

## Teaching Music at Institutions

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IN THIS ESSAY, I try to present my views on how to formulate an effective method of teaching music at institutions. Since music is a performing art, the basic objective of our teaching methodology is to produce good performers in music, performers who do not work by mere rote but who think and perform. This I say not because I am a professional singer. After all, what is music for, if it is not sung or played ?

This bespeaks a system of music education in which everything from the course content to the teaching methodology should be so planned and managed that after the completion of a course of study a student of music will have attained a certain minimum competence as a reasonably good performer. Not necessarily in our classical music. A student might be allowed to specialize in semi-classical or even non-classical music as well. We seem to be convinced that such musical forms as Bhajan, Ghazal, folk music or even film music do not require any training, although we are aware that the expertise of such brilliant musicians as Mehdi Hasan and Ghulam Ali, Lata Mangeshkar and Mohammad Rafi is founded upon sound musical training and hard work. In any case, whatever the musical form an advanced student chooses as his special area, he must turn out to be a reasonably good performer in it, one who performs with competence and intelligence. This I believe is the basic minimum that our music education should try to attain.

If it is agreed that this should be the primary objective of our music teaching, then it is necessary to review and reorientate some of our present-day practices. Take for instance the question relating to the role of theory in music instruction. Unfortunately when theory is dealt with at our music classes, it is generally concerned with what is offered in our ancient treatises. Or it perpetuates a number of myths and legends about our past music and musicians. Very little of this theory is really relevant to today's actually performed music. Perhaps this is the main reason why our performing musicians usually scoff at our musicologists. This unfortunate chasm between the scholar and the performer needs to be over-

come; and this is possible only if theory becomes a positive guide to the actually performed music. One may also reasonably assume that historically speaking, music had originated spontaneously among humankind, that is, without any prior theoretical reflections; and theory had been its later rationalization. However, what I wish to assert is that we should include in our curriculum only those items of theory which are relevant to the actually performed music of our time. The rest would be merely academic.

Besides theory, it is worth asking why music institutions have not considered introducing specialized training in the many professional areas which are directly or indirectly related to the actually performed music. As we know, music involves not only the performers of various types of music, but also the organizers, critics, teachers, writers, composers, instrument-makers, audio-technicians, record and tape dealers, manufactures of audio equipment, and so on. Music is also related to other disciplines like psychology, sociology, acoustics, philosophy, religion and poetry. Further, music is applied in areas such as physical exercise or aerobics, medical therapy, plant therapy, etc. For each of these professions and specialized areas, a highly specialized training is necessary in addition to that which can produce basic competence in performing and analyzing music. If music education offered a wider choice of activity and were job-oriented, more people would get involved with music as a serious endeavour. In highlighting professional options for students in the field of music, it would also change the widely prevalent conception of music as merely a means of entertainment. With the economic pressures of modern living, this kind of orientation would provide economic incentive to pursue a musical vocation.

One of the most fundamental drawbacks in most of our music institutions is that students cannot hope to receive instruction from the masters and veterans that command the professional stage. So they have often to seek private instruction from such artists. At this point, it is well worth considering why there are very few professional performers teaching at musical institutions. One of the reasons is that the status of the music teacher is not very high in our country. The salary scale of music educators is also very modest. Secondly, a successful performer would not think of getting involved in music institutions unless he had a keen interest in the academic study of music. Another reason is that our music departments and colleges do not generally sponsor music performances by members of the staff, although regular participation in concerts is essential to maintain their performing ability. Our academic institu-

tions on the other hand tend to control and restrict the movements of their teachers—a restriction that kills the professional skill and career of a musician. In music education, public performance by teachers and advanced students must be treated as part and parcel of the system; and leave of absence from class-room duty according to a reasonable formula should be granted as a matter of course. One objection to this is that if a teacher is always allowed to keep up his concert engagements throughout the year, he would rarely be present to teach. This is not fully correct. Usually concerts are held on weekends; and a performer who is committed to teaching would certainly try to make adjustments between the two and strike a balance. To my mind, performance, teaching and academic research all complement each other and as such must be encouraged.

One way of exposing students to artists of repute is to invite them to teach during their least busy season for a month or two. Something like an artist-in-residence scheme is therefore necessary. Normally, no professional artist permits the presence of anyone near him while he practises; but in an institution, he may permit his students to hear him practise. Listening to a performer's Riyāz would also help the students learn about how and what to practise to achieve a certain skill in performance. Likewise, teachers should also be sent to different institutions for a term-in-residence for exposure to new environments and for exchange of ideas. Institutions could take advantage of the presence of teachers from other parts of the country who may have special areas of interest and proficiency to share with the students.

There are of course several other problems that we must tackle in order to improve the general environment of our music education at universities and institutions; and it is also necessary to orientate our music teachers towards a more active and creative participation in the task of music instruction.

Let me now consider the question of methods in teaching music. The first step to take here relates to the overall formation and planning of a syllabus that begins right at the kindergarten level and proceeds to graduation. The specific contents of a syllabus at every level and the aids available would directly influence the methods required for teaching that material. By the time a student reaches graduation he should have achieved a basic standard of competence in performance as well as studied music in relation to various scientific and theoretical areas. He should be sufficiently prepared to undertake post-doctorate work in areas of specialization such as cultural history, aesthetics, philosophy, sociology and psychology of music or different types of music like folk, light,

temple, stage, film, Carnatic, Western, world music or instrumental, choral and orchestral music, etc.

Standardization of the basic materials to be taught both in performance and theory is necessary because certain skills and concepts are fundamental for every student. Whether it is in vocal or instrumental music, the awareness of correct pitch, tonal colour and rhythm, the consciousness of the subtle movements of the notes and their notational value, beauty, balance, clarity and presentation, and the knowledge of the various characteristics of *rāgas* and *tālas* and the peculiarities of different melodic forms like *Khayāl*, *Thumri*, *Bhajan*, etc. should all be developed.

A standard exercise book containing note exercises of different patterns in simple *rāgas* should be prepared, as is available in Carnatic music. This way the student could collect in his memory a store of note patterns, develop dexterity and ease in rendering notes in any given combination and gain basic technical skills in the use of his voice and instrument. The *Mīrkhand* system teaches how to create variety with a given number of notes by changing their content in terms of the position of a note in a pattern, its duration and expression. Both the standard note exercises and the *Mīrkhand* system should be applied together. This will help students improvise and think creatively. In this respect the role of *Sargam* or note combination is very important. It enables the student to become conscious of his own musical activity. The practice of various note patterns in the five vowels a-e-i-o-u would develop purity of vowel tone at any pitch. It must also be stressed that the basic exercises must be practised throughout the student's career, for it is only over time that his technique will get polished and his knowledge and expression will gain depth and maturity. The *rāgas* *Yaman* and *Bhairavī* are ideal especially during the early years of training because they help the student to get acquainted with all the twelve notes in the Indian scale. Students should be taught compositions in different musical forms such as *Khayāl*, *Thumri*, *Bhajan*, *Tappā* in the same *rāga* so that they come to know how, given the same scale, note combinations and their expressions change according to the chosen musical form.

The student should also be taught an instrument if he is a vocalist or singing if he is an instrumentalist. This will help reinforce his learning and perceptual understanding. Learning the *Vinā* or *Sārangi* would help a vocalist appreciate the movements of notes such as *Mīrs* and *Gamaks*. Likewise, a *sitār* player would be benefited in lending emotional colour to his music if he knew vocal music.

Using simple and attractive words and themes relevant to the present times and different groups, songs should be composed in different rāgas. The popularity of film and 'light' music is mainly due to its word content. In addition to specially written songs, we can easily draw from our rich Bhakti literature in various dialects for this purpose. Students should first practise reading the text aloud many times for correct pronunciation and meaning. The same composition should then be practised in Sargam so that the musical structure and overall form become clear.

To develop the ability of keeping tāla and improvising in the content of different rhythmic cycles and tempos, the students should be made to practise tāla-oriented note patterns that fit into different tāla structures. For example, if it is Jhāptāl of ten beats, the first exercise should be :

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10  
S R / S R G/ R G/ R G M//

To double the tempo, the following phrase could be repeated twice over:

1 2 3 4 5  
SR SR / GR GR GM //.

It could be tripled as follows:

1 2 3 4 5  
SRS RGR / GRG MSR SRG // etc.

Students should be encouraged to make such patterns, graduating from the simple to the complex, and demonstrate their skill in performing them at various tempos. This would be a stimulating, challenging and, if well done, satisfying experience for students. Just as a sitār player learns Tablā compositions and composes their melodic phrases, vocalists should learn similar compositions and apply them in constructing vocal phrases. The skill of playing basic Thekās of tālas on the Tablā should be compulsory. It would enhance the student's sense of rhythmic pattern and add to his understanding of the role of rhythm in Indian music.

The importance of practice cannot be stressed enough. Institutional teaching leaves the responsibility of sufficient practice on the student himself. One of the great advantages in the Gurukul system was that the guru demanded long hours of sustained practice from his students, often under his own supervision. I think institutions should not leave it to the students to practise as and when they wish. They should be required to spend a certain amount of time every

day practising on the premises of the institution, preferably under supervision. Attendance at these practice sessions should be mandatory.

The use of tape-recorders during practice work should be encouraged. If the student listens to his practice, he himself learns to be more objective, critical and self-appraising with reference to his playing or singing. In times when the teacher-supervisor cannot be present to hear and personally monitor the student's practice work, the tape-recorder would be a great boon and could act as an important self-corrective. If the student listens to his recordings with other students, they can all exchange views, evolve communication skills and develop an open mind.

Another method of encouraging students to pay sufficient attention to their practice is through inter-collegiate exchanges and competitions. This would give them an opportunity to perform before a knowledgeable audience and overcome stage fright, which would again help them develop their performing skill. Good students should also be made to participate in respectable public competitions that are held from time to time.

An extremely critical aspect of music education is the development of a student's analytical ability. If a student studied the anatomy of voice, his study should also help him achieve better tonal colour, better range, greater stamina and ease in singing. If he were studying acoustics, it should contribute towards his acquisition of a keener sense of the upper partials in his instrument or voice and an insight into the effect that the shape of a hall has upon the texture of the sound produced. If he studied the history of classical music he should be able to critically assess and describe the difference between the music of the old masters in the context of their times through recordings that are available. The students' ability to speak and write about different aspects of music could be developed by holding seminars where they are required to present papers on topics of their choice. This would also create an atmosphere of discussion and exchange and stimulate students' thinking.

In this connection, I may add that the ability to listen to music is perhaps the most essential tool a student needs in order to develop a mature musical understanding. Just as practice should be made mandatory, so also critical listening, descriptive evaluation, and even reproduction of recordings. The ability to notate is extremely important for the recognition of the development and organization of a particular musical form or composition. Traditionally, notation was not regarded as relevant and helpful for students because it was felt that notation would prevent the student

from memorizing what he learnt and, secondly, that notations were incapable of capturing the subtle nuances of Indian music. This has some truth. But those who are familiar with Western music and its notational system will know that the West has been able to capture the movement of sound to a remarkably sophisticated degree in its notational system. Unfortunately our attitude towards notation has always been so negative that it has restricted the development of an appropriate system of notation for Indian music. This powerful tool in the understanding of music needs to be given more attention.

Also related to the critical analysis of music is the appreciation of appropriate technical terminology. It is curious to note that the descriptive terminology for musical performance is being generated by a class of self-appointed music critics. The ability to speak on music in specific terms so that the thing being spoken of is understood clearly demands a certain level of sophistication. It is unfortunate that we have developed very little terminology in the context of contemporary performance beyond the pioneering work attempted by a few like Bhatkhande. Various Indian and Western authors have written on Indian music and have used several terms to describe a particular musical concept; but even now it is difficult to find a consistent and acceptable vocabulary of technical terms that north Indian musicians could commonly use and understand.

It is no wonder that if we ourselves are not able to communicate specific meanings when we discuss music, our students should also find it impossible to be explicitly critical. I have been reading music reviews for over two decades; and I am amazed and even troubled by the fact that most often readers of music reviews are fed more with flowery than technically accurate descriptions of musical performances. The reason why this is of concern to me is that these music critics, who often have very little or no practical experience in music, are extremely powerful in educating and shaping the response of the common people to music. If a layman who has no musical knowledge were to read a review of a concert recently attended, the review would invariably influence his understanding of and future response to music.

Considering present-day resources, I do not expect our colleges, universities and institutions to come up with top-ranking performing musicians and critical theoreticians on their staff. However, it is definitely possible for these institutions, even in present conditions, to help develop an intelligent cultivation of music by our students by recourse to some of the methods suggested above. □