

RELIGION AND MUSIC.



A LECTURE

BY

ANNIE BESANT,

President of the Theosophical Society.



DELIVERED TO THE
SHRĪ PĀRTHASĀRATHI SVĀMI SABHĀ, TRIPPLICANE,
MADRAS,
ON MARCH 7TH, 1908.

THEOSOPHIST OFFICE,

ADYAR, MADRAS, S.

RELIGION AND MUSIC.



A LECTURE

BY

ANNIE BESANT,

President of the Theosophical Society.



DELIVERED TO THE
SHRĪ PĀRTHASĀRATHĪ SVĀMI SABHĀ, TRIPPLICANE,
MADRAS,
ON MARCH 7TH, 1908.

THEOSOPHIST OFFICE,
ADYAR, MADRAS, S.

Adyar Library
P* 820.8 APL
7

PRINTED BY ANNIE BESANT, AT THE VASANTA PRESS, ADYAR, MADRAS.

ADYAR LIBRARY
41822

29.10.14

RELIGION AND MUSIC.

FRIENDS :

I have been asked to speak to you this evening, at your Anniversary Meeting, on a subject which, amid all the diversity of topics on which I have lectured, has never been given to me before. It is "Religion and Music". Now as regards music, I cannot speak to you as a serious student of that royal and beautiful Art, for although, like most cultured women of my race, I was trained to some degree in music in my girlhood, and I also belonged to a family several members of which were competent musicians, my own stormy and difficult life has not been one in which I could possibly carry on the pursuit of that exacting art, an art which is also a science. To be a master in music, both in its theory and its execution, demands the whole devotion of a life, and my life has been given to other aims, dedicated to other objects. Music is verily an expression of the Divine Beauty, and is a worthy object for the study of a life-time; but by me, who am only a worshipper of the Beautiful, and not one of its consecrated Priesthood, no exposition of it as an art or as a science can be made. I must consider it from the standpoint of the Occultist, not from that of the Artist, and must ask you to look at it with me from that standpoint this evening, alien as it may be from your usual pursuits.

Why does music exercise so great an influence over the passions and the emotions of man? Why is it that religion has ever found in music one of its strongest helpers, one of its most inspiring agencies? Why is it that in some of its most intellectual functions, such as meditation, music—addressed especially to the emotions as it is—is found to be most useful, at least as a preliminary exercise, and seems to enable the mind to rise from the physical plane, and to soar upwards into the higher regions of consciousness, more easily than would be possible without its aid? In every religion this use of music is to be found. It matters not whether you travel in the East or in the West, the same thing is found: everywhere music forms an essential part of religious ceremonies and services. Music in the West has gone along lines very different from those that it has followed in the East; it has appealed to the passions and the emotions more than to the really spiritual part of man's nature; none the less it plays a predominant part in the highest religious functions in the West. It is noticeable that in the Mass, the central act of Christian worship, some of the cadences that are used have come down from a far-off antiquity. I am not now speaking of the magnificent modern music with which the great musicians have embroidered this sacred rite, but of the cadences of the old "Plain Song," the strong full notes that have come down from an immemorial past. In some of the Russian sacred music, I am told, as found in the Greek Church, there are cadences which have been borrowed from the Hebrews, and if we ask the Hebrews whence

came these cadences, they will tell you that they have come down from the early days of their race, and that the knowledge of them was ever restricted within a certain family of the tribe of Levi, who had received them from the early prophets of their tribe, great seers and knowers of divine things; and they say that there are some cadences, most precious of all, which are never allowed to go outside that family, and which are only rarely chanted in religious ceremonies of special importance by the members of that family, who have been trained in the peculiar intonations which are used. These are truly mantras in the ancient Hebrew tongue, and they have come down from a vast antiquity, the Hebrew people being one of the most ancient of civilised races. They might trace their antiquity back to a past in comparison with which the dates of their scriptures are but as yesterday. Long long before the time given in those scriptures, the Hebrews were a family of that ancient scientific race which so strongly influenced Persia in the days when Persia followed the religion of Irān. In those days the Hebrews existed, and long before that again, tracing ever backwards to the time when a vast continent stretched where now the Atlantic rolls. In that far-off Atlantean time the Hebrew race had its birth, and its home was in the Atlantean world, and there you find the birthplace also of these strange sequences of musical notes, that produce the most extraordinary results on the physical bodies of the hearers. They shake the whole frame, rousing a strong and almost uncontrollable emotion. I have heard that the only other

people who have a knowledge of these peculiar cadences are the ancient Chinese, again a people who have behind them a practically illimitable past, and who are likewise children of the Fourth Root-Race. The modern Chinese music is of a very peculiar kind, but entirely different. The music is not only produced by the fingers, as on a tom-tom, or the breath, as in a flute or other wind instrument. But they use also various instruments in two pieces, like a bow and a violin, but made of the same material. Thus, there may be a sort of fiddle of wood without any strings, played on with a bow equally of wood, and without strings. Or a similar instrument of metal, with a metal bow. You might think that from such instruments nothing could be produced except scratches, and squeaks, and scrapes, but I can assure you that it is not so. Once when I was in San Francisco, California, I was taken to a Chinese theatre, where a very good Chinese company was playing a drama. It is a compliment in a Chinese theatre to be placed on the stage, and thither were we conducted; for the observer the position has this advantage, that he at once sees the drama and observes its effect upon the audience; and never shall I forget that immense theatre, crammed from floor to ceiling with intent Chinese faces, fixed with absorbing interest on the play. Here I had the opportunity of observing closely these strange instruments, wood on wood, metal and metal. Strange and weird were the effects. When, during the play, there was a scene of violence, the crashing out of these instruments had a most poignant effect on the emotions, and one could see a

wave thrill over the watching faces. It became like some awful nightmare, that sea of faces, worked on by those strange and moving sounds. On myself, they produced a curious feeling of disturbance, a certain physical distress and discomfort which I have never found produced by any other kind of music; it was not that they were noisy; the great clash of the *Araji* produces a much larger bulk, if the expression may be allowed, of sound; it was something poignant, dissociative, rending, tearing. The notes were musical, full and strong, but they seemed to have some explosive force within the body after they had pierced their way in—explosive bullets of sound, so to say.

Both in Chinese and Hebrew music, as in Hindū, the intervals between the notes are much less than in western. A chromatic scale in the West gives the limits on a western piano; in the East, many notes are interposed, and the gradations are so fine as to be indistinguishable to a western ear until it is trained to hear them; hence Indian musicians are often accused of being 'flat,' 'out of tune,' by the western stranger, while they are producing thrills of joy among their compatriots, sheer gasps of pleasure over the exquisitely fine gradations produced by the skilled voice or fingers. The Indian ear by long heredity has been evolved to appreciate these minute gradations of sound, as the eye of the Kashmīri and Persian weaver has been evolved to perceive *nuances* of color to which other eyes are blind. I presume that the Indian ear has thus become a more finally organised sound-receiver than the European, and it may be that

clairvoyant investigation would find it more minutely specialised.

There is another fundamental difference between eastern and western music; eastern music is a succession of notes, a melody, while western music consists of notes played simultaneously, and yielding harmony. The one, as it rises, becomes more subtly divided, more ethereal and elusive; the other, as it rises, becomes more massive, more splendid in complexity of blended sounds. Harmony, to the western ear, is the great inspirer of emotion, many notes sounding out together in a chord, the relation of each chord to its fellows being regulated by the strictest rules. Harmony is a science, and a difficult science, and a man who is a master of it has to know every note in relation to other notes, and to blend the notes in such a way and in such a sequence that the ear is utterly satisfied and content with the whole complicated mass of sounds. If a discord is introduced, as it often is, to make the chord yet richer, then it must ever be resolved, so that the momentary shock to the ear is followed by a yet more exquisite delight. Two notes that, apart from all others, would cause you to stop your ears if struck together, scientifically dealt with yield a keener pleasure. The discord must never be left a discord, it must not close the phrase; it must be resolved into a harmonious chord, and add a new joy.

Nature, we find, in the composing of her music, knows well this value of the discord, and ever finally resolves it in a perfect chord. Although human nature is a higher product than animal nature, we

see in its beginnings a disorder which among animals is never found. The growing will of man introduces clash and discord into the harmony of nature, asserting itself aggressively and defiantly against the order of the whole, but out of that stormy whirlpool of conflicting human wills shall emerge the strong current of unified wills in harmony with the divine, and out of the human discords shall come a note richer and fuller than the monochord of non-human nature could produce.

In the West, perhaps because natures there are more combative, more turbulent, more wilful, more aggressive, all these tumultuous qualities impress themselves on western music, and there are Niagara cascades of sounds, whirlpools and rapids of chords, storms of thunderous instrumental clashings, and then finally, when the breath is well-nigh strangled in the rushing waves of sounds, one is flung panting on to a flower-sprinkled meadow of peace, and a melody exquisite, celestial, sweet, breaths a harmony more tender and serene than eastern music knows. Another marked thing in western music is that it stirs the passions, sometimes masters the intellect, but it does not touch the spiritual notes, which often thrill the nerves to a pleasure that touches pain in its keenness, well-known in Indian music. And I have sometimes noticed that where the Indian music is appealing to the passion of love, where the songs are love-songs, even then they tend to pass beyond the passional into the emotional, from the coarser to the subtler forms of the master-desire. The music stirs the more

delicate shades of love, the finer chords, the unsatisfied yearning of it, the ever-frustrated longing for utter identity, so that it is not an appeal to passion but rather of lifting passion into emotion, purifying and refining, with an ever elusive suggestion of the underlying meanings of the physical, of the regions where Spirit is the lover, where God is the beloved.

There is a well-known use of music for the rousing of passion, alike in East and West, the use which is made of it in war. We read in the *Bhagavad-Gītā* of the use of the conch by the leaders in the great battle, sending out the conch-note like a lion's roar, and how the mighty sounds enheartened the combatants, ringing across the embattled hosts in challenge and reply. How far in later times in the East music was used by contending armies to rouse the passions and to drive men mad with furious excitement, I do not know, for unfortunately I am not well read in the story of your later part. But in Europe music is continually used in war, to stir men up to deeds of desperate valor when the pulses are throbbing wildly under the piercing notes of the war-music. You will have heard of the Highlanders and their bag-pipes, even if you do not happen to have seen and heard them over here. The Highland bag-pipe has a strange long droning throbbing note which is continuous, like the undernote kept sounding from the *vinā*, but of a quite different character. Woven on this continuous muffled growl, embroidered on that, is a tremendous cataract-like medley of shrieks and screams, yells and shouts, ear-piercing but thrilling the passions, and right into

the hail of bullets, beside or behind the charging men, goes the Highland piper with his bag-pipes, the sounds rising high above the rattle of rifles, the tramp of the cavalry. Where the skirl of the pipes is heard, the men will go to the death, their blood on fire, their hearts leaping in reply. Sometimes the piper may be a lad, scarce strong enough to fight, but able to blow the pipes, and proud indeed is the boy-piper who marches into battle and sends ringing out over his elders' heads the war-clarion cry that every Highlander knows. Some of you may have read the pathetic story, in the war in South Africa, of a lad only sixteen years of age, who was struck down, his legs broken, and who got his comrades to prop him up against a rock, and who, through the agony which ended in death, blew the bag-pipes for his regiment and sent it onwards to victory. The pipes lift the Highlander into his stormiest frenzy of courage, so mighty is the power of their music on the passions.

Let us pass on from war-music and pause a moment on the use of music in rousing another elemental passion—the passion of sexual desire, which in its higher form, refined into emotion, is love between man and woman. Like the raging fury of combat, it is simple, broad, massive, this great outrush of animal sexual passion. In many western operas, music is the expression and inspirer of passion, each containing love-songs, grosser or more delicate as the case may be, but stirring desire as a passion rather than love as an emotion. If you watch the effort of such music on the audience you will see that a certain excitement begins to stir the blood; cheeks flush,

eyes sparkle, the whole body thrills. Hence many people say, and say rightly, that it is not wise to take the young to operas, because it stirs passion, and ere they are aware of it, the music has roused passionate feeling without their will or consent. Wise fathers and mothers keep young lads and young girls away from the operas that deal with love as a passion, because such music stirs the passional nature, and may rouse an excitement which slips easily into evil act. But there are other operas wherein the theme is not animal passion but human love, love in its higher and nobler forms, love which flowers into self-sacrifice, for self-sacrifice is the natural blossom from the root of love. In one of the earlier operas of Wagner, *The Flying Dutchman*, music is used for the expression of such love. Let me outline the story, as it is probably unfamiliar to you. The Flying Dutchman is a man who has done much evil, and he is condemned to live in the body, century after century, as captain of a vessel which brings misfortune in its wake. Never might he be set free from the burden of the body and find rest through its death, until a woman should love him faithfully, even to death. A love that was self-sacrifice might alone redeem him. He meets a girl whom he had seen in dream, a girl who had been fascinated by the story of the curse upon him, the story of his well-nigh irretrievable sorrow and doom. In the sanctuary of her pure heart, she had vowed herself to his redeeming, praying that she might meet him, and vowing that if they met she would be faithful to him unto death, and thus

lift the curse of woful life that was upon him. There is a youth who loves her passionately, and woos her as bride, but steadfastly and gently she puts aside the love that offers her a happy home and the protection of a husband, and, fixing her heart on the supreme Love, she gives her maiden love to this miserable despairing soul that only by love may find redemption. The Flying Dutchman is won by the purity and sweetness of the young girl, and feels his hard heart melting under the gentle sunshine of her pure tenderness; but he hears of the wooing of his younger rival, and fearing that his youth may win the maiden's love, he is furiously angry, maddened by the fear of losing his new born hope of freedom. Then, purified by his love, he rises above selfishness into self-sacrifice, determines to set the girl free from her vow to save him, and to yield her to the fairer life opening before her; he renounces the salvation tendered him by her love, and leaps on board his ship, sets sail and leaves the shore. The girl breaks from the detaining grasp of the man who fain would wed her, rushes towards the departing ship, and flings herself into the sea, that her love, faithful unto death, may save the despairing soul. The music which has expressed the purity of love, its anguish, its renunciation, its despair, rises higher and higher, becomes ever more poignant, more triumphant, until the clouds roll ascender and the love that redeemed and the sorrow which renounced are seen together in heaven, and the final burst of melody tells of the joy that followed pain. Where music illustrates such a theme, and makes all hearts throb

responsive to the sentiments portrayed by the singers, it can but purify and refine the emotions of all who listen. Such music ever renders more compelling the inspiration of the legends of the elder time, the themes that have for their central ideas Love, Sacrifice and Death.

Now to what part of man's nature does such music appeal, for it certainly does not rouse passion, but rather lifts man above it? Beyond your dense physical body—the Sthūla Sharīra—is your subtle body—the Sūkṣhma Sharīra—a body made of matter finer than the physical, matter which vibrates in shorter wave-lengths, swifter repetitions, than those of the grosser, coarser, physical material. Into this subtler body enter various grades of the subtle matter—for subtle matter has its grades just as grosser matter has its solids, liquids, gases, ethers. These various grades answer to the waves caused by the vibrations that are musical notes, and the coarser grades answering to the vibrations that express animal desire, and the finer to those that express human love. As vibrations of matter and changes in consciousness correspond, each to each, the vibrations of the subtle matter are answered by changes in the embodied consciousness, and the hearer feels the passions, the emotions, represented by the music. Hence the power of music to stir up passions and emotions in the hearer, and this play of vibrations may be watched by the evolved vision, while the physical ear is responding to the vibrations in the coarser matter of the gases which form the air. Great masses of vibrations are formed by many notes

struck together, as by the chords of western music, and these are reproduced chiefly by the coarser, grades of matter in the subtle body, while single sweet or piercing notes are more readily answered by the finer grades.

Let us pause for a moment on the meaning of a 'note.' What is the difference between a 'note' and a 'noise'? Any schoolboy will tell you that a 'noise' is made by a number of irregular vibrations, clashing and intermingling, and throwing the drum of the ear into irregular tumultuous motions. A 'note' is composed of rhythmical vibrations, moving ever at the same rate with a similar wave-length. A large number of these blend within the ear, and a similar number of vibrations gives always the same note. Outside the ear and inside the ear these are vibrations, movements of matter. They become sound only when they reach the consciousness through the vibrations of the subtle body. Listen to a siren. As the air passes through the holes, you hear at first only puffs of air. As the disk revolves more rapidly, the puffs coalesce into a low note. As it revolves faster and faster, the note becomes higher and higher, until it reaches the keenest, shrillest sound. As it revolves yet more rapidly there comes silence; the power of the ear to answer is outraced. At first the ear could distinguish puff from puff; then its capacity to distinguish the shortening intervals between the puffs being insufficient, the puffs blended, and a 'note' was heard. As the disk whirled more and more swiftly, there were more and more vibrations crowded into a second of time, and thus the note be-

comes higher and higher until it shrilled into silence. And why into silence? Because the ear could no longer answer to and reproduce the vibrations, and although they rent the atmosphere they were inaudible to us. If the experiment be made before a crowd of persons, it is found that some can answer to the quickening throbs longer than can others, so that some are in silence while others are hearing a shrill note.

As the more delicate and finer sequences of sounds are produced in music, the subtle body is affected in its finer grades of matter, and similarly more massive harmonies affect the coarser grades. Hence, when this is thoroughly understood, as by a trained occultist, the vibrations can be chosen with reference to the results they produce, and we have the science of mantras, while people of lesser knowledge can produce lesser results. Emotions of any grade can thus be initiated or stimulated, and as the music is made to express finer and finer emotions, especially those of self-sacrificing love and self-surrendering devotion, responsive, sympathetic thrillings may be set up in the buddhic body—the *Anandamayakosha*—and, lifted on the wings of the vibrations that are music, a man may reach the threshold of the spiritual world. Thus music subserves religion both in eastern and in western lands.

In the West, the greatest musicians have strained their powers to express in sequences of sounds the highest emotions of man, and if you have ever the opportunity of listening to one of the Masses written by the noblest western masters of the divine art, you will find that, though you may be ignorant of Latin

and unaccustomed to the use of choirs, the charm of the music will gradually steal over you, you will feel soothed and quieted, apt for meditation, and perhaps your eyes will fill with tears. What is going on? The music is sobbing, wailing, weeping, and the emotions it portrays stir your heart. Penitence is being expressed for sins committed, mercy is being implored for wrongs done. With the words, if you understood them, you might have scant sympathy, but the music of the *Qui tollis* of the *Miserere*, will fill your eyes with tears, will stir your heart to, beating in unison with their pathos. Then, stealing over the expression of sorrow will come a whispering strain that tells of pardon and of peace, and the delicate melody which soothes the emotion of anguish is pregnant with the sense of divine forgiveness, of reconciliation and of love. Then comes a more joyous strain, as the divine Messenger descends, bringing benediction, peace and bliss, and then a sublime cry to the people to lift up their hearts to the Lord, to prepare for the solemn sacrament of the altar, for the consecration through which Deity descends to His children. Every gradation of music is arranged to arouse the right feeling in the hearts of the worshippers. The cultured and refined, the ignorant peasantry and the market women, all kneel in the same congregation, feeling similar feelings, thrilling with similar emotions, each and all purified, strengthened, uplifted by the swelling music, which lifts them out of the sordid world, lifts them into the outer courts of the Temple.

I have not found in western music, however, strong and ennobling as it is, that peculiar and elusive power which in Hindū music predisposes to the higher forms of meditation, by which, as its own sounds sink into silence for the entranced mind and heart, the consciousness slips away from the body, leaving it cradled in the melody, and passes into the higher regions. There are delicate notes given out by the instruments which thrill softly out and cause subtlest vibrations in the higher bodies, till all sounds are left behind and spirit is set free. Those single delicate notes seem to have a power greater than any chord; the chord raises passion or emotion; these single notes thrill to spiritual ecstasy; the one predisposes to activity, the other to quiescence, to contemplation, to peace. This seems to me to be the greatest service that music can do to religion. For the difficulty met with in meditation is very largely a difficulty caused by the subtle body. Accustomed to respond continually to impacts from without, this body is ever vibrating and ever changing its vibrations. These vibrations bring about continual changes in consciousness, and these again re-act on the body. Religious music checks these movements, imposes its own vibrations on the body, and instead of the jangle that is noise there are the rhythmical vibrations of the music. Gradually the whole body is calmed, and held to these steady vibrations, and the calm is answered by the steadiness of the consciousness, responsive to its rhythmically vibrating vehicle. Thus by music can the subtle body be made a help to the steadying of consciousness instead of

being, as it usually is, a hindrance. This calming and steadying, then, is one of the services that music can render to meditation.

There is another, when we use the specialised form of music known as a manṭra. A manṭra is a sequence of sounds arranged so as to bring about a definite result. The manṭra has its Devata, and this Devata belongs to one of the hierarchies, each one of which has its own musical note, and the sequence is arranged in harmony with this. When the subtle body is made to vibrate according to this sequence, it is vibrating with the vibrations of the Devata, and thus is more susceptible to his influence, more open to receive impressions from him. A manṭra brings about mechanically with little difficulty a condition which is hard to reach in any other way, thus shortening the time of preparation and leaving more strength of mind and will for the proper work of meditation. Only the manṭra must be accurately chanted or recited. Full effect must be given to every note, whether sung aloud or within; the right sequence, the right cadence, must be employed. Every sequence, every cadence, has its own vibratory effect, and if you change these you change the effect; for the laws of sound are as inviolable as any other law of nature.

Another fact well known to most of you is that a general manṭra may be made more effective for an individual by prefixing to it a sequence of sounds called a *bija*, or seed. This must be given by some one versed in the science of vibrations, who is able to choose the sounds fitted to the individual, which will combine effectively with the sequence of the manṭra

and with the note of the individual. For each of us is ever sounding out his note, the totality of the vibrations of the super-subtle body. We send out that note constantly, mingled with the notes of the lower bodies, and the Devas hear them ever. The dull ears of earth cannot hear that ever-sounding note, but in the higher spheres it ever is ringing clearly, and we may sound out in our lower lives discordant jangles of mere noise, or music which harmonises with our true note, adding to the melodies of the worlds. As we progress in the spiritual life, the vibrations of all our bodies become more harmonious, more musical, and the notes we send out have fewer discords and add less to the noises, more to the music.

This fundamental note is the man's true sound, his true name. It is not the name of the passing personality, not such a name as Subbiah, or Govind, or Sheṣha, or Praṭāp. It is the name which is the same through the cycle of births and deaths, the name by which the Devas know us, the name to which we ever leap up in answer as it rings through space. It may be drowned to all save the keenest ears in the discords of passions, in the whirl of turbulent and irritable thoughts; but none the less is it ever sounding in the cave of the heart, and the true life is outbreathed in that note.

As we grow into spiritual reality, transcending the dissonance of the world in which we live, we are playing the true music, creating the true melody, and are summing up our being in one pure note with countless harmonious overtones. As the earthly

mantras aid in harmonising us, we are going towards the chanting that final mantra which shall be ours when the Spirit realises its freedom, and thus reaches the true liberation, the true mokṣha, the mantra which shall make our bodies impervious to the jangling noises of earth. Music will help you, if you choose it well; music will hinder you if you use it to stimulate the lower instead of the higher in you. knit religion to music, and music to religion, and then music will become more inspired, and religion more beautiful, until the highest music and the most spiritual religion will be the atmosphere in which you can most freely breathe. ✓

ADYAR LIBRARY