

## **uplifting melodies and blissful drones: a journey to raga music**

by Amelia Cuni

How did it happen that an Italian girl in her teens went to India to learn *dhrupad* singing – a genre of classical Indian music that originated in temples, and became the court music of the Mughal kings? I have been asked this question innumerable times, maybe my answer will provide useful hints for whoever is attracted to the power of Sound.

I have been fascinated by music since childhood but my efforts to learn an instrument were regularly frustrated by the way in which music was taught. The musical training in Europe typically relies on written, composed music and focuses on mastering instrumental (or vocal) technique. I perceived that something important was missing and my expectations could not be rewarded. A new perspective opened up during my teens, when I first came in contact with Indian classical music through the recordings of Ali Akbar Khan and Ravi Shankar. The sound and performance of this ancient tradition deeply moved and inspired me. The sustained drones and the gradual unfolding of the melodic themes produced an intense and elating experience, involving strong emotions as well as a contemplative, blissful state that I had not known before. My whole self responded to it and I became more and more involved as I realized the impact of this total merging with sound on my developing personality. Finally, I resolved to apply myself to the study of Hindustani music and dance and started on a journey that has been going on for more than 30 years. I felt that I could not miss the opportunity, even if it seemed an eccentric choice to many people and involved integrating into such a different and distant culture. This music was able to fill the gap I had been experiencing in my humanistic education and to satisfy my deepest needs. It offered a systematic method for learning, a discipline aiming beyond musical skills and virtuosity; it could in fact become a path to self-knowledge and a rewarding way of life.

Beside the fascination I had with its sound and its effect on a receptive listener, what I mostly valued in Indian music then, as I still do now, is the philosophical framework that has shaped it. This is rooted in a comprehensive, holistic view of man and an elaborated theory of Sound, informed by Vedic ritualistic knowledge and Tantric mysticism. It recognizes several gradations of Sound, both manifest and unmanifest. It affirms that Sound is the substratum of creation and a manifestation of the vital force, which animates the Universe. According to this perspective, music performs the link between micro- and macro-cosmos, reflecting and making intelligible the harmonies and proportions of the 'inaudible', unmanifest sound (a concept similar to that of the 'music of the spheres' of ancient Greek philosophy). In other words, metaphysical correspondences allow evocation through sound, and music is an expression of the relationship between human and cosmic orders. The practice of *mantras* has developed out of this understanding, as well as the yoga of Sound (*nada yoga*). In this context, the human voice plays a primary role as it connects the universal substratum of Sound with the individual musical sound through the breath.

The fact that a *raga* (musical mode, see further) must be re-created anew each time is part of a vision which sees music directly connected to life, flowing and resounding with it, echoing the laws of Nature and generating harmony and well-being in the process. The sharing of music becomes a sacred act the moment we are aware of its innermost meaning. According to this tradition, Sound is the agent of creation (*nadabrahman*) and singing mirrors the creative process within our bodies.

## **RAGA**

The term *raga*, 'that which colors the mind', refers to the melodic modules, frameworks on which the Indian musical system is based, and emphasizes the emotional impact of sound. *Ragas* are often described as musical personalities or beings that may be evoked through a disciplined process of creativity. This concept is a product of Indian symbolic thought, which involves various levels and aspects of knowledge. It cannot be described in one sentence, but I will attempt to explain it from the point of view of my practical experience.

*Ragas* are not defined by immutable laws, but are rather conceived as living beings. Thus, they are manifested within a process in time and cannot adhere to pre-ordained musical outcomes, as in the case of notated music. Their distinctive musical character (*raga-bhava*) has to be recognizable and move the heart of the listener through an appropriate choice of sonic, melodic, rhythmic, semantic components, techniques and stylistic elements. Over the centuries, the *raga* praxis has changed considerably, transforming with it, in an organic way, the character of Indian music. As a result, modern *ragas* and *talas* (rhythmic cycles) are based on highly refined musical concepts that have been cultivated by generations of musicians and mystics. *Ragas* keep changing shape, new ones are born while others are forgotten since they are granted full status only if repeatedly played and heard. Their main features have to be established and tested by experienced performers whose knowledge and interpretation contributes to the definition of the *raga-bhava* itself. In this respect, Indian musicians often speak of a '*raga* grammar', sets of rules and patterns of behavior that determine the selection of intervals and characteristic melodic movements. This practical knowledge is aurally transmitted and guides the development of every performance; it is an essential framework for the manifestation of each *raga*'s personality. It takes a long time to master *ragas* since they have to be rendered by effectively unfolding their full potential. To be able to compose *on-the-spot* these recognizable though ephemeral musical personalities, musicians have to train their memory, inspiration and creativity to constantly interact. Ultimately, they have to reach a state of *surrender*, allowing the *raga* to manifest itself through the music.

A *raga* is performed in one of the music genres that are in vogue today (*dhrupad*, *khyal*, *thumri*, *tarana*, instrumental etc.), and possibly according to the style of a specific school or master. A performance includes brief, loosely composed sections followed by lengthy improvised / flexibly-memorized variations. Accurate pitching, oscillating and bending of the tones come into play, parallel to the chiseling of micro-melodies, the improvisation of larger melodic frames, and the apt use of rhythmic elaborations. All these aspects have to be kept in view while the focus has to be fixed on the individual, unique nature of the *raga*, its customary ways as well as its unforeseen, yet unexplored landscapes.

If ragas are understood as 'living' musical entities, I would say it is because of their inherent generative power reproducing Nature in her manner of operation.

## **DHRUPAD**

*Dhrupad* is the most ancient genre still being performed and traces its origins in the Vaishnava temples of North India in the 14th -15th centuries. It is deeply influenced by Hindu and Sufi ritualistic and mystical practices and has been handed down by generations of music practicing families. Among the distinctive features of a *dhrupad* performance, we find the preference given to slow tempi, detailed micro-melodic treatment and long duration (to stabilize pitches/shades, to impress them on the consciousness). The depth, clarity and sober treatment typical of this genre are conceived to support and intensify the aesthetic experience. This is certainly one of the reasons why, besides its antiquity, *dhrupad* is regarded as the most 'classical' and uplifting music of North India. *Dhrupad* songs are accompanied by the ancient double headed drum *pakhawaj* which greatly enriches the texture of the rhythmical rendition with its deep resonating sound and the skillful punctuation of the improvised singing patterns. *Dhrupad* is an inspirational, devotional genre and at the same time passionate and earthy. The songs are preceded by a so-called *alap*, a lengthy and systematic introduction, improvised on syllables derived from *mantras*. Often, the text of the song is a *dhyana*, a visualization of divine attributes and powers, or it consists of verses with a philosophical or mystical content. Here is a significant example, composed by one of my teachers, Dilip Chandra Vedi:

*Nadabrahma (Sound as agent of creation) is all pervasive with knowledge,  
The entire universe is made up of Nada (sound), which is its measure.  
From Nada come the letters, the alphabet, the word and the sentence,  
From language, knowledge increases.  
In the City of Nada, Sangeet (music and dance) is the temple,  
Shrutis (microtones) are the walls and Svaras (tones) are the doors.  
The consonance of the notes makes up the Raga  
which is the Murti (image) of God in the temple.*

## **RAGA-MEDITATION CLASSES**

During more than two decades, I have been teaching *dhrupad* music and reflecting on how to make the valuable, unique knowledge I have received from my Indian teachers (R. Fahimuddin Dagar, Bidur Mallik, Dilip Chandra Vedi, Manjushri Chatterje and Raja Chattrapati Singh a.o.) useful for people who do not intend to become full-fledged singers of *dhrupad* but who could nonetheless profit from its wisdom and insights. Along the years, it became obvious to me that anyone may benefit from this training by realizing the power of sound in one's own body and achieving a more effective connection to the voice.

Gradually, by learning from my students and their specific needs, I have developed a teaching method where the technique of singing is not in the foreground. Rather, it becomes a tool to acquire a direct experience of sound through a meditative approach.

These teachings integrate body and mind, posture and inner attitude. They provide practical hints and effective tools to cultivate one's own vocal instrument and widen the understanding of music and singing. Through concentration and focused listening, with exercises blending voice and imagination, I guide the students to the full enjoyment of tuning pure intervals and resplendent tones. In accord with the tradition of *dhrupad* and *nada yoga*, we can cultivate an unhindered delivery with the speaking-tone at its base; we explore some fundamental aspects of voice production through awareness and observation of physical and inner processes.

*Raga-meditation* classes will interest people who wish to cultivate their voice production and refine their hearing and musicality by practising within an approach that is both meditative and rigorously structured. This is a basic and wholesome vocal training which suits any singing style. No previous musical skills are required.

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