

THE TEACHING OF CLASSICAL MUSIC TODAY

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The *Khayal* is the basic form of expression in Classical Hindustani Music to-day. The very word explains itself — a divine creation born out of endless broodings in the depths of man's mind almost as if such a creation was pitted against eternal silences of the Universe — and grappled with them.

What a deep search it was for man — an endless *sadhana*. As if haunted by a pre-historic echo he explored the rhythms and forms of the earth's soul — and created music from them.

How unlike our pursuit of music today. We ignore its philosophic and religious dimensions, and look at only the purely aesthetic, though in its truest form it still should be a *sadhana*, a kind of prayer. Many great musicians lived and died thinking it such: some were a little recognised, others not at all. It was very late in his life that my own guru, the late Ustad Amir Khan began being truly appreciated for the rare classical purity of his music, which he preserved without being influenced by contemporary trends in music. His music was based mainly on the system known as *Merkhand* which he developed almost to perfection without resorting to cheap gimmicks which would easily allure the audience. It was this that he passed on to his disciples.

Indeed, there is really no true substitute today for the *guru-shishya* relationship. One cannot accept too far the institutional system of teaching and learning music. Institutions are set up to make money, and the training imparted is aimed at diplomas and degrees, which cultivate the taste of only listening to music and not of performing; they can create *Kansens* and not *Tansens*. Besides, students often join with the feeling that unless they are given a couple of *taans* to jot down on their copy-books at each 'lesson' they have not been attended to properly.

I remember years ago, as a young student myself I was once sent with a message to the house of Barkat Ali. (Ustad Bade Gulam Ali Khan's younger

brother). There by the fire, frying meat he sat, listening to a young boy practice his *taans*. The same *taans* had been repeated for a long time and the boy was tired. But Barkat Ali shook his head, "*Abhi taan mein chamak nahin aayee*" he said and made the boy go on. ("There is no sparkle in the *taan* yet")

This was the way they taught. A tremendous emphasis was laid on daily practising for long hours at the *Taanpura* until each note would sparkle. There was another reason for this. Any student asked to repeat a set of *taans* one hundred times will definitely, from fifty onwards, start creating something new on his own within the same framework.

It is vigorous practice of this kind which students lack today. And it is not surprising to note that whereas the facilities for learning music are much wider today — the system of notations; the exposure to different schools of classical singing through the radio and gramophone records — the actual musical achievements of this age are far lower. Unlike students today who have many more *ragas* to prepare, one or two generations ago a musician could earn the title of *Ustad* by singing twenty to twenty-five *ragas* only. The *shishyas* then had no opportunity to listen to music other than that of their *Guru*. There was a great advantage in this until their 'musicality' had evolved into a certain style, and they were still at an impressionable stage, they were not exposed to different styles at the same time. During the process of learning students are musically changing from moment to moment, and there is the common temptation of picking two *taans* from, say, Bhimsen Joshi and the next two from Hirabai or whoever is popular at that time — the temptation of imitating musicians and not so much of *understanding* their individual creativity.

Thus the basic problem with most students today is their not being able to understand that, ultimately they have to give it their own form—and even outgrow the overpowering influence of their teachers. It is perhaps only at that level that they can at all claim to appreciate other musicians, or even their own *gurus*. It is by the building up of that artistic arrogance which carries with it its mark of originality, that is the true maturing of a musician.

This is why institutions should encourage holding regular "listening classes" which would help build the musical temperament of students. This would help them shed their (at times) absurd notions about *ragas* and develop their taste. Listening to each other can also help sharpen their critical faculties.

There is a general complaint among students today that their teachers keep many secrets away, in the teaching of Classical Music. Well, does this not reflect upon the students themselves, who can, by their very devotion towards their teacher, compel him to give all that he has? Though this is, of course, not true of all teachers, it does reflect on the intensity of the

questioning mind a student may have — or perhaps his lack of reverence and sincerity towards music itself.

In fact, *shishyas* in the past went through many tests before their *gurus* thought them worthy of learning. At a time when such a thing was unheard of Hindus became Muslims in order to learn music. The great Pandit Bhaskar Rao who was from Maharashtra went to learn music from Ustad Nathan Khan of Agra. At the Ustad's home he was often sent to buy meat. There is this story of how one day he was asked to get beef from the market. The *shishya* said nothing, picked up the cloth and slowly walked into the street with tears in his eyes, when his *ustad* called him back and explained that he was only testing him. It is said that Ustad Nathan Khan was so moved by this that he taught more to Bhaskar Rao than he did to his own son.

In those days great *Ustads* openly acknowledged what they took from their elders. Mushtaq Hussain Khan of Rampur would, during a performance, touch his ears and say — “Sahab”, that such and such pattern of *taans* he got as his ‘dowry’ from his father-in-law, Ustad Bahadur Hussain Khan. Most *Ustads* taught their disciples to pay their respects to other *Ustads* of the time, and not to sit in coffee houses and concert halls forming little groups criticising each others’ *Ustads*, appreciating no other but their own. In fact until quite recently there was this custom among disciples of giving *nazar* to elder *Ustads* upon meeting them for the first time — even if they were not their *gurus*. Giving *nazar* was actually laying five or ten rupees at the feet of the *guru* — as if to say, we acknowledge you as our elder, and ask for your blessings. We would dare to sing in their presence only by first asking their permission ‘*Khan sahib, ijazat hai?*’ and in their own paternal way they would bless us and ask us to sing.

We would often sit for hours at their feet listening to musical *baat-cheet*. When two or three *Ustads* got together it was a time of great excitement for us. Even when they were not talking of music, there was a lot to learn from them. There was a wealth of secrets to pick out of their casual remarks, and their attitudes towards things in general. It was thus our close associations with our *gurus* was made, which helped so much in building us up. The actual lessons which we got in music were only occasional. And our relationship with them were as important to us as those with our own parents, sisters, brothers, wives and our own children. There was always a deep fondness even in their anger. And even when we argued, it was with love.

It was by close contact with our *gurus* that our musical temperament took shape. This is why it is important to take as one's *guru*, not merely a good teacher but a performer as well. For he who cannot sing well, can hardly guide students into doing so. If he can only talk well about music he can at best also only teach his students how to converse agreeably about it.

I do not mean to lessen the importance of musicologists. But it goes

without saying that their material is provided by performing musicians themselves. This has been duly acknowledged by one of the greatest musicologists of our time — Pandit Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande. A great Sanskrit scholar, Bhatkhande was always collecting from the great singers of the time — and his almost encyclopaedic work contains about 70 percent of all the compositions in India — in *Khayal* or *Dhrupad* — all easily available to students today in simple notation. It is said that he was almost barred from entering *mehfils* because he would quickly note down the compositions — ‘stealing them away’ they said — and that he often carried on his work by hiding behind curtains when listening to the *Ustads*. Bhatkhande was a singer too — and he composed under the pen name of ‘Chatur Pandit’.

Thus I firmly believe that a great teacher is one who is a great artist himself — a person who himself learns from his students. In fact from them only does he learn how to teach.

For only when he can understand his students psychologically can he solve their problems. If for instance the teacher is keeping rhythm on the tabla and the student is not able to synchronise with it, it may be because he is also keeping his own rhythm with his hands. He is obeying the beats of his own hands. He can be aware of the teachers’ beats only when he stops his own.

Understanding of the individual student’s vocal system is also of great importance. If a student is not able to reproduce a *taan* it may be that instead of modulating the note, — the *sur* — he is moving his head. A common problem is the lack of coordination between the *sargam* and *aakar* too.

I remember an incident about a young girl — a student of Delhi University for the Sangeet Shiromani course who was learning under me. She was doing the *raga*, *Bhim Palasi*, and was successfully singing all the difficult *taans* and *paltas* being taught by me. Suddenly she got caught by a very simple *taan*. I opened my eyes and thought for a while. I saw her nervously clutching on to a handkerchief in her left hand. I asked her to drop it. It came as a surprise to herself when she sang that *taan* immediately.

It is at this vulnerable stage when, checked every moment by the teacher, a firm and solid base can be built in the mind of the student.

Perhaps only then can the strict classical purity of Hindustani music be preserved. Which is why it is only after years of *sadhana*, and of deep devotion to the *guru*, that a true musical sensibility can evolve. Time has not changed our appeal for classical music — and it is only right that time should not take from it its religion and its philosophy.

PANDIT AMARNATH had his early training in Hindustani Classical music from Prof. B.N. Dutta of Lahore. Later he became one of the foremost disciples of Ustad Amir Khan. He worked in All India Radio for several years and taught at the Triveni Kala Sangam, New Delhi. He has composed music for films and the theatre. He writes poetry and often sings his own compositions.