

# The Nature and Function of Music: A Philosophical Inquiry

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## Introduction

The year is 2009 and obviously I am not the first to approach the theme indicated for the first time in human history! In other words, I grant that many, and more meritorious minds, have applied themselves to inquire into the nature and function of music - because of the importance music assumes in the life of beings. But I take refuge behind two oft-repeated assertions. Firstly, every generation must attend to all fundamental themes afresh for its own sake and secondly, to paraphrase Wittgenstein who was quoting Schopenhauer with approval - "to talk of a beginning and an end of a philosophical inquiry is a contradiction!" However let me state at the outset that my inquiry has two limitations - limited personal studies and the musical raw material drawn mainly from one culture - namely Indian.

It is tempting to say that the theme, mainly and simply, asks two questions - what is music and what it does? Equally attractive is the pithy response - music is what it does! However, it soon turns out that these responses provide only a temporary reprieve because the question, what does it do is not lurking far behind! A little more analysis would also suggest that as the 'function' aspect includes the phase of music-reception, it is inevitable that extra-musical socio-cultural factors would play a major role in discussions of the theme. In other words, what function a particular manifestation carries out may not entirely depend on the quality of the performance itself. At this stage we have audience-spectator's contribution coming into play as a major force. Some other conceptual triads also demand attention.

For example:

- 1) Nature, Nurture and Culture
- 2) Expression, Communication and Art
- 3) Skill, Craftsmanship and Art
- 4) Conception, Propagation and Reception.

It is also necessary to note that somewhere along the line another related issue will also have to be addressed. In view of its specific nature and the responsibility of fulfilling certain identifiable functions what method music follows to attain the end? Is there a fundamental process, which enables music to reach its end?

Thus the inquiry is expected to answer three basic questions? 1) What is the nature of music as such? 2) What are the functions it is expected to carry out? 3) What processes are inevitably employed in music-making, music-propagation that lead to music-objects and music-reception?

### **Towards Definitions**

In view of the scope of the examined theme the collective and received wisdom usefully contained in dictionaries, traditional definitions, etymologies etc. can surely be of help. These and such other sources are repositories of crystallized or consolidated knowledge of a community and they easily provide a platform for further thinking. As somebody put it "to understand a problem go to the history of it". Thus combining the historical perspective with the scholastic tradition and juxtapose these with the performing actuality appears to be a fruitful and desirable strategy.

Standard dictionaries reflect the normal, representative understanding of the phenomenon identifiable as music. For example, read the following:

1. An art of sound in time that expresses ideas and emotions, in significant forms through the elements of rhythm, melody, harmony and colour.
2. The tones or sounds employed, occurring in single line (melody) or multiple lines (harmony) and sounded or to be sounded by one or more voices or instruments or both.

### **Etymology, Derivations**

Etymological excursions or tracing derivations offer an opportunity to get a combined historico-scholastic view.

For instance, in deriving the term music supplies an interesting chain: 1200-50, ME musike <L musica < Greek mousike (techne), (the art) of the Muse, feminine of mousikos equivalent to mous(a) (mus + icos).

(Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary, 2 edition, p.1268, 1977).

### **From the Indian sources we have:**

Sangeet = संगीत - सं + गीत. A complete geet/song. As song was regarded to be complete when accompanied by instrumental music and dance. The ancient tradition defined music as an inclusive expression. Synonym was tauryatrik (तौर्यत्रिक), which was employed in theatre-related discussions. The Buddhist and Jain synonymous term was गंधर्ववेद (Gandhavvaveda) and there too geet, vaditra (वादित्र), and akhyana (आख्यान), natya were brought together. It is obvious that the Western term music and muse also suggest a similar wider framework of the term. SANGEET = सम्यक् गीतम्. The term obviously consisted of individual as well as collective expression. In *Natyashastra*, 'geet' is primary, and instrumental music and dance was to follow it. In Kalidasa's *Meghdoot* the meaning of music was expressed through instruments, dance and drama. In Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, singing, playing of instruments and dramatic arts were associated arts. In the Bouddha and Jain 'Gandhavvaveda' - singing, dancing, playing of instruments as well as telling of a story were brought together.

### **A Historical looking back: The West**

As is to be expected, approaching works dealing with musicology, aesthetics etc. in this respect is really to face music! Mythology, cultural histories, dense reflections of the early association with literary manifestations and such other seemingly extra-musical features make their respective contributions and the entire matter of understanding the thrust of music as a phenomenon becomes considerably complex.

In the Western tradition of thought music is easily connected with the muses, i.e. Goddesses who were daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne (memory). Each goddess presided over one specific activity or art. The nine muses were: 1) Calliope (epic poetry) 2) Clio (history) 3) Erato (love poetry) 4) Euterpe (lyric poetry) 5) Melpomene (tragedy) 6) Polyhymnia (songs of praise to Gods) 7) Terpsichore (dancing) 8) Thalia (comedy) and 9) Urania (astronomy). In the literary tradition poets invoked aid of the related muse to help them with their particular work.

Three other details emerging from this are also instructive: 1) the maternal connection of memory with the muses 2) special allocation of certain muses for specific genres of expression 3) the invocation addressed at the beginning in certain genres. (One remembers that the phenomenon known as *mudra* in compositional forms (*prabandh*) in the Indian tradition also had a similar thrust).

It is important to note that though originally the term muse referred to creative endeavors of many kinds, later it became associated with Polyhymnia - the muse of many songs-thus coming closer to music-related activities. During the medieval times some writers connected the word with the Egyptian 'moys' meaning 'water' and further carried on the connecting act to Moses. Indeed Moses, Jubal and Pythagoras were considered inventors of music. However the more important musicological medieval idea was Boethius's concept of music as an all-embracing 'harmony of the world' divided into 'musica mundane' (harmony of the world), 'musica humana' (harmony of the human soul and body) and 'musica instrumentalis' (music as actual sound). Boethius's contemporary Cassiodorus (C.485 - C.580 BC) was more practical in accepting the Platonic distinction between 'scientia harmonica' (high and low sounds), 'metrica' (different meters) and 'rhythmica' (was this a text-related description?). St. Isidore of Seville (C.570-636) reached further with his classification - musica harmonica (vocal), organica ex flatu (organ, flute, trumpet etc.) and rhythmica (ex pulsus digitoru i.e. drums, kithara). In the 14th century, Theodoricus de Campo classified music as mundana, humana, vocalis and artificialis; subdividing the latter as follows: artificialis armonica and instrumentalis armonica, prosaica, metricia rhythmica, and instrumenalis (corde - strings, ventus - wind, and pulsus - percussion).

From a different but important stand-point Aristoxenos (300 BC) had divided music into theoretical and practical. This distinction was significantly reintroduced around 1500.

The relationship with the muse invariably points to the concept of inspiration, which acted as a force for the person involved in the creative process and the force, preferably the divine, was located outside. Hence, Wordsworth used the phrase 'storm of association' in connection with the power of inspiration and this clearly amounts to a variation on the external force description' of the creative power. From Wordsworth's two operative words, 'storm' appears to allude to the rather chaotic but impressive nature of images etc. while the word 'association' could be an indicator of the specificity of related images etc. as every individual would be expected to have his own universe of associations about the inner and outer world. Yet another variation is suggested by the French word 'Donnee' meaning 'something given'. The suggestion is of an idea or a notion or an image implanted in the mind of the person almost as a seed of the creative work. Henry James called it 'a speck' which may be in the form of a phrase, conversation, facial expression or a tune that starts off the chain of ideas etc. in the creator's mind. When speaking of the 'ligne donnee' (the given line) as the inspirational source, Paul Valery was only underlining the external quality of the inspiration.

This early view was later replaced by theories, which attributed the inspirational force to the individual engaged in the process of creation. This 'internal force' interpretation of the phenomenon of inspiration accentuated the role of the individual's genius. The subconscious or the unconscious was credited with the creative power that came into play.

In the final analysis the theme of inspiration suggests an unpremeditated, sudden precipitation of forces leading to creation. Shelly's 'skylark', who poured forth 'profuse strains of unpremeditated art' or Wordsworth's definition that, "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings", both point to the importance of the unexpected in the creative activity. Coleridge was more cautious and distinguished between those who wrote from inspiration and those who did so as an act of will.

Like 'the outside force interpretation' the importance of spontaneity has also been denied by later thinkers who emphasized the deliberate and the craft-element in the creative activity. Auden suggested a compromise solution when he stated that perhaps a few lines might be 'given' but the rest of poetry is just 'plugging away'. At some points of theorization spontaneity was related to sincerity of the creator concerned, as the latter was expected to indicate the aesthetic excellence, truthfulness and even moral integrity of the creator. This equation also stands somewhat discredited today because it implies knowledge of the creator's intention etc. The position on the sincerity phenomenon presumably held that a work should reflect the state of mind of the creator, or his personality. But this too has been hotly debated. C. S. Lewis, the celebrated literary theorist in fact called it 'the personal hearsay'.

This sample-tracing of the historical development about the nature and function of music merely proves one point - we have to approach the theme with all this background again! Nearer we come to the modern times the ideas about both nature and function of music change gradually but surely and sometimes radically.

### **My working definitions**

Now I venture to put forward the following definitions basic to my exploration:

'Music is an acoustic expression characterized by centrality of the auditory experience and a sensibility that places the multi-sensory associated expression on the periphery of the performance in varying degrees'.

'Function is a cumulative result of intention, performance and its actual reception'.

The definition of music I have put down is a ground-definition for music of all six categories namely, Primitive, Folk, Religious, Art, Popular and Confluence in India. Expectably definitions related to each category are to be separately put down when required and these category-wise definitions will be narrower in scope but specific and more technical. It is clear that expressive characteristics and performing features in action differ category-wise and the attempt is to cohesively bring them together in the concerned categorial definitions.

Further, it is important to note that identifiable criteria flow from, and are determined by the crystallized definitions. Definitions are generally and firmly quoted in, and sometimes are products of the scholastic tradition related to the performing tradition in the culture concerned. However, it should not be forgotten that scholastic traditions normally lag behind the associated performing traditions.

The overall musical activity of a community can be placed in three broad phases: expression, communication and artistic/aesthetic manifestation.

As noted earlier, each category has its own criteria or a set of them to evaluate the musical activity taking place within the category. In view of music-life relationship obtained in most societies a kind of bi-polar state may prevail as far as their ultimate goal is concerned.

Thus some categories may move towards performing effectiveness and others towards artistic or aesthetic excellence. Both these ultimate goals enjoy equal cultural legitimacy. It must be remembered that musical excellence is not co-terminus with what is regarded as artistic or aesthetic achievements.

Following Wittgenstein - who approvingly quoted Schopenhauer and who, in turn quoted from Faust, provides us the clue to follow the trail in our quest of comprehension of the theme. The clue is 'In the beginning was the deed.' In other words performance and the inherent performing idea are our guiding loadstars.

## **Function of Music**

At this stage of the exposition it can be stated that the primary function of music is to make concrete performing ideas conceived, expressed and projected as

musical. (It is to be specially pointed out that the said ideas may not be received as 'musical' by the concerned receivers, society or cultural groups).

Performing ideas are the basis of every musical manifestation irrespective of the category involved. Categorical musical functions or responsibilities bring into play their special demands to determine the specific character of the musical performance. As suggested earlier, categorical manifestations determine the characteristic features, formats of presentations, distribution of the performing set, media, mode and manner of participation and finally the criteria or their sets needed for evaluating the success or otherwise of the performance.

Two chains are formed to lead us to basic music-related frameworks enabling us to reach the performing and theoretical ends respectively:

1. Sensation > Imagery > Images > Perception > Auditory Imagery > Mood > Feeling > Emotion > Emotional Configuration/Expression > Action
2. Sensation > Imagery > Images > Perception > Idea > Thought > Concept > Cognitive Experience > Theory > System

### **Towards Symbols in Music**

After having discussed the fundamental nature and function of any musical activity, after elaborating on the category-wise variety of functions including the legitimate extra-musical and socio-cultural manifestations we found a pervasive focus for all musical endeavors - the performing idea.

Now we reach the seminal question - Through what fundamental process or processes music works towards its goal? The answer is symbolization as it emerges through the conceptual hierarchy set up by - will to express, communicational urges, raising of representational structures, necessity of sign/signal-making, calibrated recourse, language, inevitability ritualization, pervasive presence, mytho-poetic imagination and finally symbolization. This is a perfect octave and is this not symbolic in itself!

### **Will to Express**

Reception of stimuli and a desire to project responses to them are inevitable due to various reasons. However the main reason is the will to participate in the life-exchanges, contribute to their outcome and channelize the entire process of expression

in the pail of behavior accepted as meaningful. Aspects such as the accruing pain/pleasure, creating overtly pleasant/unpleasant experience are relegated to the sidelines. The most predominant motive is as put in the Indian tradition; "I am one, I will be many (ekoham bahusyam)".

### **Communicational urges**

Almost as corollary emerges the intention to communicate with the world around about the undertaking and hence the intended pattern of action/activity moves towards selecting a suitable sensory channel, bringing in one or many senses in definite 'roles' or proportions perceived as conducing to the desired/intended activity. This is the stage at which the act emphasizes aspect such as the aural/auditory, visual, movemental etc. though other sense-modalities may not be entirely excluded. Signs and signals make their way to the center-stage.

The outcome is a patterned behavior, which has a mental map to follow or which is to set up a parallel to it. The overt action appears chiefly to be of three types: 1) It may represent the mental or psychological or the felt urge or experience, 2) It may work as a sign of it or 3) It may symbolize it. In other words, in these ventures there exists a morphological similarity between the felt and the expressed.

### **Representation**

Representation relies on easily identifiable external clues to the felt and the expressed. For example, convention, accepted nomenclature or protocol regarding dress, gestures etc. provide the easiest way to representation. Thus a son may represent his father, or similarity in occupation, dress etc. may work in a similar fashion.

### **Signs and signals**

Sign moves a step further. It turns itself in to a conventional equivalent of what it stands for. Theoretically it may be possible to force a sign into becoming what it is entirely through a legal action by a designated authority. Most importantly, it points to only one predetermined meaning-unambiguously and unexceptionally.

Finally, arrives on the scene - the symbol. However, some more ground needs to be covered before further exploration is attempted.



## **Calibrated recourse to language**

Thus far, association and at least a vague metaphorical similarity were the mainstays in the operations, which were chiefly directed at striking identifiable and nearly invariable equivalences. However, at the sign-level one mediating agency - that of language - plays crucial role. To anticipate a little, an expressive journey can be completed only when language, ritual, myth and symbol carry out their respective functions - potentially reaching the ultimate expressive phase, namely the art.

The point is that the earliest movement of unrest towards a vague idea that expression is / may reach and stop at any of the phases mentioned - depending on the innate strength of initial desire is also the availability of conducting external circumstances. At the level of representation the act acquires a firm character because of the accepted connotation and fixed denotation. Connotation and denotation are clearly understood also at the phase of becoming a sign though the connection between them might be more arbitrary. It is at the phase of symbol that a strong intervention of the processes of abstraction plays its role and the hold of the actual denotation is loosened.

Coming back to the role of language, it is well known that language constitutes a major instance of the process of symbolization and in addition to the process of abstraction one more desire functions to enable its effective liberation from the denotation-connotation combine - the verbal metaphor. It is the functioning metaphor that brings in a qualitative dimension to the linguistic endeavor to reflect the experiential turmoil seeking an expressive outlet.

## **Inevitability of ritualization**

It is easy to understand that all expressive endeavors cannot be adequately explored through the verbal channel-even when it is supported by a qualitative use of the literary metaphor. The non-verbal and the performing actions seeking expression would therefore turn to ritual, mythical and the symbolic. All the three are essentially multi-sensory. Hence when the mind seeking expression has recourse to the threesome, its armory is considerably strengthened.

For example, the ritual will bring in the psychologically charged atmosphere, attention to the precise details and a carefully drawn action-plan for the multiple senses. On most occasions it also carries with it the authority of the sacred or the religious to back up the entire activity. The ritual may also mean an inevitable participation, or

more direct involvement of the diverse social strata. All these and such other features will undoubtedly enhance the appeal and effectiveness of the act.

### **The pervasive presence of the mytho-poetic imagination**

Myth, the other supportive constituent of the non-verbal or the performing expressive effort enjoys an inherent cultural base boasting of a long tradition. Myth exercises attractions and impacts on human minds at multiple levels. It also distinguishes itself because it simultaneously takes hold of the essential aspects of the human personality often divided in bi-polarities namely, rational/non-rational, imaginative-mechanical, emotive-intellectual, personal/social-cultural. Finally it invariably enlarges the expanse of the human perceptual world because even the non-human animate, non-animate and the supernatural enjoy a focused, meaningful and well-projected presence in it. Direct or indirect but a powerful context of values created by its framework also add to the persuasive power of the myth.

### **And finally to symbolization**

When one reaches the phase of 'the symbol' on this background as the final phase of the human expressive endeavor, one has actually participated or proceeded in a graded or gradual symbolistic march. Now what we have is the most inclusive, gripping and potentially the most powerful human achievement. Isolated sense-modalities, slanted depictions, and ever-intriguing dualities are left behind. This is important because Dualities such as mind-body, reason-emotion, personal-social, historical-cultural and national-universal, otherwise prove to be obstructive. Even the truncated time flowers at this stage into an eternity!

Expressive symbols are total in every sense of the word. They have the potential to fulfill the ambitions of the human creative intent. In other words it is a symbol artistically or aesthetically realized.

In my opinion such a symbol is patently found functioning in music-whether one is conscious of it or not.

### **What are its chief characteristics?**

As already suggested, it carries out its work irrespective of the receiver's of even the creator's consciousness or awareness of it. Such symbols may not be

deliberately placed in a proposed or potential work of art. During the process of creation, propagation or reception they strategically appear, emerge and locate themselves (provided the said processes are 'flowing' in a genuine way!)

## **Musical symbols**

What is a musical symbol?

Musical symbol is initially and predominantly an acoustical expression and experience consisting of structure, emotive thrust and design as its main components.

Symbols are essentially combined entities as in the symbolization process 'X stands for Y'.

Sooner or later symbols tend to be multi-sensory in appeal – though in varying degrees.

How many types of musical symbols are experienced?

Musical symbols are spread over six categories of musical expression, namely Primitive, Folk, Religious, Art, Popular and Confluence. In these six categories, musical symbols of differing kinds or types operate at various levels as also in different proportions.

Individual/Personal, Cultural and Universal

Tonal, Rhythmic, Textual and Combined

Natural, Artificial i.e. man-made

Do the various symbol-types operate identically or differently?

Symbol being a multi-leveled phenomenon it operates simultaneously at all levels. But the intensities may vary as far as its receivers are concerned.

Possibly at some juncture/in some cases, the operating/functioning symbols may correspond with those elements identified in some music-related disciplines as musical universals.

For example, the following may be mentioned.

1) The octave experience 2) Consonances in intervals 3) Acceleration in tempo 4) Slowing down in tempo 5) Ascending melodic movement 6) Descending melodic movement 7) Continuous projection/sustained sound 8) Intermittent/Interrupted projection of sound 9) Repetition with the employment of sounds etc. three times (and

perception of it ) occupying a special place 10) Fading in and out of the sound energy  
11) According to some authorities instrumental and sexual symbolism is also active in operations of musical symbolism.

The following are also identified as universal elements in music: pentatonism, tonic gravitation, repetition as form-determinant, and widespread existence of polyphony. As notes change or alter, there are consequent relationships set up between them, relationships of pitch, dynamics, and duration and so on, and we may follow Hindemith's phraseology in dividing these relationships into tensions and resolutions. Tensions are relationships less pleasant to the ear, and resolutions are those more pleasant.

It is certainly tempting to relate the discussion and identification of the musical universals to the Jungian way of discussing archetypes!

### **Attempt at Conclusion**

Can there be a conclusion to this exploration? Obviously this could be a difficult task and a distant possibility. For example, there are some more questions to be discussed before a closure is applied. Perhaps it is better to note the questions and leave the questions in incubation to be grappled with in future! The questions could be: 1) When can a sound/musical expression become a symbol? 2) How can one describe the process of symbolization? 3) What are the respective roles of the processes of emergence, projection, propagation or circulation and reception in symbolization? 4) In what way musical symbols are meaningful, significant etc.? 5) Do musical symbols inevitably need interpretation? If so, why? 6) In the final analysis what do the symbols achieve?