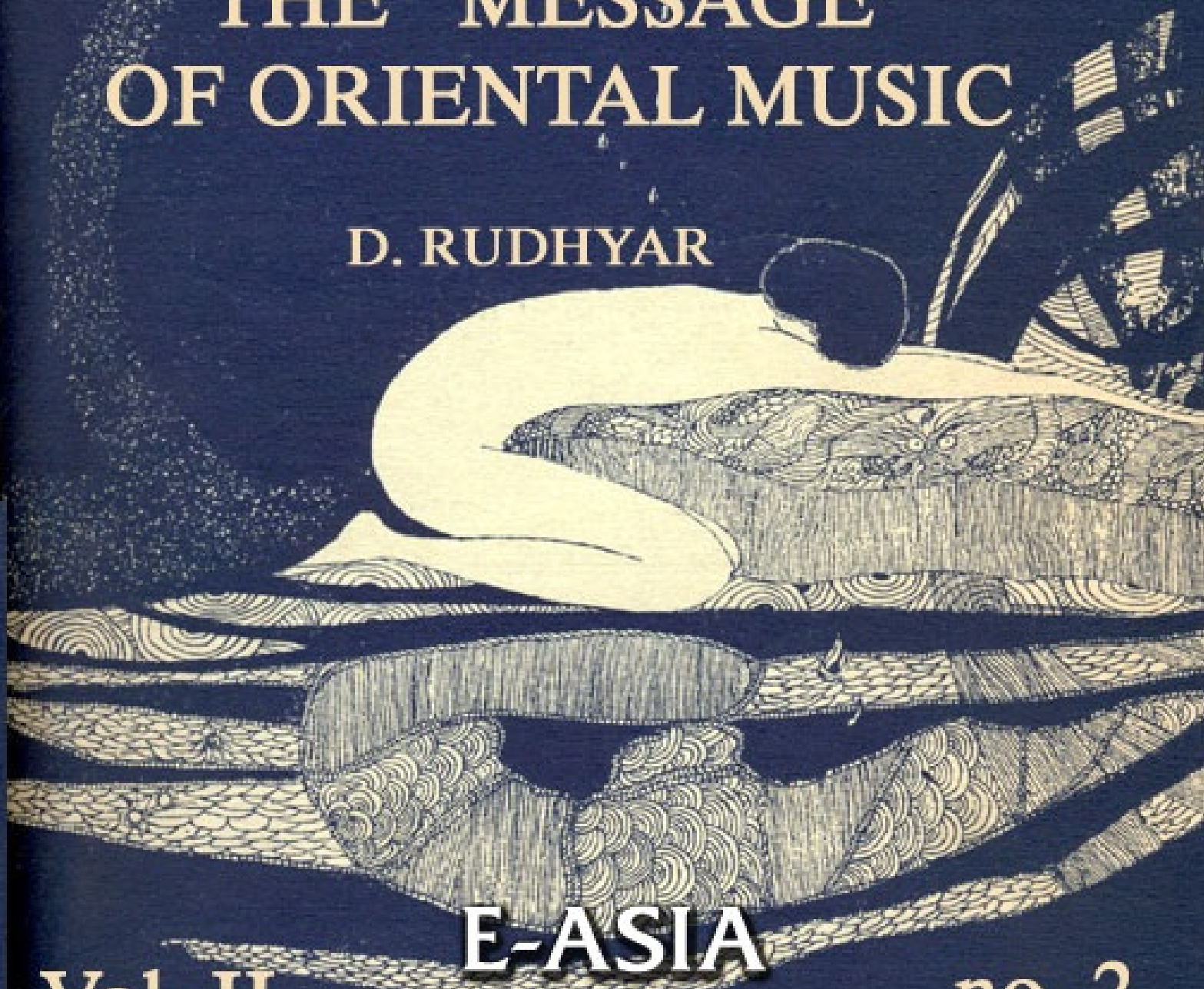


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THE MESSAGE OF ORIENTAL MUSIC

D. RUDHYAR



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pp. 56-60

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The Message of Oriental Music

By D. RUDHYAR

AT a time when the world of music is torn apart by contending factions, and when there is less contact between the youthful generation of progressive composers and the public than has ever been the case, in such a time of crisis it becomes the duty of all sincere and awakened musicians to turn around, look into the wide world every day made smaller, and search for beacon-lights pointing to new truths, or old ones half-forgotten.

The Western musician reflecting eagerly upon the essence of his art --- if there exists such a musician ! --- cannot help but turn to Asia and interrogate its old races now in the process of awakening its old artistic ideals, which even natives have half forgotten. How many musicians in America, however, take such an enquiring attitude? Oriental music is practically unknown in the West, or when known, it is known only through its disfigured shadow on the rough wall of pianistic transcriptions. Whereas Chinese and Hindu literature, philosophy, architecture and painting are finding an ever-increasing response in the heart of European artists and dilettantes, the music of these same countries, especially in America, is considered generally as queer and barbarous, --- histories of music either mention it passingly or class it under the vague category of "primitive music."

The reasons for such a condition are multiple and we cannot hope to study them all in an article of limited size. Let us, however, mention the outstanding one, hoping thus to open new vistas to those who may have been misled by most superficial books, hardly to be trusted even when written by Orientals themselves, forgetful of their traditions and often of the very soul of their cultures as they too frequently are.

The main difference between Eastern and Western music is that the former is based on Nature's laws and is part of Nature's rhythm, while the latter is basically a product of man's personality, of an overly-intellectualized culture. The outstanding result of such a fundamental difference is that, in India, the performance of music is a ritual, where man communes with the natural elements following the rhythm of their particular manifestations throughout seasons, months, days and hours. Everything in Nature moves, and the motion of all these natural forces is an orderly one regulated mainly by the revolution of the sun, and at times of the moon. The result is that music *needs* to be attuned not to some fixed and unvarying material diapason, but to natural conditions, as they change hourly, daily, monthly. In other words, the various prototypes of Hindu melodies, called the *rags* and *raginis*, are magnetically linked with certain solar conditions and therefore must be sung at the exact time when such conditions are manifest. At any other time their performance would constitute a crime against natural laws and harmony, just as stealing is a breach of the social harmony in a community based upon the principle of private property.

Such a fact has been often noted by students of Oriental music. Yet I wonder how many Westerners have ever realized its meaning. Most of them have laughed at it, and talked of their transcriptions of Hindu melodies as being true Oriental music. They failed to see that the truest type of Hindu music *can never* be transcribed in such an occidental manner, nor even be recorded by a gramophone. The singers who sing for gramophones do not know the *real* Hindu music; those who know would never sing thus. For the real Hindu music *cannot* be performed whenever it would suit the fancy of a dilettante. What reaches us is only the degenerated forms of the ancient music.

To sum up: music which can be played at any time, without any attention being paid to the magnetic conditions prevailing at the moment of the performance, is hardly music at all for the real musician in India. At any rate, it is not Nature's music, or, if one prefers, *magnetic music*, and therefore it cannot have any of the tremendous powers which are attributed to it in India, powers ridiculed by Westerner only because they do not really understand what Indian music is an: cannot help judging it from the European standpoint, according to which music is a purely human element.

There is, however, such a thing as popular music in Asia, as well as in any other country where civilization has not yet corroded the consciousness of the peasant. By popular music, I do not mean here that music which is the corruption of the

old sacred music, which, according to all traditions in all countries of the world was revealed to man by superhuman beings in the beginnings of each race, but that which is the spontaneous expression of popular emotions arising out characteristic and almost impersonal Life-experiences such as love, oppression, death etc. Such folk-songs can be classed in a very few categories corresponding to the simple types of emotions aforementioned.

page fifty-eight

The study of such songs, usually very simple, always direct and moving, is a fascinating study, and these songs constitute the repertoire which lovers of Oriental music can listen to through the intermediary of gramophones, and which ought to be recorded on an extensive scale and then collected in great public musical libraries for the benefit of future generations, as these songs are fast disappearing before the advance of our so-called civilization.

In European countries the real folk-songs are almost non-existent, except where the Slavonic races are still dominant; even there they are fast disappearing. They are vanishing because of the rise of intellectuality in the world. Pure and impersonal race-emotions have gone. Peasants have gained enough mentality to become selfish and unnatural, not enough to become living and creative intelligences. The race-consciousness which creates folk-songs has waned into nothingness, and true self-consciousness is but very rare in the world of to-day. In its stead we have European culture, the glorification of disreputable and amoral intellectuality. As a European myself, of strictly European descent, I cannot be accused of race-prejudice. As a professional musician, composer and critic, educated in Paris, I can hardly be accused of ignorance of existing conditions.

Peasant music is, then, the basis of musical emotionalism. Magnetic music is the basis of scientific music, because of its being founded on Laws, rationally studied and strictly applied. The music of today is the degraded progeny of both. In Europe the degradation is basically greater because the ancient magnetic music of the Egyptian and Syrian Mysteries was utterly forgotten, first when the Gnostics were expelled from Christianity; secondly when Gregorian triumphed over Ambrosian plain-song. However, what it lost in this direction it gained in another, and the dreadful impoverishment of the modal material of music and the stultification of the melodic flow urged musicians to work along polyphonic lines, i.e. to superpose melodies in intricate ways. Classic music in Europe was a marvelously wrought architectonic structure, essentially intellectual yet often

retaining enough of the peasant and emotional origin to keep it alive. Romanticism enhanced emotionalism in music prodigiously, mainly as the result of Chopin's and Liszt's works. With them, for the first time --- or perhaps before them with Beethoven, who is in a way the father of Romanticism --- music passed from the racial to the interhuman emotionalism. They created, as it were, an interhuman peasantry rooted not in the purely physical soil-race emotions, but in a mental-cosmic soil. This, combined with the Germanic intellectualism, resulted in Wagner's works, perhaps the apex of European music and artistic intuition, if not realization.

page fifty-nine

In India the influence of the ancient magnetic music has been kept more powerful because of the inherent spirituality of the race, an influence which still more or less pervades all Asiatic musicalities. Over-intellectualism not being there to corrupt the race-consciousness, peasant music has maintained its strong contact with nature; and, as the old magnetic music was also based upon Nature, the result is that Indian music as a whole is founded upon natural laws, uses natural scales deduced from the law of harmonic progression of overtones, etc. The inner and esoteric aspect of such music constitutes the old magnetic music with its strict laws and its powerful inner rhythm. Its outer of common aspect is what may be heard by any well acquainted foreigner, a mixture of folk-songs, of more or less degenerated sacred music and court music.

Yet, degenerated as it may be, this music has still a definite purpose in the life of the race, which Western music lacks. The real musicians are still considered as the teachers of the race and the messengers of a world sacred in its nature. Music is not a technic, but a mode of Life. And this again makes it entirely foreign to the Westerner who goes to concerts for recreation and amusement, if not as a matter of social etiquette.

Western music is essentially a form. Eastern music is essentially Life, a mysterious fragment of Life captured by some great musician-soul to teach living people. Or else it is that which makes of the race-soul a living entity energizing all the children of the race through a common woe or joy for a common purpose. Here, in America, community music is rapidly developing, and orchestras or choruses unify in waves the multitude of isolated, self-centered, distracted atoms which the men and women of today usually are. And

so a higher purpose is slowly being discovered for music which may produce conscious creators who will ordinate their masses of sounds with some great communal purpose in view.

A community is but what its units are; a symphony is but what its constituting notes, melodies, rhymes are. These units, individual men or musical atoms, must be transformed if the communal music in the making today is to serve a high, noble and spiritual goal. I venture to say with the assurance of a conviction based on years of experience and effort, that, unless Western music listens to the message of Eastern music, and understands and then adopts the vital elements which give to Indian music its natural and magnetic power --- unless Western musicians realize their human mission as their Eastern comrades do and forsake commercialism in an endeavor to become cultural leaders and teachers of the Harmony which is Life, unless Art becomes a, spirit-

page sixty

ualizing force ensouled by the consciousness of a purpose --- there is little hope that music in the future will become a great and elevating communal factor in the life of humanity. By its very nature it will bind together collectivities, as all religions do. But this bond, unless they change, will be a superficial and stultifying one, stunting the growth of the individual, unifying by leveling from below, a spiritual opium entrancing but to enslave. The age of the machine, of communism of and in Matter, is ruling over Western music as over Western souls. The ancient traditions of the East, which modern Orientals themselves have half-forgotten, is the only salvation, the only beacon-light pointing the way to spiritual and true aesthetic triumphs. Western musicians should be the first to tread the path which it shows.