

## A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF INDIAN AND WESTERN MUSIC<sup>1</sup>

by

*Swami Agehananda Bharati*

Those who are familiar with both Indian and Western music are well acquainted with the terms that are used most often to distinguish the two. Indian music is called melodious, and Western music, harmonious. Everyone knows that Western music is melodious, too, but "melodious" as it is applied here is a technical term. We shall commence our enquiry by explaining and exemplifying these two terms.

By "melodious" we mean tunes in which everything rests on the succession of tones. We enjoy their sequence and the esthetic pattern given in that sequence. By "harmonious" we mean, apart from the succession of tones, their partial simultaneity—the chord, and in a more complex stage, the counterpoint. In every part each "voice" sings his or her own tune, more or less, and it is their simultaneous combination which the Western ear enjoys. This is of course no random combination, but a highly cultivated one, obeying acoustic laws discovered long ago—a discovery older than any known musical score. Long before Aristotle, Pythagoras and his disciples experimented with strings of various lengths, noting consonances and dissonances while striking them at the identical moment; one school of the history of mathematics has it that Pythagorean mathematics was a sequel of these musical, or at least acoustical, experiments.

In India, strangely enough, there has never been any such original experimentation in music. The possibility of tones acoustically complementary, providing a means to simultaneous musical expression was never explored there. It was only after contact with Western music, late in the last century, that a few composers

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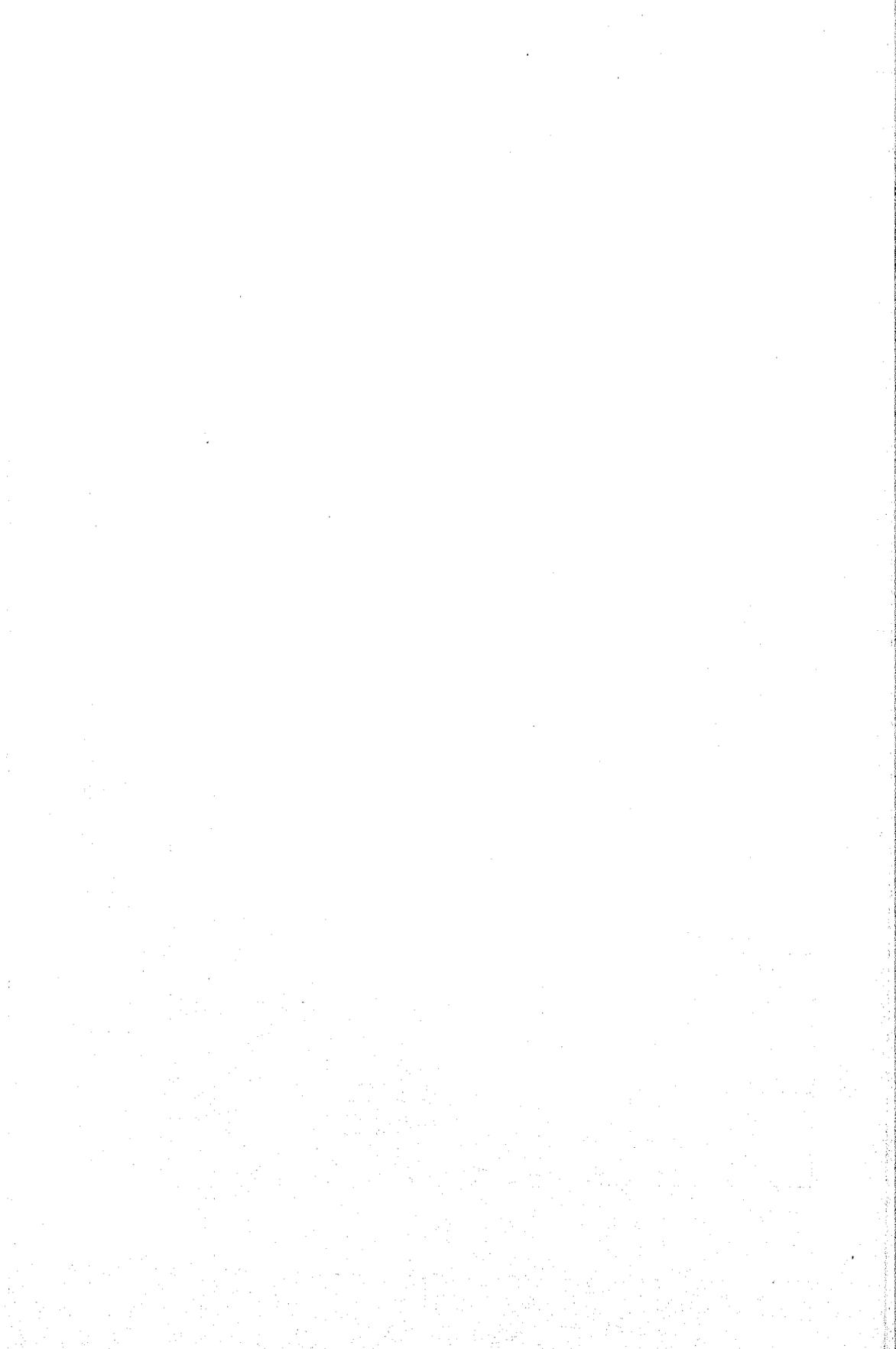
1. Adapted from a lecture given at the May 16, 1956, meeting of the Siam Society. Selected records of Indian and Western music were used to illustrate the author's enquiry.

began to experiment in a somewhat clumsy fashion. If one listens to a classical piece of South Indian music and tries to imagine a concurrent part—either in the form of another voice, a chorus, or in the accompaniment—he will feel that no such part could be added or inserted. Indian music requires a trained ear just as good Western music does—for the Western-trained ear, enjoyment of Indian music necessitates the acquisition of a new taste, just as liking Western music is an acquired taste for the Indian. Indian and Western music are not in any way competitors for the prize of greater beauty, for they belong to entirely different traditional patterns. Hence, just as one would switch over from the BBC to New Delhi on his radio, he will have to switch over from one kind of musical experience to another. He cannot listen with the same ear to both Indian and Western music with satisfaction, although there are some bases for comparison. There is, for example, a Sanskrit poem in praise of the Goddess Kamakshi who resides in the shrine of Conjeeveram in South India, in which the violin repeats the singer's phrase without any addition or alteration. It is something like the canon of Western classical music of which Haydn and Mozart were particularly fond.

Now we are right in the centre of our quest, and presuming a general familiarity with the Western musical notation, we shall, on this basis discuss the formal elements of Indian music. The common Western notation has been in use since well before Bach. It has been adopted in Siam, and, to my knowledge, also in Japan and some other Asian countries, though never in India. There were several ancient and medieval notations in India, but we have to omit reference to them; that would be a different topic, and of paleographical interest only. The seven tones and the half-intervals of Western music are in Indian music, as they are in the music of every part of the world with only few exceptions.

The Indian notes constituting the octave are *shadja*, *rishabha*, *gandhara*, *madhyama*, *panchama*, *dhaivata*, and *nishada*. Their etymology is not clear throughout. *Madhyama* means the middling one, (Siamese *mathyom*), *panchama* means the fifth (Siamese *benchama*), and *shadja*, the sixth, from the most ancient notation given in





the *Natyashastra* of Bharata, of about the second century B.C., which is the canonical text of Indian music and the oldest extant text on the subject in India. *Rishabha* means a bull; *dhaivata*, *nishada*, and perhaps *gandhara* refer to birds. The hypothesis is that originally some absolute pitch might have been indicated, under the naive assumption that the matured animal and bird voices have the same pitch within the species. For musical practice, these seven notes are abbreviated into *sa* for *shadja*, *ri* for *rishabha*, *ga* for *gandhara*, *ma* for *madhyama*, *pa* for *panohuma*, *dha* for *dhaivata* and *ni* for *nishada*; this is how we shall refer to them. It must be borne in mind, however, that there is no such thing as an absolute notation as in Western music, where the standard 'a' is about 440 vibrations of the tuning-fork. The basic Indian note is *sa*, but the singer intones his own *sa* relative to his voice and to his disposition at each performance, and the accompanying instruments tune their *sa* to his. For convenience's sake, we shall equate *sa* with *c*, so that the fundamental Indian scale, *sa ri ga ma pa dha ni sa*, is translated as the *c*-major scale, and transcribed as here, *c d e f g a b* and *c* (see chart). The chromatic intervals have the same names as the full ones distinguishable in the Indian notation only by diacritical marks above the letter. The tones in India have never been symbolized as round notes, but always as letters, as in the antique and early medieval West. Here, they are, of course, letters of the Sanskrit alphabet.

An Indian instrument indispensable to all musical performances is called the *tanpura*. Its job is to hold the drone and nothing but the drone. It is not an independent instrument; its functions could be said to correspond to the pedal-note of the organ. The four strings, starting from *c*, are two equal *c*'s in the two central strings, the *c* of the lower octave on the right string, and either *e*, *f*, or *g* on the left, according to the mode of the piece. This is the only case where there is a kind of primitive chord; the four strings are plucked in regular succession, and the chord basic to the tune results. The *tanpura* is used along with vocal as with all kinds of instrumental music; accompanying, for instance, a violin solo, it sounds

redundant to the Western ear, but of course it is no more redundant to the Indian musician than the pedal-note is to the organ player. The instrument is made of the wood of the jack-fruit tree or of some other light wood, and at the lower end there is a large gourd, a real gourd of a particular Indian variety, encased in a thin layer of soft wood. This gourd and fruits of similar size and shape are frequently used for Indian instruments; they serve to enlarge the volume of the tone or the chord.

If we view things from the point of polyphonus Western music, *i.e.*, music composed after the fourteenth century, Indian music is entirely monodic; there is only a single part in any musical piece, there is no counterpoint and no chord. The stress is entirely on the melody. In the West, music was monodic until the end of the Middle Ages. It was the Renaissance which along with other pleasant heresies introduced the counterpoint and polyphonus music, though some rudimentary attempts can be traced to antiquity. It seems that certain portions of the Sophoclean tragedy, recited by the commenting chorus, had two parts in their tune. We know virtually nothing about it. But monodic music is known in the West; the original plainsong is believed to be purely so. If we compare a Latin plainsong of the 10th century with a Sanskrit invocation of the 17th century (the most fertile period of Indian music), we find a similar temporal extension of the tones, not only on the vowels as in Latin, but also on some consonants, especially the nasals.

Before going further, we shall have to deal with a few technical terms. They are Sanskrit, and they have no exact equivalents in Western musical terminology. We shall not use more than half a dozen of them, but even the most elementary discussion is impossible without them. The main term to be adumbrated is *raga*. Etymologically, it means a 'sentiment' or a 'humour' in the sense of antique psychology, one of the four humours. Later on, it came to stand for a particular group of sentiments, that of passion, anger, and erotic excitement. The Sanskrit word for colour is derived from the same root (*ranj*). We may aver that it came to mean all

those sentiments to which folklore ascribes the colour red. As a musical term, it is the most important in Indian music. A crude interpretation would simply be 'melody,' but that would be insufficient and misleading. We have the scales of Western music, and there are of course as many scales as there are notes in the octave, or twice as many, *i.e.*, the major and the minor keys. The *raga* is a kind of mongrel between a scale and a key, but it is closer to the latter. According to the canonical texts of Indian music, there are seven, and according to another ancient scheme, twenty-six *ragas*. Each of them has a number of *raginis* and *bharyas*, which literally mean 'wives' (originally all *ragas* were supposed to be masculine entities). Hence, we may say Western music has only two *ragas*, *i.e.*, the major and the minor keys, plus a few more in extremely old music and in jazz, which do not belong to these two categories. It follows that Indian music is richer than Western music if the purely melodic development is alone taken into account. The Indian melody is at once richer and more complicated than any Western tune. Indian music has intervals smaller than a half step, that is, the skilled musician and singer can produce, and the skilled audience, distinguish, another tone between *e* and *f*, or *b* and *c*. It is for this reason that the piano, the organ, and harmonium-like contraptions are despised by the good musician in India, and used only for the most inferior kind of music, film-music, about which we shall have more to say later.

A *raga*, then, is a melody-type, *i.e.*, a particular set of notes in the octave, occurring in defined patterns and excluding at times one or two notes of the octave. This is not so intricate as it sounds; put more simply though not quite correctly, a *raga* is a skeleton-tune, consisting of prescribed notes and forbidding certain other notes. There are *ragas* having five tones; they are called pentatonic in Western terminology and are frequent in plainsong and older Western music, too. Their distinct gravity and solemnity makes for their use in sacral music, which was experienced in India and the West alike. For example, there is a pentatonic *raga* called *malavakarsika* in Sanskrit, *malkons* in the modern northern vernacular, and

*hindolam* in the south. *Hindolam* means a swing; the derivation of *malavak ausika* is not clear (it may be a geographical allusion); and *malava* is the ancient name for Mewar, a district in the present Rajasthan. Each *raga* is depicted as some human, semi-human, or divine figure, male or female, and a great amount of Indian painting has had *raga* as a subject. Each *raga* has a *dhyana*, i.e., a meditation, and it was from the suggestion of these *dhyanas* that *ragas* were painted; the *dhyana* is a maxim couched in a Sanskrit *shloka* or verse, a sort of mnemonic aid. This pentatonic *malkons* is depicted as a *bhairava*, a semidivine attendant of the God Shiva and sometimes almost identified with Him. Of uncanny looks, smeared with white ashes from the cremation ground, a red staff in his hand, a garland of human skulls hanging from his neck, with a red belt fastened around his waist covered by a tiger skin, a wandering ascetic like Shiva Himself, the Lord of mendicants, this is the *dhyana* of *raga malkons*. Every *raga* has to be performed at a particular hour; *malkons* is sung and played just after midnight. The *raga malkons* consists of the notes *sa, ga, ma, dha; ni, pa-re* are forbidden. In English notation, these would be *c, e-flat, f, a-flat, and b-flat*.

In a *malkons* performed in the strict north-Indian classical tradition called *khyal* (a Persian word which means 'fantasy'), a considerable scope for improvisation is left to the artist, there being no prescribed rhythm in the first part. This part has no words and is nothing but the *raga* spun out on the vowel 'a.' This initial part of the musical piece, irrelevant whether sung or played on an instrument, is the *alapanam*, which is Sanskrit again and means a discourse, a disquisition or simply a conversation; the artist holds a kind of monologue with the impersonal creator of the *raga*. An expert audience is interested chiefly in the *alapanam*, the portion which is the most trying for the layman. In a classical musical soiree in India, one will find the artist working out his *alapanam* for thirty minutes, and finishing the rest, containing the actual song, in barely ten.

The other compulsory item in any musical piece is the *tanam*; the word derives from the Sankrit root *tan*, and is related to the Indo-European root *ten-*, as in *tend*, *tension* (Latin *tenendo* and *tendo*) and it means stretching or extending the tune. The *tanam* is perhaps the most typically Indian feature in Indian music; it requires special voice-training, and for the Western listener it demands the greatest amount of aural adaptation. It might be compared, to an extent, with *coloratura*; the difference between the two being the rarity of the *coloratura* in the West, and the ubiquity of the *tanam* in Indian music. The *tanam* is next in importance only to the *alapana*, to which, however, there is nothing even remotely similar in Western music. The other difference is, of course, the technique involved in each style. *Coloratura* is a staccato art, *i.e.*, the individual tones require separate laryngeal concussions in quick successions, whereas the *tanam* is executed in one breath and the intervals are achieved by rapid extensions and contractions of the larynx; to the uninitiated, *tanam* at first tends to sound definitely unpleasant. The author made a countering test in India and observed that to the Indian singer who is unfamiliar with Western music, *coloratura* sounds funny rather than unpleasant. When a record of it was played for one of the three top musicians of North India, he and his party, musicians of standing all of them, roared with laughter.

Another element of Indian music is its rhythm and its measure. Music being far more intimately connected with dance in India than anywhere else (the oldest text, the *Nayashastra* of Bharata already mentioned, deals with both music and dance as two aspects of the same art), the emphasis on rhythm is enormous. The Indian word *tala*, whose etymology is opaque, is extremely ancient and occurs in the *Rigveda*, the oldest collection of Indian literature, with considerable frequency. Just as musical instructions were given at the beginning of the Psalms and other poetry in the Old Testament, instructions about *raga* and *tala* were given in these most ancient Indian texts. Two cake-like instruments are closely

connected with the *tala*. The two pieces constitute a single instrument called the *tabla*, the North Indian finger-drum. In the South, the more elegant and accoustically richer *mridanga* is used. The *dholak* is a drum used for folksongs, religious litanies and similar unsophisticated entertainment. The *tabla* and the *mridanga* have a function similar to that of the conductor in Western music, and to compare its position to that of the Western drum or kettle-drum would be quite wrong. In Western music, the drums are just instruments among their neighbours, aimed at stressing certain phrases and enhancing the total volume. Not so in Indian music; the *tabla* or *mridanga* are independent or guiding tools. *Tabla* solos are very popular, and the *tabla* player is the most important, the most indispensable and, next to the singer, the most expensive musician. Whereas the *tala* is an abstract entity like time or measure, and means just that, the *tabla* or *mridanga* are, as it were, the embodiment of the *tala*, something like an audible conductor's baton.

There are over thirty meters in Indian music, some of them obsolescent or obsolete. Their names are similar to those of Western music, like *chartal*, which means "four-measure," and *ektal*, which means "one-measure." Some have fancy names or are onomatopoeic, like *dadra*. The professional *tabla*-player adds the most incredible ornaments, speed, and a host of the most breath-taking feats on the instrument. Each touch of the fingers and hands has a sound-symbol, a name as it were, so that each drum-beat can be dictated literally; this is of great importance with dance, where the instructor dictates the movements of the feet.

*Khyals* are usually performed in the meter called *ektal*, or "one-measure," though the nomenclature does not seem to have any bearing on the meter. This meter has twelve beats, and its dictation runs "*dhin dhin dhage tirakita dhun na, kat dhu dhage tirakita dhin na.*" Because the *mridanga* is a far more powerful instrument than the *tabla*, South Indian music has come to be more rhythmical and stricter in its time. This probably accounts for the fact that Western musicians prefer South Indian music to the Northern style.

With this much knowledge of Indian music, one can now follow the pattern of any complete musical piece, a *kṛiti*, in any performance of classical Indian music. There is little modification in the programmatic arrangements of the North and the South, and almost none as between vocal and instrumental performance. The first part of the *kṛiti* is the *alapana*; here the *raga* is displayed without any accompaniment and the artist has to show his power of improvisation; his limits are set only by the *raga* itself. When the drum sets in upon a definite concluding phrase known to the *tabla*-player, the part then commencing is called the *sthayi* in the North, the *pallavi* in the South. Here the text of the song is introduced, though usually as yet only the first line or even just the first two or three words. In the ensuing *antara* (*anupallavi* in the South), the rest of the text is sung, the rhythm frequently changes, and so does the speed. This part has an amazing, albeit purely accidental, functional similarity to the *Abgesang*, the final part of the schematized song of the Meistersingers in medieval Germany. The didactic stanza in Wagner's opera could almost literally apply to the Indian *kṛiti*: "darauf nun folgt der Abgesang, der sei auch etlich Verse lang und hab' sein besonder Melodei, als nicht im Stollen zu finden sei." This means roughly that the *Abgesang* should also take a few verses, and should have its separate tune such as had not been used in the previous part. Here 'tune' must not be understood to mean a different *raga* in the analogy; the *antara* is just a novel combination of the notes and phrases of the *raga*, relative to the previous parts of the *kṛiti*.

The last part is the *thanam*, that coloratura-like, most intricate portion of Indian music; here the text is no longer reiterated, except at times a salient word or phrase of it, and this only in the North; the rest runs on the vowel "aaa." In the South, the names of the notes, *sa re ga ma pa*, etc., are sung in the *thanam* in lieu of a text, a most delightful interpretation of its import.

The closest Western analogy to the arrangement of the Indian *kṛiti* is the *rondo*. There is, however, no symphonic music nor any programme music in India in any sense comparable to the classical and romantic compositions of the West. We do not know whether there was a common root at any time; if there was any, it must have been thousands of years ago and it is not expedient in a subject like ours to venture conjecture on the basis of the somewhat mythical home of the Indo-European race. It would, moreover, tell against our purpose, because it seems most certain that Indian music as we know it today derives to a large extent from non-Indo-European sources, from the Dravidian background. The oft-mentioned *Natyashastra* of Bharata was a South Indian work, written at a time when Sanskrit had penetrated the South, giving an intellectual guidance to the Brahmins. Professor Subbramania Shastry, the first authority on the history of Indian music, suggested that there was a more ancient work on musical scales in Old Tamil, of which, he thinks, Bharata's magnum opus was an elaborate exegesis in Sanskrit. The only ancient mode that is decidedly Aryan is the Saman-chant of the Veda, a simple tetratonic mode preserved, incidentally, again in the extreme South only. An example of the Vedic chant, the Srisukta, the oldest extant Aryan hymn to the mother-goddess Sri, later on identified with Lakshmi, the spouse of Vishnu, may be compared with any Gregorian chant of the Roman Catholic Church, in a simple and frequent phrase like "dixit Dominus ad Dominum meum."

A few words about Indian instruments are necessary here. There is a great variety of them, and the main difference between them and their Western counterparts is that of volume. There is no Indian instrument of great volume (hardly a disadvantage), in spite of the gourds that appear so large. There is no brass of any kind; everything is wood, weeds, or fruit-shell. Strings are no doubt of metal, but the volume depends on the resonance-body.

The most ancient instrument is the *veena*, a string-instrument, a permanent emblem of the goddess Sarasvati, the tutelary of the arts and of learning, wife of the deming Brahma. The *veena* is mentioned in the oldest texts. Strangely, there is no extant indigenous bow-string instrument; whatever you hear today in India, the *esraj*, *mayurveena*, *sarangi*, or the *dilruba*, are later adaptations for imported music, that of Persia, in particular. This influence never reached the South, where the oldest tradition has remained entirely unbroken in music and dance. It was due to this want for a string instrument that the violin found entry into South India some sixty years ago. Today it is the most popular solo and accompanying instrument.

The two most popular string instruments in the North are the *sitar* and the *sarod*, the former a kind of simplified *veena*, with frets beneath eight strings, the latter a sort of big mandolin without frets, and played with a plectrum. The somewhat hard sound, resulting from the lack of overtones, resembles that of the virginal of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The conception of an orchestra in the Western sense is not known to the Indian instrumentalist, for an orchestral score implies polyphony. In recent years, there have been various attempts to introduce something of the kind, but such performances by an orchestra are really just the classical *kritis* played by more than one instrument at a time. These orchestras never exceed ten players. A dislike for this type of performance is shared by many people in India. It is generally felt that orchestras do not fit into the tradition and therefore make for crudeness. There is a general mistrust of musical innovations that lean on Western models. The films, whose music is the dross and curse of modern Indian art, have usurped these innovations and this naturally deters good musicians from using the orchestral medium. The regrettable fact remains that the most of Indians, even those who ought to know better, accept the abominable trash the screen produces in huge quantity. No doubt the Government of India is trying its best to stem the tide of bad taste and of vulgar choice

through certain restrictions placed on radio programmes and in educational curricula. It is to be hoped that its endeavour will be successful. The average Hindi film takes three hours, and about two thirds of it are musical pieces of this kind, neatly composed to last four minutes in order to provide lucrative gramophone recordings on ten-inch discs.

In the West, the term 'classical' when used in the musical context, means a particular historical period. In India, the term has no such connotation and is purely methodical; classical music in India means traditional music or, to be more correct, music subject to the rules of a *raga* and a *tala* and hence, in the final analysis, to the *Natyashastra*. To this we oppose modern music in India, music, that is, composed from non-canonical elements, mostly from some kind of folk-music, or independent creations of musicians. Usually the stress is on the text of the poem thus sung. There are two trends of contemporary Indian music. One type uses ancient literature as its material, pieces of Sanskrit poetry either in the original or in vernacular versions. An example is a modern rendering of a stanza from the famous lyric *Gitagovinda*, by the medieval Bengali poet Jayadeva, whose language is said to be the most elegant of all that has been written in Sanskrit before him. The poem describes the romantic exploits of the youthful Lord Krishna in the bucolic setting of the tradition. Radha, his beloved, complains to her friends about the prolonged absence of her divine lover. The piece uses elements of at least three *ragas*, a thing which is unthinkable, in this form, in traditional music. The accompanying violin does not repeat the singer's phrase, but brings its own, a Western idea that makes it sound very modern indeed. The end is Puccini-like, quite unusual in the tradition, as the end does not stand out in relief from the rest of the classical composition.

No consideration of Indian music can be made without recognizing the greatest poet of modern India, the late Nobel-Laureate Dr. Rabindranath Tagore. He wrote about 3,000 poems which he set to his own music. They are a national treasure of India, and the

musical life-blood of the Bengalis. The type of music Tagore used for his poems had various sources, but the chief ones were the old songs of the religious bards of Bengal, the Bauls and Bhatiyals. English translations of Indian poetry sound flat and almost always trivial, but then no poetry can be truly translated into another language. Tagore, however, was a master of English as well as of his native tongue. His translation of one of his own poetic songs cannot fail to give some idea of the phrasing of Indian music. This song, addressed to the Lord Buddha, is entitled "Hinsae Unmatho Prithivi," which freely translated is a call for all thinking earth-creatures not to do violence to one another:

"The world today is wild with the delirium of hatred, the conflicts are cruel and unceasing, crooked are its paths, tangled its meshes of greed; all creatures are crying in anguish for a manifestation of thine. O Thou of boundless life, save them, raise the eternal voice of hope. Let love's lotus with its inexhaustible treasure of honey open its petals in thy light. O Serene, O Free, in Thine immeasurable mercy and goodness wipe away all dark stains from the heart of the earth. Though Giver of immortal gifts, give us the power of dedication, claim from us our greed and pride of self. In the splendour of a new sunrise of wisdom let the blind gain their sight, let life come to the souls that are dead. O Serene, O Free, in Thine immeasurable mercy."

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