

## A Study on Musicality of Swami Vivekananda

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### Abstract

*One of the greatest sons of mother India, Swami Vivekananda, was a most learned philosopher who played a leading role in social reform movement with his multidimensional personality in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and brought Hinduism specially the philosophy of Vedanata to Western world where he is regarded as most influential Hindu monk of India. But it is a less known fact very few people are aware of that Vivekananda was a gifted musician with vast knowledge in various aspects and genres of vocal as well as instrumental music of both Indian and Western style, an excellent music composer and a writer who expressed very details of different topics related to music, his perception of music. This article is an utmost attempt to sketch the musicality of Swami Vivekananda.*

**Key Words:** Sangeet Kalpataru, Music, Pakhawaj, Veda, Spirituality

### Introduction:

“Music is the highest art and to those who understand, is the highest worship.” – Swami Vivekananda

According to research it has been acknowledged that the origin of Indian Music is the ‘Vedas’(1500 BC-600BC), the oldest Hindu scriptures. Among the four Vedas (Rigveda, Samaveda, Yajurveda and Atharvaveda), Samaveda consists of the musical form of hymns derived from Rigveda. . According to David Frawley, great Vedic scholar, ‘Rig Veda is the word, Sama Veda is the song.’ In Vedic literature it is declared that Veda has non-human or super-human (Apourushyam) authorship that means Veda is not created by human. It is believed that Vedas are cosmic sound (Shabda Brahma) existed since the very moment of the creation of universe. According to the tradition sound is God, therefore the term used as Nadabrahma. Melodious sounds are produced naturally by winds, water babbling down a stream, chirping of the birds, human voice etc. Since the ancient times, spirituality and

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religion had been the basis of Indian music. In Hindu mythology almost all the deities are associated with some kinds of musical instruments. We see that the lyrics of the most of Dhruvad (ancient form of Indian music) compositions are the description of God and Goddess according to Hindu mythology or in praise of them. Therefore in Indian tradition music is considered as a spiritual practice to achieve aesthetic experience, for cultivating self-realisation through which one can reach God or Bramha, attain salvation.

Swami Vivekananda, one of the greatest philosophers and social reformers of India, who hoisted the flag of Indian culture specially the 'Vedanta' to the western world, realised the celestial essence of Indian music which reflected in his musical writings, poems and in musical compositions as well. It is a humble attempt through this article to understand the musical thought and perception of Swami Vivekananda.

**Musical Talents of Swami Vivekananda:**

Acharya Brajendranath Seal, a learned Indian philosopher of international reputation, a versatile scholar, author, educational administrator and a close friend of Swami Vivekananda, reminisced in his write up which was published in 'Prabuddha Bharata' journal in April, 1907- "When I first met Vivekananda in 1881, we were fellow students of Principal William Hastie, scholar, metaphysician, and poet, at the General Assembly's College. He was my senior in age though I was his senior in the college by one year. Undeniably a gifted youth, sociable, free; and unconventional in manners, a sweet singer, the soul of social circles, a brilliant conversationalist, somewhat bitter and caustic, piercing with the shafts of a keen wit the shows and mummeries of the world, sitting in the corner's chair but hiding the tenderest of hearts under that garb of cynicism:....A friend introduced him to the study of Hume's scepticism and Herbert Spencer's doctrine of the Unknowable, and his unbelief gradually assumed the form of a settled philosophical scepticism. His first emotional freshness and naivete were worn out. A certain dryness and incapacity for the old prayerful devotions, an ennui which he concealed under a nonchalant air of habitual mocking and scoffing, troubled his spirit. But music still stirred him a weird unearthly sense of unseen realities which brought tears to his eyes.....The fascinations of the sense and the cravings of a youthful nature now appeared to him as impure, as gross and carnal. This was the hour of darkest trial for him. His musical gifts brought him associates for whose manners and morals he had bitter and undisguised contempt. But his convivial temperament proved too strong for him. It was, therefore, some relief to him when I occasionally kept him company of an evening when he went out for a musical soiree."<sup>1</sup>

So we see that in his young days when philosophical qualms overcame Vivekananda's mind, generated questions concerning the conventional metaphysical beliefs and continuous mental conflict and inner struggle made him restless, it was only music through which he used to

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<sup>1</sup>'Remeniscences Of Swami Vivekananda- Brajendranath Seal', Prabuddha Bharata, April 1907; reprinted Brahmavadin, May, 1907. Courtsey: Frank Parlato Jr.

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achieve mental peace and tranquillity of mind. Music was the food for Vivekananda's soul from the formative years of his life.

Swami Vivekananda inherited a rich quintessential mellifluous sweet voice and a natural talent for music. Vivekananda's father Vishwanath Dutta was a highly successful attorney and an accomplished musician of Dhrupad style. His mother Bhuvanewari Devi, a devout housewife also had a strong inclination towards music and was able to sing many traditional devotional songs. Naturally Vivekananda grew up listening to music in melodious atmosphere within his family. From his very tender age besides formal studies he started learning music systematically. Initially taught by his father Vivekananda later received vocal music training specifically Dhrupad style under the able guidance of Ustad Beni Gupta and Ustad Ahammad Khan, Chhote and Bade Dumni khan.<sup>2</sup> He had tremendous mastery over the art of instrumental music also. Swami Ji learnt the techniques of playing Mridanga from the then renowned Mridanga player Mridangacharya Murari Gupta. He also got intense training of Tabla, Pakhawaj and Khol from Kashi Ghoshal of Adi Brahma Samaj. Great Mridanaga player Late Pandit Durlava Chandra Bhattacharya (Dulli Babu) of Lala Keval Kishan Ji Gharana of Bengal was a guru brother of Swami Vivekananda. One of the greatest musicians and noted guru of 20<sup>th</sup> century Ustad Allauddin Khan was a direct disciple of Pt. Nandi Bhatt who was a disciple of Mridangacharya Murari Gupta. One of the most precious books transcribed by Shubhomoy Ghosh on the basis of spontaneous conversation with Baba Ustad Allauddin Khan is 'Amar Kotha' where Ustad Allauddin Khan mentioned that 'In Vivekananda's home all were Ustads. Vivekananda was an accomplished Dhrupad singer. Vivekananda's brother Habu Dutta used to play musical instruments like Clarinet, Sitar and many others. He used to compose music for concerts in National Theatre...' Legendary sitarist Pandit Ravi Shankar wrote in his book 'My Music My Life', "Baba also participated in the frequent orchestral parties held by a prominent composer, Habu Dutt, who was the brother of the famed Swami Vivekananda. Habu Dutt had studied both Eastern and Western music and maintained an orchestra for which he composed in *raga* and *tala* framework; he used all the Western instruments as well as a few Indian ones. This later inspired Baba to create his own ensemble, the Maihar Band, which was quite famous for many years." So there is a clear picture of a deep musical atmosphere in Swami Vivekananda's home. A renowned journalist and speaker Mr. Tarun Goswami wrote in his article titled as 'The artistic monk' that "Vivekananda was also a noted violinist and during a meeting organised to oppose Lord Curzon's proposal to partition Bengal in 1905, he was the key accompanying violinist."<sup>3</sup> During his college days Vivekananda was deeply influenced by Sadharan Brahma Samaj, a powerful reformist movement of Hinduism. Vivekananda had a close association with the then musicians and music composers of Brahma Samaj. Kunjabihari Dev, Umanath Gupta, Trailokyanath Sanyal were among the most leading music writers and composers of that time. Shri Priyanath Singh, a childhood friend of Swami Vivekananda reminisced that during his student life Narendranath (Pre-monastic name of Swami Vivekananda) was always

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<sup>2</sup> Swami Vivekananda in a Beam of Musical Light' by Prakash G. Burde

<sup>3</sup> 'The artistic monk' by Tarun Goswami, published as web archive on 7<sup>th</sup> January, 2014 in 'The Statesman'.

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inspired by songs of Brahma Samaj. He used to sing songs composed by Rabindranath Tagore, Bishnuram Chattopadhyay, Dwijendranath Tagore and many others with equal proficiency. Not only Dhrupad, Vivekananda possessed a vast knowledge in different genres of music such as Topkhyal, Tappa, Shyama sangeet etc. He participated in many music concerts in Kolkata then known as Calcutta. From article published in 'The Statesman' newspaper we came to know that on 29<sup>th</sup> July, 1881 in the occasion of marriage between the daughter of Rajnarayan Basu, Lilabati and Krishnakumar Mitra Vivekananda then as Narendranath Dutta sang few songs composed by Rabindranath Tagore such as 'Dui Hridoyer Nodi', 'Shubhodine Esehho Dohe' etc. as a lead singer of a choir. Later in an article published in 'Tattvobodhini Patrika' Lilabati mentioned that "Narenbabu had enthralled the audience by his sweet voice and rendition". In the assembly of monastic disciples of Sri Ramakrishna in Baranagar Math Narendra was found to be singing 'Amra Je Shishu Oti'. In the year 1891-92 on the meeting with Kshitimohan Sen in Benaras Narendranath sang Tagore's song 'Mori Lo Mori'. Vivekananda also composed music for the play 'Chaitanya Leela' directed by legendary dramatist and the father of Bengali theatre Girish Chandra Ghosh. Eminent Hindustani Classical musician of Gwalior Gharana Pandit Raamkrishnabuwa Vaze (1858-1943) who had great contribution to Marathi Natyasangeet, was blessed by Swami Vivekananda. On the return trip from Nepal Pandit Vaze visited Swami Vivekananda's Bareilly Ashrama and accepted swamiji's hospitality. Soon they became great admirer of one another. Pandit Vaze reminisced "...Swamiji would get up early in the morning, tune his two Tanpuras (Indian drones) and sing a morning melody Ahir Bhairav, specifically a Tansen Dhrupad composition, to wake up the Ashramites. The days I spent in the Ashram were simply unforgettable"<sup>4</sup> Pandit Vaze recorded in his autobiography that he learned a dhrupad from Swami Vivekananda who was expert in different genre like khyal, tappa and devotional song also.<sup>5</sup>

Though it is coincidental but literally it was the artist identity of Vivekananda (then Narendranath, pre monastic name) that connected him with his spiritual guru Bhagwan Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa who is remembered as an incarnation of God of nineteenth century. In November 1881 Sri Ramakrishna came to the house of one of the very prominent householder devotee of him, Sri Surendranath Mitra, who was a close neighbour of Vivekananda. Narendranath was invited there to sing devotional songs in this festival and thus met his future guru Sri Ramakrishna.<sup>6</sup> Impressed by his music Ramkrishna invited Narendranath to Dakshineswar. Narendranath accepted the invitation and went to meet him at Dakshineswar which became the turning point of Narendranth's life. From life history of Sriramakrishna we all know that Sriramakrishna taught the devotional song 'Ma Twang Hi Tara...' to Narendranath. The songs often sung by Narendranath before his guru were,

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<sup>4</sup> Sangeet Kala Prakash Part II by Pandit Raamkrishnabuwa Vaze

<sup>5</sup> 'A musical on the life of Swami Vivekananda' published in Mumbai Mirror on 27<sup>th</sup> April, 2011

<sup>6</sup> 'Sangeet o Sriramakrishna' by Swami Divyananda

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‘Mohasinghasone Bosi’, ‘Tomarei Koriyachhi Jeeboner Dhruvatarā’, ‘E ki Sundoro Sobha’ etc. and Sri Ramakrishna often went to trance listening to Narendra’s music.<sup>7</sup>

Vivekananda, one of the greatest sons and a true patriot of India was gigantic multi-talented personality rich in versatility. He was a great philosopher, magnificent orator, an excellent writer, a notable social reformer with vast knowledge in Sanskrit, Bengali, English, French literature, eastern and western culture, and in various arts form of India and was equally able in theory as well as practical of different genres of music and an outstanding Pakhawaj player. Vivekananda wrote numerous articles, essays, poems in different languages and a few musical compositions also. From some authentic sources researchers found only five songs composed by Vivekananda. Among those there are one song written in Hindi language composed in Raga Multan or Raga Mishra Dhani (in different opinion), ‘Ta Theiya Ta Theiya Nache Bhola’, ‘Har Har har Bhootnath Pashupati’ which depicts the majesty of Lord Shiva, ‘Ek Roop Aroop Naam Boron’ which reflects the philosophy of the Nasadiya sukta also known as the hymn of creation from Rigveda composed in Bengali language set in Bada Hans Sarang raga (or Khamaj in different opinion) and Chautaal or Chaartaal, ‘Nahi Surya Nahi Jyoti’ which describes the ‘Pralaya’ or destruction according to Indan philosophy composed in Raga Bageshree and Jhaaptaal , a prayer song dedicated to his Guru Sri Ramakrishna comprises of four hymns in Sanskrit made in Dhruwad style, based on Raga Mishra Kalyan and tala Chautaal with Tala-ferta in Teentaal Dadra and layakari. This famous devotional song sung all over the world in the monasteries of sri Ramakrishna order depicts Vivekananda’s unique views on music that, “There is science in Dhruwad, Kheyal, etc., but it is in Kirtana, i.e. in Mathura and Viraha and other like compositions that there is real music – for there is feeling. Feeling is the soul, the secret of everything. There is more music in common people’s songs, and they should be collected together. The science of Dhruwad etc. applied to the music of Kirtana will produce the perfect music.”<sup>8</sup> Swami Ji composed many Sanskrit hymns also. In conversation with swami Shivananda Maharaj Vivekananda revealed his insight and in-depth knowledge about Indian as well as Western music.<sup>9</sup>

### **Sangeet Kalpataru:**

Vivekananda (then as Narendranath Dutta) at the age of 23 edited and compiled Bengali language song anthology ‘Sangeet Kalpataru’ on the request of his friend Sri Vaishnab Charan Basak. This book was first published in August- September, 1887 from Arya Pustakalaya, 118 Upper Chitpur, Calcutta.<sup>10</sup> In the preface of this book Vivekanand thanked Sourindra Mohan Tagore, leading educationists, musicologists and patron of Indian music, who played a leading role in spreading music education among common people, which revealed Vivekananda’s deep knowledge in music and awareness of social responsibility. In the first part of the book there was an article named ‘Sangeet o Vadya’, where Vivekananda

<sup>7</sup> ‘Point of Contact’ - The Statesman, [www.thestatesman.com](http://www.thestatesman.com)

<sup>8</sup> ‘The Complete works of Swami Vivekananda’ by Swami Vivekananda, Volume7, Notes of Class Talks And Lectures

<sup>9</sup> ‘SwamiVivekananda-The Artist’ by Dr. Sudhish Chandra Banerjee.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Swami Vivekananda o Sangeet Kalpataru’ by Swami Prajnanananda.

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penned many extensive writings on different aspects of music, description of different musical instruments like Veena, Tanpura, Esraaj, Violin, Mridang, Pakhawaj, Tabla etc, in details with reference to ancient historical account, various styles of Indian music such as Dhrupad, Khayal, Tappa etc., description of different rhythms with many self-composed formations, elaborate explanation of Raga-Ragini system, scientific explanation of acoustics of music. At the end of the first part he wrote Bol-Bani of different taals like 8 Bol-Parans in Dhamar Taal, 15 Bol-Parans in Adachoutaal, 9 Bol-Parans in Teentaal, 13 in Surfaaktaal, 16 in Addhataal, 9 in Jhaaptaal, 8 in Tiwattaal. In the second part of the book Vivekananda compiled various kinds of songs such as devotional, mythological, national, social, love songs etc. of the then noted music composers. According to Swami Sarvagananda Maharaj who re-edited this book in the year 2000, we came to know that there were 646 songs printed in the original books. In the third part there is short life histories of some stalwart poets and artists or some gigantic personalities like Wajid Ali Shah, Rammohan Roy, Girish Chandra Ghosh, Dwijendranath Tagore, Kabir, Chandi Das to name a few.

**Conclusion:**

The songs composed by Swami Vivekananda reflect the absolute ideal and beauty of Indian music. His extensive writings on music are priceless treasure not only for their literary richness but also to realize the very essence of Indian philosophy. Hope, his musical ideals inspire the music lovers and composers nation-wide.

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