

# ON APPRECIATING AND PARTICIPATING IN RAAG

## MUSIC

**Hassan Azad**

*(My father-Rauf Ahmed Ansari- and Hayat Ahmed Khan were close friends. The seed of the Music Conference which they planted in Lahore almost 50 years ago has now grown, despite all odds, into a sturdy tree. There is a thriving branch in Karachi and a nascent branch in Islamabad. This essay is dedicated to the memory and ideals of my father and Hayat Sahib)*

The classical music of India and Pakistan is one of the two systems of music which enjoy worldwide appreciation. The following lines are written for someone who is keen to widen his-or hers- horizons. A genuine appreciation can only come from extensive exposure to this music, for then one learns to sift the exceptional from the ordinary and to appreciate the heights to which the human spirit can rise.

Like all arts, the classical music of Indo-Pak derives its inspiration from folk elements. A composer of art music has the same relation to folk music as a poet has to everyday language. Through centuries of cumulative work, these simple folk melodies have been transformed by men of genius into what are called Raags or Ragas. In contrast to the Western tradition, these composers have chosen to remain anonymous, for apparently religious reasons. A Raag then is a melodic structure which is based on inter-related themes; these themes have been transmitted from generation to generation orally. The dynamic lies in developing these fixed patterns and rejecting those which have become banal over the years. A practitioner of Raag music is therefore at once a composer and a performer - a tall order to which very few measure up. For this reason it is fair to say that the average performance of Raag music is devoid of transcendental elements. However, in the hands of a master-musician, the development has elements of great beauty and excitement and one becomes oblivious of the passage of time. An hour long performance of a single Raag is not un-usual.

The rest of the lines describe what happens in a concert of a master musician, where the human voice is not the vehicle of expression.

A Raag performance starts with an extensive arrhythmic development, called the Alaap, which is arguably the most artistic and demanding part of the performance. Depending on the artist's imagination, the notes and characteristic phrases of the Raag are approached in possibly myriad of ways. It gradually merges into more rhythmic structures, called the Jor and Jhalla, full of breathtaking improvisations and technical complexity, which serve as a link to parts of the performance inspired by vocal music. The instrument literally sings, approaching the refrain by alliterations, called Taans, of great beauty and technical complexity. Departing from the refrain at any point, , improvising and merging seamlessly into the refrain, using complex cross rhythms (Laikari) and tihais , give one a feeling of magnificent acoustic architecture and deep aesthetic satisfaction. Appreciation in the form of a nod, a word or a sigh of ecstasy is expected from the audience and if this is expressed where the musician expects, it serves as a spring board for more improvisation and a source of inspiration. In the Islamic world, it is not unusual to hear spontaneous cries of Subhan Allah and Masha Allah. Because of this difference in etiquette, the usual performance in the West of Raag music is rather insipid. However, if you express your appreciation openly you will begin to see the atmosphere changing and you will get from this something close to a religious experience.

One final word: a connoisseur of this music does not tire of listening to the same Raags again and again. The reason is that the personality and mood of the artist changes the performance very substantially and, in any case, the pleasure one gets in hearing a familiar Raag is akin to the pleasure one gets in meeting and conversing with a good friend.