



Path and Purpose in a Raga

Steve Larson

University of Oregon

An issue of the /College Music Symposium/ dedicated to Robert Trotter includes an article by Trotter entitled "/Raga Puriya Kalyan/: Opening the Door to a Treasure." That article provides an excellent introduction to the style and cultural context of North Indian classical music and a brief analysis of its basic musical materials. Because the performance it analyzes (by Pandit Ravi Shankar) is short, engaging, and readily available, I feel it provides an excellent opportunity to explore the ways in which analysis based the theory of musical forces can illuminate a listener's experience of this recorded performance. My presentation offers a transcription into western musical notation of that performance as well as a transcription of Shankar's spoken introduction to the performance. I begin by observing that the transcription is essentially an analysis; making the transcription forces one to make choices, not only about what pitches are actually played, but also about how to notate what might be regarded as elaborations of more basic pitches (I avoid the word "ornament" for reasons that I will explain in my talk). I continue by observing that the transcription/analysis can be rendered in a series of levels, each showing how it may be regarded as a transformation (by elaboration) of a simpler level; the result resembles a Schenkerian analysis, and it allows me to talk about how my (admittedly western) hearing of the piece reflects aspects of the theory of musical forces. The theory of musical forces claims that experienced listeners of tonal music not only talk about that music in ways informed by their experience of physical motion, but also hear it as shaped by musical analogues of physical gravity, magnetism, and inertia. The theory goes on to suggest a series of questions that might allow us to test the degree to which its ideas may be relevant in the analysis of music of other world cultures. Thus, my presentation continues by sharing those questions, and suggesting some of the ways in which my analysis illuminates the potential value of those questions. I conclude by showing that the whole approach gains some credibility when we observe that my (essentially Schenkerian) analysis reveals that the underlying structure of Shankar's opening (its "alap") bears a remarkable resemblance to the specific patterns printed in published description of the characteristic melodic motions of this raga (its "calan").