

In this issue

Indian and Western music

The Structure of Music in Raga and Western Systems by Raja Ramanna is a scholarly work. Its cover is striking, blending the spirit of the title and the contents of the book. The cover designer is to be specially congratulated. It is said that a beautiful wrapper is often used to cover up the deficiencies of the contents. This is not true of this book. I read the 200 pages almost at one sitting, it being physically and metaphorically difficult to read in bed. Even one with a smattering knowledge of music can understand the elementary parts of the book. To comprehend it completely, one must work with a pencil in one hand and a piano in the other. Ramanna, the piano maestro *par excellence* has produced a remarkable tome which all Indians, particularly the scientists with any musical sense must read. One suspects that the author while writing the book had also one eye set on a Western audience – which is all to the good.

I religiously read books on Indian music written in English which come my way. I have enjoyed many of them. The one set that had impressed me the most is that by our reputed musicologist and scholar Prof. P. Sambamurthy. I once had the privilege of joining a group of music students he was taking around Tiruvayar, particularly to the house in which the great Thyagaraja lived. With his anecdotes and singing of little pieces, along with his combining history and myth he made the great composer live all over again, and we could almost 'see' him singing his incredible songs, in praise of Rama. Sambamurthy's books are filled with poetical passages and quotations which make us imbibe the spirit of Carnatic music:

Music without Gamakas is like a night without the moon, a river

without water, a creeper without flowers, a lady without ornaments and a flower without smell.

Another book that most of us should read is by the reputed musicologist and veena player Vidya Shankar: *The Art and Science of Carnatic Music* – consisting of a series of lectures she delivered in Kalpakkam Atomic Energy Centre, almost bearding the lion in its own den – where she tries to bridge the gap between the two cultures. Ramanna's book does many things. He has most seriously tried to represent our Ragas in staff notation. This has been attempted earlier by many others. (Thyagaraja himself was familiar with Western notes and has composed one of the most charming tunes using them). The advantage of the Western staff notation (as Ramanna points out) is that one can train oneself to read music, i.e. hear music through the eyes. As Sir John Wood says, 'one can take the works of Beethoven or Chopin, sit in front of a fire and read and enjoy them as one can Shakespeare or Shelly'. I think this has not yet been achieved in Indian music. Ramanna is trying to find a notation to represent the most beautiful part of Indian music, the *Gamakas*. One wishes him success, but there is much work still to be done to make all this practical and acceptable.

Ramanna attempts to make a synthesis of the Indian *Raga* system. Reading his book took me back to the early thirties when great scholars like Tiger Varadachariyar, Vasudevachar, Sabhesa Iyer, Nema Natesa Bhagavathar, Budalur Krishnamurthy Sastrigal and many others assembled in C. S. Ayyar's house during the Music Academy sessions in Madras. I felt that the discussions which took place during those 10 days were much more exciting than any I have witnessed at scientific meetings in India. I remember a point made by

some experts that by listening to a single note a *Raga* can be recognized or identified (a point Ramanna too makes). But this theory was strongly contested by others on the basis that when the note is sounded the voice or the fingers produce subconsciously other relevant subsidiary notes. During these sessions I heard demonstrations of how sets of *Ragas* could be generated by changing the basic *Sruti*. This modal shift has been treated in a most elegant manner by Ramanna and his presentation of this idea using circular projections makes the concept comparatively easy to understand. The author has, in my view, made an important beginning and introduced new thinking into the relationship between Indian and Western music.

When I read this book I invited its author to write an article or two for *Current Science* (page 897). Probably, many scientists may feel that it is not an appropriate subject for *Current Science*. I, on the other hand, felt that scientists must not only understand the jargon of Indian and Western music but must also comprehend the deeper relationships that exist between the two. With the coming of computers and electronic instruments there is every danger that traditional Indian music may deteriorate unless scientists too take special interest. It is only when scientists, musicians and composers get educated about both the systems that new experiments would be possible. An expert in Western music like Ramanna is best suited to explain to us the concept of harmony and the possibility of its being applied to Indian music. One remembers that around the 18th/19th centuries the European scale was altered so that harmony would be possible. To the ear trained in Indian music the Western scales appear unmusical. This is probably why scholars like Chinnaswami Iyer have felt that

'European harmony mars all the beauty and the intrinsic value of oriental melody'. Ramanna in his book is very optimistic that harmony is possible in Indian music. When one hears Madurai Mani Iyer or M. D. Ramanathan, one cannot miss the linear harmony when they sing their exquisite *Kalpana Swaras*.

It is true that purists will object and resist any change; they may be right in their view but in the process they may be hampering the growth and flowering of our music in a new direction. Of course, it would be very difficult to prevent such new experiments from being carried out.

Strangely enough, the innovative music composers of the Indian cinema who use computer music have begun to perceive these possibilities. Some of them have discovered for themselves the possibility of change in the tonic-*Sruti* using computers (again something Ramanna talks of). These composers have succeeded in presenting a South Indian *Raga* in different *Srutis*, creating new effects. When asked 'what next', one of them with great modesty said 'we are just learning and there are still many worlds to conquer. Whether these innovations will improve our music, only time can tell'. I personally like

Ramanna's book. While some of the reviewers have praised it, some others have condemned it, pointing out several printing mistakes and technical errors the author has made in describing Indian music. I feel this is not at all important as it is a case of the wood and the trees. We have been fortunate enough in getting a physicist, a scholar in music (somewhat of a traditionalist) who has himself been experimenting with the possibility of using computers in Indian music, to present a review of this book (page 971).

S. R