Abhinavagupta’s concept of music

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Though Abhinavagupta’s contributions to the Śaiva systems of Indian philosophy, Sanskrit poetics and dramaturgy are well known, the same cannot be said about his contributions to music and musicology, which remain a relatively unexplored subject yet. The reason for this seems to be that Abhinava’s stature in philosophy and aesthetics is so imposing that we tend to underrate his achievements in other fields. However the fact remains that Abhinava has made significant contributions to the aesthetic, philosophical and technical aspects of music. Madhurāja Yogin portrays him in his meditative verse(*dhyānaśloka*) as playing on the *nādavīnā* and giving instructions in music to his disciples.[[1]](#footnote-2) He is one of the few musicologists mentioned as an authority by Śārngadeva in his *Saṅgītaratnākara.* Abhinava’s treatment of music can be broadly distinguished as falling into two categories, viz. his treatment of technical aspects of music, especially music related to dramaturgy as gleaned through works like *Abhinavabhāratī* and his philosophical explication of music as a part of his aesthetic philosophy found in works like *Tantrāloka*. Let us take up these aspects one by one.

I

In *Dhvanyāloka,* Abhinava has portrayed the contours of music as consisting of concepts like *śruti, jāti, amśa, grāma, rāga, bhāṣā, vibhāṣā, antarabhāṣā, deśi and mārga*, which list fairly represents music of his times.[[2]](#footnote-3)Many concepts in this listing, however are absent in Bharata’s music. Bharata maintains that music is indispensable for play production by asserting that production (*prayoga*) is the union of song, instrument and action.[[3]](#footnote-4) The *Nāṭyaśāstra* treats music as an ancillary of theatre and not as an independent art pursued for its own sake. Therefore we get only glimpses of Abhinavagupta’s attitude to theatrical music and not to pure music as such. *Nāṭyaśāstra* represents the post Vedic phase of Indian music wherein rāga, the pivotal concept of Indian music had not yet fully developed. Indian music had not yet branched off into Hindustani and Carnatic systems. A big problem confronting musical researchers is the fact that at least ten centuries separate Bharata and Abhinavagupta and hence we are not in a position to ascertain if Abhinava had direct access to the antiquarian phase of music seen in *Nā*ṭ *yaśāstra*. In all probability, Abhinava inherited a Post-Bharata phase of Indian music and tried to make sense of *Nāṭyaśāstra* passages from his own encounters with contemporary theatre.

Bharata’s musical system comprised both vocal and instrumental music. The vocal music found its representation mostly in the *dhruvāgānas* which were fixed songs to be sung on specific occasions like the entrance and exit of characters .The elaborate instrumental music was performed by an orchestra as background music. It consisted of stringed instruments like the *Viṇa,* holed instruments like the flute, percussion instruments like *pataha* and *dardura* and solids like the gong.

Theatre music envisaged by Bharata and Abhinavagupta manifests at four levels, First of all, the preliminary rituals consist of the placement and tuning of the musical instruments to set the tune of the play. Secondly, instruments are to be played throughout the play for background when the action is not accompanied by speech. The third aspect is the rendering of the dhruva songs on specific occasions. Finally, Bharata also prescribes musical notes (*svaras* ) to several rāgas.

As pointed out earlier, the musical system in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* represents the pre-rāga phase of Indian music. This could be described as *Mūrchanāpaddhati* in contrast with the later phase of music which can be called *Melapaddhati*. A hall-mark of this system is the concept of the melodious entities taking place to modal shifts.  *Mūrchanā* consists of heptatonic serial progression .The consequent change of the basic note resulted in the emergence of several melodious entities which are described as *jāti-*s.

*Jāti* is the key concept of Bharata’s musical system. Abhinava defines *jāti* as the musical notes having a specific placement which provide delight and subtle auspicious results[[4]](#footnote-5).Bharata refers to two parent scales called  *ṣadjagrāma* and *madhyamagrāma* which served as the basis for these modes of music. The *madhyamagrāma* differed from the *ṣadjagrāma* only in one microtone (śruti) with regard to the *pañcama* note and this served as the measurement of microtone itself and was designated as *pramāṇaśruti*. It served as the unit for measuring the 22 microtones of the octave. Abhinavagupta, while commenting on *Dhvanyāloka* 1.7 defines *śruti* as the measurement of sound which alters the musical note and which is measured as the difference between one note and the next note and which in twenty two in number.

Music has a very important part to play both in the preliminaries and the actual enactment of the play. In the first chapter of *Abhinavabhāratī* , Abhinavagupta details the manner in which the orchestra is to be deployed in the preliminaries. The percussionist should sit facing the east in between the two doors of the dressing room. The drummers should sit on his left. The male singer should sit on the right side of the dressing room facing north. In front of him are to sit the female singers facing the north. The Vainika is to sit on the left side of the male singer. The flutists should occupy the other vacant positions[[5]](#footnote-6). Abhinava gives great importance to female singers and maintains that music exclusively consisting of male singers will not have the desired effect, reinforcing his idea from *Nāṭyaśāstra* 33.5-7.

In the present state of research, it is very difficult to reconstruct the practical aspects of music described in *Nāṭyaśāstra* and *Abhinavabhāratī.* However, Abhinava seems to have been conversant with Bharata’s music in its broad outlines. He often refers to different interpretations of concepts, which shows changes in the original musical system. In short, while the metaphysical aspects of his musical philosophy are easy to reconstruct, the same cannot be said of the more practical elements.

II

Coming to the more philosophical aspects of Abhinavagupta’s concept of music, we are on firmer grounds. Abhinava has explained in detail the phenomenon of pure music and the psychological process for its generation and behind its appreciation. In his *Tantrāloka*, Abhinava refers to the generation of a tremor like pulse, which he describes as *spanda* taking place when a person hears sweet music or is in touch with objects like the sandal.[[6]](#footnote-7)According to him, this stir is due to the rise of the power of bliss (*Ānandaśakti*), which results in the transcendental bliss within. Deshpande demonstrates that there is a correspondence between musical sounds and sounds of language in the perspective of Śaiva metaphysics. According to the Pratyabhijñā  philosophy, language manifests itself at four successive stages from the subtle level to the grosser levels and these are termed *parā , paśyantī, madhyamā* and *vaikharī.* The former three levels are beyond the pale of our sensory experience. According to Abhinava, this four level manifestation is also seen in music with the only difference that speech (*vāk*) of the former is replaced by tone (*nāda*) in music. The entire universe is a reflection of the ultimate consciousness and distinguished into expressive sound and the objects referred to by it. The Śaiva metaphysics postulates two latent powers in the ultimate consciousness which is designated illuminative (*prakāśa*) and self reflective (*vimarśa*) powers. The former is similar to the reflective power of a mirror, and the latter, the hall mark of sentience, is the power in consciousness by means of which it becomes aware of the process. The Śaiva metaphysicians distinguish the whole phenomenon into the expressed (*vācya*) and expressive (*vācaka),* the former the signifier and the latter the signified, to use Saussurian terminology. According to Deshpande, the signified (*vācya* ) is essentially of the nature of illuminative power and the signifier (*vācaka*) of the nature of reflection. [[7]](#footnote-8) He further maintains that it is the power of illumination which is predominant in the signified and the self reflective power in the signifier.

The self reflective power is further identified with *parā* *vāk* also, which, in music becomes *para* *nāda.* The four successive stages in the manifestation of speech are applicable in music also, wherein the subtle sound is gradually manifested through the stages of *paśyantī,* and *madhyamā* to the gross level of *vaikharī.*

Abhinavagupta maintains that the artistic beauty of a piece of art lies in the harmonious blending and unity achieved in its contents. He defines sweetness as undivided identity (*avibhāgaikarūpam mādhuryam*) .In poetry and drama this unity is achieved through the combination of the specific determinants(*vibhāva*),consequents(*anubhāva*) and transitory mental states (*vyabhicāribhāva*) related to each aesthetic emotion. As pointed out by Deshpande, in the vocal and instrumental music, it is the harmonious unity of the notes produced by the human organs of speech and the musical instruments that makes music beautiful.[[8]](#footnote-9)

It is remarkable that Abhinava, when dealing with the nature of aesthetic experience quotes a verse from Kalidasa’s *Śāakuntala*.The verse is the reaction of King Duṣyanta to a beautiful song sung by Hamsapadikā.

Often, if a person , on seeing beautiful sights and hearing sweet music, though himself comforted, is afflicted by a deep longing, it is surely because he remembers with his mind unconsciously the friendships of a previous birth which are deeply embedded within .

Abhinavagupta here is describing the nature of aesthetic experience which he portrays as consciousness characterized by the cessation of the obstacles and aesthetic wonder *(camatkāra*).It is a type of consciousness characterized by immersion in a vibration (*spanda*) of a marvelous enjoyment.[[9]](#footnote-10) The passage in *Abhinavabhāratī* is important in that here Abhinavagupta, for all practical purposes, equates aesthetic experience caused by poetry and drama with that of music. In short, Abhinava’s philosophy of music, like that of literature, has rasa at the pivotal position.

1. See G.T.Deshpande, *Abhinavagupta* p.115 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. *Dhvanyāloka* , p.84 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. *Nāṭyaśāstra*  , 32.378. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. *Svarā eva visistasannivesabhajo raktim adrṣ*ṭ*ābhyudayam ca janayanto jatirityuktāh. Abhinavabhāratī.* Vol II, p 42 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. *Abhinavabhāratī* , Vol.I, p.213. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. *Tantrāloka,* II.200 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. *Abhinavagupta*, p.115 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. *Abhinavagupta,* p.117. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. See R.Gnoli, *The Aesthetic Experience According to Abhinavagupta*, p.60. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)