

# Symbology and The Performing Arts

Ashok Da Ranade

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I have narrowed down the scope of my discussion from performing arts in general to music in particular. Firstly, because dance has been dealt with to a certain extend yesterday and secondly drama itself would require a full paper. But at the same time music, dance and drama form a group of performing arts. They have certain common problems and common solutions which they have found out through the performances and that is why the grouping should be kept in our mind even when we are discussing music.

As soon as we start discussing an art we have definitely moved away from sound. And that definitely pitches the discussion on a totally different level. Now we are not dealing with sound and hence not dealing with sound symbol, but we are dealing with music which is a highly processed reality, highly processed acoustic reality if we can put it that way.

Secondly, as far as music is concerned a deliberate omission of reference to language is necessary if we want to concentrate on something oral and auditory. Reference was made to 'OM' and other Beejakshara which are sound symbols but which are not musical symbols, so we can keep them away. Secondly, we must make a distinction between some terms which sound alike: aural, oral and auditory. Aural is something which pertains to the sense of hearing. Oral is something which creates a stimulus through the organism which we have for producing sound and which is received by the sense of hearing, and auditory is something which takes place in presence of an audience which is a contributory agent to the performing arts. So when we talk of music we should also consider the audience participation and the musician's give and take with the audience.

As soon as one talks of symbols which are auditory, we are landed with difficulty because music is a very wide term and unfortunately whatever theoretical positions have been taken, they have been confined to the discussion of art music, which is hardly 10% of the total musical reality. Unless we take into consideration the

primitive music, folk music, religious music and popular music, the discussion will be incomplete. We cannot be talking about music in general.

One more distinction needs to be noted on a subtler level. Primitive music does not mean music which is practised by the tribals. There are primitive elements in urban produced music too. Really speaking, tribal should not be treated as antonymous with urban art. And that is why unless we have a category-wise discussion we won't be able to do justice to the total musical reality. Once these categories of music are accepted, it becomes clear that no general symbological position will be possible.

Hence I have made some sort of tabulated attempt at analysing the total situation. When we say primitive music we are taking it as a musical category. A category which responds to certain acoustic stimuli by organising them in a particular way and a category of experience which results because we respond to the stimuli in a particular manner.

I have therefore posed before myself four questions: Which is the musical category? What that musical category stands for? By what means, by what principles it tries to stand for that particular mental state? and through what particular musical mechanism it tries to attain the symbological operation?

Primitive musical elements stand for undifferentiated collective and individual psyche which wants to regain its lost poise. Let us go back to the evidence which is collected by ethnographers. Unfortunately, no work has been done on primitive element available outside the tribal area, that is why we are treating the evidence of the ethnographers, but the validity is not confined to tribal music.

It is quite true that primitive element in music is characterised by at least five features or five principles: (1) the principle of repetition, (2) the principle of unilinearity, (3) the principle of timbre deviations, (4) the principle of recognising sound as sound, and (5) applying music for individuation.

I will briefly explain what I mean by these principles. Principle of repetition is realised because there are very small units in music and these units go on coming again and again. The units are quite perceptible and precise, but by themselves, they are so small that they go on only as units and they do not form a pattern. In tribal music, there is no recognition of a pattern. The first impact is of a continuous activity which perhaps does not have a beginning and nor is likely to have any end.

Unilinearity means reliance on time-division. It is the time-division which is most important in primitive musical expression. Time is divided, time is manipulated, time is thrust forward, and time is brought to bear on our consciousness. Thirdly timbre deviation. It is very interesting to note that primitive element in music relies on deviating from the day to day timbre of voice or of the instrument. It tries to register a break away from normal day to day use of sound and introduce the shades of timbre which otherwise are not acceptable or not pursuable. Such timbre deviations are very slight, but are precise and deliberate.

Further, there is a recognition of sound as being important by itself. And that is why there is a concentration on sound quality. When I say, timbre, of course, I am referring to the sound quality, but when I say recognition of sound as important for itself, it means that without any provocation or with the slightest excuse they will burst forth into sound-making activity. It need not be a music-making activity, it can be just a sound-producing activity. That is because sound is supposed to be the first expressive agent for whatever are the feelings.

Further, comes a rather psychological or analytical psychological term 'individuation'. This is to be linked up to the earlier philosophical question: what primitive music stands for. Whether a person is happy or sad, it is a disturbance ultimately: he/she is disturbed. There is a deviation from the normal state. Immediately there is a hankering for a more equable mental state and that is why the sound and song comes into the picture. One sees that at the slightest provocation there will be music-making when primitive elements are operative because sound provides them with an answer. And that is why the technical term- 'individuation' - is used. There are attempts to balance the unconscious and conscious forces. There are attempts to link up the activities of the unconscious with the conscious. That is why the term individuation is very important here.

How is this realised in the musical mechanism? As I said, there are micro-units which can be repeated. You can have for a contrast of a time-cycle which runs into 108 beats per minute. The repetition will involve so much work and so much time that it can't be perhaps repeated with a lot of meaning. Therefore, anything which needs to be repeated with meaning must have a small unit.

Reliance on time division also takes you on to the matter of the type of sound used. One comes across a very percussive sound production. When I say, percussive sound production, I am not referring to the percussion instruments alone. I mean that even when you sing you will produce your voice in a manner that leads to an

experience of *Āghāt*, i.e. accent. There is an experience of something hitting another. And that is the primary element of primitive music. The timbre deviation leads you to a very great reliance on song as opposed to music and as soon as you say song it is the human voice which comes to the fore. Everything that happens in primitive music is centered around the concept of the song. A song need not have words all the time. A song can be composed of just syllables. And that is why meaningless syllables have a great place in primitive music.

Application of 'individuation' leads you to gender symbolism in primitive music. The matter once more refers to the linking of operations of the unconscious and the conscious. We have been talking about the binary division of the world and the world of experience, where male and female are the two agencies. That is why three variations are possible in primitive sex symbolism - certain timbres, instruments and movements are associated as male and female. The gender symbolism very strictly adheres to the symbological quality that this music has.

I can divide musical symbolism as it appears in all these categories of music as either musicological symbolism or musico-societal symbolism or musico-psychological symbolism. When I say musicological symbolism, it means that certain acts of the music-making stand for certain qualities regarded as qualities of excellence. So an act stands for quality. There need not be an inherent relationship between these correspondences. They are there because they have been accepted as musicological symbolisms.

As far as musico-societal symbolism is concerned, it means musical happenings will be equated with extra-musical societal considerations and institutions. This is the reason why equations between certain occasions and certain types of music, certain times and certain kinds of music, etc. prevail. All these equations exist because the symbolism of musico-societal type becomes active.

Thirdly, there is a symbolism of the musico-psychological type. At this point, an important and contrary symbological movement registered in music has to be noted. Musical symbolism need not be always a communicational symbolism. It can be merely an expressive symbolism. A musician does music because he wants to express himself and there ends the matter. Whether he succeeds in carrying it across is another matter. He might have all the intentions and he may fail in them and even then the symbolism will be there.

Let us move on to the folk variety. It is necessary to remind ourselves once more that these are categories of musical experience and they are not to be confined to

certain societal divisions. That is why primitive in music is not tribal music. Similarly, folk in music is not folk music or the folks! Folk psyche which needs channelisation of energy which has contrastive sources. It can be secular as well as religious. It can be personal as well as societal. It can be sad as well as happy etc. The point is that if the primitive element in music is an undifferentiated psyche, the folk is more demarcated, and it has multi-various aims in view.

Now, what are the principles which folk musical symbolisms can follow? Firstly, the repetition in folk music or folk in music is a loose repetition. There is a room for improvisation. You can repeat with strictness and you can repeat with some laxity. It is the second alternative which the folk always prefers. Then there is a circularity. Circularity in folk music is very important because it allows people to pursue the form. If you don't feel a form in primitive music, you definitely get a feeling of having a form as far as folk expression is concerned. If one is to analyse the appeal of the non-elite music and in particular the appeal of the folk music, the answer lies here: it is folk music which tries to bridge the gap between the primitive element and the art element. That is why it appeals to both.

Thirdly, in folk music, you have melodic and rhythmic patterning. It is quite clear that to have a melody is to move away from the conglomeration of sound. Sounds can come together without giving you a sense of melody and sounds also can come together to give you a sense of melody. (What gives you a sense of melody is another question). But this difference exists. Further folk music establishes the musico-societal symbolism that is referred to. In folk music, you always see that particular songs will be sung by a particular caste of people. The societal stratification gets reflected in the musical symbolism as well as the non-musical appendages that go with the folk performance. How is this realised in the actual musical items that go with these? Why is there a loose repetition? Why the repetition in folk music appears to us as loose? Firstly, because there is room for improvisation. In short, improvisation means responding to the demands of the moment and moving away from a pre-conceived idea of form. Improvisation means a folk artist (or an artist who has the folkish slant in his thinking) can move away from his predetermined design.

The solo element, therefore, becomes relevant to the folk. It is in folk that you get an idea that there can be solo performances. In primitive music, everything is collective. Of course, if one man is singing and others are listening it necessarily does not mean only one man is singing! To the contrary in folk if one man is singing and others are accompanying, might be others are accompanying him such a way that they

only appear not to sing! Virtuosity comes to the fore in folk, and solo element comes to the fore and everything else is in the background.

In folk representations, there are deliberate attempts at patterning the material that you have. In particular, elements are shaped by two agencies, movement and language. In primitive music, language does not come into play, while in folk recitations language enters with a definite force.

We now move to art music. Art music is a highly personalised human genius moving towards solo or self-expression (and not towards communication) of ideas and emotions that are abstracted. Many authorities including Susan Langer have written on music stating that music does not have discursive symbols, it has representational content to the minimum and has therefore only presentational symbols. While making these statements all the three other categories of music, i.e. primitive, folk and popular, were overlooked. It is only on art music that people have been writing. And it's only in art music that you get a symbolism which is intellectually conceived and perhaps nothing to do with emotions as such. At this point, it is very important to note what Indian musicology has to state.

In art music, there is abundant improvisation connected with the solo element. The solo element and improvisation together gives art music an arabesque quality. Patterning of sounds and patterning of patterns is experienced only in art music. In fact, one can say that sound by itself becomes important in primitive music, sound with conventions becomes important in folk music and sound with grammar becomes important in art music. One can see that there is further and further processing, a very deliberate attempt to process the material to give it a form, to gain control over it, and that is why it becomes abstracted.

Thirdly is the matter of the processing of sounds to form Raga, Tala and Bandish. I am of course referring to art music in India. Incidentally, I don't know why art music in India perhaps is craving for striking occidental and oriental parallels which were the result of the 19<sup>th</sup> century education in India. There were two terms which refer to this type of music in India, current at that time: One was the musician's day to day use 'Pakkā Gānā', a very simple term for which highly Sanskritised one was 'Shāstriya Sangeet'. Why the term 'classical' came into the picture I don't understand or perhaps I do understand, but I fail to see the reason for it! 'Pakkā Gānā' is clear enough and 'Pakkā Gānā' definitely characterises what this music means.

It evolves a grammar and as soon as grammar is involved, the criteria changes. Instead of relevance and irrelevance, you have correctness and incorrectness,

and that shows that we are operating on a different level. How art music tries to do this? Firstly, you get a dichotomy between composition and elaboration. In primitive music, there is nothing like elaboration, because the idea itself if it is a long idea, suffices. There is no idea and an elaboration superimposed on it. In folk music, there is a longer entity but in itself, it is complete, as it is also bound by musico-societal symbolism and constraints. It is in art music that you come across a person who says, 'this is the basic composition, this is the basic pattern. Now I am going to elaborate the pattern, spell out the ideas'. You can talk about art music, as if art music has ideas because elaboration is possible. There is a seed form and there is a form which is a greater form.

Secondly, there is a very clear cut division of roles in art music presentations: there are artists and there are accompanists; and as soon as there is a change of roles, even the positioning of the performers changes. A very interesting thing can be noted if you look at the 19<sup>th</sup> century photographs of musicians, either when they were at the concert or when the photographs were taken deliberately in studio conditions. The soloist will be at the centre flanked on either side by two drone accompanists, then to the right will be the rhythm accompanist and to the left is the string accompanists, (not the harmonium player). Both these accompanists face each other and not the audience. The only member who faces the audience directly is the solo performer. The 'drone' - people used to have an angle struck in such a way that a drone will enter directly to the performer's ears. Today you will see that even the accompanists face the audience! They have become now separate units. Art music of India has now been transformed into a collaborative activity where almost an ensemble is presented to us. Unfortunately, the content of music is not that! It can't be unless you change the form. The point is the symbolism enters here only as far as positioning is concerned and of course, if you have extra-musical considerations like the dress, etc. in your mind.

Let us move on to popular music. Unfortunately, I don't agree with Dr. Ashok Kelkar when he says that popular music is the folk music of the urbanised. I don't agree, but perhaps another seminar on that! The whole point is that popular music is too sophisticated. It stands for a sophisticated mass-mind in search for outlets for suppressed primitive urges. That is what popular music is. As you know popular music will include amongst other things jingles, slogans, fashion songs, all these will come into popular music. How popular music does it, achieves it, by following what principle? Firstly, by evolving various mixes. Popular Music tries to evolve mixes and it is a very deliberate activity. You perceive the outside situation and you interpret the

situation by saying that 'this situation wants this type of music, so '*Uska bhi thoda daal do*', so it involves a mix.

It is a deliberate, conscious activity which is effect-oriented and not impact-oriented. Art musicians will try to have an impact. Folk musicians will be the impact themselves - they are not addressing themselves to society. Primitive music is for itself and is a very self-contained activity. Popular music addresses to the people and it involves mixes or changes them to do so. The dynamism of popular music is, in a way, a deceptive dynamism because it only changes the fashions or tries to follow the changing fashions, but doesn't have any philosophical base for it. And when I said philosophical, I do not mean high sounding terms of 'Satyam Shivam Sundaram' etc. I only mean that there is no well thought of design behind it. It is only a sort of trial and error. If you feel that things can be imported with ease and it gives you an exotic appeal you bring them and use them. That is the philosophy. And here I think, importing the exotic is also a very important thing. Now in India, the tam-tam represents the exotic sound for us and that shows that, really speaking, the primitive element in music can remain with us even when we call ourselves sophisticated, urbanised, etc.

Thirdly, popular music relies on an engulfing strategy. Whether music is worth as music or not it doesn't matter. Engulf the people with this music and they will accept it. There is something like a Goebbels' strategy here! Inundate them with falsehoods and people will accept it as a truth. Of course, I do not mean that all popular music is false-music. I don't say that. (In fact, I like certain jingles much more than certain art compositions.) The point is that this is the strategy which is used. The strategy which relies on the number, a strategy which relies on pace, a strategy which relies on producing on a mass scale, so that people won't have time to think about it and respond, but first get it and then think about it. That is why it relies on sound effects.

At this point, I should mention the musical items used to pursue these strategies. It uses sound effects. A sound effect is quite distinct from sound, musical sound, notes etc. A sound effect is an effect. One knows when one hears it. There is a quick-reaction-gadgetry used. What I am referring to is a mechanism which tries to respond to musical situations. Human beings are slow. As you know, right from Platonic time onwards, people have insisted that music is the most conservative of the art. Come what may, all changes may percolate down to the last level of the society, but music changes will come very late in the day. Plato says 'don't allow the rhythms to change because it will bring in anarchy in the state'. He felt that if rhythms change, the whole society is bound to change. This element is something which has to be constant.

That is why popular music as a category tries to rely on gadgets which will elicit very quick responses. Elicit in the sense, it will force you to respond to the situation very quickly. The use of gadgets aligns with its aim. It is a very efficient equation struck here. One has to understand how it works so that it can be used profitably for better purposes too.

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