

SAMGĪTA-ŚĀSTRA AND ŚĀSTRĪYA SAMGĪTA: THE 'SCIENCE OF MUSIC', 'SCIENTIFIC MUSIC' - THE INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

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1. BACKGROUND

Music theory, in India, is referred to as '*saṃgīta śāstra*', literally the 'science (*śāstrā*) of music (*saṃgīta*). The term itself is already designed to point at the scientific approach to music taken by Indian theorists since ancient times and reflected in a significant number of musicological treatises compiled over the past two millennia. Beginning with the *Nāṭyaśāstra* of Bharata, a text on 'the science of drama' settled presumably between the first century B.C. and the first century A.D., an entire string of musicological writings have emerged, with each individual text providing valuable information about musical theory and practice during a given period of time. Such information is essential to assess the development of music in India in terms of both historical context and scientific implications.

Classical music derives its special virtue from the fact that it is created and performed strictly in accordance with *śāstra*, the science. Consequently, classical music is referred to as '*śāstrīya saṃgīta*', 'music (according to) the science' ('*śāstrīya*' is the adjectival derivative of '*śāstra*', hence '*śāstrīya saṃgīta*', 'scientific music'). Its conformity to the science thus distinguishes classical music for example from folk music, which latter follows a number of rules of its own without necessarily making recourse to a sophisticated science or theory.

2. THE PROBLEM

Up to this point, the classificatory constellation appears unambiguous and logical, with classical music on the one hand, and folk music and other non-classical styles on the other hand. Our well-founded definition, however, topples as soon as a third musical category enters the spectrum of consideration: devotional music, that is, music in the religious context and in particular, music associated with worship in the Hindu tradition.

Indian music is generally divided into a northern and a southern hemisphere, following the pattern of the cultural and linguistic segregation of the South Asian sub-continent. Both North India and South India possess a rich and flourishing music history, reflected in and resounding from not at last the two principal traditions of classical music, Hindustani music of the North, and Carnatic music of the South.

In both North and South India, classical music shares a strong affinity with its respective surrounding traditions of devotional music. More than being merely closely related, the classical traditions are indeed rooted in their devotional counterparts. In the concrete, the principal classical forms and genres took their origin in the musical tradition of the Hindu temples, where they used to be rendered as part of the daily divine service.

Now, if classical music has its foundation in devotional music, the current terminology that labels classical music as '*śāstrīya*' in distinction to other types of music including devotional gives rise to questions. How come that classical music being 'scientific music' in the sense of conforming to centuries-old musico-theoretical science is rooted in 'non-scientific' music? Or, is devotional music too 'scientific music', and if so, why is this fact not acknowledged in the terminology? Moreover, is there any collective term for devotional music, and is this term satisfactory?

3. THE ARGUMENT

The answer to the last question raises the central point regarding the inadequacy of musical terminology beyond a certain point of theoretical inquiry. There is no consistent term for devotional music such as '*śāstrīya saṃgīta*' for classical music. Devotional music is popularly referred to as '*bhakti saṃgīta*' (*bhakti*, 'devotion'), and this leads straight to our core query: if music in the ritual and religious context qualifies as '*bhakti saṃgīta*', 'music indwelt by devotion', is that to say that music embedded in any other context is devoid of devotion? The answer is clearly no, for, according to the concepts of Indian philosophy, devotion is the source of all music, hence no music can arise if devotion is absent.

To ask the other way, if '*bhakti saṃgīta*' is different from that which is explicitly termed '*śāstrīya saṃgīta*', does this mean that devotional music is not determined by the music theory to the same extent as is classical music? Again the answer is no: the forms of devotional music expose in many cases a much stronger binding to *śāstra*, to the science as do contemporary classical styles.

The point may be illustrated with two examples referring to the fundamental musical genres of Hindustani and Carnatic music respectively. The principal and most ancient style of North Indian music is known as *dhrupada*, literally 'fixed verse', a type of vocal composition first described in detail in the 13th century musicological treatise *Samgītaratnākara* of Śarṅgadeva. *Dhrupada* flourished as a classical genre at the Mughal courts of the 16th century before it was superseded by several lighter musical genres. The *dhrupada* style, which had never been completely extinct as it was preserved in a few musician family lineages, is still in vogue today after it experienced a significant revival over the past decades.

Parallel to the classical *dhrupada*, another *dhrupada* tradition is maintained by the North Indian Vaisnava temples. Here, the songs are rendered as part of the daily ritual worship, and due to its relevance as a liturgical component, the temple

dhrupada was never affected by the decline experienced by its classical counterpart. Consequently, the present-day temple *dhrupada* exposes a structure much more in accordance with the prescriptions laid down in theoretical treatises than that of the classical *dhrupada* which, in spite of belonging terminologically to the category of 'scientific music', underwent substantial changes that made it to some extent depart from the original 'science'.

[MUSICAL EXAMPLE (SUNG DEMONSTRATION):
DHRUPADA COMPOSITION IN DEVOTIONAL AND
CLASSICAL VERSIONS]

A second case study is taken from the field of South Indian music. Here, the *kīrtana* genre is regarded as one of the oldest and fundamental musical forms. *Kīrtana* is a strophic song which, like the North Indian *dhrupada*, originally belongs to the musical repertoire of the Vaiṣṇava temples. Since all specifically South Indian musicological treatises compiled before the 18th century retain complete silence on the subject of musical form, the structure of the original *kīrtana* compositions cannot be traced on the basis of written evidence (cf. Thielemann 1995).

It is however commonly (though not undisputedly) presumed that the *kīrtana* may have served as a model for the later *kṛti* form, a classical genre created by the 18th/19th century saint-composer Tyāgarāja, who thereby laid the foundation for that which is today referred to as Carnatic music, i.e. the classical music of South India. Strictly speaking, South Indian classical music is thus not older than some three hundred years, while its underlying 'musical science' - embodied in the much-quoted *Samgītaratnākara* of Śaṅgadeva whose validity applies to North and South India likewise - reaches several centuries further back. Here, musical theory is likely to have been first reflected in devotional music rather than in compositions nowadays termed 'classical'.

4. IMPLICATIONS

The apparent discrepancy between classical music termed 'scientific music' on the one hand, and the actual scientific content of devotional music not explicitly termed 'scientific' can be solved if one considers both stylistic directions in the larger context of Indian music history. Classical music in both North and South India evolved from the Hindu temples, where it flourished as a liturgical element long before it entered a secular matrix. Moreover, liturgy is always associated with *śāstra*, with science, since theological concepts have their foundation in Indian philosophy which is in essence a science - the science of sciences, *the science*.

Moreover we may ask, what does 'classical' actually signify. In musicological terms - both in India and in the West -, convention has it that by 'classical music' we mean 'art music'. But is this interpretation truly perfect? On a recent train journey, a co-passenger engaging me in a discussion about musical streams in Bengal, remarked, 'what is classical music? Isn't it that which never loses its appeal to the people, that which remains ever-valid?'

Classical music as 'that which remains ever-valid' is indeed a definition that matches the criteria of 'scientific music' much

better than merely art music. For science itself is considered as ever-valid, as a set of established truths that have found their reflection in written treatises as the fruits of human intellectual striving. Science thereby rises above the level of mere theory, for science - unlike theory - is alive, and is revealed in its practical manifestations: in the case of *saṃgīta śāstra*, in the musical practice of *śāstrīya saṃgīta*.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, we may argue that terminology has its obvious limitations when it comes to dealing with a living presence as complex and multifarious as music. Any attempt to classify and categorize sounding realities into different sets of rule-bound entities remains ultimately an incomplete effort. In the context of Indian musicology, we face this problem with regard to the term '*śāstrīya saṃgīta*' applied solely to classical art music on account of its secular context. From the theoretical point of view, nothing speaks against employing the same term to the music of the Vaiṣṇava temples - which forms the foundation of classical music in any case -, while the term 'devotional music' utilized for the latter is just as appropriate for art music which is likewise carried ahead on the current of devotion. It is the mere context - secular respectively sacred - which is implied in the terms 'scientific' and 'devotional', rather than the actual content of the music itself.

Therefore, musicological terminology may serve as a useful guideline for the theoretical study of music - for the study of *śāstra*, of the science so to speak -, while such terminology remains of little value in the context of assessing the phenomenon of music as the sounding embodiment of human spiritual inspiration from a universal perspective. The aspiring musicologist is thus well-advised to accept the terminology as a tool with all its implicit limitations, rather than fighting heated battles over the literal particulars of the one or other term. However, the fact that such passionate arguments have always formed part of musicological inquiries is well-documented in some of the more amusing passages of Indian musicological writing.

6. REFERENCES

1. Thielemann, Selina (1995), 'Parallel forms in South and North Indian classical music: kṛti and dhrupad', in *Dhrupad Annual* (Banaras: All India Kashi Raj Trust), vol.10, pp.1-76.