

The Power of Music

By R. A. Kashyap

All ancient peoples have their store of legends and tales concerning the effects wrought by music on man, beasts, and even the inanimate world. The powerful effect of music on man has long been the subject of poets. Dryden in his *Song* tells us how Alexander, the world conqueror, became the vanquished victor, subdued by the power of music. This poem celebrates the power of music and how it can sway the various affections and passions of men. In addition, music is considered to have a power over the snakes and other animal creatures. It is believed by many that music can even change the set course of nature, unalterable though it is supposed to be; so that day is rendered night and burning things are quenched, and nature for a while excuses herself from the operation of laws.

Some experimental psychologists have even developed a therapy based on music to cure patients subject of nervous and mental disorders.

Decades ago, when it was said of a great Ayurvedic physician, Pandit Taranath, that he could effect cures by applying music, people just turned their faces away. But today's researchers have also asserted the possibility. Hence it is quite conceivable that someday these things which are in the domain of "beyond science" may be brought within the purview of science.

"I have been assured by a credible eyewitness," says Sir William Jones "that two wild antelopes used often to come to the woods to the place where... Siraj ud Doulah, entertained himself with concerts; and that they listened to the strain with an appearance of pleasure, till [he] shot one of them to display his archery; secondly, a learned native of this country [India] told me that he had frequently seen the most venomous and indignant snakes leave their holes upon hearing tunes of a flute, which he supposed gave them peculiar delight; and thirdly, an intelligent Persian who...told me that he had more than once been present when a celebrated "musician", surnamed Bulbul, was playing to a large company in a grove near Shiraz; and that he distinctly saw the nightingales trying to vie with the musician—sometimes warbling in the trees, sometimes fluttering from branch to branch, as if they wished to approach the instrument whence the melody proceeded, and at length dropping on the ground in a kind of timid ecstasy, from which they were soon raised, he assured me, by a change of the mode."

The *ragas kaliani* and *saranga* are believed to have this effect. We have numerous tales and anecdotes relating to the effect of music on cobras and snakes. Of the *ragas* that exert such power, the most reputed ones are *Nagavarali* and *Punagatodi*.

Once a Prince of Mysore wished to test the truth of this and went to a neighboring hill with his court musician, who began to sing the ragas. As soon as the strains reached the ears of the cobras, they left their holes and came and formed a ring around the musician. With heads erect and swaying to and fro these cobras listened, fascinated by the music. When the strain stopped, the cobras, without harming anyone, quietly slithered back to their holes.

Colonel Meadows Taylor relates a somewhat similar circumstance: "One large cobra, which frequented my garden at Ellichpur, and of which everyone was in dread, was caught by some professional snake charmers in my own presence by means of the *pungi*. It was played at first very softly, in front of the aloe bush underneath which the snake lived in a hole, and gradually the performer increased the tone and time of his playing, and, as the snake showed its head, he retreated gently till it was fairly outside and erected itself in a defiant manner. At that moment, another man stepped dexterously behind and, while the snake's attention was absorbed by the player before, threw a heavy blanket upon it, seizing it by the head under the jaws."

To speak of the effects of music on nature herself: Musicians believe that the power of music is such that it can make day into night and bring freshening and life giving showers to the parched earth. The violinist Chowdaiah of Mysore, a reputed player, asserted that plants may be made to yield better if they are subjected to music at the proper time of their growth. There are stories of how skillful musicians have averted famine by singing appropriate songs.

Sir William Ouseley relates [from historical documents of the sixteenth century] that in the court of Emperor Akbar, the musician Miyan Tan Sen began to play an evening raga at midday. The power of his music was such that it became instantly night, and the darkness extended in a circle around the palace as far as the sound of his voice could be heard. It is also related that Miyan Tan Sen brought down showers from the sky when he sang the *Megha Malhar*, though there was no apparent possibility of any rain at all.

Just as music can bring comforting rain to the parched earth, it can equally perform the opposite, burning and drying up things...

A story with a tragic touch is related about the power of the *raga Dipaka*, which emperor Akbar ordered Nayak Gopal, a celebrated musician, to sing: He endeavored to excuse himself, but in vain—the Emperor insisted on obedience. He therefore requested permission to go home and bid farewell to his family and friends. It was winter when he returned, after an absence of six months. Before he began to sing he immersed himself up to his neck in the waters of the River Jamuna. As soon as he had performed a strain or two the river gradually became hot, and at length began to boil. Suspending for a moment the melody thus cruelly extorted, he sued in vain—Akbar wished to prove more strongly the power of the raga. Nayak Gopal renewed the fatal song. Flames burst from his body, and though immersed in Jamuna's waters, he was consumed to ashes.

It is said that those who sing the *raga Ahiri* shall go without food for the rest of the day. Years ago there was a musician who was determined to discover the truth in the power attributed to this raga. After packing some food in a basket, he took his instrument and set upon his travels. Very soon he came to a large tank, with a cool and shady grove a bamboos by its side; there he thought he would rest during the heat of the day. Accordingly, he hung up his basket on one of the overshadowing bamboos and began to sing the raga. When he had sung for some hours he began to feel hungry, and so looked for a place to cook his midday meal; but to his great chagrin he found that as the sun had risen higher, the bamboo upon which his basket was hung had bent upward out of his reach. The possibility that this coincidence was related to the raga did not satisfy him however; he felt it was due to his own neglect rather than to divine interference.

Continuing his journey, he arrived in the evening at a large town, whose Rajah had built a *Chattram* or rest house, for the free accommodation of all poor travelers. The musician was hospitably received there, and food was laid before him. The Rani herself customarily served the guests with *ghee*, or clarified butter, before they commenced to eat. As she served the musician, he was unable to restrain his glee, and exclaimed, "I have overcome thee, *Ahiri!*" unfortunately for him, the name of the Rani happened to be Ahiri, and she naturally fancied that he intended some impertinence. He was promptly arrested and condemned to be impaled. As he was led to execution, he implored the Rajah to grant him a hearing; his request was complied with, and he told the whole story. The Rajah then commanded that he should be set at liberty, and dismissed him with a present, bidding him to refrain from tempting the gods further, as it had so nearly cost him his life.

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