

**D**R. Ashok D. Ranade has been in the field of music for the last 38 years. He has had rigorous training in Hindustani vocal classical music from stalwarts like Pandit Gajananrao Joshi, Pandit Ganu, Pandit Bodas and Professor B. R. Deodhar. He worked at AIR and taught English and Marathi literature in Bombay's Siddharth Commerce College before becoming the first Director of the Music Centre, University of Bombay. During 1968-'83, the Centre became known for its numerous and many-sided musical activities. Ranade has done pioneering work in voice culture (for speech and for singing) and through his imaginative music appreciation courses, he has been instrumental in generating a keener interest in music. His motto has been: "To music via experience and not through grammar"; he believes in an interdisciplinary approach. His belief is amply reflected in his writings on music, aesthetics and literature, in English as well as in Marathi. Some of his important publications include *Sangitache Saundaryashastra* and *Lok Sangitshastra*. His latest book is titled *On Music and Musicians of Hindoostan*. Ranade's monograph on Marathi stage music is in the process of being printed.

Ranade recently joined the National Centre for the Performing Arts (NCPA) in Bombay as Assistant Director in charge of research and ethnomusicology, after heading a similar wing of the American Institute of Indian Studies. His optimism, his concern for the Indian identity and his continuing attempts to initiate and welcome change strike a new note in contemporary cultural thinking.

Excerpts from an interview:

**You are known as an ethnomusicologist and have joined the NCPA to head the newly-formed cell for this discipline. "Ethnomusicology" is, to many, a new term. What does it mean?**

Firstly, I prefer the term "cultural musicology". Ethnomusicology is a term used by western students of non-western music systems. It came to be synonymous with the study of what sounded exotic and different. German, and later American, studies became more serious and ethnomusicology is now a discipline which links music with culture. However, in Asia, the word still carries a pejorative flavour.

Music is so closely related to a given culture, that if you want to understand music, you have to understand the entire culture within which it exists. Similarly, if you want to understand culture you have to understand the music which reflects it because music has an intrinsic relationship with the culture-core. Cultural musicology, therefore, tries to give the perspective of culture to music and of music to culture.

We should make a distinction between what is culture and what is cultural. We have a very "cultural" notion of culture. For example, we equate culture with the fine arts. This is a mistake because culture offers a total view. For instance, culture involves our own sensitisation to all sensory perceptions. So I am not referring to music when I talk about culture but to sound...not to perfumery but to the sense of smell...not to paintings but to the visual stimuli itself. Without this broader framework, culture becomes a segmented, isolated and narrowed entity.

**Given your pioneering work at the American Institute, how do you think**

# 'To understand music you must understand the culture within which it exists'

*Gouri Dange talks to ethnomusicologist Dr. Ashok Ranade.*



*Dr. Ashok Ranade (extreme right): interdisciplinary approach*

**the NCPA cell will help you to contribute more meaningfully?**

The NCPA had envisaged a section on cultural musicology in its 1965 blueprint. So what I am trying to do now is to create a programme for which an idea has existed. An organ with an in-built possibility to study three performing arts together can provide an excellent platform for the activities I have in mind. As you know, it is only recently that art or classical music has become a separate entity. It used to be a part of a whole; dance, drama, music constituted a family. A very important lesson in cultural musicology is to remember that all performances are package units to be studied in their complete setting. I have a growing awareness that both music and culture need to be made more meaningful and in my opinion, only cultural musicology can perform this task.

**Today's setting is largely a result of the influence of the mass media. You have been a successful telecaster. Do you think the new perspectives provided by the discipline can be exploited by TV?**

Yes, TV has immense possibilities. To carry the package idea further, all performances need to be treated as audio-visual packages, too. Hence, TV can help to project

music in its context. The evocation of the total context would attract people towards all music – and not merely classical music. After all, classical music constitutes perhaps five per cent of the total musical reality.

**Would you elaborate on that?**

I mean that all categories of music, namely primitive, folk, art and popular, need to be conveyed to the people within a setting if a musical picture, a faithful map of Indian music, is to be charted. In the absence of a total perspective, we pitch our expectations incorrectly. Take film music and its parent genre, that is, popular music. People tend to condemn film music because it is very short-lived. But in doing so we fail to get what it has to offer. Popular music and, therefore, film music, is a contemporary response to a contemporary situation. So it is irrelevant to look for permanent structures or permanence in it.

**You seem to be an advocate of the media.**

Yes.

**And yet you do not sing on AIR any more. In fact, few people look upon you as a performing musician. The Who's Who lists you only as a musicologist. How do you explain this and what do you see yourself as?**

To take up the latter part of your question first, I see myself as part of

the older tradition of Indian performers who were also researchers. Music is a performing art and in the final analysis, one can conduct research upon it only by being a performer. Unless you perform well, your research will lack relevance.

Unfortunately, a divide developed between researchers and performers centuries ago. This happened because the new patrons of music, the newly educated class, were not ready to accept the autonomy of art and the artist. I mean the performers received the "new" patronage provided they spoke the "language" of the "educated". Music as a performing art therefore became confined to those who took it upon a narrower basis. All this resulted in a massive fragmentation of the performing culture.

Thus, today we pigeon-hole people who take up music. Anybody taking up university teaching is branded as a teacher. I use the word "branded" deliberately because it is assumed that those who teach cannot perform. Similarly, if a person writes, he is taken to be a bookish researcher. How one becomes a researcher by writing passes my understanding. This sort of compartmentalisation has become the order of the day and that is unfortunate, because good research and good performance are reflected in each other. Therefore I would tell musicians not to leave music research to non-musicians. At the same time, music being a protean phenomenon cannot be grasped entirely from any one angle or aspect. So I ask the sociologists and physicists not to leave music entirely to the musicians.

Coming to my public performances, I stopped singing on AIR because it does not have an atmosphere which is conducive to music-making. As for the conferences etc., due to commercial pressures, they leave little scope to present unfamiliar music. What you hear at conferences is pre-composed, no-risk music. This is one of the reasons why I decided not to earn my living through singing.

*Do you think that performances today are so conditioned by audiences?*

Top performers today give two distinct types of performances. One for the public and the other for the connoisseurs. They tend to repeat what they have recorded on LPs etc. for the public.

*Your recently released book (On Music and Musicians of Hindoostan) has been hailed in some quarters as a benchmark in the interdisciplinary conceptual study of Indian music and musicians. Yet it is not widely read or reviewed. Why?*

I feel sad about this, but looking at this question objectively, I can see some reasons why. The book touches upon many disciplines and views music from many angles. So it is a difficult book to review. More importantly, in India, certain subjects seem to be reserved for woolly thinking. Music is unfortunately one of them. Impressionistic accounts, anecdotes, grammatical discussions, pages and pages of equations and quotations from *Natyashastra* etc., are accepted as legitimate musical subjects. But conceptual discussions on oral tradition and music, or films and music, or performance and literature seem to deviate from the accepted idea of musical learning. A multi-disciplinary approach to music and a closely argued presentation create problems in India and one can only sympathise with the re-

viewers and, of course, with me. To put it rather aphoristically, our music thinking is chiefly influenced by four "logies" - chronology, geneology, etymology and eulogy. My book has a different fibre.

*One of the strong points of the book is the close link it establishes between performing and scholastic traditions. Considering your statement about the great potential of TV, do you think it is a good idea to weave programmes in music appreciation with the accent on*

*the traditions you have analysed so well?*

It is a very good idea. However, the total music heritage of India should be the target, not just the art or classical variety.

*What is your reaction to the proliferation of ghazal and bhajan singers?*

They fulfil the long-standing need of the Indian listener for music which also has meaningful words. As you know, classical musicians ignored words for a long time, or at

least, saw to it that they remained unintelligible! In the past 50 years, we also allowed our links with the devotional tradition to weaken. Since the last few years film music, too, has dished out meaningless songs. Hence the welcome revival of *bhajans* and *ghazals*.

*What is your opinion about the emerging generation of musicians?*

There is a lot of talent around, but aspiring musicians should ensure that they receive a good

grounding in the traditional corpus. They have to be patient enough to do that. With so many records etc., it is easier for them, but there is no substitute for traditional lore for it cannot be replaced.

*Are you optimistic about the general musical scene?*

Very. In cultural thinking, pessimism has a place only if one thinks in terms of an individual's life span. Otherwise there are signs of hope all round.