a *swara* is well sung it *alone* may seem to sway the listener's attention. In other words, our acknowledged definition of *swara* relates to the note's own (aesthetic) look, not to the way we identify it for the sake of understanding. It is not its being a *rishabh* or *gāndhār* but its appearing as an accent of intrinsic beauty that our *definition* is about. It seizes the aesthetic, not the grammatical character of the note; the *swara*'s aspect of beauty, not its location in the scale. For those who make music, the *ustāds* and all who are wedded to *gharānās*—and care for the beauty, as opposed to the mere understanding of music—the *shuddha-komal* talk is often irritating.

They do not like to be dominated by a literal approach to music; and the definition being discussed—of the basic material of song—also seems to favour their relative indifference to mere fact. In reality, we may note, a sound as it seems is *never quite* independent of its setting. Even where it is all by itself it acquires its real character in part from the quiet that encompasses it. On the other hand, where it has a rich and manifest setting—say, a moment of pause in the midst of an intricate *tān*—it may well *appear* to be admirable in itself. The aesthetic and the merely grammatical approaches to *swara* are therefore truly different. As a member of the scale a *swara* is never in fact independent; but as integral to music it may well *seem to be so in respect of its beauty*.

It is easy to argue for the difference I here seek to press. What is grammatically the same *swara* may indeed appear very differently in the music of two masters. As illustration, I invite the *rasika* to compare a full-throated projection of the *tār sā* by Omkarnath Thakur with a very brief *dyut* glimpse of the same *swara* by Rahimuddin Khan Dagur. The note remains grammatically identical; but whereas in the first case it affects us by sheer grandeur, in the second it appears to be the very essence of fineness. I believe it is incumbent on those who seek to understand and write on music as art to isolate and find appropriate words for the various appearances of the same *swara* in the music of our masters. Terms like *shuddha*, *komal*, *teevra* are here hardly enough.

Many are the factors on which the 'look' of a single *swara* depends. But, for the sake of brevity, I shall choose just two of these for comment: the artiste's individual manner and the *swara*'s own location in the trelliswork of music. I hasten to add however that the two, though admittedly distinct, are often seen to work in unison. An Omkarnath *swara* is not merely a sweet sound; it is often suggestive of a yearning majesty. But this suggestion arises from the subtle way he regulates the vocal volume as he links one note with another. It is this hidden artifice which makes the *swara* appear as an upsurge of feeling. Behre Buwa, on the other hand, often lets go a *swara* or *swara-samoocha* with a gentle droop. The music steals into us, instead of being merely 'before' us; and of course it never seems to impinge on the ear. Sometimes in Behre Buwa's music, I recall, almost every *swara* seems to be a little accent of feeling, partly because of a gradual and not quite manifest waxing and waning of *akāra* in either the utterance of a single note or in a passage across two or three adjacent ones, a detail of manner which tinges Abdul Karim Khan's *swaras* with a gentle pathos, and which Omkarnath Thakur later used effectively to work up effects of loftiness and sublimity.

However, the manner which makes a note look beautiful so variously is not merely a matter of how one utters it, the *swara* itself, but also that of the way one rises to it as the climax of a more or less extensive knit-work of notes punctuated, maybe, with some excellence of sheer passage. Two illustrations here come to my mind, one from a favourite *bhajan* of Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, and the other from D.V. Paluskar's memorable *Rāmkalī* in the Vishnu Digambar Jayanti of 1955. The *bhajan*, at a point, would seem to carry us bodily, so to say, to the very top of a temple by means of an exquisite rendering of the word 'Mahādeo'. Here, I recall, the flow of song would rise majestically from the basic *sa* in a yearning, 'ascending' *meend* which would appear to take us along in its sweep, bringing itself to rest with the luminous utterance of a note in the *tār*, leaving us bewitched with the feeling it evoked, of devotion that uplifts us. But the point I am seeking to make is perhaps better brought out by how I reacted to "a consummate *dhevat*" in Paluskar's *Rāmkalī*:

[The singer's voice rose nimbly] from the . . . *sa* in a thin, sweeping thread of [sweetness]; curved gracefully around the *dhevat*—if the latter be taken as an ideal point—half encompassing it with its curl; and finally touched the very core of the *swara* in such a [bewitching] instant of beauty that it [at once] made me reverent towards the artiste . . . It is [such ways] of [highlighting] a *swara* [in the moving fabric of song] that draw out [our] inner being into open and spontaneous applause [and supplement] the delight of sense . . . with depth and inwardness of appeal.*

A *swara*'s relation to its setting is however not merely a source of charm. If we reflect over it, it can also be made to heighten (for thought) the difference between two ways of looking at a *swara*, from the view-point of grammar and from that of aesthetic experience. Take the case of a *vivādi swara*. Grammatically, its relation to other notes in a *rāga* is more or less negative. It is a *swara* which is not ordinarily taken in a particular *rāga*, though its use here is not expressly forbidden (or *varjit*) either. In the singing of a maestro, on the other hand, such a note—or even an utter outcaste, so to say—may well come to find a place without seeming to obtrude on the fabric of the *rāga* to which it is alien. I have myself once heard the great Ghulam Ali Khan project a majestic *pancham* in a Malkauns *khayāl* with such skill that a fellow critic and I took a little time to discover that the *swara* was an intruder, grammatically; it did not appear to be so in our aesthetic experience of the music. But of course the incorporation was made only after an entrancing 'atmosphere' of Malkauns had been built up.

* Reproduced from my review of the recital in *The Hindustan Times*.

Here I find it necessary to make some distinctions in respect of the setting of the note I speak of. The *rāga* as thought of, in terms of its distinctive *āroha* and *avaroha*, is the grammatical setting, and this is not ordinarily open to the influx of the *vivādi*. When the singing has just begun—and the *rāga*'s mere notation newly replaced by its living form—employment of the *vivādi* is not permissible; for the setting provided by the *rāga*'s constituent notes, sweet though it be, has not yet acquired the intensity or plastic power which, like a deep and abiding affection, may take the sting out of recalcitrant elements. It is only when a spell or 'atmosphere' of the *rāga*'s 'commanding form' has been created, through an interplay of what the music itself offers and the *rasika*'s discriminating openness to it, that an 'alien' note can be suffered for a moment. The setting provided by *rāga-swaras* is now truly aesthetic; the *swaras* seem to gallop or meander, reign over or merge into neighbouring ones, or radiate light or blush into quiescence; perception of the grammatical identity of notes, though nowhere absent, is here but an implicit awareness, because of *tādātmya* or intense and imaginative self-identification with the *rāga*'s overall character; and so the alien note does not readily disturb, for its grammatical identity is not at once perceived because of our sense of the *rāga*'s overpowering form. Where, as in our music, an art-work is occurrent and in part determined by how the *rasikas* react to it, the elements—here the *swaras*—which go to make the work do not remain what they are as abstractly understood in the notational scheme; though they do not lose their places in the *saptak*, their 'look' becomes open to change, and so does the suggestion as to what they demand or reject in the interest of beauty.

I here feel enabled to offer an *argument* for the 'incorporation' of *vivādi* being discussed, instead of merely insisting that it does occasionally take place. Reflection on the very grammatical structure of a *rāga*, I suggest, can be made to point to the possibility of its transcendence in real music. But let me clarify.

A key feature of a *raga* is *samvāda*, that is, the mutual agreeableness (or consonance) of two *swaras*. This relation of accord is however aesthetic, like two colours seeming to complement each other; it is clearly not a relation of meaning, and so not a matter of theoretical consistency. So, when the very basis of a *rāga* is what *in fact seems agreeable* to the ear, one cannot roundly object to the inclusion of a *vivādi* on the ground that once we have fixed and accepted the schema of a *rāga* it would be *theoretically inconsistent* to let in an alien note; for where the influx in question is allowed, as in the instance cited from Ghulam Ali's music, the (grammatical)

intruder *does in fact seem to go well with the other swaras*, and so quite squares, if but for a moment, with a basic requirement of all *rāgas*, that is, consonance.

A *rāga's swaras*, however, do not only relate to one another. It is *the musician* who puts life into them; and they serve and affect him variously. Now, I believe, the essential function of the opening *swara* (or *swaras*) in relation to the singer is to take his mind away from the everyday world to that of the *rāga* he chooses to sing, and to settle it there. A warm-up or attunement of the voice may also take place. But while this is necessary it is only of secondary value in the context of good singing. What I mean is that though of course there can be no music even of passable quality without the basic tunefulness which keeps out off-key notes, the depth and inwardness which we commonly associate with good classical singing just cannot exist in performance unless the artiste's inner being, and not mere voice, gets and keeps in tune with the song. It is precisely this fuller orientation which the utterance of the first few notes brings about in the case of a good music-maker, as against the manner of those vocalists whose concern with music is, in the main, academic and scholarly, not creative. Amir Khan, Ghulam Ali, Bhimsen Joshi and Kumar Gandharva all seem to gather themselves into the virtual world of music as soon as they set out to weave their magic. A subtle detail of manner, I may add, is helpful to them here. They do not straightaway begin with the tonic; they rather attain to it as the end-point of a gentle passage; and the gradualness of approach and the final advent which has the look of a *mergence* are almost a vocal transcript of the inner act of attunement. The *shadaj*, I believe, is not aesthetically basic unless it in fact puts the singer in inner accord with the act of singing.

Once the singer is able to so relate himself to the music, he at once becomes open to impression by the *swaras'* varying character. It would indeed be surprising if he did not. If an earnest *rasika* can register and respond to almost everything that the music offers, how can the singer, who makes the music, fail to do so? The *gāyak* does not go on singing breathlessly. There are frequent intervals when he contemplates the form of what he has just created or is about to conjure up. How else can we explain the gentle swaying of Kumar Gandharva's visage when there is in fact a lull in his song or the dreamy, far-away look of Bhimsen Joshi as he finishes with the final curl of a pattern afloat in the *tār*?

The *gāyak* not only brings about but acknowledges the direction in which a *swara* presses; for this is necessary to proceed in an orderly way. And he also registers how the note itself looks—majestic or

tender and yearning, a mere throb of light or a fount of radiance. In good singing, indeed, the utterance of *swaras* is having the experience they permit or produce. To the singer himself, therefore, the notes appear to be living; and the total recital is not a mere performance, but an experience. □