

ON THE "INCOMPLETENESS" OF A MUSICAL WORK

It has been said that a musical composition is essentially incomplete, and that it needs completion through performance. I wish, in this paper, to discuss this contention and some issues connected with it. But before doing that, it is essential first of all to determine, what precisely is the identity of a piece of music as a work of art. For this would, I believe, bring out some powerful peculiarities of music as a work of art.

I

It may be said that, of the identity of a piece of music as a work of art, two kinds of questions may be asked— one metaphysical and the other logical. My interest here is primarily in the logical question. The answer to the metaphysical question, "Is a work of music a physical or a non-physical object?" is obvious enough. Here, I do not wish to go into details but merely to mention that, the metaphysical and the logical questions (which may be of the form, "what in actual fact, are the criteria of identity of a particular work of art?") are intimately connected, and an answer to the one would in most cases lead to an answer to the other. In attempting to find an answer to the logical question, I am guided primarily by an argument of Richard Wollheim's in his rather difficult and terse essay entitled *Art and its Objects*.²

Following Wollheim's lead, we might begin by making a distinction between a general entity, or more correctly, a generic

entity and elements that come under this generic entity. And a general answer to the logical question, "what is a work of music, say a *khayāl*?" might be as follows - *khayāl* is a generic entity, and a particular performance of it is an element that comes under the generic entity. It may be said that there are three different kinds of generic entities viz., type, class or universal with tokens, members and instances respectively, as their elements. The distinction between the three can be most illuminatingly made in terms of the relationship that there is between they themselves and their elements, and the relationship could be said to vary in the degree of what Wollheim calls "intimacy" or "intrinsicity," that an element may have with its corresponding generic entity. Thus, the relationship between the members of a class and the class may be said to be the least intimate or intrinsic, the relationship between a type and its tokens the most intimate, while the relationship of a universal and its instances coming somewhere in between. The different kinds of relationship are also reflected in the different ways in which properties may be shared between an element and a generic entity. A generic entity and its elements may just happen to share certain properties or it may be that an element has a property *because* the generic entity has it and *vice versa* i.e. properties are transmitted between an element and the generic entity.

A musical work is a generic entity which is closest to the generic entity called *type*, and particular performances of the work may be thought of as tokens of this type. An important characteristic of the type/token relationship is that a type and its tokens may not only share properties, but properties are also transmitted from one to the other. It is important to make, for an understanding of the general nature of music, the following points about properties that may be predicated of a type. These are : (i) there are no properties which cannot in principle pass

from the token to its type i. e., everything that can be predicated of a performance of a musical work, can also be in principle predicated of the work itself. If the performance is, say moving or rousing, the work itself may be moving or rousing. (Here of course the spatio-temporal properties of a performance are not being considered.) (ii) Although all properties, apart from the spatio-temporal properties of a token, may be transmitted to the type, it is not necessary that they will do so. (iii) In fact it is necessary that not all properties should pass from token to type, although any single property might do so. Among the properties, of which it is necessary that they should not pass from token to type, are the properties generated by the art of interpretation or rendering of, say, a particular piece of music. Such properties of a token might be said to belong to the token in excess, as it were, of the properties that it has by virtue of being a token of the type in question. This, taken along with the previous point, brings us directly to the question of completeness in music. Taking a piece of music to be a type, the earlier point may be restated as : a musical composition is essentially an incomplete type which needs completion through its tokens.

To suppose that something is incomplete ordinarily implies two things. Firstly, that a thing which is incomplete is defective in the sense that it requires something more or lacks some essential feature, and secondly, to suppose that something is incomplete implies that it is in principle capable of being completed.

Taking the second sense first, what would completing a musical work entail? If one were to actually undertake the task of completing a musical work, it would involve the composer indicating every single detail of how a piece of music is to be performed. Perhaps in the case of Western classical music this could, to a certain extent, be imaginable, for here the modern

practice is for the composer to write down at least every note that is to be sung or played on an instrument, with some indication of how it is to be sung or played. One can think of the same process being continued until we have a work over which the performer has no freedom other than to follow, to the minutest detail, the instructions of the composer. But this will have the intolerable consequence of introducing a degree of mechanicality to a musical performance, which is, in the ordinary view of things, alien to it. To envisage this kind of completeness of a musical composition is also to imply the ultimate replacability of the performer, by, say, the computer. Such a thing may indeed come to pass, but what we shall then have will no longer be music in the normal meaning of this word.

However, when we turn to the Indian classical tradition, any attempt to introduce "completeness" to a musical work will reflect a total misunderstanding of the very tradition. Here, the basic melodic form the *rāga*, is merely a very loose structured framework indicating the kinds of notes, the number of notes to be played or sung; no *rāga* can indicate how exactly the notes are to be used. The freedom of the performer here is an essential part not only of his art as a performer but is also a part of the work itself. Here, we can talk of two kinds of freedom: the freedom that is part of the *guru-śiṣya* tradition, and the freedom that the *gharānā* system has customarily allowed. Both these kinds of freedom have been responsible for the central place given to the performer in Indian music and, in many cases, for the obliteration of the distinction between the artist and artiste in our music. The discipline imposed by the *guru* on the *śiṣya* always leaves, and must leave, an area of freedom to the *śiṣya* in his performance. For the first five or six years the *śiṣya* relies completely on the guidance of his *guru* who teaches the *śiṣya* everything individually and directly, but gradually the *śiṣya* learns

to improvise, and then in the rendering of a *rāga* he adds to his methodical musical training, that which he draws from within himself. Similarly the discipline of the *gharānā* system must equally leave room for the freedom of a particular member of the *gharānā*. Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan's rendering of Rāga Rāgeshwari or Lankeshwari, Goonkali and Kaushi Dhani could serve as revealing examples of this, where while retaining the broad characteristics of Patiala *gāyakī*, the artist transcends the limitations of his own school showing that his individuality is greater than the tradition he imbibed. Paṇḍit Bbīmsen Joshi is another consummate artist, who stands out as having added new dimensions not only to Kirānā *gāyakī* but to the entire tradition of Indian Music. In his rendering of Rāga Shuddha Kalyāṇa, while maintaining the systematic note by note elaboration of a *rāga*, so characteristic of the Kirānā *gharānā*, he adds intricate *taan* patterns characteristic of the Gwalior *gharānā*, and presents the *rāga* with subtle innovation and rare artistry. The idea of the freedom of the performer, then, is not peripheral, but central to Indian Music.

II

The attempt to introduce "completeness" to a musical work seems all the more absurd when one reflects on the Indian aesthetic tradition. According to this tradition, a piece of music, like any other aesthetic object, is a configuration of various elements and the configuration expresses "*rasa*" or the quintessence of an emotion or what some call the aesthetic fact. *Rasa Niṣpatti* or creation of *rasa* is the function of all that is aesthetic. *Rasa* literally meaning "juice" or "extract" is that which gives life or vitalizes an emotion. The function of all art and music is the presentation *rasa* or the resultant of the aesthetic configuration which "consists of situations, mimetic changes, transient emotions and basic emotions, so harmoniously mixed up that the

configuration presents to the aesthete something which is entirely different from that which results from the mere juxtaposition of various elements" ³. *Rasa* is thus " not pure unity but unity in multiplicity. The unifying factor in the multiplicity is a basic state of mind (*Sthāyībhāva*) which binds together in an organic whole (1) the emotive situation in human setting, consisting of the physical cause of the basic mental state (*Vibhāva*), (2) the mimetic changes, which are inspired by the aroused basic mental state and as such are indicative of the internal state (*Anubhāva*) and (3) the transient emotions (*Vyabhicārībhāva*)."

At the heart or core of a musical composition, then, lies the *sthāyībhāva* or the basic persisting emotion which binds the total aesthetic situation of a musical composition together. It is that which keeps the unity of the work together, and that which commands or guides the entire structure and form of artistic creation. The *sthāyībhāva* can thus be likened to Berlioz's "idea fixe" or Langer's "commanding idea", for in its expression the entire structure of the composition is created. Although this basic idea or *bhāva* puts a check on artistic imagination, it is not restrictive, or is restrictive only in a limited sense, i.e., only in so far as it structures too free an artistic imagination. And precisely because of imposing this restriction, the *sthāyībhāva* or "commanding idea", is immensely generative. By restricting too free an imagination the *sthāyībhāva* helps the performer spontaneously, but with understanding, to compose something which is infinitely rich and distilled. Having got a basic guide the performer's mind does not wander from theme to theme, key to key, or mood to mood, or perhaps, if it does wander from one mood to another in a single musical piece, say Rāga Mālakauns whose principal mood is *utsāha* or zeal, but in the exposition of the *rāga* the moods of *śoka* or grief, or *vairāgya* or renunciation, may also be expressed, but once the principal mood of *utsāha*

has been grasped the other moods are brought in only to accentuate the basic mood and add to its expression. The way *sthāyībhāva*, which restricts yet generates, is very significant in Indian music, for Indian music to the uninitiated is seemingly unstructured. An Indian musical recital has endless unforeseen possibilities and because the structures are so flexible there seems to be no structure at all, yet there is in the exposition of a *rāga*, an inner logic, which is essentially dependent on how the *sthāyībhāva* has been grasped by the performer. The *sthāyībhāva* is, then, embodied in the entire work permeating and unifying a *rāga*, but at the same time not restricting creativity, but rather, providing the performer an inexhaustible source of inspiration. The source of inspiration is inexhaustible for the *sthāyībhāva* is an emotion and not only is the very concept of an emotion a very complex one but the matrix of a *single* emotion is extraordinarily pliable. Taking a single emotion, say love, in expressing it one can express the joy of love, the ecstasy of love, the yearning, the tragedy, the expectancy and so on. The aim of the artist is to express as many different aspects of love as possible such that the overall presentation is that of *śrīṅgāra*.

When it is said that the *sthāyībhāva* of a piece of music is love, the reference may be to a more specific aspect or aspects of love. A *rāga* does not express love so much as it expresses a mood of love, and not a general mood of loving or being loved but a more specific mood. Take Rāga Yaman; this late evening *rāga* sung after the day's fevers and frets are over, suggests an idyllic setting of repose and indolence which gives rise to a yearning for love and one's loved ones. The *vādi* or sonant note of this *rāga* is Ga and the *samvādi* or consonant note is Nī. All the other notes or *svaras* are *śuddha* except Ma which is *tīvra* (sharp). Generally speaking *rāgas* with a dominance of the *śuddha svaras* are likely to have romantic associations, but in

this *rāga* because *Ma* or the fourth note, is *tīvra* or sharp the mood is not merely one of romantic passion or ecstasy but contemplative and pensive too. The stress on *Nī* and *Ga* also induce this mood of quiet contemplation, of love, which in turn give way to yearning for one's loved one. The *sthāyībhāva* is thus *love's longing* and this is the mood which permeates the entire rendering of the *rāga*.

But even such a specific mood as "love's longing" may be variously expressed depending on the intensity of the yearning. *Rāga* Mian Malhār also expresses "love's longing," but here the yearning is much more passionate and poignant. The *vādi* and *samvādi* notes of this *rāga* are *Sa* and *Pa* respectively. *Ga* is *komal* (flat) and both the *nishāds* or seventh notes are used. The passion and intensity of love's yearning is presented through the use of both the *nishāds* in different combinations and the descent from *Nī* to *Pa* with a *gamak* and from *Pa* to *Ga* (*komal*) with a *meend* brings in the feeling of brooding intensity. The prolonged use of both the *nishāds* traversing several *śrutis* increases the tension of yearning before the tension is released in the *vādi* note *Sa*.

The *sthāyībhāva* or the commanding idea may inspire different performers in different ways, thereby making the performer bring to his music that elusive touch which enhances the spirit of the music, and there are no criteria by which to determine which rendering is more complete precisely because there is no need for one. Here, where every performance is itself an act of creation, each musician may bring out different aspects of the same *rāga*, by his relative use of *śrutis* and varying emphasis he gives to different notes and this is dependent on how the *sthāyībhāva* has moved him. An apt example here would be *Rāga* Mālakaunsa which has been rendered by almost all the great artists, and each one has given to it a different flavour.

Ustad Amir Khan, aspiring for depth and repose brings out the profundity of the *rāga*, while Pandit Yeshwant Rao brings out the fluidity and poignancy of the *rāga*. Bade Ghulam Ali Khan's powerful rendering makes it an epitome of *utsāha* and *veera*, while Pandit Bhimsen Joshi, through his resilient style and creative use of *śrutis*, makes it sublime.

In fact the same performer at different sessions may also create different moods depending on how the *sthāyībhāva* has moved him. Thus in the Rāga Mian Malhar, at one session the performer may stress on *Ni* thereby increasing the poignancy of the *rāga*, while at another the stress would be on *Pa* and *Ga* (*komal*), which brings in a sense of brood. A *rāga* then can be presented in an indefinite variety of ways and no way will be wrong as long as the artist is guided by the *sthāyībhāva* in such a way that the inner spirit or *rasa*, which is the resultant of the organic whole is presented.

It is obvious, then, that even if one were to agree that a piece of music remains "incomplete," for there are no ways of completing it, it is not a defect in music that it is so. In fact it may even be said that it is a vital facet of a piece of music, such that its essential enduring appeal is sustained and embellished, that it should remain "incomplete" in a different sense of the term. The feeling of incompleteness is necessarily fraught with tension and tension in turn is invariably coupled with a sense of expectancy. The attempt of any great musician is to retain this expectancy by prolonging fulfilment.

A piece of music does not narrate something in the sense of having an orderly progression from a start towards an end either happy or sad. It is as S. K. Langer puts it " completely incommensurable with progress of common affairs. Musical duration is an image of what might be termed "lived" or

“experienced” time. The passage of life that we feel as expectations become “now” and “now.””⁵

III

In conclusion I would like to refer to the analysis of the Radha Krishna legend by Sudhir Kakar and John M. Ross in their recent book,⁶. They point out that “though the Radha Krishna love legend is classed amongst the world famous love stories, it is less a story remembered than a random succession of episodes seen and heard, sung and danced. It embodies “an evocation and elaboration of the here and now of passion, an attempt to capture the exciting, fleeting moments of the senses, and the baffling ways in which pleasures and pains are felt before the retrospective recollection which, in trying to regain a lost control over emotional life, edits away love’s inevitable confusions.”⁷ As such Radha is seen as an incarnation of a state of permanent amorous tension, “.. a here and now of desire that carries within itself a future expectation of pleasurable release...”⁸ Radha thus personifies an enduring arousal whose concern is not with gratification but with anticipation. Throughout the legend the attempt of the poet has been to sustain expectancy either through reminiscences or through dalliance, to prolong fulfilment by deliciously postponing delight and thereby suspending ecstasy in time and making it last for ever. The separation of the lovers has also been used by the poet to enhance expectancy. Possession is completion and completion deflates passions, but for a true presentation of *śṛṅgāra* the poet must leave passions in a state of aspiring for fulfilment. Of similar consequence is the attempt of the performer to sustain tension by channelising all creative potentialities and possibilities in a continuous and perennial state of flow. The attempt is to retain the “isness” of the *rasa* of a

particular piece of music, and this can only be achieved by keeping away from completion, for that would exhaust all potentialities.

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NOTES

1. Langer, Susan K.; *Feeling and Form* (London, 1953)
2. *Art and its Objects* (Cambridge 1980)
3. *Comparative Aesthetics*, Vol. I (Varanasi 1959)
4. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
5. *Feeling and Form* (London 1953)
6. *Tales of Love, Sex and Danger*. (Oxford University Press, Delhi 1986)
7. *Ibid.*, p. 77.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 88.

ANNOUNCEMENT

I

Mrs. Gertrude Sachs Memorial Essay Competition

In the opinion of the referees nominated to adjudicate essays invited on the theme "Modern Society and Tragic Sense of Life" for the Late Mrs. Gertrude Sachs Memorial Essay Competition *no received essay deserved to be awarded first or second prize.*

II

Prof. G. R. Malkani Essay Competition

In the opinion of the referees nominated to adjudicate essays invited on the theme "Śaṅkara's Concept of Prapañca" for Prof. G. R. Malkani Essay Competition *no received essay deserved to be awarded first or second prize.*

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