

Notes and Comments on the
Music of India and Japan

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There are no universally absolute musical values, and as such, many forms of music that we consider unconventional or strange are still worthy of their own unique recognition. Indian and Japanese music are two such systems of music that differ in many regards to what we are familiar with through Western musical traditions. It is sometimes necessary to discuss art in general as a broad category of the human expression so that the context of the respective culture is understood when discussing music itself as an art form.

Symbolism plays a much larger role in Asian art than in Western art. For example, disorder and asymmetry are highly valued in the Japanese arts. Since Japan is an island country, it developed somewhat independently, with few influences from beyond its shores. Most great works of art are unified by a certain consistent emotional tone. The four primary values of Japanese art to fully express this emotional tone are suggestion, irregularity, simplicity, and perishability. Descriptions of these four values and their distinction from Indian art are as follows. Suggestion describes that most of the art work of Japan is not explicit. This requires active work on the part of the spectator. The spectator brings his or her singular perspective to the viewing, because each person's experiences and circumstances in life are unique. Also, for example, it's not necessary to show a flower in full bloom. In fact, depicting the flower a week or two from being in full bloom requires the spectator to anticipate nature's seasonal cycles. In contrast to Asian art, Indian art is primarily explicit and tries to deal fully with content.

Irregularity reveals how Japanese art takes its cues from nature. Just like a tree branch is rarely straight, so does Japanese art value irregularity in shapes and sounds. In contrast, Indian

art is more symmetrical, and equilibrium is valued.

Simplicity indicates that the Japanese style is to use natural materials, dull colors, simple surfaces, uncomplicated designs, and to avoid decoration. Indian art, on the other hand, has much color and adornment. Indians value vivid colors, profusion and exotic ornamentation.

Perishability, the fourth and final primary value of Japanese art, shows how their art is often fragile and impermanent (e.g., rice paper, silk). Indians don't concern themselves too much with perishability; it is not a value, especially since their world view includes the notion that everything—including all art forms—is an illusion.

In Indian art, there is a deep bond between the sensual and the devotional, and elements of each are often present in artistic expressions. Three important points of contrast between Japanese and Indian art: (1) Japanese culture is much more aesthetically-focused than Indian culture, (2) Japanese art is more highly focused on nature and natural elements, and (3) the primary purpose of Japanese art is the aesthetic *knowledge of the essence of things*. In contrast, the main purpose of Indian art, influenced primarily by Hindu traditions, is of *bliss and release*. Japanese art would therefore help one be as one with the essence of something, while Indian art would help one self-actualize.

After understanding the basics of Japanese and Indian art as a whole, one may discuss music itself as a distinct art form. Japanese music is difficult to notate with any precision and specificity. Also, while songs may sound somewhat simple in structure, the tone in Japanese music is very complex. Some songs have heterophonic qualities, which mean that there are variations of the same melodic line performed concomitantly. This technique gives the illusion of multiple superimposed tonal images. What might be similar in Western music is with live performances where a guitarist might play and have his or her sound come through two different

amplifiers, each set slightly differently in tone or special effects, so the sound that comes out of each is the same notation, but distinct in tone and texture.

In India, the musical tone is not as complex as in Japan. But its structure and organizing features are much more complex than that of Japanese music. Vocal tone is the basis of Indian music, and instruments thereby try to emulate the vocal style. In Indian music, there is often a continuous drone sound over which other music is played. It is even harder to notate Indian music than Japanese music, and written music is rarely used in India.

Much of Indian music has an improvisational quality, but it is not improvisation in the sense that “anything goes.” Rather, certain traditions apply in the form of melodic archetypes that are then worked on. These archetypes are structured by the repetitive, cyclical rhythmic patterns known in India as *tāla*. According to Rowell, improvisation in Indian music is a mixture of habit and impulse, and also a mixture of tradition and innovation (194).

While Japanese music is considered asymmetric, Indian music follows a chain structure. Most Indian performances begin with a slow improvising section, followed by a more regular rhythmic section. Early Indian theorists recognized four aspects of musical form: the static part, the moving part, the collecting part, and the crowning part.

The two most important philosophical foundations of Indian music are the theory of *rasa* and the theory of *nāda*. *Rasa* relates to *flavor* and *taste*. *Nāda* is the Indian theory of sound and relates to *causal sound*. Sound is equated with the universal consciousness, the structure of the universe, and the cosmic process of creation. Sound is embodied in the divine trinity of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. As explained by Rowell, “Musical sound is thus a manifestation of the continuous stream of universal sound that runs deep within the human body” (208). Asian musical values seem exotic and/or bizarre to Westerners. Those values often seem reminiscent of

medieval thought with their “metaphysical assumptions and transcendental values” (Rowell 190).

The most basic formal archetype in the music and theater of Japan is the sequence *jo-ha-kyū*, which essentially means introduction, scatterings, and rushing to conclusion. The botanical metaphor for *jo-ha-kyū* is budding, blooming, and fading. A similar botanical metaphor in Indian music is seed to pod to leaf to fruit.

Some words follow below that help describe the Japanese aesthetic vocabulary.

Philosophically, *yūgen* has to do with the value of the mysterious and the profound. If a work of art is too perfect or straightforward in meaning, it lacks this quality. Musically, *yūgen* represents open, spacious texture. Visual decorations adorn both performer and instrument. In Western performances of orchestral music, black formal attire is common for all to present the performing group as a homogeneous unit. Contrastingly, in rock musical performances it is common that the performers and stage are adorned with visually stimulating (or visually distinctive) decorations or props of various sorts.

Philosophically, the two qualities of *shibui* and *sabi* together form a theme of quiet harmony and peace. Musically, *shibui* represents a rough, astringent tonal surface (e.g., the snap of a koto string). Rowell wrote, “Ideal sound in Japanese music is leaner, edgier, and more abrasive than the nineteenth-century concept of smooth, vibrant, opulent sound that is preferred in the West . . .” (201). Whereas Western music focuses on a tonic and root sound, the Japanese tend to focus on noise elements that help to make the sound more distinctive.

Sabi represents economy and sparseness of the musical texture. Japanese resist innovation in the performing of traditional songs. They highly value the old and the venerable, and innovation would be disrespectful to those values. In contrast, American jazz music, for

example, welcomes improvisation. In fact, being creative is highly valued. While the structure of a performed jazz song might be respectfully consistent with the original composition, improvisation is *welcomed* at the appropriate time. Improvisation in Western music helps each musician be distinctive in terms of phrasing. It is therefore the musician, and not necessarily the song, that earns focus. That is quite different from Japanese traditional songs where it wouldn't really matter who played the song, as long as it was played properly.

For Indian music, *rasa* is often translated as taste or flavor, and is also a certain pervading emotional tone. The goal of the performance is that the actor, musician, poet, and spectator are all active participants in the creation/performance. The theory of *rasa* recognizes eight basic subconscious emotions that are ready to be awakened by the experience of art. They are the comic, the heroic, the disgusting, the furious, the erotic, the fearful, the pathetic, and the wondrous. Sometimes a ninth flavor is recognized: the peaceful.

Rowell also described Abhinavagupta's¹ five levels of aesthetic experience: sense perception, imagination, recognition, universalizing, and transcendental satisfaction (204). Each level allows its own richness of experience, yet all can be experienced at the same time.

Musical performance communicates an emotional message from performer to the listener, so it is important that a competent musical performance, in any culture, requires both musical and emotional unity. The traditional theories of musical meaning are communication, expression, imitation, and representation. But these four theories of musical meaning violate the premises of Indian art—*meaning* in Indian music is referential; it *refers* to emotion. In Western culture, music *conveys* and *instills* emotion.

Perhaps one of the greatest differences between Asian and Western music is the lack of reliance on notation. Traditions are often passed down between teacher and student in Asia. It

¹ Abhinavagupta was an eleventh-century scholar and was considered one of India's greatest aestheticians.

would seem difficult to play something as complex as that written by Mozart or Bach without notation. One would wonder if Asian songs could ever be as complex as, for example, classical music. Probably not, with regard to number of notes played and the ability to notate accurately. But they have complexities in more subtle ways than we are accustomed to with Western music. Indian sitar players can play as fast and with as many notes as classically-trained musicians, but they don't necessarily play the exact same notes each time they perform a song.

A true connoisseur of music and art can appreciate styles from almost any country or source of origin. Indian and Asian music, as art forms, come from deep rooted traditions of style, tonality, complexity, technique and emotional expression. Each culture has produced many or all of these qualities in their respective musical forms, and each takes unique approaches toward full expression. One might prefer some styles over others, but each style has something different to add to the sum total of the world's musical expression. In turn, the appreciation of music of any form or style helps us be more expressively human.

Works Cited

Rowell, Lewis. Thinking About Music. Amherst, MA: The U of Massachusetts P, 1983. 190-210.