

Music and Silence¹

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Silence is of vital help to the creation and contemplation of music. However, very few aestheticians have reflected on the subject; and, to the best of my knowledge, perhaps no one has addressed the question how *Hindustani music* relates to silence. The only generally relevant essay that I have come across is the one by Gisele Brelet which appeared in the twentysecond volume of *La Revue Musicale* more than half a century ago^{1a}. It is doubtless a thoughtful essay, written (at places) in a markedly phenomenological vein; but it does not clearly bring out how silence relates to the three *distinct* ways in which music concerns us, that is, as composition, performance, and listening. And, of course, it could not be expected to have any direct bearing on North Indian music with which alone I can truly claim to be familiar.

However, before I proceed further, I must face a possible question. Does the subject in question deserve serious attention at all? Is it not quite apparent that, as privation of sound, silence is just *opposed* to music which must build upon *swaras* that are all meant to be *heard*, if discriminatingly? The point of such sceptical questions, however, dissolves the moment we look at two simple facts. First, for listening to a music recital properly we need perfect silence in the auditorium; and, secondly, moments of quiet are not only inevitable within the very run of music itself, but even desirable because music is essentially a contemplative, not a dramatic art; and because contemplation, whether religious or merely secular, always needs and involves a measure of quiet. Music *can* appear dramatic as when a vocalist becomes flamboyantly emotional or tries to cover up lack of intrinsic quality in his music with frequent and exaggerated gestures. But classical singing which is really good requires contemplation in ample measure; and, what is more, the need is equal for the performer *and* his audience. How this very need calls for recurring moments of silence should become clear if we gave some thought to what contemplation itself is. As explicit engrossment, it is not just a peck of attention, however focussed it may presently be. It needs time to settle itself and to take over the mind. This is why the *vilambit* idiom is essential for music². Now, it is obvious, leisurely or reposeful singing just cannot be unremitting; it has to let in some moments of silence. Even generally, no one can sing without any break. But even if one could, it would be an aesthetic disaster. It would just leave no time for the singer *and* the listener to internalize the ongoing music, and the heard sounds would, so to say, only tickle the ear. The experience, in either case, would be rather superficial.

Contemplation, however, is not the only key term that relates to our present purpose. We

will also be using, pretty freely, words like music, silence, composition, and performance. These are all familiar words to be sure; but a little close thinking on what they really mean in the context of practice *and* art in general may yet be found to help. *Music* is of course commonly taken to be preeminent among the arts, but its inseparability from rhythm or rather *laya* (aesthetic pace) is not generally seen quite clearly. For those who are wedded to Hindustani (or north Indian) music it should be easy to see why it is essential to distinguish *laya* from rhythm. How exactly the two differ—and interrelate—has already been brought out in preceding chapters, and here we may only focus on the fact that there is no rhythm (as *tāla*) in *ālāpa* of the *dhrupada* genre where the duration of *sustainment* of individual notes—and the pace of tonal *passages*—are both determined by the singer's own creative ability to produce varying effects. So the temporal element in *ālāpa* can only be said to be *laya* or aesthetic pace, that is, tempo as determined essentially by the vocalist's own ability to evoke varying effects, consistently of course with the character of the *rāga* chosen. Now, bearing all this in mind, and as demanded by the subject we are dealing with, two points may be made here. First, intervals of silence in *ālāpa* cannot easily be so *long* as in Khyāl-singing where the gaps in vocal utterance can readily appear filled up by listeners' attention to the ongoing *thekā*. Secondly, there are some *brief*, and peculiarly significant bits of quiet which just cannot be there in *ālāpa* because there is no *tāla* here. My reference here is to such moments of silence as (a) the ones that (may be made to) separate the three segments of a (Khyāl *ang*) *taan* modelled as a *tiyā*; (b) or the pleasing little bit of quiet which is sometimes brought about by the vocalist when he purposely closes a tonal phrase just a little before the *sama* in the *anāgat* manner (called *jagah dikhānā*), inducing us, the listeners, to visualize the focal beat and to bridge the empty little quiet imaginatively.

The way I have generally taken *rhythm* so far is, however, relevant only to our music. Aestheticians, on the other hand, have given a wider meaning to the word, with a view to covering all art quite generally, say, as:

the alternation between heavy (stressed) and light (unstressed or less stressed) parts, in so far as it follows certain rules³.

The view just cited is quite relevant to our rhythm as well. I say so because our rhythm-cycles have off-beats too — beats which may be said to be unstressed because they are not marked on the *Tablā*. However, the noteworthy point here is that the *temporal flow between the beats*, which is all along quiet because it is not marked on the drums, has got to be held on to by the listener, through sheer concentration. In fact, it is this fact which throws a tissue of ideality over our listening to music and prevents it, along with some other factors, from being a merely sensuous experience.

To turn now to *silence*, its obvious meaning is absence of sound or speech. But here two points may be made at once. First, if we take silence as absolute quiet in the outer world, even a very faint sound may yet serve to heighten the feel (or thought) of enveloping silence.

This truth can be seized even imaginatively. Thus, when in the very opening of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* we come across talk like the following:

Bernardo: Have you had *quiet* guard?
 Francisco: Not a mouse *stirring*⁴.

We lose no time in imagining that the quiet of the night is very deep indeed. Here, the very thought of the hardly audible stirring of a mouse deepens our sense of the night-time quiet. This, however, is not the only way in which sound relates to silence. Nor is momentary absence of outer sound or (overt) speech the only meaning of *silence*. The word is also freely taken to mean a *period* of such absence, stillness, refusal or failure to speak or communicate, and oblivion or obscurity. The last of these meanings is irrelevant to the making and contemplation of music. Of all the other meanings *stillness* perhaps needs a little extra attention because it means privation not only of sound or speech, but of motion or activity. This activity may be the inner tumult of thought, desire or anxiety as is implied by the Biblical maxim: 'Be still and know that I am God'. But when a philosopher (Prof. Whitehead, if I remember correctly) characterizes *silence* as "the medium in which great things fashion themselves", the word has to be taken in a fuller sense, that is, as signifying not only a period of intense concentration but of utter quiet on the outside. On the other hand, where we speak of the still waters of a lake, we mean that the lake is free from motion and noise, *both* alike features of the *outer* world.

However, such a concern with the terms' mere meanings reveals nothing about how the two overlap or interpenetrate in actual experience; in other words, the phenomenology of sound and silence remains quite untouched. In real life we have *many* sounds and *many* silences, not just one sound and one silence; and their individual character is determined not only by the way they interrelate, but by their context of situations and happenings, our attitudes and experience, and even by our state in the present which may be one of sheer vacancy or of intense absorption in some thought or activity. Now, it is easy to see how sounds in the outer world differ not only because of their intrinsic character, but because of the different ways in which they relate to silence. A pop and a thud are of course both pretty quickly accomplished; but only the second one of these looks like making a passing dent in the quiet around. Likewise, a splash seems to do what a plop clearly does not, that is, appearing to scatter the frame of silence for a while. Sounds emanating from human beings are also easily distinguishable. To sob is clearly not the same thing as to wail. With its own intermittent gulps for breath the act of sobbing only lets in some moments of nervous calm; it cannot look like tearing the quiet air apart as wailing can easily appear to do.

The way is now paved to see how the distinguishing we have done above can help us see why actual musical utterance strikes us differently. To speak quite generally, how exactly the voice is made to enter immediate quiet, gently and contemplatively *or* abruptly and full blown; how long a stretch of silence it overlays; and how exactly it re-enters the calm it has

covered, as a taper or as an emphatic cut—all this determines the look and impact of singing. Such thinking has a bearing also on the sonant variety of the very basic material of music, namely, the *swaras* as they have been named (or note names)—that is, *sa*, *re*, *ga*, *ma*, and so on. Of all these *swaras* of the musical scale *re* alone (as a note-name duly sung) seems to enter silence as an incline. All other *swaras* up to (and including) *dha* appear to rest on silence horizontally and openly. The note *ni* is the only other note which appears a little singular by virtue of making a closed linear entry into silence. It seems to me that, precisely because of this singularity, a sustained singing of *ni* (as such) is perhaps better able to evoke a semblance of engrossment than a resting of voice at one of the 'open' *swaras*. As for *re* (as sung), especially where in *madya saptak* it is *komal* or nearer to *shadja* (than its 'pure' colleague), its little incline which does not (as a rule) appear to cleave silence, makes it admirably suited to produce a suggestion of gentle emergence of sound from within its melodic neighbour, *shadja*. This is probably the reason why quite a few morning *rāgas* build on the *komal rishabh* to make the music chime with the image of sunrise.

Here, however, a question may well be put. Am I justified in giving so much attention to *sargams* (or patterns of note-names)? Have they actually distinguished the singing of any eminent vocalist? Yes, I can straightaway refer to at least two vocalists of repute: first, the late Ustad Amān Ali Khan of Bhendi Bazar and Ustad Ali Bux Khan (Bade Ghulam Ali's father) who specialized "in singing intricate *sargams*"⁵. Further, a devoted practice of *merkhand paltā-s* (patterns of varying disposition of note-names) is generally thought to make an essential part of a classical vocalist's initial training. Some *paltā-s* can be of such vital importance that they may have to be practised assiduously for one whole year⁶. Note-names, we may note, enable us to identify the sonant character of a *swara* (even as names assist us in identifying people) and its location in the scale. And this is extremely important. Names of *swaras* are of course not the same thing as *taans*; but unless the notes in the scale are identified and held on to through long and devoted *riyāz* (or practice), their occurrence in the run of *taans* is bound to be off-key and so to lose colour.

In respect of *sargams*, however, yet another doubt is likely to disturb the reader. Why do we speak of the *sound* (of note-names) entering into silence, implying that silence is the matrix of sound? Why can't we speak rather of silence creeping into the region of sound? To questions such as these my ready answer is that I realize the validity of the alternative suggested; that, later in the essay, I will myself have to argue that without the entry of quiet moments into actual or visualized sounds we can have neither the composition or performance, nor even the contemplation of music as art; and that I yet insist on regarding silence as the matrix of sound. The reason why I insist on the primacy of silence simply is that whereas we can surely have fair periods of silence quite without sound, we just cannot have sound without some silence (as environment). Sound is an event; it happens; it emerges as a passing overlay of silence; acquires its character, as already illustrated, partly in virtue of how it appears against the background of silence; and obviously re-enters the

region of quiet when it ends or is made to end.

Yet another question is possible in respect of *sargams*. If the singing of the very basic material of vocal music—that is, the note-names—includes two sounds, *re* and *ni*, which are not really open (or similar to अ, आ sounds), how can the norm of *shuddha akāra*, by which we generally mean that the musical use of voice should appear natural or uncontrived and quite uncontrived (or open) besides being sweet, be said to be essential to—or even preservable (especially as *open*) in—actual singing? By common consent, it was the *akāra* of Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan (besides that of some others whom I cannot recall at the moment) which could be said to be a model. It would indeed be sweet, lucent and unwrinkled all along. What is more, as I have already pointed out, he could even revel in singing *taar swaras* majestically in a perfectly open *akāra*. But, I may also ask, did not the *text* of some of his songs freely build on letters including ओ, ए, and ई sounds? Consider, for instance, his following *drut* composition in raga *āsāvri*:

अब भई भोर नही आए लालन
मैं तो सगरी रैन जागी⁷

Therefore, a *consistent openness* cannot be said to be demanded by the norm of *shuddha akāra*. Take, again, the criterion of *naturalness*. Did our maestros like Ustad Faiyaz Khan and Pandit Kumar Gandharva use their voices in really as natural a way as an average and untutored man, yet with a flair for singing, may be seen to do? Is sheer *naturalness* of manner unquestionably preferable to an aesthetically *cultivated* way of musical utterance? Can it ever be binding on a painter to keep his colouring continually bright and every detail of his works perfectly *open* to untutored perception? Does any material or element quite retain its own independent character in the organic form of a complete work of art? To all such questions our genuine *rasikas* may be expected to say *no*. I therefore suggest that the only meaning which can be fairly given to the norm of *shuddha akāra* in classical singing is that the vocalist's utterance should be all along pleasing to the ear, and that *akāra* has to be cultivated to this overriding end, without letting it appear merely contrived and so a source of displeasure. In the wholeness of singing and listening, indeed, even the involvement of silence is far from being simple and uniform. This should become clear as we turn to consider the role of silence in the creation (as composition), performance, inner run, and appreciation of music.

Take *creation* (as composition), to begin with. The details of the ways in which composers create music are, in principle, infinite; and all that we may do, as required by our present purpose, is to make the following simple points. First, a more or less quiet environment is generally quite as necessary for *composing* music as for intense thinking. But, secondly, for proper pursuance of the task in hand one has also to put aside all such thoughts and concerns as are likely to disturb the act of creation. Though, as an outer fact, silence may well be taken as mere absence of noise, there is an inner calm too which issues from a kind

of self-gathering, a positive control of irrelevant thoughts and impulses; and which seems to be an essential pre-requisite for focusing duly on the creative activity at hand. It may not be quite serene, because it is at once instinct with the readiness to begin what one is so keen about; but at the same time, as disengagement from one's everyday practical concerns, it is positive enough to steady one for the work ahead; and so is felt as a calm, if short-lived and not really absolute. I think it is more or less similar to the state of a vocalist who finds himself seated on the stage and is all set to begin singing the moment the compere finishes his (or her) work of introducing the artist and the music to come.

Further, a distinction may be made between the 'laws' and the *process* of creation. The determinants of creation in the region of art are pretty various. Any compulsive impression in the present or poignant reminiscence can trigger off the act of creation; and there is much to support Beethoven's view that the laws of creation are 'inscrutable' or hard to determine. Even Wagner, who is perhaps the most verbal of all the great composers "wrote about everything under the sun . . . except composition", probably because "the music rose to his pen [for notation] from levels deeper than anything that even he could verbalize"⁸. Yet, in respect of the process, as distinguished from the 'laws' (or principles) of creation, one remark may be made with certainty. Cases where the process of creation is literally continuous are extremely rare; and in most cases there are frequent intervals, at times covering a lapse of two or three years (as was sometimes the case with Kumar Gandharva)⁹, when the artist just quietly (or subconsciously) mulls over the part which has been completed with a view to determine what it itself demands as the next step. And this aesthetic demand may be quite unforeseen. This happened, for instance, with Tagore when he found that the very marks and lines with which he sought to correct and improve the ongoing course of (the writing of) his poems admitted of being turned into aesthetically significant designs. Be that as it may, the noteworthy point here is that the moments of contemplation which intermit the creative process may well be regarded as silences in the sense of suspension of active making.

However, it is only in the actual run of music that the role of intervening silence is perfectly clear. When we witness a good play of the traditional kind, absorption (*tanmayi bhāvanā*) is secured, as Bharata would say, by an integration of many factors, of which *abhinaya*, specially as *vācika* and *āṅgika*, is importantly one. Such aesthetic resources are not available to music. To elicit absorption it has to rely on some quite different factors, such as sweetness of tone, the recurring cycle of rhythm, and the organized and distinct melodic character of the *rāga* being sung. But whereas, as notated, a *rāga* may simply leave a little empty space between the different *swaras* it comprises, the moment it assumes the living form of singing, the space which separates — and interlinks — the different *swaras* or *swara-samooahas* (tonal phrases) has to be filled either with the help of glides (*meends*) or as regulated *silences*. In actual singing, we may note, these privations of sound are no mere vacuity; they are effective invitations to both the singer and the listener to *ideally hold on* (a) to the flow of rhythm, even where it runs *unmarked* on the drums *between* the different

mātrās, as also (b) to the total form of the *rāga* even where it is not audibly manifest (or actually heard), exemplifying what phenomenology speaks of as 'constitution' by the contemplator. This ideal holding on to the music (and rhythm) is *contemplation*, and what not only allows but invites it to rise and run as a confluence is deft interpositions of silence, besides of course the charm that is intrinsic to melody and rhythm. How these quiet intervals relate to the singer and the listener *differently* has, however, to be brought out.

The performing vocalist gets a little time not only to tune himself anew to the ongoing rhythm as marked by the drummer, but to visualize and even *visibly cherish* the next melodic step. This is indeed why a classical singer is occasionally seen swaying his head serenely even where there is no actual singing. Even generally, the very logic of creation in art (as performance) makes such silences necessary. On the one hand, we may note, the act of art-making is not the directed pursuit of a clearly *predetermined* (ultimate) end. Yet, on the other hand, it is not a random activity either, because every onward step in the creative process is *determined* by (what appears to the singer as) the aesthetic demand of what has just been accomplished. This is precisely what distinguishes such activity from indulgence in a mere reverie where the subject just lets himself float over fanciful images or ideas as *they* suggest each other without any attempt on *his* part to actively subject their run to norms of consistency or probability. Now the performing musician's contemplation of what he has just completed with an eye to determining its aesthetic lead is (here too) a momentary suspension of active singing and so an interval of silence, if a little tense and uneasy, because of the implicit urge to proceed.

Here, before we turn our attention to how the subject of this chapter relates to *listeners* at a concert, let us see how silences in fact vary according to situations we find ourselves in. Where we are stunned momentarily into silence by the quite unexpected news of a dear one's death, everything around us seems to come to a halt; our impulses too appear to freeze; and it is only a little later that open grieving may animate us into feeling alive once again. On the other hand, the silence that fills the act of getting set—say, at the blocks—to face the competitive challenge of a race is at once a felt, tight focussing on the task ahead. Yet another kind of silence—falling, so to say, midway between the two we have just distinguished—is provided by a poet's quiet communion with nature. As a *wise* passiveness it is quite ready to register impulses "from a vernal wood" (Wordsworth), and so is by no means quite inert; at the same time, it is not marred by any feeling of tenseness. It is this last kind of (a poet's) silence which comes pretty close to the *rasika's* state as he just waits, after the compere's prefatory remarks, for the singer to open the *rāga* 'announced'. But though this has to be the pervasive tenor of his silence throughout the recital, it may well be relieved at times by impressions of different kinds. A meteoric, yet beaded (दनेदार) *taan* from Bade Ghulam Ali Khan may just *dazzle* the listener's contemplative calm with sonority; a pattern of yearning effulgence from Kumar Gandharva may make our silence swell with a sense of high seriousness, and so provide an illustration in music of what may perhaps be called (following Kant) a look of dynamical sublimity, or of what Plotinus meant when he

spoke of art as a kind of "metaphysical homesickness"; and the recurring moments of quintessential fineness in Rahimuddin Khan Dagar's *ālāpa* may just deepen the listener's quiet into a felt tranquillity of spirit which is deeper than the charms of mere outer ornament.

NOTES

1. The contents of this article are a slightly modified version of the essay which first appeared, bearing the same heading, in the *Journal of Indian Council of Philosophical Research* (JICPR), Vol. XX, Number 3, July–September 2003, pp. 224–234.
- 1a. This essay appears in *Reflections on Art*, edited by Susanne K. Langer, the John Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 2nd Printing 1960, pp. 102–121.
2. See, here, the following: "... Is not speed normally *opposed to* contemplation?... Incidentally, the Oxford Dictionary... *pace* Winterbourne... gives contemplation; as *opposed to* active". David Best's essay, 'Reply to My Critics' in *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 23, No. 2, Spring 1983, p. 158.
3. *Reflections on Art*, p. 26 of the essay, 'Art and Feeling' by Otto Baensch.
4. Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Act I, Speeches 10,11.
5. Malti Gilani and Quratulain Hyder (eds.) *Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan: His Life and Music*, Harman Publishing House, New Delhi, 2003, p. 7.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 188.
8. Peter Kivy, *Music Alone*, Cornell University Press, 1st Printing, Cornell Paperbacks, 1991, pp.103–104.
9. Ashok Vajpeyi (ed.), *Kumar Gandharva*, Rajkamal Prakashan, New Delhi, 1st edition, 1982, p. 186.