

Book Review

Intonation in North Indian Music

Ashok Da Ranade

(Published in NCPA Quarterly Journal, Volume XII, No 4, December 1983)

INTONATION IN NORTH INDIAN MUSIC (A Select Comparison of Theories with Contemporary Practice) by Mark Levy, Biblia Impex Private Limited, New Delhi. 1982, Rs. 100/- (In English).

Levy's monograph is a welcome addition to the increasing American attempts at examining various aspects of Indian music with the aid of modern technology. Levy reviews a number of contributions on the question of actual intonation in the light of theoretical positions concerning the phenomenon. From Bharata to Bhavabhatta, from Fox-Strangways to Jairazbhoy and from Deval to Deva is an ambitious arch of authorial positions to cover. Levy does it succinctly. For realizing his own special contribution, Levy concentrates on analyzing ten recorded examples of eight performers for six raga-s and 1,213 individual pitch readings with tape-recorders, loop-repeaters, variable high-pass and low-pass filters and a strobotuner to help him. Levy concludes that there is considerable flexibility in intonation at all levels in performances of Hindustani music and, further, that there is no correspondence between the practice and the theoretical models of intonation put forward by various authorities at various periods. Levy's oft-repeated and justifiable contention is that the traditional Indian preoccupation has been to attempt a reconciliation of the ancient texts and actual practice. Levy not only wants to lay stress on actual practice but also seeks to profit by the more objective, modern audio-visual equipment and scientific laboratory-methodology.

Levy examines recorded performances of Amir Khan (3), Niaz and Faiyaz Ahmad Khan (5), Bismillah Khan (1) and Zia Moinuddin Dagar (1) and arrives at the general conclusions indicated earlier. Some of the more specific and interesting perceptions which occur in his analysis are:

1. More than any other note. Ni displays flexibility of intonation (p. 97).
2. The tones Ma and Pa ... are significantly more stable (p.100).
3. Laboratory readings show that Ga-s in Behag and Yaman are identical (p. 103).

4. Ga (komal) has higher averages in raga-s where more oscillation is present (p. 103).
5. The fourteen examples of the Ga (komal) in Darbari not only vary greatly in average intonation, but also in the width of the oscillation (p. 109).
6. Generally, there is an observable sharpening of the octave or octave-stretching (p. 104).

These and similar perceptions make Levy's attempt appear extremely concrete and that is a positive gain. Rather than coming down from theoretical heights to performance, he prefers the hard way up from individual examples to plausible theoretical conclusions. However, this is precisely the reason that (in spite of the escape paragraphs on p. 142-143 where he shows awareness of the shortcomings of his empirical approach) prompts one to criticise him on three counts. Firstly, his analysis is based on too thin a sampler; secondly, he fails to differentiate the model from the modelled manifestations of Indian music, and thirdly, the complexity of the performed raga-repertoire seems to have been ignored in his vision.

The matter of an inadequate sampler is a ticklish one. It is not a question of having mere sufficiency of number-what is significant is whether the sampler possesses a representative character. A whole chain is to be kept in view while analysing Indian music. Raga-performer-Guru-Gharana are the minimum levels to be brought into the picture. (These are, of course, capable of being split further.) For example, a raga is not necessarily very similar in every composition. Equally serious is the matter that Levy's sampler of the theoretical positions is too inadequately representative. No works in the regional languages are considered. Brihaspati, Omkarnath Thakur, Kapileshwari, Patwardhan are some of the authors worth noting in this respect. These and others had a close connection with the performing tradition and hence a discussion of their positions would have been specially relevant. Finally, on what basis does Levy conclude that the entire theorization about Indian music in India is not only verbalized but also written down? Is he not aware (with his welcome ethnomusicological leanings) that the 'truer' theorization in India is available in teaching-learning situations? Many of the perceptions in his study, therefore, only confirm what talim is all about.

Secondly, Levy fails to realize that the mainstream of Indian music is vocal and that, in vocal music, the relevant representative data is to be found with practitioners who are known for their wide repertoire. Instrumental music has only recently come of age and is more or less content with emulating what vocal music has been doing. Thus, unless a researcher takes a well-selected sample of vocal music he is bound to be puzzled by certain occurrences. For example, Bundu Khan had ample use for a low-type oscillation in Darbari (p. 117) because he knew vocal music in depth. A

wider sample of compositions in Darbari would have given Levy a proper perspective in this respect. Again, Levy's restricted sampler does not reflect the variety of vocal forms. Surely, intonation in Tarana and Dhrupad cannot be similar. This is, in fact, the reason why the traditional dictum has been "to sing according to the composition i.e. Chiz." The 'imprecision' in intonation would, in such cases, be a result of deliberate deviation in order to establish the individuality of the composition within a larger framework.

Thirdly, the extremely wide spectrum of possibilities of intonation must be studied in the context of the totality of the raga-corpus in circulation. The intonation of the member-notes of a raga is a dynamic process dependent on the nature of raga-s prominently in circulation. For example, the intonation as well as the tonal sequences in Bhairav-Bahar underwent changes when Ahir-Bhairav came into prominence-chieflly because both the raga-s had to be kept distinct (if their potentialities were to be realised in full). Similarly, the mishra raga-s often contain seeds of changeable intonation depending on the artist's inclination to emphasize one or the other component raga. Thus, a Basant ki Bahar or Hindol ki Bahar would mean one type of intonation in sthayi and a different one in antara. This is flexibility and not imprecision and it also speaks of a theorization, though not the one 'discovered' in written documents!

In the final analysis, Levy impresses more in method than in substance, in rigour rather than in comprehensiveness. One hopes for a continuation of laboratory-based methodical analysis, but with a definite feeling that this is possible only after a closer acquaintance with Indian musical reality is achieved. A point-based precision need not by itself be regarded as more valuable than a range-based definiteness. Similarly, the validity of a predominantly oral tradition cannot justifiably be sought in its skeletal written presentation. And lastly, theoretical positions are rarely averred in induced recordings. They are more often stated in non-verbal processes associated with music.