

## UNDERSTANDING INDIAN TRADITIONS IN MUSIC THERAPY

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**SUMMARY.** The hypothesis according to which music can be used to cure, comfort or stimulate has a special echo for any expert or student who is interested in Asian music. Some of the oldest Indian sources regarding the theory of music have provided information about the tight relations between music and medicine or physiology, especially aspects related to the genesis of the musical sound. The aesthetics of the Indian music strongly focuses on psychology and the structural aspects of music. The way an Indian musician inspires a listener can provide ways to comfort pains or any other therapy related actions. There are experts in music therapy both in India and outside the Indian subcontinent. There are doubts whether they apply either the theory or their therapeutic methods as related to the classical Indian tradition. It really seems surprising that both the literature about the traditional Indian musicology and the indigenous Indian medicine of Ayurveda have little to say with reference to this issue. Nevertheless, the Indian medicine refers to music therapy. Although there is no clear evidence as regarding this issue, it is pretty obvious that the Indian medical treatments involve magical-religious related phrases and incantations - mantras - related both to the preparation of medicines and to the cure of some diseases.

**Keywords:** Indian music, ancient Indian traditions, therapeutic methods, melotherapy, mantra.

The assumption according to which music can be used to heal, comfort or stimulate arises particular resonances in any expert or student interested in Asian music. Some of the oldest Indian sources regarding the theory of music provide information about the close relationship between music and medicine or physiology, especially about the aspects that relate to the genesis of the musical sound. The aesthetics of the Indian music strongly emphasizes psychology and the structural aspects of music. The way an Indian musician inspires a listener helps to identify possibilities for pain relief, for therapy in the broadest sense of the term.

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There are melotherapy practitioners both in India as well as outside the Indian subcontinent. However, it is uncertain whether these practitioners apply either the theory or their therapeutic methods in terms of the classical Indian tradition. It's really surprising that both the literature on traditional Indian musicology as well as the indigenous Indian medicine of Ayurveda have barely addressed this issue. Nevertheless, the Indian medicine mentions melotherapy. Although there is no clear evidence as regards this issue, it's obvious that Indian medical treatments involve magical-religious formulae and incantations - mantras - related both to the preparation of medicines and to the treatment of some diseases.

### 1. The three therapeutic methods in *Carakasamhita*

The treatise of medical history known as *Carakasamhita* comprises an important chapter about *cikitsa* (therapy) providing a very detailed description of the symptomatology of diseases. Among the 24 remedies against poisonings, the first one is *mantra*. This text reveals that, in ancient times, incantation was a vital ingredient of the pharmacological treatment. The magical-religious tradition of the *Vedas* (especially *Rigveda* and *Atharvaveda*) represents an early phase of Indian medical thinking and practice, in contrast with the classical treatments in the early Christian age, which are founded on empirical and rational discoveries, like *Carakasamhita*.

The treatments, as described in the chapter *Cikitsa* still follow the Atharvavedic traditional methods, which include the use of magic, incantations and the ritualistic utterance of myths and tales at well established times of the day, month or year. The recognition of the authority of the *Veda* has conveyed an important element to the later tradition: the validity and the sacred origin, since the other studied disciplines – theory of the drama, of dance and music – also originate in the *Veda*.

The introductory chapter – Sutrasthana- of *Carakasamhita* acknowledges three types of therapy – *daivavyapasraya*, based on spiritual issues, *yuktivyapasraya*, based on reason (it involves the rational administration of medicines, certain diets, etc) and *sattvavajaya* which is based on submission of the state of mind (mentioned in the text as « detachment of the mind from the notorious things »). The traditional commentators consider that the first category uses the term *daiva*, which means "what cannot be seen" – the invisible destiny, which must be opposed using incantations or invocation of gods to drive away diseases. This approach appears to use a Western concept, as it acknowledges the importance of the relationship between psychic condition and somatic symptomatology. According to the classical medicine *samhitas*, the physician is responsible for protecting a new born baby and his mother using medicines along with complementary remedies – both

the mother's as well as the child's room should be exhilarated through songs and other means. The specific treatment against snake venom consists both in the administration of medicines and ointments as well as in listening to musical instruments, for example drums (*bheri*), *mrdanga* and *pataha*. Everything that belongs to an educated life was included into "The 64 Arts". Vatsyayana (in his book *Kamasutra*) and other writers placed the vocal-instrumental music and dance in the domain of eroticism while the life of high society members was placed on top of a list including education in the field of sciences, study of foreign languages, culinary arts, etc. Vocal and instrumental music is part of general knowledge, but it is also meant to help those affected by illness. Once again, this stresses the importance of music in keeping the balance between physical and mental health. The classical medicine of the *Ayurveda* recommends in the section *Sutrasthana* that, after finishing a meal, people "should enjoy calming sounds, pleasant landscapes"... in short, everything that refreshes the soul and stimulates the mind, because such pleasant sensations are of great help in the course of digestion.

Sarngadeva, a XIII<sup>th</sup> century scholar, is known as the most famous theorist of the medieval Indian music. He was a descendant of the Kashmiri family and used to work for the Yadava court, in southern India. His father was a renowned doctor. This explains the great number of details about human anatomy included in his work whereby the genesis of the musical sound is understood through human physiology. In all cases, he explains the theory of musical sound in terms of anatomical and medical models. Moreover, the classical theory of aesthetics employed a detailed typology of emotions along with their physical and psychological manifestations.

## 2. Mantrasatra (the science of mantra)

In this context, it is worth to mention the *mantrasatra* traditions (the science of mantra), which originate in the religious practices of Tantra. The mantra practices are used to drive away demons and evil forces. These practices belong to the great group of apotropaic techniques which include rituals, poems reciting and songs. Each real mantra has its own melodic pattern. Many ancient and inspiring mantras were revealed to the mystics and missionaries while they were sunken in deep meditation. Some of their achievements and virtues are conveyed by means of sounds to the hearts of the devoted. These sacred sounds are considered to have descended with the help of the wise men from the subtle land of Anahata. Mantras are eternal; they are continuously forgotten and rediscovered, sometimes they are old, some other times they are new and their source, power and purpose belong to eternity. The following mantras can be identified: Buddhist mantras, Hindu mantras, Islamic mantras, Judaic mantras, Christian mantras, Sufi mantras, Sai Baba mantras, Punjab mantras, etc.

### 3. The musical culture of Ancient India

Information about Indian culture around the year 2000 B.C. can be found in the *Vedas* (in Sanskrit language meaning to know, to find out) written on palm leaves. So far, some 50,000 manuscripts were preserved till today containing a rich ancient literature in Sanskrit.

Among the works of the Vedic literature, divided into 4 books (*Rigveda*, *Igurveḍa*, *Samaveda*, *Atharvaveda*), the most valuable to the history of musical culture is *Samaveda*, which includes melodies of songs deriving from the religious texts of the *Rigveda*.

The collections of the *Rigveda* comprised 10 books which included 1028 hymns. The hymns of the *Rigveda* were recited, not sung.

The Indian ancient music is strongly connected to word, gesture, and movement. The Indian term *sanghit* (music) expresses the unity between song, instrumental music and dance. An ancient Indian treatise enumerates 24 movements of the head, which express compassion, amazement, fear, indifference, ignorance, passion, impatience, battle preparation and many other feelings. The gestures of the hands were even more numerous – 57 variants.

This extremely ancient music remained virtually unchanged in its essence while originating in the deepest myths. Brahma, the god of war of the Arian conquerors, is the god of melody, himself an incantation melody, whose designation to charm, is destined to inspire courage and make men communicate with him. In Sanskrit language, Brahman means a sacred, psalmodized formula. The rhythm of the melody comes from Shiva, the god of dance, holding an hourglass-shaped drum, which strikes the creative rhythm of all things – source of dance, source of life.

The classical Indian melodic modes (*raga*) have two fundamental characteristics:

- The existence of micro-intervals – *sruti* – 1/22 of an octave, barely perceptible by the human ear;
- Indian melodic modes may exceed the interval of one octave.

The most complex *ragas* cover up to three octaves with fifty or sixty steps that can be identified within these three octaves by the introduction of micro-intervals.

The term *raga*, used to design a mode, actually means mode. But *raga* is also a musical work, in all its modal and rhythmic complexity which can express the most varied moods and even the relationships between these moods and nature, the surrounding world. There is a *raga* for the morning, a *raga* for the evening, a *raga* for the night and the stars, a *raga* for love and for war. In India, the *raga* is of a theoretically endless duration.

In practice, performing it would take a whole night. The performers are surrounded by a small number of listeners, who participate in the concert by rhythmically playing Indian drums, a silent, interior, but extremely intense rendering of the unfolding of the sitar's melodic line – the large and splendid Indian guitar.

In the ensemble of the Indian *raga*, the drum is the instrument of rhythm, the latter being always extremely complex, consisting of rhythmical micro-values in parallel with micro-intervals. Indian rhythms were studied, encoded, classified in the XVII<sup>th</sup> century by Katyayana in his fundamental work *Sangitadarpana (The Mirror of Music)*. The Sanskrit word *tala* means rhythm, yet its primordial meaning is *the palm of the hand*; which explains the relationship between any rhythm and beating the drums with the palms of both hands. By its succession of values and accents, each rhythm renders the action, the natural phenomenon that inspires it. There are rhythms that are known as: «the gazelle's jump», «the impetus of the lion», «the leap of the tiger», «the soaring of the eagle», etc.

#### 4. Astrology, music and mantras in the early Indian medicine

In *santi* there can be identified the influences of several astrological phenomena. It is well known that a cycle of songs composed by the Indian musician Muttusvami Diksitar (1775-1835) was intended for therapeutic practices. It should be mentioned that this cycle is a succession of *krtis* – songs structured as classical *ragas*. In this respect, each song is dedicated to a *navagraha*, namely to the nine planets (the seven celestial bodies – the Sun, the Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, Saturn and the ascending and descending lunar nodes known as Rahu and Ketu). It was believed that the planets had a huge influence on people's lives. In the Hindu society it is customary that, in times of crises, these planets are implored through prayers and rituals. The Sanskrit term *graha* (planet) means master and it probably originates in the belief that each of them controls or influences the people's lives or destinies. The last ones, Saturn, Rahu and Ketu are frequently associated with the idea of being suspicious and their ability to spell disaster, especially disease. Diksitar's music – *navagrahakrtis* – is a music meant to calm, to appease. According to the original conception, Diksitar's apprentice, Tambiappan or Suddhamrdangam Tambi – a singer at the temple Tyagarja of Tiruvarur, suffered from a severe and chronic stomach disease caused by an unfavourable constellation in his horoscope. Diksitar introduced a suite of *krtis* into an arrangement which in the Karnatic tradition expands a sequential form of the composition structure, meant to appease the opposing forces in the constellation. Consequently, Tambi's disease was cured. However in this case, another possibility should be considered as well: it wasn't the music but the poetic content that brought the necessary comfort.

Nevertheless, according to traditional beliefs, the function of the composition art – *kṛti* was the healing element. It should be mentioned that in the classical Karnatic or Southern Indian repertoire the instruments may take the role of *kṛtis*. This means that the lyrics can be omitted provided that the melody replaces the ethos of the lyrics. Indeed, the musicians' point of view is that the power of the lyrics should be implicit in order to render this practice effective.

This example is not that strict in Indian terms. Imploration and converting conventionality into art constitute goals of numerous artistic Indian activities. If well performed, music is effective for pain relief. However, if inadequately performed or used, it can produce pain and disaster.

The concept according to which music influences orderliness is a very old one in Indian tradition and can be found even in the lyrics of the Vedic song, where the music of the religious song accompanied the sacrificial rituals. The Samavedic hymn was used as a mantra therefore its theory was not to be changed; each element of the sacrifice being connected to the way the world was working, to people and gods interacting with each other. Each sequence of the *yajna* ritual corresponded to a cosmic element, which provided a "raison d'être" (the essence itself). This relation was symbolically expressed in the Vedic texts where the different parts of *sama-stotra*, "the suite of the hymns" e.g. are related to the cosmic elements, the cardinal points, the seasons, the times of the day, various colours, etc. The balance of the cosmos, *ṛta*, was maintained by using rituals, including the *saman* (the hymn). The constituent parts of the *saman* had an important role in preserving this balance. A person could participate in the *ṛta* through the *saman*. According to a Samavedic text, the *saman* is, in itself, the object of worship. Such a statement is meant to praise the types of Samaveda and the Vedic hymns. According to certain traditions, music is regarded as an ascending pathway towards personal achievement. This emerges from the musicians' statements who argue that music is a *sadhana*, a type of worship and spiritual development. The Samavedic belief focuses especially on music itself as a supporting element for an effective text. Besides other magical powers, in *Atharvaveda* the *samans* hymns are attributed with healing powers (*bhesaja*). According to the Hindu, the belief that all music is art originates in *Samaveda*. This aspect is noteworthy because it relates to the concept of sanctity and emphasizes the idea of integrity in performing music.

The non-Vedic and post-Vedic theist traditions seem to have contributed to the appearance of the sophisticated *tala* – rhythmic and metric systems, which form the principle of time organisation in Indian music. There is a very complex historical background of devotional practices, where music was often used as *upasana*, which means worship,

homage and meditation. Some of its roots descend in the early *sramanic* religions of Buddhism and Jainism that can be characterized by an ambivalence of the attitudes towards music. This ambivalence is the result of the ideas about the *moksa* deliverance which excluded sensual matters, like temptation through music. Nevertheless, music and dance were accepted in many traditions as a part of the *sadhana*. We could compare the coexistence of a strict rule against music in orthodox Islam with the excessive use of music in Sufi practices. With reference to devotional religions, the *bhakti* tradition has chosen music and song as the main mode of worshipping.

### 5. Natyasastra; Rasa; Rasika; Raga

The Indian musical tradition originates in the technical discourse called *sangitasastra*, which is attested by a substantial document in Sanskrit language called *Natyasastra*. *Natyasastra* is a patch-work of sources of the first centuries A.D. In these sources, music is one of the components of the old Indian dramaturgy. The early aesthetics, which developed to serve music, was subjected to the needs of art, where music, the dialogue, lyrics, poetry and dance had the same importance.

The theory of the Indian aesthetics has a strong psychological character. *Natyasastra* contains a detailed scheme of emotional moods called *bhavas*. Drama is described to be an imitation of all the human emotions in the universe. In other words, the emotion, the emotional experience or the emotional responses to a certain experience make up the plot of the dramatic or literary art.

The mechanism is that of excitation of a certain entity called *rasa*. This word is a technical term in the Sanskrit poetics and it means "mood", "feeling" or "flavour". In the past, this term referred to non-technical words like "juice", "sauce" relating to food. The word was introduced into the modern vernacular Indian languages; - in Bombay you can ask for *usaca ras* and will be given white sugar juice while in Southern India they will offer you a spicy liquor called *rasam*. In the theory of aesthetics the word *rasa* gained a higher status since it was used to designate not just a fact within the dramatic work, but also a thing which the observer of the drama could have experienced personally. The idea of "tasting" or "relishing" this *rasa* has been preserved. In essence, the doctrine states that the mood *bhava* had to be inferred on the stage; if this succeeded it had to correspond to a personal mood – meaning the spectator's mood. The dominant moods (*bhavas*) which are some of the components of the human psyche are the following: passion, humour, anger, etc – these were considered to make up an individual's emotional experience. The accurate mechanism of

interaction between what happens on the stage and what goes on in the spectator's mind has been explained by several post-Natyasastra theorists. The only valid explanation is that in case of a receptive spectator, his mood (*bhava*) would turn into a corresponding *rasa*, which was to be the essence of the aesthetic experience.

The word *rasika* – the one that is susceptible to receive art – is still used in the Indian languages and it means “the one who knows how to value beauty”. The word can also be used in a negative sense, meaning “a licentious person”. A theatrical performance or a poem may lead to enjoying a dominant *rasa*. A person capable to enjoy this *rasa* would reach the end purpose of experiencing art. *Natyasastra* has exerted a strong influence on poetry and the theory of aesthetics.

Even today a number of musicians and theorists are preoccupied with identifying the entity (*rasa*) of a *ragu*. However, this may not be necessary, because the Indian tradition itself is a model for placing the *rasa* at the forefront. “Tasting in itself” is the essence of this theory. Among the beautiful aspects of *rasa* is the relationship between artistic creation and spectator (receiver). According to this tradition, drama, poetry, even representative art are means to reach the aesthetic experience – not by objective observation, but by interiorization and changing their ethos.

The structures or melodic types are called *ragas*, and those who write about the systems of the Indian music have included them into the domain of visual icons, where the detail is understood in a pre-discursive manner; a person may have in mind a certain image of a saint or of a goddess, but there is a more comprehensive concept of an icon's representation which helps identify a new “copy” as a representation of that particular sacred image. All these aspects are specific to the *ragas*.

As the melody progresses, the listener begins to understand which *raga* is represented by that melody. In practice, the initial recognition may occur very soon, because a short fragment of the melody is enough to decide the type of *raga*. *Raga* has a very special character. There are traditions where it expresses its individuality by adding extra musical images, backgrounds or lyrics in order to express its personality. Such “extra-musical” additions may hide variations or even inconsistency. *Raga* is not only something very specific. It also has a very large potential of diversity, because an infinite number of melodies can be composed on its basis.

## **6. Sarngadeva: Sangitaratnakara and the 5 mahabhutas**

There is a strong tradition in the specialised literature to search for the genesis of the sound and of musical material. While the medical Indian



literature provides few details about music, the Sanskrit texts which approach the theory of music start from the medical theory (for example Yoga) and from the philosophy of linguistics to explain how the human body and mind are able to create music. This fact is best proved in *Sangitaratnakara* written by Sarngadeva (the XIII<sup>th</sup> century), where the introductory section of the text is dedicated to the structure of the human body.

The body is made up of five *mahabhutas* and each of them represents the origin of a physical and psychological function:

- *akasa* (ether) – provides the ability of hearing;
- *vayu* (air) – provides the tactile sense and the ability of moving, etc.;
- *agni* (fire) – provides the physical appearance, colour, shape, etc.;
- *jala* (water) – provides the gustatory sense;
- *prthivi* (earth) – provides the sense of smell and qualities like weight, etc.;

This forms a physical framework wherein the musical activity is performed – a holistic view on the body and the human being – from the Ayurvedic perspective.

The contribution of the yogi philosophy consists in using the *cakras* centres or the psycho-physical centres of the body; that are placed in a specific order ranging from the genital area to the head. These are considered locations of various emotions.

An adequate meditation orientated towards one of these centres influences the musical training, because the release and passing of the air through the human body allows the sound to become articulated.

The musical theory of *Sangitaratnakara* borrowed from the philosophy of linguistics some categories of phonetic and linguistic analyses and adapted them to the musical structures. *Sangitaratnakara* states that music, similarly to talking, begins with the soul (*atman*), which wants "to talk"; but speech is produced only when the soul meets the intelligent and rational mind and drives the air within the body through different articulation centres, thus producing sound. With reference to music, the sound activates a metaphorical «harp» of the body; the air strikes the strings and produces musical notes of different pitches. This description reflects the traditional conception on the origin of the sound – something which pre-exists as a potentiality and is performed within the human body through a physical process.

## 7. Conclusions

I mentioned three main components which I consider to be representative of the classical Indian conception regarding musical experience.

**First** and foremost, we should remember the importance of the ritual and the power of music to preserve order and prevent disasters – this notion is represented in the Vedic ritual. From my point of view, it represents, in the traditional conception, the occult power of music.

**Secondly**, I intend to emphasize the aesthetic model of the drama, *rasa*, which has been extended to other forms of art. Some theorists of the drama and of the post-*Natyasastra* poetics speak about *sadharanikarana*, where the individuality of experience is lost in order to attain universality or generalization. This theory could be compared with the Aristotelian notion of *katharsis*, especially if we are open-minded to different interpretations of this theory.

**Thirdly**, I wish to discuss the physiological model which defines music as the physical representation of a spiritual need. This model emphasizes the notion of integrity and health, which can be ensured by well performed music.

From the listener's point of view, Indian music provides special possibilities, which are incomparable with other pleasures. The way music acquires meaning – in the context of the *raga* – offers the opportunity of reaffirming an already known structure. Musical performance in India does not emphasize non-specific generalities of the sound (like timbre or dynamics), but instead it stresses the accuracy of musical structure.

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