

The Sitar and the Academy: Teaching Traditional Music in a University Setting

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To my mind the principal challenge that teaching traditional Indian music poses to a University system is that of inculcating a sense of disciplined creativity in the student, the kind of creativity that will allow them to innovate within some traditional framework and make a distinct identity for themselves without destroying the framework itself. The main reason for adhering to a traditional framework is that Indian classical musical expression finds its highest outlet in the form of ragas or tonal structures that have some commonly agreed upon rules that all good classical music performers agree upon and observe in their own performances.

I would like to start therefore by trying to convey to you my sense of the notion of 'creativity', as it is commonly understood from the perspective of an Indian musician working with Indian Traditional Music, more specifically, in the framework of Indian Classical Music or *Hindustani Raga Music [HRM]*. To do this it may be useful to start by considering three notions, that to my mind, are closely related namely, 'beauty', 'imagination' and 'appreciation'.

Art, Beauty, Imagination and Appreciation

Art is interesting because it combines the familiar and the novel in surprising ways. We can sense *beauty* in a creation when it is different from our common experience and is emotionally or intellectually pleasing. *Imagination* comes from the interaction between our experiences of life and assimilated training. We *appreciate* a creation through our understanding of the art-medium, and our personal tastes as created through the experiences of life and education. In other words, judgments about beauty are inherently subjective. *Tagore* once wrote that 'AmAri chetonAr rong'e pAnnA holo shobuj, chuni uthlo rAngA hoye" ... emerald becomes green or ruby becomes red with the color of one's own consciousness¹. [Diamond Harbor Story]. This holds equally true when we consider music: As *Tagore* says, "ekA gAyoker nohe to gAn, gahite hobe dui-jane" ... the singer alone does not make the song, it must be made by singer and listener in concert.

Defining these concepts allows us to consider the following notion of creativity:

A creative musical imagination is one that creates and sustains a sense of beauty in the listener over the entire course of the performance.

And as *Tagore* alluded to, there must be a shared norm of beauty between the singer and the listener for what is imagined and executed as being beautiful to be heard and appreciated in the same manner. It is the role of any musical tradition to create this shared understanding and such is also the case with HRM.

I shall therefore try in what follows to share my understanding of the nature of creativity in the context of HRM and the challenges it poses to the Academy.

¹ Tagore Rabindranath, *Aami [Shyamali]*

Basic components of Raga Music

1. Medium [*Sound*]
2. Content [*'Tonal Structure' of a Raga*]

Tonal structure may be understood as the collection of basic raga components like the ascending and descending patterns, focal notes, phrasing rules and intonations. These key raga-indicators or rAga-lakshanas are quite prominently obvious when a raga is properly expressed. However, the reverse is not true: merely articulating the *lakshanas* does not constitute a proper raga presentation. Thus I find it useful to think of a raga as a 'tonal personality' with an inner life of its own that cannot be fully grasped by contemplating the prescribed lakshanas alone. []

3. Expression [Means of articulations with ornaments or *alamkaras* and speed and rhythm i.e., *laya* and *layakAri*]

However a raga performance or the creation of a Tonal Personality [Raga] is a synthesis of content and expression that requires much more than a mere mechanical articulation of content or a combination of content and rhythm. Rather it requires the skillful application of technique to create an emotional response.

How one creates the emotional response requires an understanding of the use of surprise and contrast to awaken the listener's sense of beauty. The ability to use the unexpected to surprise the listener is what I think of as creativity. Of course this requires the listener to have some sense of what is common and what is unexpected, but in the context of HRM as it is performed in India, I am going to take it as given that there exist a sufficiently large number of educated listeners (including other musicians) who can properly appreciate musical creativity.

The Role of the University - I

- Major objectives of music teaching in Indian universities are to create
 - Performers
 - Teachers
- The goal of teaching music theory, critical appreciation and aesthetics to the wider public and to train academicians is clearly widely accepted.
- What role can/should the University play in training performers? This is what I want to focus on for the rest of my talk.
- As I have suggested before, good performance requires the intelligent use of surprise which is achieved in HRM through understanding and mastery of a number of subtle elements such as:
 - Note application [*sthAyi*, *Arohi*, *avarohi* and *sancAri varnas*]
 - Utilization of appropriate micro-tones [*shruti*]
 - Phrase formation
 - Contextual utilization of ornaments
 - Sound dynamics
 - Using gross and subtle rhythmic variations ...

- Unfortunately, such training is hard to come by ... for economic and social reasons, good training is confined to family members and close confidants.
- Thus the average quality is not high even though the traditional system does produce some exceptional musicians of very high quality.
- Students flock to a small number of successful styles that are commercially dominant. Other styles even though aesthetically innovative and interesting may not survive the rough and tumble competition of the market.

The Role of the University - II

Given these problems, I believe the Academy has a vital role to play in the continued development of Hindustani Raga Music. I can think of at least four significant contributions that are of vital importance:

One

- University programs can make high quality training available by removing the economic self-interest of traditional teaching systems.

Two

- University programs can be open to everyone regardless of background or connections.

Three

- University programs can support/sustain a wider mix of styles/approaches.

Four

- University programs can allow for intelligent conversation and debate between theory, traditional practice and musical innovators.

ON PRODUCING TEACHERS

- Current university programs aptly address the making of teachers by
 - making available a considerable volume of musical content
 - providing a sound knowledge of music theory and grammar
 - providing both historical and current analytical perspectives for studying music
- University appointments now require a PhD for certain faculty appointments.
- In sum, the system successfully produces teachers who can teach other teachers and produce educated listeners.
- This is a positive development for the proper teaching of theory and aesthetics.

Analysis

Background and Context

- The original objective of institutional music programs was to propagate classical music among a wider cross-section of society to ensure the survival of the musical tradition. In other words, to produce a demand for music, not a supply of musicians.
- This led naturally to a focus on extensive exposure so as to cultivate a wide understanding of different musical forms and styles that one might hear.
- However such curricula were not designed to meet the need for intensive training in the finer aspects of performance that I have outlined above.
- In fact, it is quite possible to be a very successful professional Indian Classical musician with a limited repertory of ragas and talas, however what is essential is a mastery of the subtle aspects of music performance outlined above.

What do Indian Universities do?

The existing curricula at most Indian Universities offer:

- Adequate knowledge of
 - *Babat* in both common and rare *raga-s*
 - *Silsila*
 - Layakari
 - Talas both common and rare

What do Indian Universities do?

- Extensive exposure to the history of Indian music
- Some exposure to world music
- Some exposure to Acoustics and the Psychology of Music

What do WE do (in addition)?

In addition at RBU, to give students a sense for a wide range of musical expressions, we also expose them to different

- performance styles [e.g. dhrupad, khayal, thumri, tappa]
- traditions [Hindustani vs Karnatic] and
- media [vocal, instrumental and membranophones e.g. tabla, pakhawaj etc.]

Open Challenges

- Even though one stated objective of University music programs is to prepare music teachers, there is no standard pedagogy for performance teaching. Thus the level of teaching effectiveness varies considerably with teachers.
- There is a lack of documentation of various teaching approaches, particularly those that have been successful in producing many good performers.
- Even when there are excellent faculty who are both outstanding performers and have a good understanding of pedagogy time is a major constraint in any university curriculum.
- The types of students attracted to university programs may not always be the ones who are naturally inclined to be outstanding performers.

Some Developments Outside the Academy

- The gap is being partially bridged by some institutions like the Sangeet Research Academy, Kolkata, Dhrupad Kendra Bhopal or Kathak Kendra New Delhi that try and create a conservatory-like environment and adopt most of the elements of guru-shishya parampara (tradition).
- This is absorbing many talented students who can get performance training followed by exposure and promotion before audiences.
- However the theoretical aspects of a proper musical education are likely to challenge the approach and resources of these institutions. This may lead to undisciplined mutations.
- How successful these organizations will be over the long run and whether they will be stable remains to be seen.

Finally:

By way of conclusion I would like to summarize my arguments as follows:

1. The unfolding of creativity in a classical tradition such as Hindustani Raga Music depends on
 - a. the student's natural creativity
 - b. a sound knowledge of the traditional musical content and tools
 - c. a long and difficult process of assimilating the content and tools to form a natural style that combines both traditional form and the student's own unique personality
 - d. the availability of a suitable environment to nurture the foregoing.
2. The challenge before University Music Programs is to
 - a. provide outstanding performance teachers and effective pedagogies
 - b. allow for adequate time and attention to developing subtler aspects of performance skills

- c. nurture the process of synthesizing tradition, tools and personality to produce a mature musical mind.
3. Developing a more performance focused curriculum that will better meet the needs of students who wish to be performing musicians.
4. This will also have to be augmented with opportunities for students to perform in public and to place their ideas and creations within the main flow of musical conversation in the society at large.
5. In other words, Universities must understand the music market in which their students will have to survive and make a greater effort to help students gain a foothold in that arena.
6. Finally, the curriculum should also foster the development of personal and career management skills that allow students to better understand the larger social and economic environment in which they will pursue their careers.