

Why Study Ancient Musical Texts?

Mukund Lath

I

The question that forms the title of this essay is not intended to be rhetorical or just a verbal device to catch attention. The value of studying ancient musical texts is by no means generally granted, even by those who are seriously involved in the pursuit of music. It is common enough to be accosted with the question: Of what use is the study of old texts for an understanding of our musical art?

As a student of ancient musical texts, I would like to ponder over this question and enter into some of its ramifications in order to seek answers.

There is often a curious paradox in our attitude to the past. Although in a certain mood of denunciation, we cast doubt on the value of studying old texts, yet, in a different frame of mind, we proudly proclaim and extol our music as age-old, rooted in time-immemorial. More often than not, however, this latter sentiment hardly amounts to anything more than paying lip-service to the past; the purpose, at times, being just to add value to the present, hike up the price of what we have by calling it an antique.

The truth remains that an understanding and appreciation of the historical dimension has never been a major aspect of our musical culture, or, for that matter, culture in general. It was common enough to praise the past, as it still is, or emulate it. But this attitude never gave rise to any concerted effort to study the forms and achievements of the past in any kind of a historical perspective. No real attempt was made to perceive forms of the past as points in a process of change, a process itself worthy of serious study.

Early writers on music have, no doubt, described and even, in a skeletal form, notated older music as it was current during their time, or as they found it outlined in earlier texts. But they hardly ever asked themselves the historian's questions: How, through what process, have forms changed? How did newer forms come out of the old and in the shape they did? Why did change take place, what was its character, what were the factors that led to it? Even if the old texts do sometimes speak of these matters, they do so indirectly, in the course of speaking of other things, or in a very cursory, superficial manner. Such questions were never uppermost in their mind. Certain writers of the older texts were so indifferent to chronology that in describing or naming forms, they did not bother to keep the old and the new apart. Modern scholars have remarked on the frustrating difficulties of historically sifting the forms described in a number of musical manuals.

Compared to the past, history today receives far more serious thought in musical circles. Historical questions engage our minds and pro-

vide an impulse for earnest enquiry. Direct access to a greater range of forms (rendered over a larger span of time) is now also available to us, thanks to the invention of recording devices. We can now actually hear a musician of the past, even if only of the recent past, on recordings. Our experience remains fragmentary, limited to bits and scraps which were recorded—and that, too, quite indifferently by more modern standards; yet to be able to actually hear an Abdul Karim, a musician separated from us by two generations, would have been unimaginable in earlier times. This extension in our range certainly adds to the total quality of our experience and widens our response.

But though more responsive, in some ways, to history, a historical awareness has not quite become ingrained in our general outlook. A nonchalant disregard for history shows itself, for example, in the interminable quarrels over the 'purity' of a *raga*. The notion of 'purity' is, in such contexts, admittedly complex; but it has an aspect that is certainly historical. To elucidate this point, I would like to examine some of the assumptions which we tacitly make when we discuss the 'purity' of a *raga*. One assumption is that a *raga* was created once and for all at a certain point in time, and every specific rendering of it is an attempt at a true copy of the original, pristine form. The more successful the attempt the 'purer' the *raga*. Variants occur because of 'impure' copies multiplied over time and against these one must guard. Implied clearly are two further assumptions: one, that we always have direct access to the original blue-print of a *raga*, for otherwise we cannot speak of true copies; two, that *raga*-s are conceived as immutable forms to be handed down.

Now, to decide whether these assumptions are justified or not surely calls for a probe into the manner in which *raga*-s are conceived and transmitted in our tradition and how good our chances are of reaching back to the original form of a *raga*, especially if it is an old *raga*. What is called for is, in short, a historical probe. But though we are often quick in passing judgements with respect to 'purity', we hardly undertake the necessary enquiry.

The truth is that quarrels over 'purity' usually boil down to quarrels over favourites. These are, more often than not, battles between partisans supporting different artistes or loyal to certain *gharana*-s, battles in which 'purity' is bandied about as a weapon. The interest is not really in discovering this 'purity' whose roots lie in the past, but in championing a cause.

In the Indian poetic tradition, a discerning *sahridaya*—a man who could aesthetically respond to a poetic utterance—had before him a large body of literature, spread over centuries. The nature of a *sahridaya*'s response, however, hardly took the time factor into account; it was largely aesthetic. In evaluating poems, questions like when it was written, how it was historically connected with prior works, how it reflected its own period of time, were rarely taken into consideration. Much thought was expended on certain problems; What distinguished a poetic utterance from utterances in general? What constituted poetic merits and blemishes? What were the distinguishing characteristics of the aesthetic experience which poetry

aroused? The almost unanimous answer to this last question was: *rasa*, understood as a conglomerate of factors that differentiated the aesthetic from other experiences. *Rasa*, interestingly enough, was placed in a realm beyond time, like mystic experience. No wonder, then, that poets separated by centuries were evaluated without really taking these intervening centuries into account. The attitude, to use the terminology of linguistics and social science, was synchronic, rather than diachronic. The history of Sanskrit literature was not born, understandably enough, till modern times.

Our musical culture, today, is, in its aesthetic attitude, similar to the ancient poetic culture: historical interest has come to be a part of it but this interest is still peripheral. We value forms for themselves, for the wealth and variety of aesthetic experience they can afford us. We are not really interested in probing into how forms are linked over time, how they change, how one leads to another or moves away from another. We respond to what appeals, without caring much for how it is embedded in time and history. The fact that the notion of *rasa* looms so large in our evaluation of music is also to a degree indicative of its ahistorical character: the *rasa* mode of aesthetic perception does not take history into account.

My purpose here is not to deny that art can transcend time. On the contrary, I quite share the view that art is nothing if it does not have something to say to us here and now, whenever it may have been created. Greek sculpture, the ancient Indian temples, the Ajanta murals, Renaissance painting, to name only a few random examples, are great creations of art, not merely because of their historical importance, but because they have a quality of being ever-contemporary; we can respond to them across time, in spite of time.

Yet if the purpose of art is to enrich experience, then viewing objects of art with some understanding of their history, undoubtedly, adds a new magnitude to our awareness of their nature. History gives a perspective to our consciousness by placing objects in a total cultural milieu: horizontally, as an object placed alongside many others at a certain moment of time; vertically, as an object viewed in company with those that followed, across time. This perspective helps us to understand the dynamic inter-connections between forms, how they interact with each other as well as with the general human situation of which they are a part. We learn how and in what aspect they change or remain constant.

II

The sole reason why the history of music in India remains neglected or feeble as a discipline is not because of any disinclination to study its development. There are also certain other problems inherent in an exploration of this kind. History can be studied only through the traces left by

the past. In studying art-history, the major traces or data are the art-objects themselves. For social, economic, and political history, the historian does not need to have a direct observation of those events, people, movements and forces which he seeks to study. He can derive the knowledge he needs from evidence, documents, records, literature and similar other traces of the past and these are often enough for his purposes; such data, indeed, are the standard grist for the historian's mill.

But art, by its very nature, imposes a different demand. In art, the palpable particular, the form as it was created, is of supreme importance. For the secret of art lies in the actual object of art, something that can be directly, sensuously apprehended.

This is where the historian of music in India faces an insurmountable hurdle. Beyond a certain period, one which hardly extends beyond the comparatively recent past, direct experience of music as actually rendered becomes almost an impossibility. In the field of plastic arts and of literature, forms have survived from the distant past, though with greater or lesser abundance for different periods. These forms, moreover, can be placed more or less securely within epochs and often within fairly narrow limits of time. We actually have architecture, sculpture and painting dating back to two thousand years and more. But can we say the same for music, or the other performing arts for that matter?

Many, it is sure, would assert that we do indeed have ancient musical forms even today. Our contemporary classical music, they would say, embodies forms which are, in truth, age-old. But how old our forms are, and in what exact sense 'old', is a moot question. A look at the nature of the tradition in which they have been preserved and are handed over will, I believe, throw some light on the matter.

In the West, music going back from the nineteenth and eighteenth centuries to the Renaissance, and even to some extent to the Middle Ages, has been preserved more or less in the shape it was originally given. This has been done through a sophisticated system of notation and an endeavour, rooted in Western musical culture, to preserve compositions intact (an endeavour, which today has become more than ever refined through research, resulting in attempts by learned bodies to recapture the very tone of old music). True, we listen to the early Western composers only through renderings by modern artistes and it is well-known that a conductor or performer will impart his own interpretative nuance to a work, even if unconsciously. Yet a contemporary interpretation of earlier music is never allowed to stray too far from the original, notations of which can always be referred back to. Any performance of Bach remains unmistakably Bach despite differences in approach.

Things are quite different in Indian classical music, more markedly perhaps in its Hindustani form. When we hear a Bhimsen Joshi or a Kumar Gandharva, or any other great contemporary, sing *khyal*-s by the eighteenth century composers, Sadarang or Adarang, it is singularly impossible

to tell how much of the music to which we are listening is truly eighteenth century music.

One reason is that though we clamour for 'purity' and wage battles over it, yet, paradoxically enough, we consider no artiste an *ustad*, a master, if he is not truly original. What we cherish in an artiste is his individual creative genius, his unique musical vision. Even older masters, with whom we are still closely familiar, Faiyaz Khan, Abdul Karim Khan, Amir Khan, were all prized for this quality. An *ustad*, moreover, is not expected to show creative genius merely through composing new pieces and developing a new style and idiom in which he renders these new pieces. What is really expected of him is that his own unique imagination and artistic conception should be writ large on whatever he is performing, whether it is a Sadarang *khyal* or his own composition. A sensitive Western performer or conductor, too, may have a unique style, an individual flavour that enters into whatever he renders, but never do we mistake Bach's creation for another's. On the other hand, a great Hindustani performer is more akin to a creative Renaissance sculptor, who, in copying a Greek or Roman model, transformed it into something quite his own.

The value placed by modern Hindustani music culture on uniqueness of vision in rendering *khyal* is not an accidental or contingent matter. It is not a new and sudden growth, entirely different in spirit from Indian musical culture and tradition as a whole. Even a little reflection will show that the factor which accounts for the Hindustani musician's cultivation of uniqueness is a factor which evidently has been inherent in Indian music for centuries. I have in mind the central role we have assigned to improvisation.

Improvisation is woven into the very fabric of our music-making. In teaching forms, what is transmitted is not only a corpus of music but also a manner and technique of improvisation, the two elements being inextricably interwoven. Hindustani music, in its *khyal* and allied forms, perhaps places more stress on improvisation but in this, it only errs on the right side and does not introduce a totally new element uncharacteristic of our music. Evidently, it was always the practice in our music that a *shishya* could become a master not merely through being able to reproduce forms, however skilfully and expressively, but by succeeding in handling forms he had learnt in such a manner as to transform them creatively. A man of towering genius could even gloriously transfigure them.

The role of improvisation seems however to have varied in degree and extent. It could be subjected to greater or lesser constraints. Thus compared to the Hindustani tradition, Karnatic music has been exercising more controls on improvisation by limiting it more strictly, at least in certain areas such as the rendering of *kriti*-s. Compositions of old masters like Tyagraja are carefully guarded from the mutating encroachment of improvisation. Consequently, we have a more secure assurance that *kriti*-s have been handed down undistorted. In the North, on the other hand, an old *cheez* (composition) can have as many sharply distinct variations as *gharana*-s,

or even musicians; for within a *gharana*, too, individual variations are not uncommon.

But improvisation, though confined, is still given a major role in Karnatic music. A *kriti* within a *raga* may be carefully guarded from mutation but the totality of a *raga*-presentation does allow plenty of room for improvisation. How much of this has slowly crept into the *kriti*-s themselves poses a genuine query.

The basic problem for a historian, in this context, is, how to measure the extent of variation in an old form. Seeking an answer is a frustrating exercise because there was no sophisticated system of notation (subtle enough to record all the contours of a *kriti* or a *cheez* before recent times) against which a check can be made. We are, perforce, left to intelligent guesses on the basis of known musical practice and tradition.

But even if we grant that in the *kriti*-s we have truly been able to preserve old music in the original, how far back does this take us? Hardly more than two centuries.

Dhrupad, one may say, takes us further back. And it is certainly true that *dhrupad* as a form and style goes back to the fifteenth century and perhaps earlier. But the pertinent question again surely is: how old are the *dhrupad*-s that we have? No exact answer can be given. Many *dhrupad*-s are certainly older than the current *khyal*-s, and *dhrupad*, in general, undoubtedly, preserves an earlier musical idiom. Also, relative to the *khyal*, *dhrupad* is guarded with greater caution against mutating influences. Still, it is difficult to get rid of the feeling that this care to preserve *dhrupad*-s has acquired greater fervour only after the ascendancy of the *khyal*. Earlier *dhrupad*-s too seem to have been in a similar state of flux: witness, for example, the great variations to be found in the same *dhrupad* as sung in different *gharana*-s. The element that varies sometimes is not only a pattern here and there, within the same *raga*, but the *raga* itself. We find that the same Tansen *dhrupad* is sung to one *raga* in the Dagar *gharana*, but to a different *raga* in Vishnupur. A further complexity is added by the presence in the past of four *bani*-s, four different modes of rendering *dhrupad*, which must also have multiplied mutations.

Here again, in the absence of a proper notation system before recent times, it is impossible to gauge the extent to which improvisation has transformed forms. A search for the original can turn out to be, as the proverb goes, like a hunt for the primal trunk of an ancient, overgrown banyan tree. Unlike in the West, no need was felt in India to develop a sophisticated system of notation for recording music with exactitude. A notation system has been in existence for some centuries, at least since the *Brihaddeshi* (circa 7th century A.D.), but it was too crude to be an appropriate vehicle for the music it was meant to record. The little that has been recorded is, moreover, skeletal and minimal, besides being, for us, enigmatic. It cannot convey a true picture of the totality of music that obtained. The reason why so little was recorded was that, as is the case today, what was conveyed from

one generation to another consisted not only of a collection of forms, but also of modes and principles of improvisation by which to develop them; notation could be of no more than rudimentary or secondary use for this purpose. Before the introduction of recording devices like the gramophone disc and the tape-recorder, a full-fledged musical structure, such as that of a *raga*, could never be captured in its entirety.

Given the material that we have and the nature of the tradition, an attempt to reconstruct the music of the past in any palpable form does not appear to be a promising venture. Yet attempts are certainly worth making and perhaps with more research and greater knowledge, in depth, the notation preserved in works like the *Brihaddeshi* (circa 7th century A.D.), the *Sangita Ratnakara* (13th century A.D.) will begin acquiring a breath of life instead of remaining mere signs to puzzle over.

It would be interesting here to note that Rana Kumbha, the Mewar king, had in the fifteenth century made an attempt to recapture old forms. In introducing his monumental *Sangitaraja*, he asserts that he had not only read descriptions of ancient forms in ancient texts, he had also tried to experience these forms directly ('*anubhuyarthatah*': *Sangitaraja*, 1,1,1,37). Later in his work he even gives his own reconstruction of *jati-s*, *kambala gana* and the like, forms which in his days were no longer extant. The attempt seems to have been, in many essentials, a failure, as I have elsewhere tried to show (*A Study of Dattilam*, pp. 180-181). But it was certainly an attempt worth making. Also for his times, it was a rare endeavour. Again in his commentary on the *Gitagovinda*, Jayadeva's famous poem composed in the twelfth century, Rana Kumbha tells us that he had searched for a commentary on the work that could reveal the music to which it was set. Finding none, he set Jayadeva's *ashtapadi-s* to his own music (*Rasikapriya*, 1, 15, 16; the entire work is full of musical details; also *Sangitaraja* 2, 4, 2, 28-29). For us, his music, too, remains a closed book as it is not recorded in notation, but in terms of hints that could have aided a contemporary musician to improvise.

III

But if we have no music from ancient times, we have a reasonably rich array of musical texts and manuals. Another major source of information is the large corpus of sculpture, painting and imaginative literature from different periods. This latter body of evidence reveals a great deal about the context in which music was made, its social, cultural paraphernalia and its apparatus. Sculpture has many portrayals of musical instruments, and sculptural history can project a picture of how they have changed over time. So can painting, which has, in addition, preserved pictures of music and dance concerts in a more vivid, realistic manner than sculpture. Literature is a still richer source. It provides us with insights into the role of music in general culture. It reflects details of the social, human background into

which music was integrated, presenting us with a lively idea of the diversity of musical practice, the varied functions of musical forms and the complexity of attitudes towards them. Literary works also contain helpful details concerning technical terms of music, since many poets and imaginative writers were men groomed in a many-sided culture, and well-grounded in music.

The texts and manuals, however, remain the primary data. They are all that we have on music as such. Other evidence can be corroborative or augmentative; the texts are foundational. A student of musical history is perforce led to squeeze as much out of them as he can.

The earliest material on music we have is the large though often scattered body of writings in Vedic literature. This material contains very interesting reflections on music and mirrors an ethos, echoes of which are present in our music culture to this day. But music in this literature is not an object of analytic and descriptive study.

We do not know when the study began to assume such a character. Perhaps at the time when the study of the Vedic language was emerging as a methodical science in the three *Vedanga-s*: *Nirukta*, *Vyakarana* and *Shiksha*. Yaska's *Nirukta* goes back to the seventh century B.C., Panini's *Vyakarana* is two or three centuries later, *Shiksha* works are later still. The tradition of these *Vedanga-s*, devoted to analysing language semantically, grammatically and phonetically, is older and goes back to the eighth and ninth centuries B.C.

The impetus for these *Vedanga* studies was provided by the need to conserve and understand *mantra*, the Vedic speech. *Sama*, the Vedic song, was as sacred as the *mantra*. It is reasonable to suppose that the study of *sama* music began at the same time as the *Vedanga*-studies devoted to *mantra*, and with a parallel intention. The earliest work of this nature that we have is, however, a relatively late work, the *Naradi Shiksha*, which like other works of the *Shiksha* genre, belongs to the beginning of the Christian era and is not quite free from even later interpolations. But *Shiksha*, as a branch of study, is as old as the other *Vedanga-s*. A *Shiksha* when devoted to *mantra* was a phonetic study; devoted to *sama*, it was a study of music. No other *shiksha* on *sama*, besides the *Naradi*, survives.

Naradi Shiksha, along with the richer and more organised *Dattilam* and *Natya Shastra*, can perhaps be placed in roughly the same chronological bracket. Somewhat later, more scattered material is to be found in the small sections on music in the Jain canonic *Thanamga Sutta* and the older *Purana-s*.

These are all works antedating the *Brihaddeshi*, usually placed in the seventh century. With this work we come to a new group of texts, which while borrowing the old conceptual framework and material, are yet devoted to newer interests and forms. This is a fairly large group, representative

works being the *Bharata Bhasya*, the musical section in the *Manasollasa*, *Sangita Chintamani*, *Sangita-Samaya-Sara* and, above all, the *Sangita Ratnakara* (early 13th century A.D.).

With the thirteenth century there appears a lull in textual activity which begins anew with newer interests in the fifteenth century. Many old traditions continue, earlier material is still incorporated, but there is a sharp change in the conceptual framework, reflecting a major upheaval in music. Many old terms acquire a new content. Some new terms and concepts become consequential. Also, now begins a division of the large material we have into Hindustani and Karnatic.

IV

The above brief, and even perhaps at places controversial, survey is meant to convey some idea of the range of material spread over time. A few words now concerning the character of this literature, what we can learn from it and what we cannot.

Texts from the *Naradi Shiksha* onwards contain a rich vocabulary for analysing and describing musical forms. But as we have noted earlier, before the *Brihaddeshi* there is no attempt at mapping structures precisely, or, in other words, to notate them. In fact, it is in this text that we first meet with the syllables, *sa, ri, ga, ma*, as abbreviated signs for musical notes. *Dattilam*, written some centuries earlier, evinces great effort at brevity and some very ingenious formula-like descriptive devices. But the *sa, ri, ga, ma* syllables are not used. In this text, as well as the *Natya Shastra* and the *Naradi Shiksha*, the name of a note is always fully spelt out: *shadja, rishabha, gandhara* and so forth. Abbreviations must have developed sometime after these texts, which were written in the first or second centuries A.D. and the seventh century, the probable date of the *Brihaddeshi*.

Not only was a notation system unknown, no method of measuring tones through string-lengths or a similar precise manner was developed. Musicians played by the ear, even as today. In fact, it is not till the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries that we find tones being given in string-lengths. This further compounds the difficulty of knowing ancient forms with any exactitude.

The texts, it appears, were written and studied within a well-established *sampradaya*, a tradition of musical culture in which a basic knowledge of forms, a training of the ear, and a general understanding of the framework of music was already assumed in a student. Details about forms in ancient texts abound, but they only concern general features, individual details are left to the knowledgeable students to fill in.

The reason for this lies not only in the fact that these were advanced manuals, but also, evidently, in the forms themselves. The ancient *jati*-s were *raga*-like structures and have been proclaimed as the progenitors of *raga*-s. Like the *raga*-s, the *jati*-s were forms which could only be described

in their general formal features, through stating the principles of their structural formation, because they allowed room for free movement or improvisation. This freedom was extremely restricted and hedged round by numerous limits because *jati-s* were sacred structures, similar in this aspect to Vedic *sama*. Every movement in them, like ritual action in the *yajna*, was determined through rules. Yet, unlike *sama*, they did allow freedom. With them an entirely new element was introduced into Indian music: the nucleus for our *raga-s* was born. *Jati-s* gave rise to other forms in which the principles governing melodic movement were gradually loosened, modified, transformed, reduced in number and importance. It is this line of development to which *raga-s* belong.

A study of ancient texts can, therefore, help us form a picture of how these principles for improvisation have changed over time and come to be what they are today. And here we have an example of the kind of history, which the texts can help to formulate. In respect to exact form, however, the texts present a picture somewhat analogous to an archaeological site, revealing bare ground-plans or sometimes only clues to these, the rest of the structure being left to the imagination. In our case we have the present forms, embodying many ancient principles of construction, to help the imagination.

Besides forms, music has a conceptual framework with multiple functions: analysing forms, describing them, commenting on them aesthetically, spiritually, metaphysically, scientifically and in other ways in which we do talk about music and relate it to the rest of our experience. This framework itself has a history which reflects the history of forms themselves. Here the texts offer a rich fare to the historian.

The texts can also be instructive to us. Today we have gained in being able to describe forms with greater quantitative accuracy. But we have lost much in the keenness and penetration of analysis found in the best of the earlier texts.

They can also have a clarifying role. Earlier I had spoken of quarrels over the 'purity' of *raga*. An historical understanding of the character of *raga*, as a form, will surely help us to see the issue in a clearer light and the fight over it will be less dogmatic.

Many musical terms such as *shruti*, *svara*, *murchana*, *tana*, *varna*, among others, have been with us for centuries. Their meaning-content has been changing with change in music. But the constancy of the use of the terms themselves tends to create the false impression that meanings, too, have remained unchanged. Consequently, layers of meaning, which have become mixed up, create confusion or bewilderment when we apply these terms today. A historical study of these terms, to use an archaeological analogy again, can help us separate various strata of meaning and perhaps dispel some confusion.
