

## On the Fusion of Theatre and Music

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### Abstract

*The article traces the origins of the intimate association between theatre and music, traditionally considered two separate arts. The roots of this unity are sought in physical anthropology, neuroscience, and literary records. The history of the unified growth of theatre and music as well as their later separation have been considered to indicate the influence of religious bias, social stratification, and political bias that have worked towards the polarization of theatre and music. The history of western Opera has been cited together with the achievement of Wagner, and the great theatrical experiments of Tagore in India as epochal instances of the reunification of the two.*



**Keywords:** Music, Opera, theatre, language, dramatic performance, tragedy.

### How to cite this paper:

Biswas, Tapu. "On the Fusion of Theatre and Music." *Sangeet Galaxy* 12(2): 25-32.  
[www.sangeetgalaxy.co.in](http://www.sangeetgalaxy.co.in).

We are trained to misconceive theatre as a compound of all the other arts: a mechanical idea that has been instilled into us through both the academic and extra-academic theories of the theatre. For example, Wikipedia describes Opera as:

Such a "work" (the literal translation of the Italian word "opera") is typically a *collaboration* between a composer and a librettist and *incorporates* a number of the performing arts, such as acting, scenery, costume, and sometimes dance or ballet. (s.v., 'Opera', Wikipedia; italics added)

But this is actually the reverse of the truth. There are strong reasons to suppose that theatre as a dramatic performance in the shape of rituals was the original art form or 'work' (Gk. *dran* (do) > *dromena* > drama; Latin *opus* > opera = work) from which all the other arts ramified into specialized activities of several kinds, such as dance, mime, storytelling, singing, etc. Tribal ritual observances all over the world testify to this fact: the more primitive the tribal

society, the more the individual arts fade into insignificance. But theatrical performance remains. Interestingly enough, music too always remains. It is the permanent companion of ritual or religious performance. We know of no culture without a language but seldom remind ourselves that the same is equally true of music. No culture has yet been observed that does not have its music. Both are fundamental expressions of the same human psyche.

Music, whether vocal, instrumental, percussive, or a combination of these, invariably accompanies primitive ritual, lifting it above the level of mundane reality. And this gives rise to the speculation as to whether our ritualistic drive does not obligatorily express itself through the dual modes of music and language. For, whether we find it comfortable or not, human beings are as ritualistic as any other animal. Sumner's whole study on folkways could be cited as supportive evidence here. As Susan Langer states more comprehensively:

Human life is shot through and through with ritual... It is an intricate fabric of ritual and rite, of knowledge and religion, prose and poetry, fact and dream... Ritual, like art, is essentially the active termination of a symbolic transformation of experience. It is born in the cortex, not in the 'old brain;' but it is born of an elementary need of that organ, once the organ has grown to human estate (Langer 1951, 201).

Indeed, Paul MacLean has identified the seat of ritualistic behaviour in the R-complex (the reptilian complex) situated deep within our brain, which in turn gave rise to Carl Sagan's speculation about whether symbolic thinking itself is not, after all, an inheritance from our reptile ancestors.

We do not directly know if the Neolithic cave-dwellers also sang as they painted; but it is reasonable at least to suppose that their ritual performances were sung out verbally; that words, music, and activity became one in the ritual observance. The left temporal endocranial depression in their skulls as well as in the *Homo Habilis* (Holloway 1966) strongly indicates a swell in the Broca's area in their brain, and therefore the presence of linguistic capabilities. But for the right hemisphere of the brain, alas, there is no corresponding physical indication—neither in theirs nor in ours. From a physiognomic point of view, therefore, we cannot establish the musical capabilities of the primitive man. However, other physical evidence exists. The 35,000 - 43,000 years old Upper Palaeolithic ivory and bone flutes and the ancient bird-bone flute from prehistoric Neolithic burial in China (circa 7000 BCE) are proof of prehistoric musical practice and its ritual value. (Conrad et al 2009, 737-40). Recorded evidence of music in cuneiform goes back to 3000 B.C.E. Sumer.

Performance, subsuming music, is certainly the oldest form of cultural activity, but its origins are obscure. Sceptics regard the incidence of 'cultural sparks' occurring around the middle-upper Palaeolithic times, as theorized by Mithen, to be as speculative as Nietzsche's 'metaphysical miracle of the Hellenic will' (Nietzsche 1910, 951); but it is at least probable that by 50,000 to 40,000 years ago, human understanding of tool-making, of the forces of nature, of societal framework, and above all of language, had opened the door to a cultural flowering in which religion, science, and the arts existed together to create a comprehensive and abstract expression, however rudimentary, of human existence.

In historic times we find performances— epic, tragedy, or comedy, necessarily accompanied by music. For the Greeks, inspiration came from the Muses and therefore was called *mousiki*, from which we derive the word ‘music’. Dramatic performances, developed from rituals, were necessarily accompanied by music. In fact, Ridgeway’s theory of the origins of tragedy convincingly argues that tragedy arose not from dithyramps, but from hero-legends sung (perhaps also enacted) at the tombs of the heroes. In a parallel view, orthodox theorists also maintain that it developed from choric songs (*tragoidia* or ‘goat-song’, although the etymology has been questioned by such stalwarts as Jane Harrison [Harrison 1980, 420]) sung during the Dionysian festivals in Athens. Either way, music seems to have been the obligatory accompaniment to performances: *epos* (epic poetry, which Plato held to be one of the tragic forms) was certainly sung, and music seems to have been inextricably joined to, in fact, unified with, drama since the beginning. However, as analytical rationalism took over human thought processes, they appeared to our fractured sensibility as segregated elements brought together at the will of the individual artist. As Aristotle notes in the *Poetics* at 1447b:

There are, lastly, certain other arts, which combine all the means so far mentioned: rhythm, melody, and verse. Thus, we have dithyrambic and nomic poetry, tragedy, and comedy; with this difference, however, the three kinds of means are in some of them all employed together, and in others brought in separately, one after the other. (Bywater 1920, p.24)

Or more cryptically in a more recent translation:

There are however some arts that use all the ‘matters’ we have been discussing— rhythm, song, and verse: for example, the composing of dithyramps and nomes, and the arts of tragedy and comedy. (Whalley 1997, 51)

But Aristotle’s definition of Tragedy at *Poetics* Ch. 6 suggests that the end of a tragic performance is to affect a *katharsis* in the minds of the spectators. He, infamously, does not explain what *katharsis* is; but our focus here is not on the explanation of the term, but on the fact that he had considered it to be the virtual *telos* of tragedy. In *Politics*, he had promised us a detailed discussion of the phenomenon in the projected discussion of theatre work (the *Poetics*); but he fails to do so, giving rise to no end of speculation as to its nature— including that of Petrusevsky, who concluded that *katharsis* in the *Poetics*, if Aristotle had it in his mind at all, could only have referred to *music* in tragedy.

What Aristotle says in the *Politics*, however, is significant for our purposes here:

Feelings such as pity and fear, or, again, enthusiasm, exist very strongly in some souls, and have more or less influence overall. Some persons fall into a religious frenzy, which we see as a result of the sacred melodies— when they have used the melodies that excite the soul to mystic frenzy— restored as though they had found healing and [*katharsis*]. Those who are influenced by pity or fear, and every emotional nature, must have a like experience, and others in so far as each is susceptible to such emotions, and all are in a manner [*katharsized*] and their souls lightened and delighted. The melodies of

[*katharsis*] likewise give an innocent pleasure to mankind. Such are the harmonies and the melodies in which those who perform music at the theatre should be invited to compete. ...

The Phrygian is to the modes what the flute is to musical instruments— both of them are exciting and emotional. [*Poiesis*] proves this, for Bacchic frenzy and all similar emotions are most suitably expressed by the flute, and are better set to the Phrygian than to any other mode. The dithyramb, for example, is acknowledged to be Phrygian ... (*Politics* 1342a, trans Jowett [with *katharsis* substituted for ‘purge,’ ‘purged,’ etc, and *poiesis* for ‘poetry’. *Poiesis* here should be taken as ‘theatre-work’])

This clearly implies that the essence of tragic experience lay in music, rather than in the causal concatenation of events or the action (*praxis*) of a play (which in Aristotle is declaredly the essence of dramaturgy). Therefore, in Aristotle’s theory itself we find a duality inherent in theatre work: a logical, causal framework of rationality containing its own opposite: an emotive, irrational inspiration. Or we might say that while Aristotle stressed causality in the structuring of the verbal part of drama, he relied on its non-verbal or musical character to communicate its effect to the spectators: that the logical aspect of theatre relates to the author and the text, and the emotive appeal to the audience and the performance.

In the olden days theatre was invariably sung. The Greeks had their own scheme of vocal acting modes: the *kataloge*, *parakataloge*, *kommoi*, and *monodia*, framed by and interwoven by the ubiquitous Chorus with its *parodos*, *strophe*, and *antistrophe* etc. Greek tragedy was, in its origin as well as in later practice, a Choral song-and-dance presentation performed close to the audience and aimed at stirring up their emotion to effect a kind of mental release.

Vitruvius in his *Architecture* suggested that the Greeks installed metal vases in their *theatre* to resonate to their actors’ voice, and advised:

When the theatres are built of solid materials like masonry, stone, or marble, which cannot be resonant, then the principles of the *echea* [sounders] must be applied (Pollio 1914, V, v.).

The idea was to install a number of (13, 26, or 39) metal vessels shaped and honed to resonate to a specific series of notes, and depend upon them to resonate to the actors’ voice as he spoke. But this speaks of an acting style totally different from what we expect in modern times. A modern actor’s speaking voice in a non-operatic play exploits an intricate range of frequencies within a limited range which do not follow musically regulated notes at all; and one cannot really set up an infinite number of vases to resonate to them. But whether the Greeks actually set up the tantalizing *echea* or not, Vitruvius’ suggestions for the Roman stage are clear enough:

If the theatre be rather large, let its height be divided into four parts, so that three horizontal ranges of niches may be marked out and constructed: one for the *enharmonic*, another for the *chromatic*, and the third for the *diatonic* system (Pollio 1914, V, v.; italics added).

It will be evident from this that not only the Greeks, but Romans too actually *sang* out their dialogues.

Aristotle insisted on the establishment of causal links in the development of the action on the stage, and rated the episodic plot lowest among the tragic constructions. On the other hand, music has no inherent cause-and-effect chain, as the reputedly causation-oriented Aristotelian drama does. No part of a musical composition is actually ‘caused’ by what went before: it is merely propelled forward existentially by what went before it; and in this it is representative of the flow of emotions in us; it is pure experience.

Action, the essence of drama, exists as flux, as does music: both of them are ‘flows,’ symbolic of existence itself. This was the reason why Nietzsche, who glorified music in his *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*, said that we can break free of the chain of rationality through music. And this was the reason why music was indispensable in ritual theatre. It was the catalyst between the experiences of the performer-shaman and that of the members of the community: the witnesses to the ritual. It transformed the shaman’s mystic experiences into an existential reality for them.

Again, emotions aroused by music are not case-specific or individual-specific. They have a common ground in humankind. Pathos or suspense in music does not arise from a specific case, nor are they valid for only one individual. They are equally effective for all (the reason why film music is often plagiarised as background music for theatre by less prosperous theatre groups). But the real problem with music is that it is not amenable to verbal explication. To explain verbally what a piece of music conveys is like trying to make an artist paint a portrait by listening to a verbal description of the subject. One can, of course, whip up a dust-storm of words, trying to sound profound:

No doubt composers sometimes express their feelings in what they write, but they do so not by conveying what they feel to, or betraying it in, the music but, instead, by creating music with an expressive character that independently matches what they are inclined to feel. (Davies 2005, 11)

But as the dust settles, we realize that what this author means is the public platitude that the composer objectifies his feelings in his composition. Here is another expert’s deliberation on the dilemma of music:

Why do listeners enjoy and revisit works that, on their own account, incline them to feel sad? (Cook 2000, 178)

—which is simply a rephrasing of the age-old conundrum: Why do we go to see such a painful thing as a tragedy? Why should tragedy be valued above all the other forms of drama? The answer lies within our brains: music is processed in the right (holistic) hemisphere of our brain which has a ‘dark’ or ‘sinister’ ‘personality’ (Trotter, 1974) that takes pleasure in those experiences which are normally considered undesirable, unpleasant, or even painful. Experiments with Dimond’s extraordinary contraption— contact lenses that can show films to either the left or the right hemispheres in split-brain patients— have proved that the right

hemisphere bears the responsibility for the darker, more painful aspects of human emotions, while the left sees the world in easy-going, humorous terms (Dimond and Farrington 1977, 255-60; Dimond, Farrington, and Johnson 1976, 690-92). Dimond also locates the seat of 'values' in the right brain (Dimond and Farrington 1977), which supplies us with a neurological cause for the high value we place on both unhappy drama and unhappy music.

Without delving further into obscurities and perplexities propagated by such experts' comments as quoted earlier, we will simply posit the assumption that music is the complement of language— it is to the right brain what language is to the left. It is a way of intuiting the world around us and expressing it through a non-analytic way.

Throughout history, this non-rational character of music has elicited mutually exclusive responses from mankind: branding music either as demonic, or as divine. Interestingly, throughout the European Middle Ages, while formal church music was considered divine, music in its demonic character was associated with informal or improvised popular music: more or less at par with theatre being banned as entertainment and its actors as individuals made into social outcasts. This attitude's antiquity seems impressive when it traces its origin back to Plato in his *Republic* Bk. X (397d-398a), where he prescribes banishment for the poets and actors, but permits singing odes and paeans in praise of the gods (and incidentally, characterizing nonverbal music as basically meaningless) in his ideal Republic. However, tables have at least been broadened in modern times, if not actually turned, since the Beatles music has been accepted into the University Music curricula of many universities. But this has not happened overnight. The major problem with admitting into pedagogy musical performance like that of The Rolling Stones is that it is less aural, and more theatrically visual: and without the theatricality of their presentation, their music may not necessarily possess much pedagogic substance. At least, it is certain to lack a substantial methodology.

And thus we return to our original queries about the relationship between music and theatre. Not only the Aristotelian 'action', but also action on the stage, exists in time, in flux, as does music. Perhaps this is why 'doing' has generally been accompanied by singing: the missing emotional charge in language complemented by that of music. The acme of this collaboration is the western Opera, with its fusion of drama and music. And its parallel in popular culture was the melodrama, where an emotional charge is virtually 'injected' into the visual experience through added melody, as in the Hollywood melodramatic cinema and its imitators all over the world.

When popular theatre and music were socially marginalized, Ben Jonson was reputedly laughed at for having his plays published as his '*Workes*'. But the tables were turned within a century with the rise of the Opera (opus > opera = 'work') as the dominant social art form. The dialectics of Opera, shaped historically by the oscillation of its preference between the demands of music and language, set in motion by Gluck, Verdi, and other giants of the Opera, presents an evolutionary picture through the centuries toward the complete fusion of words and music, culminating in the works of Richard Wagner in whom the composer and the librettist become one. Wagner rejected the name 'opera' in favour of the significant 'music drama'.

The fact that Bach in the eighteenth century was still uncomfortable about popular music, claiming the thoroughbass to be the foundation of music (Hammerstein1973), indicates the class struggle between the dominant and marginalized cultures continuing throughout the history of music (also illustrated earlier by our earlier reference to The Beatles). This becomes easier for us to understand in the context of our own theatre in our own country in the denigration of the rural indigenous theatre forms such as the musical *Jatra* in favour of the ‘educated’ entertainment provided by the western proscenium theatre. Here not religion, but urbanization, became and continues to be, the dividing line between the two.

Despite the State-sponsored paradox of injecting ‘folk elements’ into urban proscenium theatre, Bengal propagandist intellectualism from the ‘60s through the ‘80s had seen to it that any play that stressed song and music lost artistic credibility. The so-called ‘Marxist’ ideology disparaged the intrusion of emotion and feeling through music into the tough and class-struggle oriented approved ‘revolutionary’ theatre style— and that simultaneously with idolizing Brecht, who had made such powerful use of music in his plays. In fact, *The Threepenny Opera*, rendered into Bengali as *Tin Poysar Pala* by Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay, was a landmark production created outside the sphere of communist ideological influence.

This is all the more regrettable, and certainly an indication of the post-colonial hangover among the Bengal intelligentsia; since Tagore, the greatest genius born to Bengal, to India, and putatively to the world too, chose— indeed, created, after a lifelong experiment with various theatrical forms— the Dance Drama form as his final theatrical statement. It is fortunate, on the other hand, that theatre, both in West Bengal and in Bangladesh, is gradually moving towards the musical drama form as witnessed, for example, by *Madhab Malanchi Kainya* of Anya Theatre, and much more recently, by plays like *Malua Sundarir Pala* of Kalyani Kalamandam (dir. Dr. Santanu Das), to cite only two instances. Apart from the theoretical justifications presented in support of the continuation of such fusion, the fact that both these productions drew the public for considerably more than a decade each also provides some practical justification for the same.

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The present article developed out of several discussions with Prof. Dattatreya Dutt on and around his musical plays.

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