

Music, Sound and Culture

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Lecturers came to us when the British introduced a new system of education, in which there was a lecturer and there were listeners. Indian tradition always believed in an exchange of views through discussions and questions and answers. That is why I am going to ask you some questions and you will ask me some questions. Our basis will be what I play back as musical illustrations. I have chosen the theme “What happens in music?” When you listen to a piece, you will have to answer two basic questions: whether you like it or not; and if you like it, then you would have to give me reasons. So you cannot escape the responsibility of imparting knowledge to me.

(Audio clip: some sort of animal sounds, howling and screeching. There is also a sound of flowing water. There are grunts, and a kind of braying).

Ranade: Responses?

Student: It gave an eerie feeling.

Student: It lets you imagine many things.

Student: Can it be called music?

Student: It was jarring to the ears.

Student: It was very funny.

Ranade: So music should always be sweet, it should never be funny. Would you agree with these statements? Perhaps the set of criteria you are using to judge a piece of music might be inadequate if a new piece of music comes along. I am trying to suggest to you that there are different categories of music.

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There are five categories of music in India. These categories are fundamental moulds in which all types of music are accommodated and through which we are able to interpret various musical experiences. There are thousands and thousands of musical experiences, and they belong to various musical categories. So if you take a set of criteria that is applicable to one category, and apply it to another category, then you are naturally going to get answers that may not be valid. I am trying to tell you this so that we can keep in mind when we listen to various pieces of music.

(Audio clip: The track with animal sounds continues. There is still the same combination of grunts, growls and howls and the sound of flowing water. Less eerie than before. Slowly the sounds change. As though the night has moved into day. Because now the early morning sounds are heard of birds, and possibly people who are murmuring. A few howls are still heard but the birds seem to drown them out).

Ranade: Now, compare both these. We heard the first and another followed it. Can you compare?

Student: I wonder whether it is artificially created or is directly from nature.

Ranade: It should not matter, what matters is your experience. What did you feel?

Student: The first one was more disturbing. The second was mixed, it was more pleasant.

Student: The previous sounds were mixed with more animals. Now there were more sounds of donkeys...

Ranade: You raise your eyebrows when you refer to donkeys they will strongly object to that. They have a freedom of expression guaranteed by the Constitution.

(Laughter)

Ranade: So, how would you compare the two clips?

Student: The first music reminded me of the Saturday night movies on TV.

Ranade: These are legitimate responses, but these are called "extra-musical associations"; they are not associated with music, they are connected with you. They are not valid for others, and even for you they won't help you in making a judgement of music. So, coming back to the original question, how would you judge that music, on

what basis? When we say "judge", we are not passing a judgement on it, but saying, compare quality and quantity.

Student: I think we liked this more than that.

Ranade: You know, that kind of statement allows the repetition of an experience. After all, experiencing does not stop there. Because you are part of society, you have to communicate that experience. You talk about it, you share it, you try to re-create it. That is how traditions are created. That is why today we are talking about art and culture. If I stopped at only having something pleasant, then nothing would have been passed on to you.

The whole problem is that somehow, music and fine arts are always referred to in mystique terms. And this is a kind of demystification of it things need to be understood, things need to be analysed, things need to be talked about. There are concepts involved, ideas involved, crafts involved, people involved.

Finally, you really come to a conclusion that everything has a musical potentiality; you can't rule out by definition that this is music and this is not. That is exactly what we are trying to suggest: that supposing this kind of music is not always heard, it is totally new to you and you hear it for the first time. How would you respond to it? The first thing that you have to accept is that this can legitimately be music, even if I don't like it at the moment. You must allow the right of existence to a different kind of vision. This is very important now, in the changing context of globalisation, changing context of media. You face different kinds of music all the time and if you are, by definition, ready to rule out many experiences, then you are the loser, not the music.

And finally you are allowed to decide, "Fine, I like this music," or "I do not," but what are the reasons? Perhaps these could be extra-musical, and it is perfectly all right to have these associations, but it does not tell us much about the music, though it tells us something about the person.

If you want to really elicit anything from anything, you must have a "pro" attitude towards it. If you are totally indifferent towards it, then naturally there is no relationship between that experience and you. We are definitely assuming a desire to receive communication. In fact, I might suggest to you that you are in an era where you are losing the potential of your sense of hearing. And perhaps that is why less and less things are communicated to you through sound, than can be communicated.

Taking the two examples we heard, usually the second one is liked by many. Perhaps because it is nearer to your daily life. There are birdsongs and birdcalls. The first one was a whale song. Whales are great composers, every whale composes his or her own song and that song is stuck to the family. Over a number of years it continues to sing the same song, because the song has the additional quality of marking a territory. When a whale from the Atlantic and one from the Arabian Sea come together, they won't speak the same language.

The same happens in the case of birds. There are many opinions about bird songs. Initially; it was said that birds can't sing; it's only humans who can make music. So they said, "Oh! Birds only make amatory calls to attract members of the opposite sex". Then they found out that they were making these calls even when they were not interested in mating and had found some new prey. Then they thought they were making these calls when they found some new source of food. Apart from that, birds made other kinds of sounds. So then they said, "There is a residual content to their music making which cannot be accounted for by amatory songs, food, songs." Finally, the scientists relented and said, "Maybe there is something such as bird songs". If you listen to bird songs, the melody of it, then you can definitely espy a kind of constructing ability the bird is "constructing" all that. It does not happen by coincidence.

What are the clues? You listen to it and you feel that it constructs only half, seems to sing it wrong, then stops and corrects itself. And again, there is the same melody. It also teaches those melodies to its offspring; naturalists describe in detail how this teaching process takes place. After being taught, these birds have been recorded practising these songs continuously for eight hours an eight-hour riyaz. How else do you perfect all that?

The bullfinch and some other birds have been known for their ability to assimilate sounds. There are people in Russia who taught eight-ten birds Beethoven's symphony. There are some questions involved here. One is, are they musicians because they are creating "our" kind of music? This is a homocentric definition. Do you have a right to praise them only because they are able to imitate you? You never pay attention to what they are saying about you. There are co-ordinated pitches, co-ordinated aarohas and avrohas (ascending descending scales), whatever you want but according to the parameters that the whale culture has set for itself. Their music is not going to fit into your definitions.

(Audio clip)

Ranade: There was some kind of question-answer session going on between the birds. A question was asked in song, and answer was given through song. So, this was a duet, or it could be a quarrel. Maybe they are more musical than we think, so their quarrel might be more musical.

Student: Does that mean birds and other species like whales speak their own language?

Ranade: We don't know about speech. The moment you talk about speech and language, there is a different kind of argument involved. People have distinguished between speech and music, even in the case of birds, just as they have distinguished between amatory calls and food calls. These things have been recorded and there are laboratories working on this. We are only to take this much notice of it, to expand our own definition, our notion and understanding of music. Perhaps it will interest you to know that in Indian musicology, the science of music, the very early shlokas say that this note was created by a peacock, this one was created by an elephant; a whole musical gamut has been covered by bird calls and animal calls. Of course, I have not heard that kind of music in that kind of scale, with all the animals and birds standing in their respective places and giving me music. But the notion persists and that is very interesting.

(Audio clip: a chorus. Sounds mostly like women, with certain voices dominating and then phasing out, to be replaced by other voices. The sound of a distant drum that occasionally beats but is mostly drowned by the voices).

Students (various responses): It was monotonous... two groups... question and answer probably... it seemed like a dance song... there was an element of tempo, not really rhythm.

Ranade: This was a clip of Gond tribal women's marriage songs. This category is what we call "primitive" music. Whenever we say "primitive" music, we are really referring to a group of qualities. That group of qualities is very important. For example, this kind of music is made for groups and crowds, not really a single person. In this music, the whole community is involved. The function of music in the primitive stage is to gather the crowd. So it has a collective role to play, which is extremely important. That is where music binds society.

So even if you refer to disco, it is primitive, but primitive in this sense, that it has a structure that binds down the collective. We are talking of certain experiences, certain structural features. In the clip we heard, you might say there are groups singing, and there are overlaps. What does that mean?

Students: Shared experience... continuity.

Ranade: That's it! It has to have continuity. This kind of song can continue for the whole night, and it is essential that it be a continuous activity. Only then is it possible for the whole crowd to participate in a musical activity.

Even if I don't know the language, I can still infer that the clip we heard was meant for this kind of a group activity. But why the high pitch, when high pitches are not always pleasant? That suggests to you one more thing: that music does not have to be pleasant to be music; it has a function to carry out, and that function might not always be sweetness and melody. So when you say, "The whale song is not sweet," then the whales protest very strongly against that. They say, "Why does music have to be sweet all the time?"

Music also tries to match itself to the spectrum of experiences that it is able to make available to you. That is why this kind of primitive music has an important place in our life.

The way we discuss musical categories, you will know that they are not just musical categories, but categories of culture itself. When you are talking of "primitive" and "folk", you are not referring to musical examples per se. You are talking of a particular way of life which music is a part. Therefore it is very essential to remember that music is not isolated from your life; it is not an artificial activity.

It is only "art music" that is extremely artificial. This is not a derogatory description. Just as when we speak of "primitive" music we are referring to certain structural features and experiences that are inherent to it, so when I say "art music" is artificial, I am suggesting that it is entirely manmade.

When you come across categories of art expression, whether in dance, drama or music, you understand that if they move away from day-to-day life it is because they want to attain certain goals. It is essential to know that, so that your judgement will be in the spirit of the experiment. For example, you will never say that this particular khayal or this particular kruti does not sing about the travails of modern man. It will say, "No, why should I?" Art musicians always try to maintain a kind of abstracted distance from day-to-day life; popular music does not do so. We will have to accept the legitimacy of all categories of music, because all of them have different functions and different goals.

(Audio clip)

Ranade: Now what kind of music would that be?

Student participant: Devotional.

Ranade: Okay. I would like you to amend that category you can perhaps say "religious", because that is a wider term. Devotional sects are of particular kinds.

What were the other characteristics of the music?

Student: The words are important.

Student: It involves emotion.

Student: A whole feeling is created by singing together.

Ranade: This is where one can see the overlap. Even primitive music tried to bring people together. Devotional religious music also tries to do that, but it always has a more directional kind of feeling; they are coming together for a purpose.

Won't you say there is a repetition of certain musical motifs? Why so? Why not more variety?

Student: Because everyone has to follow.

Ranade: Why does everyone have to follow? Because if a bhajan is meant for specialists, it is not a bhajan at all. The basic thing about religious music is that it allows and encourages, in fact, expects the widest possible participation. It has to be collective. You want people to be charged by a particular range of emotions. This "range of emotions" is very important. Sometimes you feel that the person is singing a bhajan with the kind of devotion that says, "I am your servant"; another might be saying, "No, after all if you are God and omnipotent, you should be removing all my troubles", so he is the beggar there. Sometimes he might be the complainant saying, "If you do this then you are not God." All this makes religious music a very accommodative category, and it is very essential that you have categories that are accommodative if collectivity is your goal.

There are bhajans sung by Lata Mangeshkar bordering on geet, a song. When it becomes a song it is a very personal kind of presentation, but when it is a bhajan it is not personal. All these aspects are thrown up by tradition; we are trying to deduce certain principles that are current in almost all the regions of India. In addition, you will see that every region has its own folk music; every region has its own religious music. Of the ten major religions in the world, eight have made India their home, and all of them have a very long tradition; all of them are well distributed over the land. That is why one has to realise that what has happened in India is very unique; it has become a crucible for all kinds of experiences, and all of them are available to all of us.

What about the instruments (in religious music)?

Scattered voices: Cymbals... Mridangam...

Ranade: These instruments are also very simple. Once I asked a question to people who practise religious music as well as folk music. I asked, "What really distinguishes the instruments which you use?" One of them, who was very witty and very truthful, said, "Our instruments are special, they don't need any maintenance!" And it is true. If you have the manjiri, the kartal, what kind of maintenance do you need? The mridang needs maintenance when it comes onto the concert platform, otherwise if you listen you will realise that 90 percent of the time they are out of tune. But it does not matter there. That is why our criteria, which are based on sweetness of music, tunefulness of music, aesthetics of music, are very narrow. Different musical categories challenge the validity of these criteria. They tell you their aim is different. So then you don't have any right to impose any outside framework on the musical experience, because musical experience is the primary thing, not your cultural theories.

Everywhere, theories will have to be post facto deductions something takes place for a number of centuries, in a number of locations with a number of cultural groups. Then you try to make sense of it and say "Oh! This is a pattern," and that becomes a theory. The moment you have another kind of experience, you should be able to relinquish the hold of that theory and try to examine everything afresh. In my opinion, now is the time to examine all our theories again. My pet prediction is that in the coming 20 years, the quality of our brains is going to change entirely. Our perception of time has changed; our perception of space has changed. All our art theories, cultural theories, will have to be re-examined afresh, otherwise we will cling to older theories that will hamper us in receiving new experiences.

(Audio clip: Chanting of Jai Jai Ram Krishna Hare accompanied by loud cymbals and mridangam, in a continuously rising tempo)

Ranade: Apart from the change in tempo from slow to fast, what were the other qualities you noticed?

Student: There was a trance-like quality created?

Ranade: How do you think that trance-like quality was created?

Student: When you say the same chants again and again, and then by increasing the tempo and the volume, you create a trance for everyone sitting there.

Ranade: Trance is a good, useful term, though it's a very high term, implying an altered state of consciousness. This is supposed to take you to a higher plane: forget about day-to-day troubles; forget about your own concerns; don't be self-centered; merge your identity with that of the crowd. That means you are nobody; still you are together. These kinds of feelings are attained easily if sound is used in a hypnotic fashion. That means you don't change the stimulus too much, you maintain the sameness. That slight variation with the rhythm, with the tempo, with the crowd, helps you. When we say this, we are not referring to one particular cult or religion, these are common features found everywhere. That means they are human features, not religious features.

(An excerpt from a qawwali in which Yallah Yallah is repeatedly chanted)

Meaningless words are not, as they say, "tainted with the daily traffic of the world". That is why meaningless sounds form a very important component of all mantras.

This form of music was the qawwali. The interesting thing is that both Buddhism and Islam frowned on music. Both these religions felt that if music was allowed to hold sway, it defiled the soul of the devotee. Both these religions ended up not only allowing music, but also encouraging music to a very enriched level.

The point I am making is that no religion can do without music. When you come to the relationship between religion and music, you have various levels of music making. But the primary level needs collectivity. To learn religious music, you don't have to go to a class; you are in a culture and you know about the music; you start participating and it becomes your music. Nobody bothers if you are singing in tune or out of tune. When it becomes art music, then they might bother.

The other point is that religious music builds bridges between music and other areas of your life. That is why it has definite occasions, definite places, definite spaces, definite rituals associated with it. It is a very simple trick of building a web of association. How do you enrich a thing? By placing it in a very comprehensive perspective. For example, you can remember so many things by just remembering the Ganesha festival. Of course now you might just remember the noise. I remember once telling a group in Pune, "The reason Ganesha has such a large stomach and such large ears is that he has to accommodate so many sins of his devotees, and so much noise!"

Religion creates for you a large framework of reference and memory. Then things become meaningful, you can make sense of the situation; otherwise, things fall apart, or they are isolated and you are not able to make connections. This is the logic behind one category of music.

Some categories of music are highly collective, some of them are highly individual, and all of them have a logic.

(Another music clip: Irish church music)

Ranade: Two primary questions you always have to answer: Did you like it? Why?

Scattered voices: Very sweet sounding... There are sort of vibrations... You sort of get goose bumps... Very melodious and soothing.

Ranade: You used the words "sweet", "melodious", "soothing" all these are highly urbanised responses, if I may say so. Actually I would have loved it if you had used words "evocative" and "moving", and I insist on using these words, because when I say evocative, I am not referring to any single emotion but I am saying that it appeals to me, it moves me. That is the essential quality of it. It is not taking a particular feeling, it is merely unsettling you for a while. You become introspective when you listen to this kind of music. It creates a space around you, you become quiet. Even in a crowd, that tends to happen. You can be most anonymous in the most crowded hotel because there is a space around you that belongs to nobody.

You may not be able to enter the fabric of certain music very easily, perhaps because you are foreign to that culture. Music is culture-oriented; to say that music is a universal language is a myth. Music becomes universal at such an abstract level that it ceases to remain music, it becomes sound. It is only when you come down to the level of dialects that you are able to say that you understand this music.

You have to make distinctions between vocal music and instrumental music. I will give you a simple example. I live in India. I am associated with Hindustani music. I appreciate south Indian instrumental music much better than vocal music. You would do the same thing; if you belong to a particular culture you would appreciate better the instrumental music of another musical culture than its vocal music. This is because the voice is very deeply and intimately connected with a particular culture. Instruments are emotionally and culturally more neutral than voices.

Chanting tends to be minimal as music; it is less complex; it repeats certain sounds. That is why primitive music, even if it is African or Warli, you will be able to understand because it is simpler. Otherwise, maybe not. Just like language. If you listen to a foreign language you may understand the tone of it but not the meaning. So when you say, "I like music, music is a universal language," you are only saying, "It appeals to

me but I am not making any sense out of it." You will have to go further and find out what the music is made of, what it means and only then it enriches you more.

I would suggest you think about three terms: self-expression, communication, art. When you like a song for reasons of your own, then you are expressing yourself, which is a self-sufficient activity. If you start telling others about that song and they have a totally different perception, then what do we share? We only disagree. That is why we move to communication, where we share things: we ask, "What do you mean by this?" and you answer, "I mean..." Then you come to the level of art.

"Without meaning" does not mean "meaninglessness". If you have ambiguity then it is an asset, but if you have contradiction, it is not an asset. If we have a particular experience, it will have components like a, b, c it will have a language, lyrics, etc. You may like a, b and she may like b, c. So a and c are not shared but b is. So there are overlapping areas of appreciation, hence communication is possible. But if there are no areas of overlap, there will be no communication.

Why is it that all good poetry always attracts the charge of obscurity? You sometimes feel similarly about music, you don't know what it means but you know you like it. This indicates that if you knew what it meant, you would like it even more. There is an overlap when you like something and I like it too. Unless you share you won't be able to communicate, and unless you communicate, really speaking you won't be able to be yourself. Individuals are individuals because they are part of society. That is where meaningfulness comes in.

You need to make a distinction between meaningfulness and significance. Something might be meaningful today but cease to be meaningful tomorrow, that is why it is not significant. Something may appear good to you today, but tomorrow you might turn around and say, "It was not that good. I liked it at that moment, it was good for that moment." I am not frowning upon that. It is like popular music. I often say popular music has a very important feature: topicality. If BEST fares are raised, and I want to protest in music, then I can have a song about that. But can I have a khayal or a thumri about that? You know, kerosene is really costly now and I suffer because of that but can I have a symphony about that? I can do that in popular music. Popular music means that I can respond to every situation with music.

The Irish Christian music we heard, when you listen to it you realise that not only is it very appealing and evocative, it is also technically sound. You can hear some amount of breathing and even the sound of breathing creates a bond. It makes it very human. The song is coming out with every outgoing breath, that is the kind of feeling you get. You

will find that all over India, the chants and the mantras are always associated with pranayama techniques. You breathe particular mantras in a particular fashion. Everything is approached from a physio-psychological angle: never body alone, never psyche alone; the two together all the time.

(Audio clip: advertisement jingles)

Ranade: This is one specimen of popular music. Notice how many messages they have given us in 20 seconds. They have used bright colours, quick tempo, voices that are attractive and messages that are short. Just to ensure the message has not been lost, there is a re-enunciation of it. This is what communication means.

I am not saying this is greater than a Shakespearean play but I am saying this is very effective. One should know how it happens, why it appeals? It wants you to concentrate on only one image. They are not opening up issues; instead they are narrowing them down, pinpointing them. All the same, the technique is very interesting and can tell us something about popular music and its reach.

Jingles are very good specimens of popular music. They are propagated by the media, they have the infrastructure of industry behind them, they are very purposeful, they are topical, and they are almost like musical fashions. This is how popular imagery functions it keeps pace with the times, it is with you all the time.

Even the motor horns you get now range in tune from Beethoven to bhajans. Just as you can have Hamlet in a comic form, you can have Beethoven diluted down to a motor horn. Film music is one of the great segments of popular music.

(Excerpts from a song from film *Chalti Ka Naam Gaadi*).

You realise that in three minutes they are doing so many things. There is a duet, there is a tonal colour, a change of human voice, there is imitation of instruments, there is a dialogue involved, a picture is created in your mind all these things are simultaneously carried what an art musician requires three and a half hours for, they can create in three min Still, mind you, we are not confusing the categories; we are not saying that instead of Bhimsen Joshi, the popular musician should be given the award. We are just saying that it is a very legitimate category, performing a specific function.

A word about why not to use the term "classical" I feel, firstly, the use of the term "classical" immediately creates the distinction that this one is classical, that means the other one is not worth it, and that is not true. Secondly, "classical" is a term derived from art history, so I don't have to accept it. In India there is a better term. For example

all raga music is always described as shastrokta sangeet. We believe all music has a shastra; all music has rules, there is nothing random there. They are very precise, whether it is folk music, devotional, or popular. They know what to do, why to do, how to do. So all music is shastriya, nothing is random. Shastrokta means "the rules of which are spelt out"; that is why raag sangeet is shastrokta, all other music is shastriya.

I don't use the term "classical", I prefer the term "art" music, because that distinguishes the intention of the artist. The artist always says, "I am creating aesthetically satisfying music". A folk musician will say, "I am singing a song", and if you ask a person who is singing a bhajan what he is doing, he is likely to say, "Main bhagwan ka bhajan kar raha hoon". (I'm singing a bhajan to God). He will not say, "I am singing a sweet, soothing song," because he does not intend to do that.

India is extremely rich in music. Unfortunately our knowledge of music, as presented in the media and through various classes and courses, does not do justice to the riches that we have. If I ask what the music systems in India are, you are likely to say Hindustani and Carnatic. There are two more, one in Kerala known in Sopana, and one in northeast India that has never been termed or analysed properly. In addition, you have folk music systems, then religious music, then primitive music and then popular music. So there have been five categories running simultaneously for almost 2,000 years. There are so many languages, so many people, so many races; all of them are contributing, and that is why the fabric is so rich.

Politically we are one nation, but culturally we are a federation. There are so many people coming from so many different backgrounds, there is a plethora of ideas. Somehow we have not made full use of this diversity. Sometimes I get the feeling that if only I could try to know what is happening in the region next to mine with which I share boundaries, even that would clarify a lot of things. There is a science called ethnomusicology, which means studying music and culture together. One of its basic premises is that a culture cannot be understood unless you understand its music, and vice versa. It also says that music reflects all the nuances of a culture.

I have always maintained that music helps you in prognosis, not diagnosis. Whatever concerns you have are first reflected in music. If you have the ears, you will be able to listen to them and know them. But if you have a definition of music that tells you that music should be sweet and melodious, then you are deprived of a great deal of information and insight, because music is created by your basic identity. Nobody can change anybody's music by forcing music on him or her. Unless I decide to accept that music, I will not change my music. We are using a foreign language, but am I using

British music? If I decide to, I will. Eventually it will be my choice, I have started using polyphony, I have started using chords and harmonisation because I have decided to do so, not because there was a law enacted to make me do that.
