

Some Trends in Indian Music

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The face of Indian Music is changing rapidly. We may echo Heraclitus with a change and say "One cannot hear the same music twice!" Without concerning ourselves with the philosophical densities implied in the statement we may profitably try to have a closer look at those who are the harbingers of this wind of change blowing through the musical world.

A very obvious trend is the trend towards synthesis. There was a time when various schools of Indian Music - the Gharanas - were water-tight compartments. A follower of the tradition, a disciple of one Guru, would look upon his Gharanas music as the only music that had a right to exist validly. He looked mostly with scorn and some-times with a patronizing, condescending attitude at all other ways of reconstructing the musical universe which is what a Gharana is. The very legitimacy of an approach different from one's own was vehemently questioned. It was a life and death matter for a singer to vigilantly guard against any musical phrase, any stylistic peculiarity, that he had not received directly from his Guru. Any failure in this respect was regarded as an act of sacrilege. This does not mean that all the Gurus and their Shagirds were singing alike. It is never possible. As in the case of two thumbprints, two persons also cannot be alike in their singing. But the difference was confined to stylistic variations or to inevitably intrinsic difference of voice etc. The approach was always the same, and no other approach was thought possible.

This is where the modern movement of synthesis comes into picture. Not only that the validity and legitimacy of a musical approach different than one's own is viewed as possible but such different views are now deemed fashionable. It is now possible to find a singer executing Alap in Kirana style, Tanas in Gwalior and Jaipur way and Boltanas in Agra method. His attempts are thus directed to have a composite point of view in which the various approaches are fused together. He tries to have a look at any musical phenomenon as a multi-fevered one requiring a broad-based attitude.

To me this synthetic school of musicians is best illustrated in Shri Kumar Gandharva and Smt. Manik Verma.

The tendency at Synthesizing is first apparent in the forms of music they render. There is no bar to what they include in their repertoire. Shri Kumar Gandharva has, for example, sung everything except Dhrupad and a Cinema-Song! All musical expressions seem to find their way in his repertoire with an ease not possible in the case of a large number of musicians of the last generation. It is not a question of a more or less pliable voice but a case of treating all musical expression as musically of equal status. Smt. Manik Verma also belongs to the same movement of musical synthesis and has equally wide variety' of musical expressions in her repertoire.

This synthetic approach as mentioned earlier is found on a deeper level too. Shri Kumar Gandharva has tried to mould together Kirana, Gwalior traditions, in addition to the obvious influence of the late Pt. Omkarnath Thakur and folk-music in general. Smt. Manik Verma has been trying consistently to make her Kirana-based Gayaki more and more broad-based.

This synthesis is naturally a tight-rope dance. For example you cannot import a folk tune as it is. The raw music cannot reach the art-music stage unless it is processed. But you cannot process it too much because that will be the death of the folk-element. Similarly if you do not want to make the Khyal singing mechanical and rigid certainly you can give it a Thumri-slant by giving importance to the meaning of the words used in the composition. This will give Khyal a new dimension as it were - it will seem less abstract. But this also cannot be overdone. If one gets entangled in the meaning-patterns then the elaborative possibilities of the Raga are bound to suffer—thus defeating the very purpose of Khyal-music. This is how Shri Kumar Gandharva has constantly to face the possibility of losing his grip over the classical quality of his Khyal by allowing the accessories to get undue prominence. That he is able to succeed in maintaining the austerity of classical core in spite of introducing elements from other lighter forms is a tribute to his musical genius.

Smt. Manik Verma keeps the Kirana frame but tries to go beyond it with the help of it. The slow gradual detailed Raga-elaboration and revealing shades and nuances of every tune that matters - these are the Kirana peculiarities she keeps. But her Tanas and lack of total involvement in the Swaras marks her departure from the Kirana tradition. Her inclusion of rare or Mishra Ragas in her repertoire also points out a significant deviation from Kirana tradition. The attempted fusion of Agra, Kirana traditions are too apparent to need emphasis and her artistic successes bear testimonies to the fruitfulness of synthetic attitude.

Amongst the instrumentalists too the tendency to synthesize is taking roots. Among the Sitar-players, Shri Nikhil Banerjee for example is trying to fuse Pt. Ravi Shankar and Shri Vilayat Khan. The delicacy and subtlety of Pt. Ravi Shankar combined with the verve and lyricism of Shri Vilayat Khan - this is what Nikhil babu is trying to achieve. His attempts naturally entail a lot of careful choosing and sifting before the proposed art-transplantation becomes feasible. It goes without saying that this is a delicate operation and any overlooking of the involved essential basic differences may result into just a mixture and not a fusion.

Nikhil babu's attempt is important because Pt. Ravi Shankar and Shri Vilayat Khan have exhausted the possibilities of their own schools. They have been such thorough masters of their idioms that most of the Sitar-players now seem to have fallen in the rut of imitating either of them. Both of them have created a tradition where there was just a possibility and now any significant Sitar-playing has to be a deviation from them. A real fusion of both, thus has to be ultimately an escape from them.

In Sarod-playing the need to outgrow Ustad Ali Akbar is equally manifest but there is hardly anyone who seems to have sensed it. The same stylistic rhythmic patterns that Ustad Ali Akbar has introduced into the life-stream (along with his father Allauddin Khan) of Indian instrumental music - one hears ad nauseam from the younger players. One feels sorry, for the instrument has too rich a quality to subject it to drab imitative routine music. Indian music in general lacks tonal colour and as such, instruments like sarod are to be carefully nurtured into regions of new possibilities and artistic achievements.

Another equally important but not so welcome tendency of our artists is their obvious yielding to influences of mass-media in general. Singers or instrumentalists - all seem to be conditioned by these. For example an artist who sings regularly for the radio unconsciously becomes time-sense oriented as far as musical expression is concerned. Consequently it is not the musical sensibility that governs his melodic elaboration for longer or shorter duration but his sense of the temporal time. One can easily observe a musician referring to his performance in self-adulation by boasting that he sang a particular melody for a 'full' hour. This is an indirect admission of the fact that he has replaced the criterion of melodic significance by a cruder "judgment by length". This is of course a subtle valuation substitution in which the obvious is preferred to a subtler criterion.

The corollary which follows is the deriving tendency to render or play a 'composed' music. That our music is not written in the sense Western music is written is

too well known to be explained. It is argued that not being bound down to a music written in black and white our musician is able to give a more spontaneous musical performance. But being compelled now to give more performances where he is allotted a fixed short time to deliver his goods, it seems our boasted advantage over the western musical tradition is lost. In a short time one is under pressure to give his best at the peril of losing public favour or at least suffering a concert-failure. This means he will think in terms of time and pre-determine what he will play or render.

This over determining denies any spontaneity. And moreover this makes the expression stereotyped where there is no room for the 'mood of a moment' to flower gradually. If one defines mood here as musical intensity then one can say that due to time-orientation or time-conditioning the artist's very conceiving of the musical experience is dissociated from special flavours that every moment carries with itself. Musical experience is conceived in a fettered way because the expression of it is already predestined to a certain way. This is perhaps worse than written music in the western sense. Because due to age-old convention musicians in the west have written music but with the firm knowledge that it will be just a "form-seed" burgeoning variously in different hands. In the present Indian context one over-composes for one's own self and this is eternal bondage in lieu of sure success on one particular occasion.

A co-related trend may be called 'playing for effect' and not for communication. As the phrase shows, this trend is mainly discernible in instrumentalists but is not completely absent in vocalists. The craze for speed by which even the senior instrumentalists like Pt. Ravi Shankar and Ustad Ali Akbar have been affected, is a clear manifestation of this trend. For a close observer our vocalists might seem to be making a lot of gestures which do not seem involuntary. They perhaps try to introduce some 'drama' around and not into their music. These are not musically expressive gestures but dramatically communicative-ones. One suspects that this leaning towards extra-musical - to be precise, visual - appeal shows the craving for effect. This in turn points out the deeper malady: musician's lack of faith that music can do it alone.

There are trends and trends and only some important ones are noted above. How they are connected with and caused by the general pattern of life is something to be thought about. They might be symptoms and the source that needs cure may be deeper. More intensive thought by better minds is what is needed. This is a provocation in that direction.