

The Universal Approach to Music and Rabindranath

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The magic of Music appeals to all people, irrespective of nationality, race, caste, creed and religion. It rises above the limitations of language and education. Man's emotions are the same for all and are expressed through his music. The aesthetic appeal of the beauty of melody, the swaying of meter easily attracts and vibrates the human mind and works as a bridge to build up a sense of universal brotherhood. Music can spread its wings in to the sky of human mind easily surpassing geographical barriers.

From the time of British rule, European music began to be learnt and practised here in India. The Tagore family of Jorasanko was pioneer in this respect. Since his childhood, Rabindranath Tagore brought up in the cultural environment of his family acquired a considerable degree of knowledge of both Indian and Western music. Gradually he became acquainted with music of different regions of the East and the West as well. By virtue of his creative consciousness he explored fields of music, got into the depth of the phenomena of music and reacted to them in his own unique style without caring much for traditional view points of professionals.

Though Rabindranath drew inspiration for his songs from Hindustani music, he was not of an orthodox attitude of shunning western music. He could become a creator of such magnitude only because he had the astonishing catholicity to accept anything that appeals to the mind. In western music various feelings and various moods can be expressed and described which is difficult in our Indian music. Unlike our music in European music the laya goes on changing with the change of emotion or mood and the use of pause is also essential where needed and the voice quality is developed by training. Whatever is presented on the stage is a finished product and there is no scope for improvising or elaborating the original composition. Being inspired by these characteristics of Western style with the use of different ragas and raginis Rabindranath successfully created his music-drama Vālmiki-Pratibhā followed by Kālmrigayā which are comparable to the music-drama of Wagner of Germany. He expressed various feelings of mind such as song of fury (*Eto baro āspardhā*), song of crying (*Hāy ki dashā*), song of joy

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(*Tabē āy sabē āy*), song of wonder (*Ki bolinu āmi*), song of laughter (*Path bhulechhis sotti bate Hah! Hah! Hah! Hah! Hah! Hah! Hah!*). The thematic variety in European music brought diversity in Tagore's songs also. Though he followed western music in these songs, he maintained his own originality in every sphere. The influence of European Opera may be noticed in Tagore's *MāyārKhelā* though the application of tunes and the style of presentations is mainly Indian. In some other individual robust bold songs appropriate for chorus presentation the influence of western music is noticed, however, with an Indian base. A few songs have the influence of the slow and solemn Church music like '*Tomār holo suru, āmār holo sārā*' and '*Ākashbharā, surja tārā*'. There are certain Tagore songs based on Indian rāgas and rāginis but presented in a European style also, like – '*Ānandadhvani jāgāo*', '*E shudhu alas māyā*' '*Anek diner sunyata mor*' etc.

(There is a number of songs of Tagore following western music –

<i>Katobār bhebechhinu</i>	-	Drink to me only
<i>Purāno sei diner kathā</i>	-	Auld Lang Syne
<i>Āhā āji e Basante</i>	-	Go where glory waits thee
<i>Ohe Dayāmay</i>	-	Go where glory waits thee
<i>Mānā nā mānili</i>	-	Go where glory waits thee
<i>Mori O kāhār bāchhā</i>	-	Go where glory waits thee
<i>Kāli Kāli Balo re āj</i>	-	Nancy Lee
<i>Phule Phule Dhole Dhole</i>	-	Ye banks and braes
<i>Sakoli phurālo saponaprāy</i>	-	Robin Adair
<i>O dekhbi re bhāi</i>	-	The Vicar of Bray
<i>Tui āy re kāchhe lāy</i>	-	The British grenadiers)

By some European lyrics also Rabindranath was inspired e.g. '*giyāchhe sedin, jedin hriday ruperi mohone achhilo māti*' ... translated from 'Oh! the days are gone, when beauty bright my heart's chain wove' of the poem 'Love's Young Dream' from the book of Irish Melodies of Thomas Moore.

The Dutch Scholar Arnold Bake says about a Tagore song '*katobarbhebechhinu*', "The thing that strikes one most forcefully ... is that this typically English tune has been transformed

into just as typical a Bengali song. In later years these youthful borrowings from Western music cease altogether. The impact of European songs of his very early manhood hardly ever shows in his mature works. It is sometimes noticeable in his rousing tunes such as '*Ashramsangeet*', or '*Ālo āmar ālo*' etc.

Rabindranath expressed his views on the music of other countries especially of western music in numerous statements in various contexts on various occasions. In his essay 'Sangit' Tagore describes one of his wonderful experiences he had in the Handel Festival arranged in the music-room of the Crystal Palace in London in 1912. The renowned German musician Handel presented certain portions of the Bible set to music. "Four thousand voices and the same number of instruments struck up the tunes. ...which came out dancing together, none of them conflicting with another and yet they were not of the same single note but a great harmony of a variety of notes. I was struck by the stupendous power that can transform a multitude of notes into a perfect whole. ... Outwardly, the production was magnificent, many – splendored and faultless, but the emotional appeal was sadly missing. There was power in it, but not 'lila'. But it cannot be asserted that the magnificent skill involved in European music is its only characteristic and not its emotional appeal for we observe how the whole of Europe is intoxicated with the lyric sweetness of music. .. The basic difference between European music and Indian music is Harmony the chief ingredient of Western music, whereas our music is predominantly melodic. Europe has turned its eyes towards the manifold whereas our music aims at oneness ... Our music is to be performed by one person, it is of an exclusive nature but that exclusiveness is not of isolation but of universality". [Translated]¹

Rabindranath explains, "Western music is magnificent and variegated issuing out of the victory-chariot of man. The sound of music goes vibrating all around. One spontaneously utters 'Splendid!' ... But, though very simple in character, our music captures our hearts easily." [Translated]² Our own music touched him more deeply by its fundamental lyrical appeal.

Tagore said in the essay 'Sangiter Mukti', that Indian music will remain deficient without being complemented by harmony; however, much we cry ourselves hoarse over it. We must be certain that harmony must be set in a distinct pattern if we assimilate it in our music. A few Vedic hymns like '*Sangachhadhyam*' was set to music with some harmonization successfully....³ [Translated] Tagore also says, "In fact, Indian music has nothing to fear. It will certainly enrich

itself by contact with the music of the West”⁴ [Translated]. ‘When harmony is excessively dominant, it eclipses the melody of a song (geet) and when a melody tends to become too individualistic, it drives out any element of harmony. The separateness of harmony and melody can be allowed for the time being. But a permanent separation is not at all desirable. A synthesis between melody and harmony is expected to emerge in the near future.’⁵[Translated] The preparations in this direction have already set in especially in our modern music where western orchestration is very prominent. However, he was cautious to mention that for any new creation real talent is essential and by ordinary people it is not possible.

In 1930, during a discussion Einstein told Tagore that sometimes polyphonous music swallows up the melody altogether. Tagore beautifully compared melody and harmony with lines and colours in pictures. A simple linear picture may be completely beautiful – the introduction of colour may make it vague and insignificant. Yet colour may by combination with lines create great pictures so long as it does not smother and destroy their value.⁶

However, Arnold Bake a true connoisseur of Indian music had a different opinion, ‘musicians, Indian and Western, have tried to fit harmonies in Tagore’s melodies, they have succeeded only in vulgarizing his songs almost beyond recognition.’

A.K. Coomarswamy the great exponent of Indian music also held that all attempts at harmonizing Indian airs had been so far unsuccessful... The harmonic combinations to which the western ear is accustomed is in Indian music compensated for by greater freedom in melodic intervals: the elaborate use of harmony is quite impossible to combine with the melodic system of the East, and also is felt to be unnecessary. According to Coomarswami perhaps what strikes a foreign ear in first listening to Indian music is the softness and the sweetness of the music as compared with the noisy tangle of sound in western music. One realizes then only, the true and infinite value of pure melody.

We are surprised to find that at the very outset none of Rabindranath and Vivekananda liked western music. After his first visit to the western countries Vivekananda remarked in this context, “It is good, but not so much to our untrained or uninured ears. I also had the belief that they only initiate the calls of jackels in their songs. But when I began to listen to it deeply and realise it, I was amazed. I used to be charmed while listening to it.”

Dilip Kumar Roy the son of the famous dramatist D. L. Roy was a bright student of

mathematics, but switched over to music while studying in England. He had a series of conversations with Rabindranath on the subject of Music. In a discussion with him Rabindranath told, “When I went to listen to European music in my early youth, I did not like it. But I found people queuing for tickets for hours together. How curious and happy they were – I wonder! I could not make out their music. But I never criticized their songs. I used to say that I was unable to appreciate their songs only because I didn’t know and didn’t learn the idioms of their music.”⁷

During a conversation with Marguerite Wilkinson, Rabindranath again remarked that listening to a great singer in England it seemed strange – imitative – he did not like it. But he said to himself, ‘If so many people think it is beautiful, I will try to understand. And so I studied the Western music and I have found much to admire in it.’⁸

Regarding harmony Vivekananda said that it may be introduced in Indian music and it should be. He thought that the Indian music lacking harmony is unable to express the martial or enthusiastic mood while European music is successful in this.⁹

Rabindranath advised Dilip Kumar Roy who was quite familiar with Western music, to enrich Bengali music with the good elements of Western music. He was not in favour of blind imitation, but always welcomed adaptations.¹⁰

Tagore says, “... For sometime past Europe is turning its attention towards Indian music. In India, I have seen European listeners absorbed in the demonstration of ‘Bageshri’ tune on Surbahar. One day I found an Englishman listening to song of Sāma Veda from two Bengali young men.”

In 1912, in London, Dr. Coomarswamy, who had come from Srilanka invited Tagore to a demonstration of songs by Ratan Devi his second wife whose early name was Alice Richardson. She had learnt Indian music from a traditional Ustad in India. Leaving piano, she sat on the floor with Tambura on her lap and presented the rāgas Behāg, Kāndra, Mālkaus with all their richness of details, depth of modulations and exquisite feelings. Tagore was astonished at the proficiency of a European in Indian Classical music.

On 8 April 1925, during a conversation Dilip Kumar Roy asked the poet whether the saying that the language of music is universal is true or not. Rabindranath replied that one aspect of creation is the inner truth i.e. the idea or emotion and another is the vehicle of the

truth i.e. form or language ... Language is not universal. But the inner truth is. In order to realize the universal truth one has to master the external form too. ... When we know the grammar only then the essence and its outward expression is revealed to us as an indivisible one.”¹¹ [Translated]

In recent times, Europeans have become attracted by Indian music, but the poet doubts if their appreciation is genuine.¹²

In 1926, in the Foreword of Edward Thompson’s book *Rabindranath Tagore: Poet and dramatist*, Tagore wrote ‘it is nonsense to say that music is a universal language, I should like my music to find acceptance in abroad, but I know this cannot be, at least not till the West has had time to study and learn to appreciate our music.’¹³

During a conversation with H.G. Wells in 1930 in Geneva, as Tagore again expressed this doubt, Wells assured Tagore that closer acquaintance with Tagore’s songs would gradually lead to their appreciation in the West.¹⁴

During another conversation with Roman Rolland, Rabindranath states, “I love Beethoven and also Bach. I must confess it takes a good deal of time to understand and thoroughly appreciate the idiom of your music. As a young boy I heard European music being played on the piano; much of it I found attractive, but I could not enter fully into the spirit of the thing.”

Both Rabindranath and Einstein had the same opinion that it is difficult to analyze the effect of eastern and western music on our minds ... To him, European music was epic in character; it has a broad background and is gothic in its structure. But he also said that our own music touched him more deeply by its fundamental lyrical appeal.¹⁵

Rabindranath, H.G. Wells, Roman Rolland, Einstein agreed that the appeal of music is universal, but there is a need of enough exercise, cultivation and study to enjoy and appreciate the essence of it.

During ‘Journey to Persia’ in (1932) a Persian gentleman treated Rabindranath to a violin recital the melody of which was very similar to our raga ‘Bhairavi-Ramkeli’. He was deeply moved by the dedication and feeling with which he played and with such controlled cadences and phrasings. Rabindranath enjoyed an hour’s post-dinner music-recitals for two days. The Poet told him “A current trend in Asian countries is to attempt a fusion of Eastern and Western cultures, and this fusion is pregnant with possibilities. In the early stages of such assimilation

the difference between the two separate streams will be still discernible, but the impact of adoption will continue to be strong. Real integration develops gradually provided there is quality of purposeful vitality in it just like the grafted plant where the difference between the old and the new disappears and the resultant new fruit is born with its distinctive flavour. I have never understood why our musicians are deaf to western music. The interaction of various arts invigorates each culture to make it many splendored”.

In a dialogue with Dashty, Rabindranath said that he liked Persian music very much, but it seems to him that it had not yet been fully assimilated by the native genius of their music. They were too reminiscent of Europe; in any case, they did not move him so much as their classical music.

A.H. Foxstrangways in his book *The Music of Hindustan* included Rabindranath Tagore’s music in the overall discourse on Indian music.

About Rabindranath Tagore he says, “...To hear him sing is to realize the music in a way that it is seldom given to a foreigner to do. The notes of the song are no longer their mere selves, but the vehicle of a personality, and as such they go behind this or that system of music to that beauty of sound which all systems put out their hands to seize.” Again he states, “As I heard the song ‘*Prothamaādītāboshakti*’ on their anniversary on Jan 25 with a choir of twelve voices supported, in unison, by a small organ and two violins, with drum was extremely impressive.”¹⁶

Margaret E. Cousins in her book *the Music of Orient and Occident*, tried to enhance mutual understanding and called Rabindranath ‘the Supreme Internationalist’.¹⁷

Bake came to India and joined Visva-Bharati in 1926 on a research scholarship from Holland. He published 26 song of Rabindranath from Paris in 1935. The songs are set in staff notation in original Bengali, of course in Roman letters. The discussions and translations are in both English and French. He had almost daily converse with Tagore on music. He was one of the chief foreign exponents who acquainted the western music-lovers with Tagore’s incomparable songs.

The French musicologist Alain Danielou known as Shiva Sharan (1907-94) composed Piano arrangement and symphony Orchestra for our national anthem *Janaganamana Adhinayaka*, published by V.B.¹⁸ During his stay in India for 20 years Danielou frequently visited Santiniketan and met Rabindranath in 1932. He used to sit close to Tagore and noted the songs

sung by Tagore. In 50 years, Danielou translated a number of Tagore songs matching the original melody.

The noblest treasure of Tagore songs is perhaps the world-renowned *Gitanjali*.e. ‘Song Offerings’, the lyric of which fetched the poet the honour of a Nobel laureate in 1913.

In the end, we find in Santiniketan where the whole world meets in a single nest, people of distant lands come here to learn Tagore songs. Quite recently the Italian musicologist Francesca Cassio delivered a special lecture on ‘Tagore songs in Danielou Collection’ in voice and Piano transcripts on 5 September 2008 at Visva-Bharati. Her demonstration with the gentle and appropriate background music composed by Danielou have indeed the true ring of the poet’s emotions and musical gift e.g. ‘*Jodi premdilenāprāme*’ and ‘*Hingsāyunmattopritthwi*’.

With Tagore’s words we may conclude –

‘*Gaaner bhitordiye jakhon dekhi bhubankhāni
takhontārechini, amitakhon tare jaani*’.

(When I see the world through music, only then I recognize and know it.) [Translated]

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