Music
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East & West; Part II

A small boy awkwardly molds his hands into new shapes and strikes the drum nestled on his crossed legs. Desperately struggling to produce the rudimentary sounds-"Dha Gi Na Tin Na Ka Din Na"-he's trying to learn the mridangam (an ancient South Indian drum). As he suffers a ponderous lack of grace, his guru quells his distress with tales of the "Lord of Dance."

"The thunder of the drum moves Siva to dance and arouses the kundalini to rise through the seven chakras," exclaims the teacher as he pauses for a moment to gaze at a small picture of Siva Nataraja hanging upon the wall. Uncontrollable tears come to his eyes as he continues: "The tambura drones, the vena sings and the serpent of power enters the golden chamber of the crown above."

The student is inspired. His mind flies to heights of mystical inspiration, far above the drudgery of his lessons. He feels that he is exploring magic and mystery, and his joy knows no bounds.

In India, Hindu esoterics have been inseparably entwined with a music student's practical training from before recorded history. Centuries of such intermingling have woven these two elements into a single fabric. Yet, modern times are threatening this seemingly indestructible tradition in two important ways. First, humanity is being lured into an all consuming fascination and preoccupation with anything new at the expense of everything old as today's complex and multifaceted technological age offers endless possibility in "high-tech novelty." Second, the breakneck velocity of computer technology is forcing mankind to forfeit depth of mind for quickness of wit, spawning attitudes of disregard-even disdain-for time-tested culture built upon the wisdom of the world's greatest sages.

Ravi Shankar, the Harbinger

When the famous sitarist, Ravi Shankar, made his Western debut 25 years ago, he was keenly aware even then of the tenuous existence of valuable ancient traditions like the Guru/disciple relationship. In his early concert tours, he dauntlessly embraced the Hinduism of his musicianship and let his Western audiences know it. He would stop concerts in the middle and politely educate his audiences in matters of protocol and basic music appreciation-and they loved it. He pulled no punches. His soaring success attests to the fact that he, his music and his Hinduism have all been well received. Yet, the free-wheeling abandon of the 1960's continued to unnerve him with its disregard for his beloved musical legacy. What he did not realize, however, was that the situation he thought was so bad would only get worse. Although the ensuing years tamed the initial impetuosity of that era, its spirit of liberty and license has only amplified. At least during the 1960's, the differences between the music of the East and the West were fairly clear-cut. Now, even these lines of distinction are more a matter of opinion than fact.

The 1980 edition of Encyclopedia Britannica reads: "Much of music outside the West has entirely different aesthetic aims; the music of the Hindu world, best known to the West through the classical music of India, provides an example. Hindu music always has had strong ties with mythology and religion and thus produced an art that is as different from Western music as Hinduism is from Christianity."

Twenty years ago, Alan Hovhaness, USA composer and leading American authority on the music of the East said: "Unlike Western music, which has elaborated its secondary element, harmony, at the expense of the essentials of melody and rhythm, Indian music retains its roots in pure melody and rhythm, and the subtle interplay of these essentials is its essence."

These definitive assessments are true for a situation that existed a quarter of a century ago. Today, modern thinking continues to modify traditional values at the lightening pace of computer technology, causing radical changes in musical interests globally. A new criteria for evaluating East/West differences is being established in the process.

Quick Wit and High-Tech Novelty

In ancient times, musical styles could be easily traced to geographic or linguistic sources and, to some extent, were preserved by such isolation. Today, the high speed and ease of international communication and transportation shatter such apportionment while intensifying past/present disparity. As novelty slowly eclipses respect for background, training and development, entire countries synchronize musical tastes to the same contemporary trends in music that have absolutely no basis in the past. Although the East and West are experiencing a meeting of minds, much of the subject matter of their agreement lacks depth, continuity and stability.

Additionally, modern computerized musical instruments and synthesizers are being developed almost daily. While such innovations are producing a multiplicity of intriguing sounds previously unimagined, they are also drastically changing the requirements for performance expertise, the standards by which listeners enjoy music and music's potential marketing value. Musicians have a full-time job just staying up with the latest instrumentation. Listeners are constantly bombarded with all-new sounds before they have had a chance to assimilate what they have already heard. And to all of this, a frantic music industry is adding a maddening touch of competition with more contenders than ever, fighting to be first on the market with whatever is new and next. Speed is the name of the game, wit is the player and novelty is the weapon.

Even the strictest traditionalists can't ignore the frenzy. They are finding it increasingly difficult to sit calmly in practice rooms, holding firmly to established routines with only the hope that in this transition the greatest gems of an ancient heritage will not fall too far by the wayside. Yet, novelty dies almost as quickly as it is born. More novelty is its only hope for continuation. Such circumstances yield little hope for a stable future.

A Breath of Hope

Today's musical infatuation built on the life and death of novelty is also attended by a spirit of aesthetic conscience among an unobtrusive few. These are the nameless patrons, the inconspicuous ones who-like connoisseurs of priceless antiques-turn their attention to the deathless creations of yesteryear and by their very consciousness set a whole new wave of music appreciation into being. By the grace of these advocates, a quiet flood of Eastern musical prodigies keeps coming West to gently refresh the churning tides of a turbulent age.

Pandit Pran Nath, referred to as a "musician's musician," is considered one of the greatest living singers of North India. Now living in California, Pran Nath has been a professional teacher and singer since 1937. His knowledge of ragas and compositions is so vast that he is sought after by a variety of artists, Indian and Western, classical and modern, who represent a vast spectrum of modern-day musical interests. Some seek to strictly learn Kirana Gharana, the musical tradition which is his specialty. Others are looking for fresh insights and new inspiration into the "roots of new age music."

Karnatic violinist L. Subramaniam has been amazing Western audiences for years. Recognized as one of India's finest "orthodox" musicians, he is also admired for his exploration and experimentation into different forms of Western music, including classical, jazz and rock. He has had a strong influence on the famous, contemporary, classical composer, Philip Glass and in jazz has worked with flutist Hubert Laws, pianist Herbie Hancock and many others.

M.S. Subbulakshmi, Sachdev, L. Shankar, Harihar Rao, Nikhil Banerjee-the list of great Indian artists in the West, living or visiting, performing or teaching, goes on and on. Among this formidable assembly of artists are both models of the past and precursors of a hopeful future. The traditional music they were taught and which they brought with them to the West has descended from the Vedas and is permeated with the essence of Hindu mysticism. Is it possible for such a tradition so ingrained with Eastern thought to move Westward fully intact? There may not be a simple answer, for modern times are complex. While quick wit and novelty currently hold sway, a global renaissance of aesthetic and cultural refinement is also quietly under way. This dilemma is nothing new. It's a war of the worlds, inner and outer-one of history's many repetitive plights. Rarely won in direct conflict, one side against the other, it usually ends with the lesser team's self defeat. Today's music is still in the melting pot. Who can say how it will come out? With people becoming "Westernized" and "Easternized" all around the globe, even the terms, "East" and "West" are indicating attitudes more than places. And these attitudes-unlike the places-keep changing.

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