

INDIAN MUSIC

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Indian music has a great and immemorial tradition, going back to the prehistoric period of the Vedas which were perhaps the earliest records of mankind to be put into a metrical form. It is therefore no wonder that the whole subsequent development of Indian music was dominated by a religious spirit, in spite of political and economic vicissitudes. Indian tradition asserts that the evolution of the musical scale can be traced through the three tones of the Rg Veda (Ni-Sa-Ri or B-C-D) and the four tones of the Yajur Veda to the penta-tonic scale in a descending order of the Sama Veda in its original form. Further developments through the six and seven tones took place in the later elaboration of the Sama scale adapted to the Indian lute or the Vina (Veene) and Indian musicology was systematised by Bharata in early centuries of the Christian era.

India is the country from which many ancient civilisations derived their music. The Sumerian "Bin" was derived from the Indian Vina. Strabo says that the Greek and Persian systems were influenced by India. The Greek musical instruments Kinyra, Kithara, Nabla and Kratala were derived from the Indian Kinnari, Chitra, Nakula and Karatala. A type of accompaniment in ancient Greece called Magadi singing was derived from the Magadhi song. The Syrians called their sacred hymns Sugita (the good song in Samkrt). The Chinese pentatonic scale and its later developments were due to the influence of Indian culture.

In Europe the Gregorian chant and polyphony were derived from the Indian system and the Guido de Arezzo adapted the method of the Sama Veda for memorising notes on the lines of fingers. Relics of polyphony are even now to be found in Java and Bali which have developed an orchestration for Indian music and dance.

In Indian music the emphasis is on melody. The Raga, like the old Greek and Ecclesiastical mode, is a selection of five, six or seven tones distributed along the scale. The Raga however is more particularised than the mode and has certain characteristic progressions to which the singer must pay due regard and a chief note to which he constantly returns. The Raga is a melody-mould only and gives ample scope for the artist to improvise.

Modern western music relies only on the pure or musical note aiming at a large scale effect through harmony of the instruments rather than the subtle nuances of the voice. Therefore it has no Sruti in the Indian sense because it is not aware of the intrinsic value of the musical note but only of its relation to the fundamental note. Therefore in Indian music the Raga constitutes the most distinguishing feature. In India it is not the scale that is fixed but a group of intervals and the precise vibration depends on its position in a progression and not on its relation to a tonic. The scale of twenty two notes (Srutis) is simply the sum of all the notes used in all the songs. The quarter-note or the Sruti is the micro-tonal interval between two successive scale notes, but as the theme employs only two and never three scale-notes in succession, the micro-tonal interval is not generally conspicuous except in ornament (Gamaka and Alamkara).

From the thirteenth century Indian music developed in two directions, the Hindustani or North Indian and Karnataka. Hindustani music is nearer to western music as it is attached to the pure note and admits only those ornamentations (Gamakas) which conform to it. It is also attached to the vowel sound and therefore a large group of oscillatory Gamakas are rejected and complete Bhava and Rasa (feeling and emotion) cannot be expressed, as for example in the Karnataka ragas Mohana, Sankarabharana or Kambodi. Karnataka music being theoretically perfect, has seventy two melas from which hundreds of ragas can be derived, where as in Hindustani music the repertoire is limited to about twenty melas. In Karnataka music there is no undue attachment to the pure note and the Gamaka is more natural and spontaneous. Further Karnataka music recognises the importance of time or laya to evolve rhythmic patterns or Talas.

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries witnessed a remarkable renaissance of Karnataka music, co-eval with Wagner, Chopin, Beethoven and Mozart in Europe. The great musical Trinity – Muttuswami Dikshitar, Syama Sastri and Tyagaraja have left an immortal legacy not only to India but to the whole world.

By Dr S.Srikanta Sastri