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## Transcending time and space

*Gowri Ramnarayan*

**There is a whole tree within a seed  
And a seed at the end of each tree  
That is how it is between you and me  
One contains the Other.  
There is a ripple on water  
That is itself water.  
Says Tuka, the image  
Merges with the mirror.**

*From Says Tuka, translated from the original Marathi and ed. Dilip Chitre, New Delhi, Penguin Books India, 1991.*

The year 1988, the place Rachmaninoff Hall, Moscow. M. S. Subbulakshmi sings a resonant Kalyani, with the nuanced depth that would move a diehard Mylapore connoisseur. But the packed hall of Russian listeners, some of them experts in western music as performers, scholars and students, are mesmerised by the vocal magic. To most of them, this is the first exposure to Indian, and certainly Carnatic music. During a pause, a woman comes up to the stage to offer flowers, with tears spilling down her cheeks. There is rapt silence for the two hours of the recital. Then a roar of thunder. The standing ovation continues, the applauding listeners follow the artiste as she makes her way out of the hall, down the staircase, and into the car on the street...

R. Prasanna Venkatesh/Wilderfile



Remember how T. S. Eliot urged that poetry should cultivate an auditory rather than a visual imagination? He was aware that music, the most intangible of all the arts, has the most direct appeal to the heart. We know from our own pulse beats that melody and rhythm can arouse every reaction



from the physical tingle, to the spiritual trance. And across time and space, the diversities of race and culture.

How else can we explain all the young people of the world swaying to rock and jazz and pop? Elvis Presley and Bob Dylan had his past generation in absolute thrall. Today if you are a teen, it matters not whether you are from Mumbai or Madrid, Melbourne or Montreal. You will instantly recognise the voice of Madonna, or the strings of Jimi Hendrix. This common craze forges Masonic links among the young.

In our own subcontinent, hasn't film music crossed every barrier of language, creed and class? Music directors Naushad and Shankar-Jaikishen were national heroes, while Ilayaraja and A. R. Rahman have fans all over the diaspora. Why, we have a Kashmiri writing about songs in "Roja" and "Bombay", a Malayali collecting K. L. Saigal's evergreens. Tamils burning with anti-Hindi sentiments can belt out a Rafi number with gusto. And Pakistanis can easily idolise Lata Mangeshkar as the queen of melody.

A couple of years ago, an Indian woman walked into a music store in some remote Hicksville in the American midwest. The owner immediately pulled out CDs of music by "Raavee Shunkayr and Zakeer Hoosayne", and discussed their amazing skills. He also had albums by artistes Black and White, Indians among them, who had jammed together. This kind of fusion has fostered a global awareness of our multicultural heritage as never before. It is no longer a surprise when celebrity New York artiste like Francesco Clemente attends Carnatic music recitals in Chennai, or Brice Marden listens to Salamat and Nazakat Ali Khan as he paints on a vast canvas in his studio, believing that the music brings its own charge to the spiritual abstractions he strives to create!

Music brings a whole environment with it for cognition and empathy. After all, hasn't Zubin Mehta done more to bring India into the limelight as a Mumbai-born conductor of western orchestral music than ministers and diplomats? Haven't L.Shankar and L.Subrahmaniam, Vikku Vinaykram and Zakir Husain brought their country into focus through their fusions and jam sessions with great musicians from across the world? What is important is that such crossovers in music don't fan parochialism, but make us realise that there are more things common to human nature than we suspect.

That is why, the realm of music remains innocent of racial prejudice and religious strife. The music making pandits and ustdas of Hindustani music made a close knit community, and the people respected them as being above such rifts. That is why, during the worst phase of the Hindu-Muslim riots during the partition, master sarodist Ustad Hafiz Ali Khan was protected by both Hindus and Muslims in his Gwalior home. Alladiya Khan and Allauddin Khan were venerated figures among rasikas who never identified them by their religion but by the spiritual radiance of their art.

Nor was there any north-south divide in music. Ustad Vilayat Khan gets a special look in his eyes when he recalls the music of the Mysore vidwans of yesteryear. Pandit Ravi Shankar still talks about the impact of Veena Dhanammal, Tiger Varadachariar and Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer on his young mind. (Once he told Musiri

Subramania Iyer that what he had produced was literally "Devamritavarshini", a shower of divine nectar, when he sang the raga of that name). The regard was reciprocated, Carnatic musicians flocked to hear Bade Ghulam Ali Khan. Earlier, Abdul Karim Khan had been a regular house guest in the Veena Dhanammal household. They remained strangers to each other's language, but why should that matter when they understood the music perfectly? It seems Khansaheb would never perform anywhere without saying, "Buddhi ma ko bulao!" (Call the old lady).

Dhanammal's grandchildren built bridges across the Atlantic. T. Balasaraswati and brothers Ranganathan and Viswanathan created a whole community of rasikas for their art in the U.S., where the legendary dancer held Friday sessions for years in Middletown, Connecticut, and the brothers taught in Wesleyan University. Their students are now teachers in many departments where the Asian arts are taught in that country.

If you were to drop in at Wesleyan today, you may be amazed to see an American girl or boy walking beside guru Ramnad Raghavan, carrying his mridangam for him as any disciple in Chennai would. Enter T. Viswanathan's class and you see more white students than brown, all familiar with the difference between gamaka and brika, as also the sociological features of the growth of Carnatic music. They adopt some aspects of the culture to which it belongs, trying to visit south India for direct encounters with it, seeing it as educative and enriching. They know just how to greet other Indian visitors, whether laypersons or musicians, are familiar with many of our regional attitudes and requirements. The late Jon Higgins was a product of this unique environment. And he was able not only to connect with Carnatic music, but master it to the level of giving competent performances in the genre. To other Carnatic music buffs the world over, he was no stranger, but an admirable clansman.

To the successive batches of students trained at Ali Akbar Khan's college on the West coast, the passage through the Hindustani system meant not merely acquiring some skill in a foreign art. Starting with the touching of the guru's feet before the lesson, the experience made them adapt a wholly new perspective which changed their lives, and the way they looked at the world.

Interestingly enough, western film makers have been using eastern, particularly Indian music, to serve various functions in their background scores. Tabla rhythms spew suspense in pursuit, khyal and thumri spill romance and nostalgia, modern medleys are bent to more zany purposes. Nowadays you can get anything from Baul music to qawwali in European art films. I was amused by a group of bhajan singers in a cafe in a Swedish noir film, the sitar in an English production about separated lovers, and the bamboo flute in an Italian film whenever the son remembered his dead mother. Not to forget A. R. Rahman's "Chainyya! Chainyya!" on the TV screen in a Marseilles bar in a French film about African immigrants. And don't you recall the haunting ring of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan in "Dead Man Walking"?

Modern technology (including the idiot box) has achieved much in disseminating what had been the elitist preserve of the initiated, forging links and promoting a wider understanding of diverse kinds of music. It has even cultivated a taste for the distant and the remote, until the exotic becomes a familiar source of joy.

His wonderful trilogy on gypsy music by the French film maker Tony Gatliff, has electrified viewers from other communities, making them empathise with the nomad spirit, often disdained because it had been misapprehended. Similarly, greater exposure to the gamelon and the sitar have made people feel kin to the races to which they belong. In the twentieth century, music proved a great leveller, promoting kinship among aliens. After all, if you are familiar with the zither or the vina, those who play them cannot remain strangers!

Native Americans singing "Heyanna hey! Hey!" round camp fires, or the Manganiyars of Rajasthan strumming strings and beating drums in rhythms forgotten, served the same purpose of linking human souls. From ancient times, folk music has knit whole communities together, in war and peace, promoting solidarity and harmony, enhancing joys and mitigating sorrows. Its obsolescence today is sad testimony to fragmentations, both social and physical.

### **Vikku Vinayakram and Zakir Husain.**

Music instigates another kind of connectivity across time and space. Psychologists use music to prod recalcitrant memories. Even more than visuals, auditory catalysts can plunge you out of the present into some deep, distant, hidden, forgotten past, into locations misty and uncertain. Sometimes they can actualise an experience with all the fervour and passion intact, or drown you in yearning nostalgia.

All of us know how a little tune can change our mood completely. A snatch of a song by the Carpenters in a foyer, and you have forgotten your children beside you, and are back in some college romance. "Yesterday" by the Beatles can bring tears to the eyes as you recall the carefree days that are no more, and the people that are lost forever. Hear a qawwali and you are transported to your early life or eventful years in Hyderabad or Lucknow. A friend's daughter broke down when she heard the azaan, the prayer from a mosque. She was a Hindu, studying in a foreign country, but the musical call reminded her of the strains she used to hear everyday from a mosque close to her home in her motherland. Ironically, this chant was not even from a mosque, but part of the sound track in the film "The English Patient."

Certain persons who may now be out of your life, can be vividly actualised by a tune. Whenever I hear the songs from Guru Dutt's "Pyaasa" I feel my friend is listening with me. She died fifteen years ago. A musician tells me that he feels most secure when he hears Nilambari, the raga in which his mother sang lullabies. Some kinds of music can bring to mind artistes who had mastered them. "He is good, but this should be sung by Pavarotti," says the opera buff. "Nobody should sing John Lennon's songs but himself," says the Beatle maniac. Purya Dhanasri died with Ustad so-n-so," says the Pune listener. "Giripai has an imposing Sahana which is beyond everyone except M. D.



Mohammed Yusuf

Ramanathan," declares the Carnatic rasika. How indelible the connection!

We all know that the power of music arises from its ability to strike a universal chord within the human soul. Sometimes this can take you by surprise.

A graphic example of such magnetism was provided when Tamil vocalist Aruna Sairam teamed with French singer Dominique Vellard in a series of recitals in India. Theirs was no fusion, but a juxtaposition of the Carnatic tradition with medieval liturgical practice. The unlikely tandem paired a series of chants and songs in languages as far apart as Tamil, Sanskrit, Latin, Italian, Spanish and French, but which were remarkably similar in melodic structure and content.

The mystical glow suffusing the sounds created a sense of cosmic oneness in singer and listener. You felt exalted when "Ave Virgine" was rendered by Vellard, interspersed with Sairam's step-by-step, quietistic alapana of Kalyani, culminating in rapturous singing of the last verse together. It was a moment when divisions and differences ceased to matter. The charge of devotion warmed the entire hall. To be there was to know the bonding of self forgetfulness, beyond the fleshly concerns which divide us in daily life.

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