Description, Interpretation and Music Criticism

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THE TASK OF THE CRITIC is a complex one. He lavishes close and regular attention on works of art, distinguishes their individual features, brings out their hidden significances, sometimes classifies them as representative of a particular style or *gharānā*, and much more freely passes value judgements on them, calling them good or pioneering or poor and ineffective as art. His *influence* can be great. He may be able to push a young and deserving but so far neglected artist into prominence or to temper our excessive regard for a maestro by drawing attention to some quite unsuspected flaws in his art. But the critic's basic, immediate *functions* are, in the main, three: description, interpretation and evaluation. How these functions interrelate is easy to see. A poem, for instance, cannot be lauded or decried without ascertaining with care what it says or suggests; and this in turn requires that notice be taken—and some account provided—of its details of content and structure.

It is, however, not always possible to easily decide whether a critical statement is interpretive or merely descriptive. Consider, for instance, the painting *Abhisārikā Nāyikā*[1] by A. Ramachandran. It would of course be a clear description to say that the work employs several bright colours, say, red, yellow, green; that the lady's face is hidden by the cot overhead; and that the visible parts of her body appear to bulge. But were someone to say that the use of colours here is by and large *breezy*, would that be merely describing or *interpreting* what is seen? Is the liveliness in question a given property which is just readily noticed, or is it something interpreted as expressed by the curvilinear shapes? Or, again, take the case of a *tritāla* (*madhya laya*) *bandish* in *rāga* Bhoopāli. If the *rasika* who listens to it says that the *sama* is located here at *pa* and that the other key emphasis—say the offbeat—occurs at *ga*, the statement would be an obvious description[2]. But if, in respect of the same composition, a music critic remarks that the descent to *ga* from the *pa* (marking the *sama*) brings out the *rāga's* character clearly, would that be mere description or some evaluation as well? An unhesitating answer may be difficult here. For proper projection of the nature of the *rāga* that is sung or played is both a mark by which we identify and a criterion by which we judge the excellence of a piece of our classical music. If in drawing attention to the passage in question the

critic is only acknowledging or affirming that the composition is clearly an essay in Bhoopāli, his remark is descriptive, but if he wishes—and if, in the light of some other remark in his review, he may be taken—to suggest that, because of the feature isolated for mention, the *bandish* is a good one, the judgement in question is evaluative too. So it is needful to see how exactly the critic's three main functions differ from each other.

The way we *distinguish describing from interpreting* is well known. To describe is simply to report what one sees or hears, or what is otherwise *given* to one in a work of art. In the case of literary arts such as poetry and drama description requires attentive *reading*; in others careful *perception*. Features or aspects that are given to sense—say the *perceptua*—are clearly more important in arts like music, dance, painting, architecture and sculpture than, say, literary prose. But two important points are likely to be missed here.

First, there is an element of rationality in perception itself. Whatever we perceive is apprehended as having a distinct character; and some comparing, involving an ideal putting apart from or along with—or differentiation and classification—is necessarily involved here[3]. Further, where the object before us is a work of art, the right kind of perception requires discriminating employment of a duly trained attention. Thus in the case of painting one should be able to distinguish, say, symmetrical from asymmetrical balance[4] or *colour as interpreting form* (as in Cézanne's *L'estaque*) from *form as fused with colour*, say, in Turner's *Interior at Petworth*[5]. And, to turn to music, how can anyone listen to it *as art* without the ability to identify and distinguish the various notes and, in the case of our music, even the microtones or *śrutis*?

Secondly, following the ordinary meaning of words while reading is mere understanding or simple cognition; it is not *interpretation* if the word be taken to mean, as it normally is, the mental act of *going beyond what is obvious or given*.

An instance may be taken to explain what this 'going beyond' is and how it distinguishes interpretation from mere description. If in respect of Leonardo da Vinci's famous fresco *The Last Supper* one says that the work shows a group of 13 men around a dinner table it would be a plain description. So too would be such remarks as the following in respect of the work's own composition:

> Christ is [here] exactly placed in the middle with two groups of three apostles on either side. Note, too, the placement of the small items on the table. The graceful mobile pictures of the apostles . . .[6]

But the moment we set out to speak thus:

> So perfect is the composition in its majestic simplicity, so poignant the varied attitudes and expression of the Apostles at the supreme moment when Christ exclaims: 'Verily I say unto you that one of you shall betray me' that this work, restored, has remained the typical representation for all Christendom of the sacrament of Christ's Supper . . . [7]

we clearly turn to interpretation and evaluation.

Interpreting a *particular* work of art is of course not the same thing as interpreting art *generally*. Instances of the second kind are provided, say, by theories which maintain that works of art are disguised wish-fulfilment of our repressed libidinous fantasies in a socially acceptable way (Freud), or that "the natural site of beauty is the intelligible world: thence it descends"[8].

When a critic in fact uses any such theory in *interpreting* an individual work of art or seeks to throw light on an artist's works generally, he does not remain tied down, it is clear, to what meets the eye directly or is otherwise obvious. He has to make the effort of analysis and fact-finding. Thus, to understand why rectangles are so dominant in the work of Piet Mondrian, he must acquire the information that because it is so removed from *nature's* accidental shapes the rectangle is in this artist's view material for *art* in its purest form.

This is why a common way to distinguish interpretation from description in art is to say that the former involves a more active effort than the latter. To interpret is to perform a distinct activity that makes a fair addition to—without of course being an imposition on—what the work of art seems to be at mere attentive viewing, listening or reading. The aim of description, on the other hand, is simply to register and state what the work of art shows.

Another equally popular way of drawing the distinction is to suggest that whereas to describe a work of art is to mark—that is, to identify and distinguish—the details of its *factual* content or its non-meaning properties, to interpret is to get at the work's *meaning*, which is not always embodied in words. It is indeed true that interpretation in art criticism is quite importantly an effort to unravel the meaning of symbols, verbal or other. The critic has to be familiar with iconology, the study of symbols with a primarily *conventional* basis. For instance, in respect of Titian's well-known painting *Sacred and Profane Love*[9], unless the critic knows that the work was painted before the rise of puritanism and has a conventional basis in neoplatonism, he will also not realize that the *nude* woman is sacred and the woman clad profane. Again, it is this (second) way of distinguishing the two functions which determines how exactly we phrase the statements that result from the exercise of the functions.

The language of a critical description is informative and the adjectives we commonly use in respect of such description are: accurate, comprehensive, detailed. Interpretations, on the other hand, are said to be plausible, cogent, original, revealing.

But, we may note, the 'ways' we have so far spoken of do not provide any very definite ground for distinguishing description from interpretation. So let me explain.

Take, first, the suggestion that interpretation calls for greater effort on our part. Can we be sure of this, and how is the relative greatness of effort to be determined? The *rasika* who correctly tells the *atikomal gāndhār* in a *rāga* Darbāri composition and describes the structure of the *bandish* by detailing its constituent *swaras* in the right order has devoted considerable attention in the past to identifying and distinguishing the various *swaras* of the *saptak*, and, in particular, the character of the *rāga's* pivotal note referred to here. Is his total effort less than that a music critic puts in, say, in interpreting a recital as one representing the Agra *gharānā* of *khayāl*-singing just because it makes liberal use of *bol-tāns*, or a composition as a product of a maestro's late years when he had been mellowed by intense personal suffering? One can hardly say yes.

Nor does *content* provide a surer basis for the distinction we are seeking to make. Remarks such as the following

> *Macbeth* . . . is . . . the most concentrated . . . of the tragedies. [It] leaves a decided impression of colour . . . light and colours of the thunder-storm in the first scene; of the dagger hanging before Macbeth's eyes and glittering alone in the midnight air . . . Above all, the colour is the colour of blood. It cannot be an accident that the image of blood is forced upon us continually, not merely by the events themselves but by full descriptions . . .[10]

are clearly about colour, but they tend to be *interpretive*. On the other hand, were someone to say that *alārippu* in Bharatanatyam opens with a definite employment of *patākā mudrā*, the remark would be *descriptive* in spite of the fact that it speaks of a symbol.

Luckily, however, it *is* possible to suggest some more definite ways of distinguishing description from interpretation.

To begin with, whereas a description is an implicit *assurance* to us that the object really is as it is stated to be, an interpretation is merely a *proposal* that it would be reasonable to accept what is said about the object. Unlike a person who *describes* a work of art, one who interprets it cannot be said to be guided *all along* by what is already manifest, for the meaning has to be discovered. As opposed to mere description, a work of art's interpretation can never be said to be *quite* true, if truth be taken as adequacy to or correspondence with

what is. Description aims at absolute fidelity to details of the given, and the end is taken to be attainable in principle. But interpretation, especially in relation to a literary text—say, a poem—is nowhere quite determined, though it may seem to be fairly warranted by the evidence provided by the work[11].

A competent critic is of course careful to give thought to whatever there is in the work, but between the direct meaning or suggestiveness of given details and the interpretation finally arrived at there is always a gap which the critic bridges by resorting to some ideal construction; and it is here that the interpreting grows open to variations in the hands of different critics, in accordance with their individual ways of looking at art. The work itself is, in the main, a culturally emergent entity, not a merely perceptual object[12]. An everyday object such as a knife interests us in but two ways. It must serve the purpose for which it is meant and do that reasonably long. A work of art, on the other hand, reflects the personality, or at least the individual skill, of its maker, and the culture—or the ferment, aspirations—of the period of history he occupies. Further, it has its own intrinsic beauty or significance and can be, or *has* to be, attended to at different levels. *How much* about the work is taken into account, and what aspects or features of it are *emphasized*, all this varies in the case of different critics; and therefore alternative interpretations of the same work are always possible. The ideal here is comprehensiveness and subtlety of notice *and* cogency of interpretation. But what exactly is relevant to the work, how much of its context is to be taken into account, and wherein really lies a work's aesthetic value—all these are matters of disagreement between critics. Some, like Hirsch, insist that it is "a fundamental ethical maxim for interpretation" [13] that the author's intention should be given due weight. Others, following Wellek and Warren, warn us that

> The meaning of a work of art is not exhausted by, or even equivalent to, its intention; . . . [that] as a system of values it leads an independent life; [and that] . . . the total meaning of a work of art . . . [is more than] its meaning for the author and his contemporaries . . . it is rather the result of a process of secretion, i.e., the history of its criticism by its many readers in many ages[14].

Yet though because of this infinite openness to alternatives—and basically because it is not all along based on a face-to-face inspection—interpretation can never make such a claim to finality as a careful description, it is no mere guesswork either. One who interprets may, quite fairly, be required to *justify* his interpretation by appealing to the interpretandum (or the object of interpretation).

But no such demand can be made of a man who merely guesses.

Further, whereas careful interpretation of a literary text may well lead to a meaning which is quite different from, perhaps even opposed to, what the text may seem to say when we first look at it, a good description of a work of art is never so free to deviate from the work's direct appearance. To illustrate this point we may turn once again to a work already referred to. A proper description of Titian's *Sacred and Profane Love* has merely to follow what is directly revealed to the eye. But interpretation cannot be so faithful. A mere look at the title of the painting may suggest that the nude figure is profane and the lady clad sacred. But when we *interpret* the work in the light of its neoplatonist basis we get a meaning that is quite opposed to the obvious one. In literature, where language is often used in the way of *dhwani*, illustrations of the kind are easier to get.

Finally, "the most characteristic difference between describing and interpreting a work of art lies, so to speak, in the center of gravity of the two notions" [15]. Description assumes that there is "a stable, public, relatively well-defined object available for inspection"; and that if there are any differences between the various descriptions, they have to be resolved on further inspection of the object, perhaps from a fresh point of view. The object is here believed to *have* certain properties, and these are taken to be enumerable. To interpret, on the other hand, is not merely to find, but to make out. How this is in fact done may now be stated.

In the realm of music, as we know, one may speak of interpretation by the listener or critic *or* the performer, the *gāyak* or *vādak*, himself. Every piece of our classical music conforms to and projects a particular melody-type or *rāga*. The grammatical form of the *rāga*—that is, its constituent notes, its pivotal and main consonant *swaras* (*vādi-samvādi*), and its manner of ascent and descent (*āroha* and *avaroha*)—is of course pre-fixed and has to be closely adhered to. But, as rendered in notation, this form is but the skeleton of a *rāga*. In living music the aesthetic substance—or inner unity, variety of effect, and a distinct, overall emotive 'appearance'—is provided by the artist's own individual way of singing or playing; and it is this *enlivening* of music—or its being endowed with a manifest substance, character and beauty—which is the *rāga's interpretation by the artist himself*. The process is somewhat similar to Hindi writing. The spellings or constituent units, their order, and the *mātrās* (*laghu, guru*)—like the *vādi* and *samvādi swaras* in music—demand conformity; but the thickness or thinness of contours, and the flourish or staidness which the making of a letter may evince, are all free to vary in accordance with the individual style or character of

the writer.

In the case of *our* music, of course, the performer is rarely quite individual in his manner. He generally professes allegiance to a *gharānā* and sometimes also to a *bānī*; and this may predispose him to sing in a way that is not only identifiable but more or less foreseeable. But whatever be the real source of differences in the music produced, the singer's own individuality or that of the *gharānā* or mode of utterance (*bānī*) he represents, two treatments of a *rāga* may well be said to be its interpretations if they are manifestly diverse in detail and overall 'look' or impact. Thus whether we say that the Dagar and Agra *gharānās* interpret a *rāga* differently in *ālāpa*, or that the interpretation of a *rāga* is different in the various *bānīs*, it is either way fair. For the differences are in both cases clear, and in neither case is the artist free to violate the *rāga's* grammatical identity. Thus, whereas an Agra *ālāpa* treatment of a *rāga*—say, by the late Ustad Fayyaaz Khan as a preface to *dhamār*—is distinguished by vigour and bunchiness of utterance, besides of course tunefulness, *ālāpa* in the same *rāga* by a Dagar is often notable for its serenity, spaciousness, seamlessness and infinity in addition to its ability to produce a *rāga-rūpa* which is not merely identifiable, but often so intense yet expansive that the *rāga*, it appears, is "not only presented to us, but in a way surrounds and possesses us, pervading both the hall and our inner being"[16]. And whereas the *khandār-bānī* way of *ālāpa*, so to say, makes a *rāga* proclaim, and not merely reveal, its character and aesthetic might, the Dagar-*bānī* mode, we may say, opens in a soft, whispering way, inducts us, by degrees, into the growing *rāga-rūpa*, and finally puts us wholly under the sway of music in an experience of deep, elevating delight. But whatever be the *gharānā* or *bānī* it represents, interpretation of a *rāga* in terms of *ālāpa* is utterly different from *bol-banānā* in *thumri*, that is, so regulating the musical utterance of words that the import of the text of a song, generally emotive, may be brought out variously and ever more fully.

Interpretation of a *rāga* in *ālāpa* shows what infinite variety of effect and beauty can be created within the ambit of a single melody-type. Whereas *bol-banānā* in *thumri* only shows how vocal modulation can be made to assist the expressiveness of words, *rāga-ālāpa* (of the *dhruvapada* kind) is at once witness to the inherent power of musical utterance, quite independent of words, and to the inexhaustible richness of a *rāga* against its individual expositions. It would be relevant here to mark that when a critic accuses an *ustād* of dwelling on the same *rāga* repeatedly in his public performances, the maestro's ready answer often is that it is so

because he never feels assured he has done all he can with the *rāga*. As an individual interpretation of the potential fullness of the *rāga*, a recital somehow always falls short of the mark. This is very different, we may note, from the thesis that the interpretation of a literary text, say, a poem, is necessarily a little above (or away from)—in so far as it is always underdetermined by—the given text.

What is however of real relevance to us is the interpretation of music by the *rasika* or the critic; for it is only as so regarded that interpretation is related to, and has to be distinguished from, description and evaluation. Now in such interpretation two acts are necessarily presupposed: identification and discriminating notice (or exercise of *nigah*). Whether he is simply a *rasika* or a professional critic, the listener who wishes to interpret a piece of music should *himself* be able to identify the *rāga* being presented, instead of merely taking it to be what it is said to be by the compère. For unless he himself recognizes the *rāga's* identity, of course, on the basis of his previous knowledge—and is otherwise familiar with the ways of our classical music—he will not be able to listen to the music properly, and will probably miss the significance of quite a few of its details, which would adversely affect his interpretation, should he attempt any. But I must explain the point.

The right aesthetic attitude in listening to our classical music is not only *attending to* what is directly presented, but *looking forward* to what is yet to come; and this latter determines how one registers the immediately given. To illustrate, let us take the case of a Puria recital. Here, if the singer tarries at *ni* for a while, but tunefully, the knowledgeable listener will take it to be aesthetically proper not merely because the note in question is grammatically vital but because, being familiar with the usual progression of the *rāga*, he expects, and would be happy to identify, the final attainment to the *tār sā* via such a deft touch of the adjacent *rishabh* that the brevity of *re* may be easily heightened by the vocalist's extended utterance of *nishād*. Thus the interpretive judgement that the *ni* here is duly 'fed' obviously depends on the listener's independent conversance with the fabric of the *rāga*.

Here, I may add, the listener's own awareness of the *raga's* (or a *swara's*) specific character is identification; the feeling that as seen in the light of (rather than judged from the viewpoint of) an aesthetic requirement a particular *swara* has (or has not) been duly attended to is the reflex of discriminating notice and is interpretive, if incipiently; and the explanation, offered or merely arrived at, that therefore the detail in question is (or is not) congruent with what follows it is a full-blown interpretation, with a clear evaluative aspect.

What I have adverted to as identification of course runs throughout; nowhere is the listener free to weaken his awareness of the *swaras'* individual characters; and indeed the two processes that I said are presupposed do not merely precede but are all along implicitly present in the act of interpretation.

It is now necessary that I cite some instances to show what interpretation of music itself is. Before, however, I actually do this, it would be well to mark that to interpret is not merely 'to explain the meaning of' but 'to elucidate or clarify what is presently obscure'; and that interpretation therefore often arises as an attempt to find or give answers to questions that may be prompted by what seems unclear in or about the music one is listening to. The following random list of questions and possible answers to them should now serve as a fair specimen of how our music is in fact interpreted:

1. A *vilambit sthāyi* by Kumar Gandharva does not use the traditional device called *kanbharnā*—linking word-free spaces of *sthāyi* by means of slender, flowing *akāra*, *ékāra* and *ikāra* passages. How then does the *sthāyi* in question avoid appearing broken on the inside?

True, a Kumar Gandharva *sthāyi* is not in fact undivided internally, but only seems to be so. It is also true that it does not avail of what is called *kanbharnā*. Yet the semblance of unity is there, and it works on us because in the musical utterance the *akāra* is made to wax and wane so deftly, and almost imperceptibly, that a suggestion of rise and fall, or flow of feeling, is created and sustained all along, unifying the vacant recesses.

2. Why is a good *madhya-laya tritāla bandish* so often and so widely admired, both visibly and audibly[17], by knowledgeable listeners when it reaches the focal beat?

This is easy to explain. Where the *laya* is not very slow (nor too quick) the form of a *bandish*—including its accordance with a cycle—is easy to follow; the offbeat is readily manifest; and the listener is able to follow, quite without effort, the passage of aesthetic pace or *laya* from the *khāli* and *towards* the focal beat, so that what is in the end applauded is not only attainment of the *sama* with split-second accuracy, but its emergence as the destiny, so to say, of an oriented flow. The reason for acclaim is not only the singer's ability to keep to musical time, but the inner ordering of the *bandish* itself in relation to the central beat. The experience is, if in part, a

perception of artistic form.

3. Why does a *vilambit sthāyi*, as presented by Pandit Jasraj[18], not seem to be quite classical *in temper* even where it has a meaningful text and observes a steady rhythm?

Here a good clue to interpret rightly is provided by the difference between the musical and the merely verbal. If one crowds a *sthāyi* with words no room is left for those stretches of *akāra* (or *ékāra*) that not only unify the word-free regions of the *sthāyi* but lend a roomy and imposing inside to it. The free use of decorative flourishes, though appealing in itself, is an additional bar to the requisite suggestion of dignity. Two points must indeed be borne in mind by a good classical singer. First, a wordy text set to music is not the same thing as musical wholeness achieved with the aid of just a few words providing not only a basis, by virtue of their meaning, for the rise of the *rasa*—or feeling—of the *rāga*, but allowing for the varying uses of *akāra*, say, in its अ, इ, ओ, ऊ shades. Secondly, a *sthāyi* merely placed in a *tāla* or, conversely, a cycle only wrapping, so to say, the song's basal line, cannot be the ideal. The idiom (or *chalan/andāz*) and the pace of the *thekā* have somehow to be manifest in the flow of the line itself. Otherwise the *sthāyi* will not seem to be what it has to be—a beautiful self-sufficient whole. And, precisely for that reason, it will not be a true *sthāyi*. The aesthetically stable is not the merely inert; for there *is* actual movement in both the *sthāyi* and the *thekā*, indicatable by pointing to the before-after order of the *swaras* or *mātrās* passed over. Nor is it only the ground on or across which the patterns rest or move, or to which one returns after describing them. It is not even simply that which does not change its location in the scale, or in the total art-work. It is also, and importantly, that which does not seem to *need* any change because it appears to satisfy us as it is and because of what it is. A *sthāyi* is in principle a projection of the dual *rāga-tāla* form in terms of song; its *formed* quality makes it appear resting on itself and induces us to take it as a stable basis for creative effort in the sense that, though the *tāns* surely need it as a background in opposition to which alone they take their character as patterns, it itself is self-subsistent in appeal in so far as the *rāga-tāla twosome* used appears embodied *within* it.

All such interpretation in music proceeds by using concepts like *rāga, ālāpa, tāla, sthāyi* which themselves—though freely used—call for interpretation. Indeed some interpretation of the basic concepts of art is always implicit in or demanded by our critical concern with

specific works. A few specimens of such interpretation may also be provided here, partly with the purpose of suggesting that music criticism is not really possible without a clear understanding of the basic concepts of musical discourse. Such understanding itself, I may add, delivers many of the basic criteria the critic needs, as also some hints that aid subtlety and penetration in interpretation. Only a few basic concepts may be taken here to show how casualness or sketchiness in criticism may arise from our inability to understand these concepts clearly. Music criticism in independent India has come to stay. But the point I wish to make will be borne out—and the defects referred to become manifest—if we give a little thought to the following specimens of typical critical writing on *ālāpa* and ryhthm, the two most distinctive features of our music, and to the way I try to explain these concepts in the context of actual music.

> The *ālāpa* was well done. It was sweet and reposeful, and the nature of the *rāga* was well brought out.

Writing such as this may well be true of the music it refers to. But it is hardly enlightening. A *vilambit sthāyi* too may seem to be sweet and reposeful, and may also clearly project the nature of the *rāga* it is set in. So the acclaim here does not tell us anything distinctive about the *ālāpa*. The defect, I suggest, arises from indifference to the essence of *ālāpa* which may be put thus:

> *Ālāpa* is that kind of singing which eschews both language and cyclic rhythm because it seeks, in particular, to evoke effects of serenity, seamlessness, unboundedness and the sublime; and an intese, enveloping and identifiable *rāga-rūpa* by regulating the aesthetic pace, and by using some such formal excellences as directly make for specific effects[19].

But I must explain this and its relevance to music with an emphasis on ways of looking on *ālāpa* demanded by a proper understanding of what it essentially is, which is missed by the critical remark instanced.

The true aesthetic warrant of *ālāpa* is its ability to create effects of sheer sound which do not quite go with the utterance of words. Words tend to mar the fineness and uninterrupted flow of a delicate, 'luminous' musical passage: "The diverse letters will ruffle continuity; and also, by their volume, detract from fineness"[20]. Language cannot also be used without loss of beauty where an *ālāpiyā* creates a soft and vibrant background—a sweet and slightly nasal resonance—by producing *anuranātmaka dhwani*. Here the utterance when

subdued is sweet; and where not so restrained it may seem like a vocal analogue of the tinkle of a temple bell with alternating pulses of approach and recession. No such attention to the need to keep the sound of music free from imposition by words is commonly seen in our critical reactions to *ālāpa*, including the one referred to.

Further, what exactly is the "nature of the *rāga*" which is said to be brought out in the *ālāpa*? Ordinarily the nature of a *rāga* means merely the following: the specific *swaras* that a *rāga* builds upon; the ones it projects with a little extra care—the *vādi* and the *samvādi*; the *rāga's* manner of movement or *chalan*; and the *rasa* that is commonly regarded as its distinctive emotional property. But all this can be manifest, as we know, in good *khayāl*-singing as well; and I insist it goes merely to make, in the main, the *rāga's* grammatical *identity*. What is brought out in good *ālāpa* is the *rāga's personality (rāga-rūpa)*; and this, I must add, in the very process of coming into its own, quite without the interference of words which, because of their meaning, may pull in a direction quite different from that of pure sound. It is true that in the *barhat* of a good *khayāliyā*—say, of the Kirana *gharānā*—the construction of a *rāga* may be clearly seen; and that in a Jogiyā recital by the late Abdul Karim Khan the *rāga's* yearning tenderness never fails to affects us. But whereas in the former case—in spite of the patient, reverential invocation—the *rāga* is never able to create a pervasive atmosphere, in the latter, the feeling which may well touch us agreeably is not backed up by any projection of the *rāga's* inherent power and depth, though an overall sweetness of singing is undeniable.

I feel tempted to explain at this point how power and depth appear in our music. Some sure marks of power are firmness of musical utterance—even in the higher reaches and in the execution of *drut tāns*—an impressive volume of normal *akāra*, and due treatment of notes in the *mandra*. The last of these marks might also appear as musical *depth*, but depth is really not so tied down to the actual in music, be it steadiness of voice or volume. Depth can be seen almost anywhere in the three *saptaks* even if the voice is relatively deficient in volume, the *gāyak* resorting not only to a stepwise evocation of the *rāga*-form, but regulating the pace of singing. A leisurely glide across three or even two adjacent *swaras* often produces the suggestion of a concave curve; and its expanse lends a measure of depth to the music—and to the singer himself an awareness of this depth—by, so to say, laying open the space between the *swaras*. The depth indicated here can easily exceed the small extent of the interval. *Āroha* in good *ālāpa* is no mere flight of steps; it is an effort to explore and reveal what is left uncharted by

the notes. The marks which enable us to tell the name of a *rāga* or to distinguish it from another are only mere abstract traces, so to say, of a *rāga's* personality. From the viewpoint of the latter nothing is so removed from *ālāpa* as *lakṣana geet.*

It should now be clear how the specimen of critical writing we chose to comment on hardly tells anything about what the knitting of the form of a *rāga* really is in *ālāpa.* Nor is the comment in any way indicative of how we react to the onward passage of *ālāpa.* It speaks of *ālāpa* as something that we merely attend to, if with an occasional nod of approval. It is phenomenologically poor, for

> in contemplating the leisurely build-up of *ālāpa,* we have not only to keep an unremitting eye on *sur* and *rāga*—which care is here incidental, though necessary—but to eschew impatience for instant effects, and to make ourselves so available to the music being made that the subtlest nuances get a chance to register themselves and we are gently enabled to merely suck the sweetness of what meets the ear or to open to the expanse, immensity, and heights that may seem to be there in the music. In any case, our being is here enrolled in a much fuller way than in listening to quick and rhythmically organized music. This . . . [is] why *ālāpa* can give us a deeper delight than the other forms of music. It is true that it builds upon numerous formal graces . . . [which elicit attention] . . . but the inner spaciousness of the fabric of *ālāpa,* its infinite reaches and its seeming to engulf us rather than to merely confront us are due, in the main, to the leisurely inroads *we let it make* into our aesthetic sensibility. The way the form of *ālāpa* actualizes itself is indeed distinctive . . . The *rasika* here does not even consciously reflect that the 're' comes after 'sa' or before 'ga', though he of course loses no time in registering the *svaras.* [In reading poetry the act of] getting at the meaning of words and the vision of word-bound images cannot but be perceptible effort, an active and intricate unravelling of details, and their gathering in various ways, but listening to *ālāpa* is just a discriminating openness, and its form as contemplated develops through a kind of incipient surrender on our part. The former enables us to discover the total form, the latter is rewarded with a self-revelation of the *rāga's* own *rūpa.* I do not deny the presence of moments of felt indwelling in our contemplation of poetry, but, to be sure, the sense of putting oneself wholly at the object's disposal is here not so marked as in correct attention to *ālāpa* of the kind I here speak of . . . *Tādātmya* in art contemplation is not everywhere achieved exactly in the same way. It may have to be secured, or it may be gently elicited. The latter, I believe, distinguishes our concern with *ālāpa*[21].

Let me present a second specimen of critical writing:

> The *Vilambit Khyāl* was a composition in *jhoomrā tāla* . . . The quicker one which followed, in *drut ektāla,* was delightfully lively. Partly because of an occasional use of scintillating *bol tanns,* it brought out the festive mood of the *rāga* admirably. The vocalist's rhythmic bouts with the drummer were competent; they never strayed from the basic pace. Shafaat Ahmad Khan, on the *tabla,* provided helpful rhythmic accompaniment. It added to the charm of the recital without ever disturbing the singer's own elaboration of the *rāga*-form or filigree of fast patterns.

I would explain the concept of rhythm in our music thus:

> Rhythm, in our music, is of variform value. It shapes and enlivens the music, giving it both an intelligible form and a pleasing variety of movement. It also serves as the matrix and ground, and as a norm and determinant of creative work.

Let me now show how the critical reaction quoted is deficient, though it can of course be true of a given piece of music.

To begin with, is it helpful enough as criticism to say that a particular *sthāyi* is in *jhoomrā* or *drut ektāla*? One can hardly say yes; for the remark only shows that the critic has been able to identify the two distinct rhythmic cycles. We are told nothing about how exactly the *sthāyi* is related here to the *tāla*. Does it appear to be merely suspended or placed in a *tāla*? Is it simply waiting, not reaching for—stranded, so to say, in relation to—the *sama*? Or does it appear to be carefully laid out or developed in[22] a cycle which seems to easily fit the *sthāyi's* own natural extent? Some would perhaps say yes to the first of these questions if the *sthāyi* adverted to belonged to a *khayāl* by the late Ustad Amir Khan in *jhoomrā* or *tilwārhā*; and others would nod in approval to the second if the *sthāyi* in question were by the late Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan or Chand Khan of the Delhi *gharānā*. A classical *bandish*, I suggest, is not truly that unless it 'binds' or incarnates—or gives just the right kind of 'filling' to—the rhythmic cycle chosen, besides of course projecting the *rāga's* unique character. If the text of the *sthāyi* merely falls within the compass of the *thekā*, and if the pace of the latter is too slow to be seen as a self-completing whole by the *rasika*, the *sthāyi* will not appear organized in and by means of *tāla*. The *rasika* here cannot see the *tāla as a cycle*. It rather appears as a mere series or lateral stretch, because he has to count the *mātrās*. As such the *tāla* cannot sway us; we do not abandon ourselves to it, as we freely do to what is familiar, for we have to struggle to determine and follow the cycle. If attention is so divided between the *swaras* that are readily accepted as the *raga's* own constituents and the *tāla which seems to pose a problem*—and if, what is more, the rhythm does not convey meaning in musical utterance directly as in normal speech—how can the singing appear as an easy blend of *sur* and *tāla*? Form, as integration of elements, would here be obviously deficient.

How rhythm can shape and enliven music should now be easy to visualize. The point will become clearer if we reflect a little on how rhythm can give an intelligible form to music. Take a simple instance. The average *rasika* may not find it easy to recognize the

formed quality of a *bandish* in *vilambit ektāla*. But when the same cycle assumes a *drut* pace the text set in it may be readily perceived as a whole. In other words the cyclic quality which our rhythm lends to music is not a matter of symmetrical balance——a whole's divisibility into two equal halves—but is, in the main, one of easy perceivability which in turn depends on avoidance of excessive slowness. A *tāla* is not cyclic in itself; it appears to be so because the *rasika* follows it, and he is able to follow it because the pace is manageable and the rhythm *seems to move* instead of appearing as a mere series of *mātrās* already laid out. *Laya* or aesthetic pace is therefore the essence of the matter. But, be it noted, where it is rightly chosen or properly set, it is no mere assistance to the *rasika*; it also enables the composition to bloom or to achieve its potential beauty. A composition takes effect not only because of the *tāla* it uses but the pace it chooses. Those who have heard the late Ustad Aman Ali Khan will vouch for the truth of what I say in respect of *sthāvi-antarā*. In tabla and Kathak the 'just-a-second-before-the-*sama*' look of an *anāgat* pattern as it ends clearly suffers where the *laya* chosen is even a little slower than it should be; the tiny gap between the *thekā's* grammatical *sama* and the pattern's own final accent widens awkwardly; and the delightful stress with which the proper pacing of such a pattern enables the *rasika's* imagination to *glide* over the interval and be moved to attain the *sama* (in idea) wholly disappears. Even generally, every good performing artiste knows that a *bandish* or a *torhā* needs a particular *laya* to flower in.

It should now be clear that when I say that it is not mere rhythm but rhythm at the right pace which gives form to music, I take form to mean not only shape, wholeness or a self-completing 'look' but also, importantly, due articulation of parts or constituent *bols* and segments. This is exactly why an excessive quickening of pace is just as damaging to musical form as undue deceleration. In one case the semblance of a unitary flow disappears; in the other the parts are jumbled instead of being properly disposed in relation to one another. In the latter case there is no room for *nigah* or discriminating perception and, so far as the *rasika* is concerned, *tādātmya* is disrupted, for the essence of the 'object' demanded by the latter is form. Rhythm as aesthetic pace is thus vital to our experience of music as art.

If I recall here the second specimen of critical writing discussed, I find it does not even apear to suspect the many inner ways, just outlined, in which rhythm works as a determinant of musical form. Yet every *rasika* is familiar with them, though he rarely makes them an object of reflection. Nor is any thought given, in the writing I

speak of, to some important details of the way in which the rhythm provided by the drummer serves as the matrix or ground—and as a determinant—of creative work; reaching the *sama* accurately is seen as the only norm of rhythm. The fact that a drummer's accompaniment is helpful is one thing; *how variously* it helps is quite another.

The *thekā* should nowhere waver in respect of *laya*. Besides, the *bols* it builds on should all be crisply produced and yet seem soft. They have to mark the *laya*-flow with such deft impact that even though the segments of the cycle—the *khāli* and the *bhari*—be all along clear, the playing may nowhere tend to ruffle the main performer's attunement to the music. Such controlled drumming, because of its sustained and helpful quality, is a kind of matrix within which the main musician can freely wander without fear of losing his bearings; it helps also because of its semblance of fixity, as a ground to which the musician can return every now and then—say, after producing some *tāns*—to reinstil in himself both the rhythmic and melodic form of the music by singing a passage or two of *sthāyi*, in which alone is the dual *rāga-tāla* form pellucid. A rightly provided *thekā*—I mean one which meets all the requirements I have distinguished—determines the vocalist's work not of course by proffering suggestions but by so putting him at ease with the rhythmic form of the song that his explicit attention is left free to deal with the intricacies of *swara*, *rāga* and melodic devices.

In the beginning of course the *thekā* is set and may appear to be a slight imposition to the singer as he sets out to 'fill' the *sthāyi* once or twice. But once the *sthāyi* and *thekā* have both been duly established, the rhythm becomes a part of the singer's implicit awareness, in the way he registers somatic sensations that arise while singing; and this awareness is not a demand on his attention. Our music is occurrent not merely in the sense that we listen to it as it is being made, nor only because, say, the *tāns* follow each other, but essentially because in the same recital vital changes take place in how the growing art-work appears to the musician himself. His *tādātmya* with the music he makes is no inert, unrelenting clasp; it waxes and wanes in intensity; and what is first seen as a mere objective norm soon changes into an integral facility. The *thekā* in a music recital, I repeat, is itself subject to the change I speak of; and the singer's own overwhelmed look at the end, in case he has sung well, indicates that *tādātmya*—or surrender of the very sense of being a music-*maker* to the power of music itself—is very far removed from the manifest effort to take care of details of *rāga* and *tāla* with which one has to begin. The *thekā* in *khayāl*-singing is a vital, though not the only, determinant of such changes. □

NOTES

1. See Plate 1 facing p. 12 in *Indian Painting Today*, Jehangir Art Gallery, Bombay, 1981.
2. Assuming of course that the account tallies with what the composition in fact is.
3. Aristotle was probably the first to point this out in his *Posterior Analytics*. See the 6th footnote (on p. 11) in Harold Osborne's essay 'What is a Work of Art?' in *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 21, No. 1, Winter 1981.
4. Asymmetrical balancing is the balancing of opposites such as black and white or high and low, say, by means of diagonal positioning.
5. See pp. 28, 29 of William Gaunt's *A Companion to Painting*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1967.
6. H.R. Poore: *Composition in Art*, The Oak Tree Press, London, 1967, p. 21.
7. C.R. Cammell in *World Famous Paintings* (foreward by P. Annigoni), The New Educational Press, London, 1958, p. 184.
8. Jacques Maritain's essay 'Beauty and Imitation' in M. Rader's *A Modern Book of Esthetics*, 4th edition, 1973, p. 28.
9. W. Gaunt: *A Companion to Painting*, p. 169.
10. A.C. Bradley: *Shakespearean Tragedy*, MacMillan, 1971 reprint, pp. 278, 280.
11. See here the essay 'Describing and Interpreting a Work of Art' by Robert J. Matthews in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, U.S.A., Fall 1977, pp. 5–13.
12. J. Margolis: *Art and Philosophy*, p. 142.
13. *Ibid*, p. 135.
14. *Ibid*, p. 134.
15. *Ibid*, p. 111.
16. S. K. Saxena: 'Ālāpa in Dhruvapada Gayaki', *Sangeet Natak* Nos. 81–82, July–December 1986, p. 51.
17. Visibly, we may say, with a flourish of the right hand, and audibly with an express *'vāh'*.
18. This is in my view one of the very few flaws in the art of this admirable vocalist. My purpose here, I may add, is merely to illustrate a point, *not to emphasize* a defect.
19. These excellences can even be projected, with their distinctive effects, in relative isolation from their embedment in music. See my essay 'Ustad A. Rahimuddin Khan Dagur', *Sangeet Natak* No. 39, Jan.–March 1976.
20. S. K. Saxena: *Aesthetical Essays*, Chanakya Publications, 1981, p. 131.
21. *Ibid*, pp. 146–47.
22. This technical detail of singing is called *sthāyi bharnā*.