

MUSIC AND VIVEKANANDA

SWAMI HARSHANANDA

'MUSIC is the universal language of mankind,'¹ says Longfellow. It is said to be the speech of angels.² 'It hath charms to soothe the savage beast,'³ writes James Bramston. Shakespeare says in his *Merchant of Venice* :

'The man that hath no music in himself
Nor is not moved with concord of sweet
sounds,
Is fit for treasons, strategems and spoils'⁴

'A song will outlive all sermons in the memory,' says Henry Giles. These sayings of savants should suffice to show the importance of music in the life of mankind.

The origin of music is concealed in the bosom of pre-historic India. It dates back to the periods of the *R̥g Veda*, and of the *Sāma Veda*; that means, to the period between 4500 B.C. and 2000 B.C. When music in other nations was still at one of the earliest stages of evolution viz. the folk songs, Indian music had developed into a systematic science with its conceptions of *śruti*, *svara*, *rāga*, *laya* and *tāla*. We have a clear reference to the *sapta-svara*-system in the early Upaniṣads like *Nārada parivrājaka* and *Garbha*.

Like other arts and sciences in ancient India, music and dance (which were actually two aspects of the same art in the early stages) also had religion as their basis. They were essentially religious in character and were used as a means of expressing devotion to and realizing God. *Nādo-pāsana* (meditation through music) as it was termed, was considered to be highly efficacious in religious life. Nārada and Tumbura of hoary antiquity as also Tulasī Dās, Mīra Bāi, Kabīr, Nānak,

Rāmprasād, Kamalākānta, Tukaram, Purandara Dāsa and Tyāgarāja of historical times are shining examples of the efficacy of *nādo-pāsana*. These great sages and servants of God used the art of music not only as a means of realization but also for spreading true religion among the masses at the most critical periods of our religious history. Indian music being thus essentially devotional in character, can rightly be termed as '*bhajans*'.

A *bhajan*, if it has to be perfect, must satisfy certain essential conditions. These can be listed as follows : A good voice, accompaniments, theoretical knowledge of music, first rate composition, clear pronunciation and devotion. A sweet voice is the *sine qua non* of *bhajan*. Without it *bhajan* is no *bhajan*. It is like the digit 1 of a mathematical figure followed by zeros. The latter have their meaning and add to the value of the figure only if that digit '1' is placed at the beginning. Otherwise, they are just zeros. Similarly instrumental accompaniments, knowledge of the techniques of music etc., enhance the grace of *bhajan* if and when the voice is sweet.

Assuming that the voice of the singer is sweet, good, and correctly tuned musical accompaniments like the *tānpūra*, *tabla*, *sarod*, *sitār*, *vinā*, violin etc. will undoubtedly increase the total effect. The whole concert will get a polished touch if the science and technique of music are suitably combined.

All this combination will be to no purpose if the composition that is sung is not sufficiently poetical and is bereft of fine noble sentiments. If a really good composition is sung with feeling and in sufficiently clear tones so as to bring out the correct meaning and sentiments contained in it, the total effect will be marvellous.

¹ Outre-Mer.

² Carlyle — *Essays*.

³ Man of Taste.

⁴ Act V. Sc. 1.

Swami Vivekananda had been blessed by Nature with all the primary requirements of music. He had added great refinement to this gift by his deep knowledge of its technique as also by strenuous practice.

He had inherited a richly vibrant and intensely sweet voice, which was often likened to the sound of a Chinese gong, from his parents. It was this unique sweetness of his voice that often induced Sri Ramakrishna to request him to sing. The very first song that Narendra sang before Sri Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar threw the latter into deep samādhi. The following incident at Mount Abu will throw a good light on the sweetness of his music : 'The Swami soon gathered around him a number of devoted followers with whom he used to walk in the evening. One day they were walking along the Baily's Walk commanding the most beautiful scenery of the hill-station. Below them stretched the lake of Mt. Abu. The Swami with his friends left the walk and sat down amongst the stones. He began to sing and his song went on for hours. Some Europeans who were also taking an evening stroll were struck with the sweet music and waited for hours to get a glimpse of the singer. At last he came down and they congratulated him on his sweet voice and ecstatic song.'⁵

Swamiji had attained a high degree of proficiency in music even as a student. He had systematically studied and practised vocal as well as instrumental music for about five years under the able tutelage of Ahammad Khan and Beni Gupta, the two well-known musicians of his time. He could play many a musical instrument though he excelled in vocal music. He was an adept at singing *bhajans*. He knew quite a few musical compositions in various languages like Bengali, Hindi, Urdu, Persian and Sanskrit. He wrote an elaborate preface to a book of Bengali songs compiled by one of his friends, in which he has discussed the science and technique of Indian music. This

learned introduction gives an inkling into the depth of his scholarship in the field of music.

The following incident that took place in the house of one Sri Manmathanatha Choudhuri of Bhagalpur reveals the perfect musician in Swamiji : 'One morning in August of the year 1890, Swami Vivekananda with Swami Akhandananda came unexpectedly to my house. Thinking them to be ordinary *sādhus*, I did not pay them much attention. . . . Once I noticed him humming a tune to himself. So I asked him if he could sing. He replied, "Very little." Being pressed hard by us he sang, and what was my surprise to see that as in learning so in music he had wonderful accomplishment ! Next day I asked him if he were willing that I should invite some singers and musicians; he consented and I asked many musicians, several of whom were *ostads*, or adepts in the art, to come. Believing that the music would end by nine or ten at the latest, I did not arrange for supper for the guests. Swamiji sang without ceasing till two or three o'clock in the morning. All without exception were so charmed, that they forgot hunger and thirst and all idea of time ! None moved from his seat or thought of going home. Kailash Babu who was accompanying the Swami in his songs, was forced to give up finally, for his fingers had become stiff and had lost all sensation. Such superhuman power I have never seen in anybody, nor do I expect to see it again. The next evening all the guests of the previous night, and many others, presented themselves without any invitation. The player on the instrument also came, but Swamiji did not sing that evening. So everyone was disappointed.'⁶

This paper cannot be deemed to be complete if Swamiji's views on music are not given. In his 'Addresses on Bhaktiyoga' he declares that music has got a tremendous effect on the human mind : 'Music has such tremendous power over the human mind ; it brings it to concentration in a moment. You will find the dull, ignorant, low, brute-like

⁵ *Life of Swami Vivekananda* by Eastern & Western Disciples, P. 218.

⁶ *Ibid.*, P. 195-6.

human beings who never steady their minds for a moment at other times, when they hear attractive music, immediately become charmed and concentrated. Even the minds of animals . . . become charmed with music.⁷

In his lecture on 'The Ramayana' delivered in California he states that in India even music and dance are considered to be religion: 'The drama in India was a very holy thing. Drama and music are themselves held to be religion. Any song, if one's whole soul is in that song, one attains to salvation; one has nothing else to do. They say it leads to the same goal as meditation.'⁸

In one of his epistles written to an American lady he equates music to worship: 'Music is the highest art, and to those who understand, is the highest worship.'⁹

He reveals the secret of perfect music in one of his class talks thus: 'There is science in *dhrupad*, *khayāl*; but it is in *kīrtan* . . . that there is real music — for, there is feeling. Feeling is the soul, the secret of everything . . . The sciences of *dhrupad* etc. applied to the music of *kīrtan* will produce the perfect music.'¹⁰

To an untrained Indian ear, Western music sounds like 'the howl of jackals'! Swamiji also, before he went to the West, had held a similar opinion. There he began to listen to their music attentively and to study it minutely. As a result of this, he developed great admiration, especially for its perfection of

harmony which, in his opinion Indian music lacked.

The Swami was of the definite view that the real Indian music lay in *dhrupad* and the *kīrtan*. They were developing and improving steadily on the right lines before the impact of Islamic culture, which distorted and spoiled them. This was the opinion he often expressed (*op. cit.* Vol. V, Pp. 277-297).

Swami Vivekananda was also a poet. He has composed a few hymns in Sanskrit and Bengali as also some songs in the latter language. His hymns *nikhila-bhuvana-janma* (on Śiva), *kā tvam śivé śubhakaré* (on the Divine Mother) and *ācaṇḍālāpratihatarayo* (on Sri Ramakrishna) are a rare combination of literary beauty, philosophy and devotion. His other famous poem *Om hrīm ṛtam* on Sri Ramakrishna is sung during the evening service in all the centres of the Ramakrishna Order.

The most famous of all his Bengali poems is his *khaṇḍana-bhava-bandhana*, which is the first song to be sung during the evening worship in all the monasteries of the Ramakrishna Order. This hymn is remarkable for its booming melody and is ideally suited for chorus. When it is sung by a large gathering to the accompaniment of organs, *khol* and cymbals, it is simply soul-stirring and inspiring!

The song *eka rūpa arūpa nāma* on the Highest Brahman as also the two songs on Śiva: *tā thaiya* and *hara hara bhūtanātha*, are full of sweet melody and perfect rhythm.

We thus see that Swami Vivekananda was as great a musician as a spiritual teacher or a social reformer or a patriot or a deep scholar or an inspired orator or a great writer.

⁷ *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. IV, P. 7. Sixth Edition, 1948.

⁸ *op. cit.*, P. 70.

⁹ *op. cit.*, Vol. V, P. 95. Fifth Edition, 1947.

¹⁰ *op. cit.* Vol VII, P 395 Third Edition, 1947.

Music has charms to soothe the savage breast, to soften rocks, and bend the knotted oak.

—CONGREVE

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Music is the language of praise; and one of the most essential preparations for eternity is delight in praising God; a higher acquirement, I do think, than even delight and devotedness in prayer.

—CHALMERS