

Towards a Scientific Interpretation of the Theory of Rasa in Indian Classical Music

Authors : Ajmal Hussain

Abstract : In Indian music parlance, Rasa denotes a distinct aesthetic experience that builds up in the mind of the listeners while listening to a piece of Indian classical music. The distinction of the experience is rooted in the concept that it gives rise to an enhanced awareness about the Self or God and creates a mental state detached from mundane issues of everyday life. The theory of Rasa was initially proposed in the context of theatre but became a part of Indian musicological discourse roughly two thousand years ago, however, to this day, it remains shrouded in mystery due to its religious associations and connotations. This paper attempts to demystify the theory of Rasa in the light of available scientific knowledge fund particularly in Brain and Mind sciences. The paper initially describes the religious context of the theory of Rasa and then discusses its classical formulations by Bharata and Abhinavagupta including the steps and stages laid down by the latter to explain the creation of musical experience. The classical formulations are then interpreted with reference to the scientific knowledge fund about the human mind and mechanics of perception. The study uses the model of human mind as proposed by Portuguese-American neuroscientist Antonio Damasio in his theory 'A Nesting Principle'. On the basis of the findings by Damasio, the paper interprets the experience of Rasa from a scientific perspective and clarifies the sequence of steps and stages involved in the making of musical experience. The study concludes that although the classical formulations of Rasa identify key aspects of musical experience, the association of Rasa with religion is misleading. The association with religion does not depend upon musical stimulus but the intellectual orientation of the listener. It further establishes that the function of Rasa is more profound as, from an evolutionary perspective, it can be seen as a catalyst for higher consciousness.

Keywords : aesthetic, consciousness, music, Rasa

Conference Title : ICMS 2020 : International Conference on Music in Society

Conference Location : Vienna, Austria

Conference Dates : June 18-19, 2020