

Music Why?

Picture this in your mind:- A wedding reception. Silk sarees, jewellery, nauseating perfumes, the works. An overdressed gentleman approaches me; thumps me on the shoulder heartily and demands, "So how are things?" "Who the hell is this?" I wonder and look at him blankly. A distant uncle from Bombay - sorry, "Mumbai" as it turns out to be. "Fine, thanks" I mumble, "Just fine." "So, what do you do?" he inquires. "I sing." I reply. "Yes, yes," he snorts, "But apart from that?" "I play the veena too," I reply, with that particular air of modesty which only the genuinely arrogant can afford to put on. "I know you sing and play the veena, but what do you do?" he insists. "I rid the world of inquisitive scumbags like you" I reply - and proceed to strangle him slowly and painfully. Sorry. That was just a fantasy. I guess I got carried away. I grit my teeth and answer as politely as I can, "Don't you think that practicing music eight hours a day is "doing" something, as you put it?" "Eight hours a day?!" he exclaims. He finds it hard to believe that anybody in their right senses would be stupid enough to waste eight precious hours a day "doing" music. Unfortunately this above mentioned Mumbai-uncle is not just an isolated case, but part of a large uncultured majority who are insensitive to music.

What is music? In an abstract sense it could be anything which gives us pleasure, mainly with the help of our ears. It could be the sound of the rain, it could be the voice of a loved one, it could be the hiss of a Dosa being fried when one is famished, or it could be Mohd Rafi singing "Chaudhvin Ka Chand Ho." The incomparable American singer Miss Eartha Kitt sings thus: -

"I like Chopin and Bizet,
And the songs of yesterday;
String quartets - and Polynesian carols.
But the music that excels
Is the sound of oil wells
As they slurp, slurp, slurp into the barrels.

But I would like to talk basically about the more formally recognized forms of music that we all know. Classical music (Indian and Western), Popular music, religious music, jazz, film songs and even advertisement jingles. Let's look at something seemingly so trivial as an advertisement jingle. I am rather smug about the fact that I don't spend half my wakeful hours before the television. But whenever I do watch TV, I get the impression that they show more advertisements than programmes. The fact that I find this minute-by-minute bombardment of their products on our senses offensive is irrelevant and besides the point. The aim of an advertisement is to inspire us to drop whatever else we might be doing at that moment, rush to the nearest shop and buy their product - to satisfy some deep-

Music Why?

rooted need which we didn't know existed, till then. The problem (for them) however, is that they have to inspire us within the matter of a few seconds. This is where the music comes in. If the theme music for an advertisement is catchy, then half the battle is won. These days we come across talented children born in TV-watching households going around singing dozens of advertisement jingles flawlessly. (The tunes may be stolen from composers as varied as Vivaldi who lived three hundred years ago in Venice to our own Kishore Kumar who lived in Bombay during the twentieth century.) This shows how easily music can affect us.

But how many of these very talented children end up singing when they grow up? Not that many I am afraid. In the west virtually every person can hold a tune (Almost) because they are given basic scientific training in music when they are at school. Here the situation seems to be rather bleak. Granted, that one has to get a job, generate income and feed oneself and one's family. But to neglect and suppress the musical instinct totally is really sad. Because it is a scientifically proven fact that the instinct to sing and dance is there in all of us - at least in most of us - and by denying oneself of that one becomes repressed. Which is why, there is more and more widespread use of music for therapeutic purposes.

Let me tell you a story: - When I was a child I was closer to relatives who were much older than me than to cousins of my own age. The one exception however, was my beloved cousin Sudha, whom I called Sudha Chechi. She was not only my favourite relative, but also a favourite of almost everybody who met her. All through her college years she was the first in her class. But she was very warm, outgoing and friendly and had none of the airs or peculiarities one would normally expect from a rank student.

Then one day something dreadful happened. Her mind snapped. Nobody really knows how it came about. Some people say it was a broken love affair. Some others say it was because she got bad results. Whatever the reason might be, she stopped communicating altogether. She would just sit in her room and stare at the wall. She wouldn't talk or move or wash or do anything. Sometimes she ate a little of what was offered to her. Her parents became desperate, but over the years gradually came to terms with the situation. This continued for over a decade. I had also tried writing several letters (Pleading, funny, angry, kind) - and had failed to get a reaction.

Recently I hit upon an idea. I remembered that though Sudha Chechi had no formal training in music and though she was not particularly fond of classical music she was by and large very musical. She would make up little two-line (or four-line)

Music Why?

songs on the spot when we were children, to induce us to do various things like eat idlis, brush our teeth, take a shower and so on.

I sent her two cassettes of songs by my most revered Guru Dr. Balamuralikrishna. One was titled "Thillanas" and contained music so positive, brilliant and vigorous that it would make a dying man come to life and dance a jig. The other, titled "Thathvams" contained music which was so profound and peaceful that it would provide a balm even to the most tormented soul.

According to her parents the effect these cassettes had on Sudha Chechi was almost miraculous. She apparently listens to them the whole day. She has started behaving more normally. Once in a while her face lights up with the traces of a smile. In fact she even picked up a pen and tried to write a letter. Such is the power of good music. (Actually I don't have a cousin called Sudha. But the events related in this story are all true - including the cassettes of Thillanas and Thathvams by Dr. Balamuralikrishna).

I had a friend who lived in Delhi for some years. He hated his tiny rented room, his office, the weather, the distances, the traffic, the food - in fact almost everything. And to top it all he fell in love with a girl who nearly drove him to the point of suicide. Several years later, now respectfully married (To a different girl naturally) he confides that the only thing which gave him strength to cope during those years was his collection of old Hindi film songs. K.L.Saigal singing "Jab dil hi toot gaya," Mohd. Rafi singing "Meri Kahani Bhoolnevale", Kishore Kumar singing "Koi Humdum na raha," Mukesh singing "Ansoo bhari hai" or Hemant Kumar singing "Jane woh kaise log" would make him feel that they were also sharing his pain and weeping with him. And the happy songs, especially by Mohd. Rafi and Kishore Kumar would cheer him up no end. What a loss it would have been to the world if Mohd. Rafi had become an accountant, for example, or Ludwig Van Beethoven, a tailor! These incredible men may be gone but one can easily be assured of the fact that several hundred years from now if the world still exists, the music these people left behind would still be delighting millions of people all over the world.

It is this which renders them immortal. In my family there were good kings and not so good kings. But Maharajah Swathi Thirunal remains special though he lived only for three and a half decades. This is because of the musical gems he left behind, for posterity. While his jewelled sword and ivory throne may belong to the family trust, his musical treasures are accessible to the world at large. Similarly one talks about Thyagaraja's devotion to Rama or Mirabai's devotion to Krishna. But the fact remains that it is their musical output which has immortalized them.

Music Why?

If one takes a look at religions one can see that God, worshipped in whichever form, is rather fond of music. By the same token I find it very hard to believe that God as worshipped by any religion would find it bearable, leave alone enjoyable, to have loudspeakers blast His eardrums out in the name of devotion. Seeing the criminal level of sound which seems to be part of any religious festival in South India, one needn't be surprised if one finds that God has finally been rendered totally deaf to our prayers. These days one may observe that this despicable practice has become a daily occurrence in many places of worship. Whenever I pass by a loudspeaker in full blast, shattering the peace all around, I am reminded more of hell than of heaven. When I talk of music this is the last thing on my mind.

Music in its purest form embodies all that is good, true and spiritual. In many religions we observe that pleasures of senses are condemned while spirituality is extolled. Music seems to be the single thing with which one can experience one can experience heights of sensuous pleasure coupled with spiritual ecstasy. Of course music, like falling in love, cannot be described in spoken or written words. One has to experience it to know it. The pleasure I experience (Physical, mental, intellectual, emotional and spiritual) when I hear M.D.Ramanathan sing Yadukula Kambodhi, when I hear Jacques Brel sing "J' arrive", when I lose myself in a Mozart concerto or a Beethoven Symphony, or when I elaborate a Raga myself, is so intense that it makes almost everything else seem negligible - and hence bearable.

Recently I received a wedding invitation from a very dear friend who was finally marrying his childhood sweetheart after having waited for more than a decade. He had written " I am attaining completeness by marrying so-and-so on such-and-such a day" and so on. Similarly, with music I attain completeness. For this to happen one does not have to be a musician oneself. One only has to be receptive to its various charms. One shouldn't limit oneself to listening to music with just one's ears. One should open up one's heart, mind and the intellect and let music do the rest.

I once saw a card which said "Whatever I like is illegal, immoral or fattening." Let us be grateful that music is none of the above.

People continue to ask me "Music! Why?" This is why.