

Towards an Indian Orchestra: Interview with Vishnudas Shirali

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Presented here is an edited transcript of the interview conducted on 12 March 1974 by B.C. Deva, then Assistant Secretary of the Sangeet Natak Akademi, with Vishnudas Shirali, eminent musician and music director. The transcript of the discursive conversation between the two has been edited for the purpose of publication.

B.C. Deva: Pandit Shirali, I must first congratulate you on receiving the Sangeet Natak Akademi's Award for Creative Music. This award has a special significance because you are the first to have been awarded for something off the track of Hindustani or Carnatic classical music. For lack of a better word we have called it creative music though, of course, all music is creative. I would like to talk to you about the new trends and what you feel about them. The first question that I would like to ask you is: what do you think of the attitude to Indian music outside the country, and the effect of Western music on us?

Vishnudas Shirali: Over the last quarter century, Indian music has gained quite an appreciable audience outside India. A number of top musicians have been giving music performances, teaching Indian music in different universities, and giving lecture-demonstrations abroad. There has been a lot of cultural exchange at university level, and a number of scholarships have been given by foreign educational institutions for studying dance and music in India. More and more students and professors from abroad have come to India to learn and do research work in Indian fine arts. On their return to their countries they have helped to create, directly and indirectly, a more favourable attitude to our music through their talks and performances.

Formerly, during 1930-39, when we were touring Europe, U.S.A. and Canada with Uday Shankar's company of dancers and musicians, the conditions were entirely different. Ours was a sort of pioneering work.

Deva: Yes, I remember.

Shirali: The attitude to our music at that time was more of curiosity than understanding, especially during 1930-34, the initial years. But they felt enthusiastic and wanted to learn how to appreciate our dance and music. Their ears were not accustomed to our music. Our frequent visits to these countries for nine years, giving dance and music performances, paved the way for our dancers and musicians to go abroad in the post-independence period and give performances independently. This is not a small achievement.

Deva: It has helped the new generation a great deal. Now I would like to ask you about the effect of Western music on us.

Shirali: It is a big field. You know that there are quite a number of musicians in our country who have studied Western music and we also have some excellent performing artists. There is quite a large audience in our country who understand and appreciate Western classical music. More widely, the effect of Western music is found very much in our commercial films. It is not for me to say whether it is desirable or otherwise. But we must admit that our commercial film industry has afforded a great scope to musicians, music arrangers and to film music directors who are trained in Western music. As for myself, I very much enjoy listening to the symphony, although I have not studied much of Western music. But I trained my ears to appreciate Western classical music, by attending a great many music concerts during my nine-year stay abroad.

Deva: I quite agree that the films have taken up Western music and they do use a lot of tone colour and tone mass and such things which we normally do not get in Indian classical music. But what really is on my mind is the problem of orchestration. I would like to know whether orchestration of ragas is possible at all.

Shirali: I feel that orchestration of ragas, i.e. orchestration in Indian classical music, is possible and to a certain extent, can be permissible. If orchestration means instrumental sounds of various timbre and tones blended in characteristic combination, to produce a variety of tone colour, it is possible to have harmony in our music. When I say harmony, we should not take the word as meaning exactly what it is in the West. Generally, I would say, it means forming a sort of counterpoint achieved through the superimposition of melodic passages with different groups of musical instruments. In addition to the parent melody, a number of mini-melodies could be placed in the composition, as it were, having all the characteristics of the parent melody, but still possessing a distinctly individual quality of their own. In addition, one can portray four separate movements by varying patterns based on *asthayi*, *antara*, *sanchari* and *abhog*. There could also be various other methods of evolving an Indian system of orchestration. In the experimental stage, it may be easier to use ragas selected from the 12-note scale, so that we don't come under the influence of *Srutis*. Ragas based on the 12-note scale do not use the *Srutis*. A tempered scale therefore gives scope for creating identical intervals, in any chord from one point of issue, and simplifies the placing of chords from the key note to another. Later, perhaps, we may experiment with ragas using the 22-*Sruti* scale. Since the *Sruti* intervals are non-identical, the 22-*Sruti* scale limits the placement of chords from one key note to another.

Deva: Yes. It is a very important point.

Shirali: When shifting of key is applied to give colour to the composition, the relation between the changed key and the valuation of other notes will automatically change and it will sound out of tune due to the incorrect *Sruti* relation, especially for our audiences and our musicians.

Deva: Indeed.

Shirali: It is a known fact that the continuous sounding of the key note, or the drone, is the basis of our music and against this, the shifting of key is tried out within a certain limit. Naturally, constant vigilance will be necessary to maintain the Sruti relation with the key note if and when it is shifted. The shifting of key need not necessarily be there; it may be employed only when one feels like it.

Now comes the question of harmony. Introduction of harmony as understood in the West will deprive our music of its most notable and unique feature. This is not merely an issue of prestige but a matter of spirit and character of our music, and I would rather strictly adhere to it. Conflicts between the new and what is considered traditional has existed in every form of art, and it is characteristic of each epoch. From such conflict emerges a fresh type of art based on the traditional system, but embracing, assimilating and giving shape and form to the new trends. Therefore, I feel, orchestration in Indian music and, to a certain extent, of ragas, could be permissible and possible because of its vast scope to express human emotions through a different medium. But I would like to make one point clear, that our classical music should remain intact, untouched by any modern and external musical influence. Even if I should come under this influence, I must be stopped. . .

Deva: Pretty honest, I must say!

Shirali: And orchestration and orchestral music should be treated as an independent medium of expression, to grow along with our traditional aspect.

Deva: Ah, good!

Shirali: I am sure that after many years of trial and error, we should be able to evolve a technique from our experiments in this direction and gradually an Indian orchestral tradition may be built. Our music has great potential for development along orchestral lines. Given proper understanding and opportunities for development, it can blossom as an extraordinary medium of expression with infinite scope for variety based on materials accumulated through the centuries.

Deva: I should say it has been a very refreshing point of view on the problem of orchestration. Before taking up other points, I would like to ask you one thing. As far as I understand the Western musical material, it is generally divided into pure music and the programmatic. I would like you to tell me whether programmatic music is possible with Indian ragas.

Shirali: Yes, I would say it is possible. As you know, in the 1920s leading musicians used to sing a Khayal for one-and-a-half hours or two hours, and the duration of a concert used to be the whole night. Present-day concerts generally last hardly four hours. Still further, All India Radio allots only one-and-a-half hours for a full concert. And this, too, gives scope for the musician to exhibit his talents and provides a fairly full entertainment to the listener. This means 40 minutes for a Vilambit Khayal, 20 minutes for a Drut Khayal, 15 minutes each for a Tarana and Thumri. In other words, the present-day artist has adjusted himself and shortened the exposition of a raga and the Khayal to the requirement. This process may gradually lead to programmatic music in Indian ragas. It could become an example of the essence of a raga performed by a highly trained and talented vocalist or an

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instrumentalist, which can be repeated in the same order every time with the same Khayal, same passages and improvisation. But we have to remember that no matter how much we have programmatic music, in our system the characteristic inspirational extempore improvisation of a raga cannot be replaced. One may call me old-fashioned, but this will remain so for a few musically drugged listeners like us who would not mind any amount of time taken by an A-class musician to elaborate a raga with numerous and delicate variations.

Deva: Quite right. But orchestration is a major new force that has come into Indian music. No part of human life or creation is ever static. So, while one need not be afraid of new influences, the question is whether something new is healthy for us, or whether it will destroy what we think is a beautiful music that we have grown up with.

Shirali: True. While all that is old is not gold, all that is new is not necessarily beautiful.

Deva: That is what we have to find out, especially from you since you have been associated with the classical tradition and you have also struck a new path. I remember the film *Kalpana*, of which, if am not mistaken, you were the music director. I don't know how many times I saw it and I still have the records at home. I would therefore like to get more of your views on this subject of orchestration and harmony. Does it necessarily imply tempering and transposition? Can harmony be really taken over to ragas?

Shirali: It is a very difficult question. But, in short, I can say that we should not think in Western terms or of Western orchestra. We think now of an Indian orchestra. Though we have adopted it from the West, we have changed it: whether to good or bad is a different thing.

Even in with West, in the beginning they must have started also in unison—the church music and all that. Gradually, after years of experimenting, they added more and more instruments.

Many people ask why do we need orchestras in India when we have got our classical music which is like an ocean. Solo singing or instrumental music in our tradition takes years of study to reach certain standards, and one life is not quite sufficient. So, what the soloist or the classical people say is not unreasonable. But when the future is bringing in Western music at full blast, is it not necessary for us to prepare ourselves? Young people of the modern generation want Western music. They ask why not community singing, why not community instruments?

Deva: Yes, that is a fashion now. Of course, we can say. "I don't belong to this."

Shirali: But we have to live in this world and the future is coming to us, whether we like it or not. We have to solve their problem as our problem.

Deva: Right.

Shirali: I therefore thought, like some others who feel like me, that we should prepare our own orchestration, no matter how and what way, preserving our tradition and keeping the Indian character of our music. The experiments, good or bad, will be done by many different people. Once the groundwork is prepared, we can build on that, in future, an orchestra that will satisfy the generations to come and provide guidelines for them. That has been my approach. It will not be identical with Western orchestration.

Deva: You see, Panditji, the problem is this. You will surely agree that the raga is not just 12 tones. Even 22 Srutis, even there it is not tempered to 22 intervals.

Shirali: I agree.

Deva: The fundamental question is of different Srutis being employed. After all, the *komal dhaivat* of Asavari is not the *dhaivat* of Bhairavi or Bhairav or Darbari. So, however well you tune a harmonium or any tempered instrument, you can never produce this. The second point is: what about Gamakas? Take Darbari.

Shirali: Yes. Gamaka is very important.

Deva: Without *andolit gandhar* Darbari is no Darbari. Or you take Karnatak Todi. They have two *komal gandhars*: one is the usual *sadharana ghandharam* and the other the Todi *gandharam*. If we omit this, the raga doesn't remain Todi. If we omit Gamaka it doesn't remain Darbari. How are we going to get this out of an instrumental combination? Is it possible at all?

Shirali: That is a good question. But I think it will not be very difficult. The difficulty is only because we have still got the Western orchestra in our mind.

Deva: I see.

Shirali: Suppose we want to orchestrate in Rag Todi. What will I do? I will have many instruments: say, four or five Sitar, four or five Sarods, and about a dozen violins. Sarangis can't cope with orchestration because of their system of playing with sympathetic strings.

Deva: Yes, I was going to ask you whether all this *tarab* will not be a big disturbance.

Shirali: That is why we have to have a new approach. I dealt with this question in my paper at the Madras Music Academy. We must keep out the instruments with sympathetic strings. Then we use cellos, flutes and so many other instruments which are not tempered.

Deva: Ah, that is the point.

Shirali: Tempered instruments cannot be used. You know the difference when an Indian-trained musician plays the same instrument.

Deva: Oh, yes!

Shirali: It is because there is no demand that we find no foreign cello player who will play Indian music.

Deva: True, and if he hears the cello played by an Indian musician, I think he will be very happy to hear it.

Shirali: Certainly. Thus, from such instruments we can make our Indian orchestration. It is not necessary for us to have chords.

Deva: That's a fine point.

Shirali: We can remove those things, and it is not necessary to cross all the melodies.

Deva: Which means we need not completely take over harmonisation and the idea of counterpoint.

Shirali: No, not necessary at all. When we work in this field and we go on solving each problem at every stage, we may develop an Indian polyphony.

Deva: Yes.

Shirali: An Indian polyphony not necessarily—I would say definitely not—taking up temperament. And we can develop our own transposition, which will be of a different kind.

Deva: Whether it can be done is a very interesting question.

Shirali: It can be done in India. Only, unfortunately, without a laboratory, you can't do any experiment. I have been thinking of this question after retiring from Films Division. I thought I would create a small unit in Bombay. Every Sunday we would gather together. But in our great country that is not possible, because our egos clash.

Deva: Oh God! Each one wants to become a hit.

Shirali: Including Shirali!

Deva: Oh, yes. Every one of us. So how can we break it up? And then, to experiment on orchestration, you need a lab. You need at least 10 to 20 musicians all the time. But, you know, there are some established groups. Why should they not take it up? There are people who are already well paid and they are supposed to produce orchestras and they should produce one. They get their salaries for that. They should do it. Otherwise I don't see any way out. You can have a Sitar alone in a room and go on doing *riyaz*. Nobody can stop you. But orchestra is a group activity.

Shirali: Yes, the moment you start thinking of orchestras, there are twenty to 100 people. They must be fed. You may be willing to starve, but they may not be.

Deva: That is right. And now I will come to the other major question, and that is the harmonium and its use in Indian music.

Shirali: The harmonium is one of the things that has come to Indian music from the West. I have attended some discussions on the question whether it is a suitable accompaniment in a classical vocal concert. The opinions were, as usual, some for and some against. I myself feel that one may use the harmonium as a solo instrument; some of our well known musicians have acquired mastery over this instrument and have given solo programmes. But I do feel uncomfortable when the harmonium is played as an accompanying instrument for classical vocal music. Our ears, accustomed to hearing the nuances of the ragas, will surely feel the difference. There can be a compromise only at the cost of reducing the values, and the character of the delicate *Srutis* of our raga system.

We have been told that some of the great musicians of the past used the harmonium as accompaniment in their vocal concerts, but that should not be a criterion. Getting used to the tempered notes of a harmonium—even a 22-Sruti scale harmonium—will make our ear less sensitive to the unique Srutis of our ragas.

Deva: That is an excellent statement.

Shirali: If we hear Darbari Kanada on the harmonium while accompanying a vocalist, and do not feel the difference, then we have had it.

Deva: We have been having it anyway. We have really made a compromise. The question is whether we can afford such a compromise.

Shirali: We cannot. In fact, I do not approve of the use of the harmonium even as an aid for teaching classical music to children.

Deva: I am so glad you have said that. It is killing the soul of the children at the source, before they grow up. But do you really think the harmonium has any use even as a solo instrument? It cannot produce Gamakas, and what is the point of having such an instrument for Indian music?

Shirali: What you say is true. I recall that, in one of the discussions on the use of the harmonium, somebody said; 'You see, Fayyaz Khan Sahib used to have a harmonium, and so did Abdul Karim Khan.' The only remark I could make was: 'Just because Swami Vivekananda smoked, does it make smoking a healthy habit?'

Let me refer to an incident within my personal experience. I once asked Vilayat Hussain Sahib: 'Khan Sahib, why do you use a harmonium?' He replied: '*Beta, kaun sunta hai?*' ('My dear boy, who hears it?') Now, if you don't hear the harmonium, why have it?

Deva: Finally Panditji, I would like you to speak about your own guru, Vishnu Digambar Paluskar. What have you gathered from him, and what do you think is his major contribution?

Shirali: Pandit Vishnu Digambar Paluskar was my favourite guru. For me, he was music personified. Music is not all technique, it lies beyond and penetrates your heart and head. It inspires. That is the impression of Vishnu Digambar which I carry with me. I had the opportunity of being constantly near him for seven years, hearing him teaching senior students, performing in the music conferences and public concerts, and doing his daily routine of *swara sadhana* and practice. He was a great vocalist with a voice of exceptional quality; a strict disciplinarian; and a man of tremendous personality and dignity, of understanding and vision. He opened my ears to the approach to classical Hindustani music, and gave me the vision to experiment with applied music with a classical background. This gave me the guidelines for my entire life and career in the field of composing music for dances, dance-dramas, films and orchestration in our music.

Vishnu Digambar created an awakening which promoted respect for and appreciation of classical music; he was the pioneer in introducing music in educational institutions and

among educated families at a time when music and musicians were looked down upon and were kept away from cultured circles. He may not have created vocalists who could sing exactly like himself but taught and inspired a few students of his with the essence of classical music. He created a cadre of musicians to propagate his principles and to prepare a field for 'Kansens' (discriminating listeners) if not Tansens (after the name of the legendary musician). Vishnu Digambar made a great contribution to the cause of Indian music, and Hindustani classical music in particular.

Deva: Yes, his vision was truly great, as a teacher. If you don't train students properly, can they identify a good concert? I mean, if they don't know what is Todi Gandhar, what is Kafi Gandhar, can they identify a good concert? That leads me to ask you: what do you think of our system of music education? It creates teaching jobs, awards diplomas. But is it adequate?

Shirali: The whole system is, I feel, influenced by the fact that our country is young as a free nation. We feel we have to be democratic, so everyone must have his freedom. We don't like the old traditional way of teaching or rigorous teaching: 'You can't do this, you can't do that, you can't go out, you rehearse and you practise.' After freedom we thought: 'Let us break away from this. I want to do as I want.' That is how everybody is trying to become a teacher. Day before yesterday, I met somebody who has learnt something—dance or music—for two years, and that person would like to start a school. Even two years is too much for him. This is the approach in the whole educational system, not only music.

Deva: Yes, everywhere. Things are in a turmoil.

Shirali: Hence the question of Tansen and Kansens. Vishnu Digambar tried to create good, discriminating listeners, he wanted to make a revolution of the Yuga, or Century.

Deva: I quite understand.

Shirali: It was unfortunate that he did not have perhaps the right sort of material. But we are thinking not so much about that as of the radiation that the great man generated. I am not a party man. I don't belong to one party. I belong to a party which creates, which is in tune.

Deva: I think that is an excellent thing. The social environment is unfortunately such that we even in our science; in our music, we want to get a degree easily. And for that we are paying the penalty. I am so very glad, Panditji, that you came and that we have had a fine, open-minded discussion. Thank you very much. □