

RABINDRANATH TAGORE

A Centenary Volume 1861-1961



The Real Rabindranath Tagore and his Music

TAGORE, Rabindranath Tagore was famous in France. But the idea people had of him was entirely artificial. A wonderful old man with a noble white beard, a biblical patriarch, perhaps somewhat solemn. Writer, philosopher and poet, bringing with him the very essence of poetry, but rigid in his solitude as if in an ivory tower.

When Tagore arrived in Paris, in a central, noisy hotel, surrounded at once by a fluttering swarm of frivolous, pretty young women whom he did not know how to avoid, he thought: 'There can be no peaceful contemplation in the West.'

But the East had not really met the West, for there were many of us even in the great city who lived outside the bustle.

And the real Tagore was yet to be seen.

I had had a fleeting glimpse of this real Tagore. I had sensed that the vital significance of Tagore's work was not just rhythmical language, verse; nor was it music without words; it was an inseparable union of both: song.

I had studied his songs with a view to publishing some of them.

I believed then, as I still believe, that Tagore's work was not detached from his environment. It does not lessen him, rather the opposite, to feel to what extent he was rooted in his country of origin, expressing it better than any of his fellow-countrymen, steeped in the long tradition of tangible and familiar mysticism (Bhakti, Chaitanya, Kabir, the Bauls, etc.).

As soon as one mentioned his songs to him, the real Tagore was revealed. Human, very human. Losing nothing of his admirable dignity but allowing an extreme sensitiveness full of reserve to appear. Sometimes a hint of quiet irony about himself. Mystical—one felt this intensely in his songs—but mystical without emphasis. An acute and real sense of a divine presence (no matter what name one gave it) infusing the everyday life of Bengal with poetic simplicity. A tender and restrained emotion when he sang under his breath as if lost in his song, marking the time with lightly snapping fingers. He had composed, he told me, many, very many songs. As soon as he composed a song, he entrusted it to the memory of his nephew, Dinendranath Tagore, for the musical notation used was a mere aid to memory and not enough to capture the subtleties of melody and style. He then forgot the song. This was necessary before he could compose others. So that when he tried to find an earlier song he had to ask his nephew to teach him his own creation. 'I have to submit to that injury,' he told me, and while saying that, an indescribable, slightly moved, ironic smile reappeared. How far we were from certain statues representing Tagore in all the cold majesty of a sage, formal and unbending, too much aware of his own worth! What

a false image! As soon as one talked to him about his songs it was as if he had left his beautiful white beard outside in the hall, so as to be himself.

And remembering the deep and penetrating charm of his songs when he sang them and hearing them to-day performed by students or on gramophone records and accompanied by several instruments, I am afraid, much afraid, lest we lose what is most precious in all he gave us, and which in certain interpretations has disappeared.

Hearing once at an Indian festival that song he had sung to me and which had become the national anthem, I did not get up. I did not recognize it. The delicate continuous line with its accents on 'victory' had become a military march, hammered out with a regular beat, its essence lost.

As often in Asiatic music, the songs of Tagore will not suffer harmonization. The most important things they offer, it seems to me, are continuity of melodic line, delicacy, suppleness, intervals other than those of the temperate scale, inflexion drawn out which melt into tenderness, nostalgia (of which Krishna's far-off flute is the poetic symbol). Everything which contributes to their value is destroyed if they are encased in the frame of too simple a rhythm, too much cut-up, with too insistent a beat, if they are made to become mechanical in order to give them emphasis and the false solemnity of certain stiff effigies of Tagore. Rendered this way, nothing of their original quality is left. They are no longer themselves, they are dead. And, in what I have had the occasion of hearing recently, this often happens.

It is thus my fervent hope that side by side with these unfortunate deformations due to Tagore's legend, a tradition will remain which will keep alive for us—sung by a single voice and practically without accompaniment—the tenderness, the supple, delicate and penetrating nostalgic charm of Tagore's real songs, perhaps the most precious, moving part of his work, for which I myself have nostalgic memories.