

Archiving Hindustani music at the Samvaad Foundation

Hindustani classical music has its uniqueness in the fact that it allows the artist the opportunity to explore and develop his individual artistic expression to the fullest, while still keeping him linked to the age old system of his tradition. Any attempt to archive, or even write about archiving a tradition this sophisticated, must begin with a little pondering over how this form of art works. A little clarification of the philosophy of music that drives our archives is therefore necessary.

Hindustani music builds itself around three foundation stones that its practitioner relentlessly studies, romances and reinterprets – the raga, the tala and the shruti (the microtones). The raga, contrary to what can be observed in an appallingly large number of performances today, is not just a scale of notes. A raga represents a specific gait that the notes of the scale make their own. The artist, as so many stalwarts have said, can only attempt to keep developing his understanding of the raga. The gait of each raga thus demands repeated perusals of the artist, which is essential to the survival of the raga, the artist and the tradition.

The rhythm system of Hindustani classical music is probably one of the most unique structurings in the world. The tala system consists of a series of recurring rhythm cycles (*avartans*). Each *avartan* has a first half and a second half – a rise and a fall, like a crescendo followed by a decrescendo. The first beat of each cycle is called its *sum* and a typical Hindustani song (*bandish*) has its catchphrase (its main melodic theme, its *mukhada*) anchored around the *sum* of the tala. Here's what makes all of this so unique – The space in the *avartan* that the *mukhada* does not occupy is left empty for the artist to play around in – or with – as he will.

The shrutis that our music is widely known for are microtones that are used by the artist in his singing and vary according to the raga that is being sung. The shrutis used in a raga also vary between artists, depending on the artist's mood, his training and his *gharana*. The scales used in Indian music are never tempered like western scales are and this adds a whole new dynamic to our music.

The reinterpretation that the raga and its shrutis (or even, for that matter, the *bandish*) demands and the possibilities that the tala offers together allow the artist to blossom forth again and again while staying rooted in the raga and around the *mukhada* in the tala. It must also be explicitly said that Hindustani music is not pre-composed like other forms of music are.

Because this system of music has been practiced across two thirds of India's vast geography, the country's incredibly diverse cultures, attitudes and dialects have added a host of delicious flavours to it. This, of course, has only

been possible because the very nature of the music allows it. In an era without the radio and television, these geographically separated attitudes and cultures of music grew, in their isolation, into full fledged aesthetic ideologies of music called *gharanas*. Each *gharana*, while belonging to the same greater system of Hindustani music, has its own specificities of language, pronunciation, inflection, the treatment of the raga and the improvisation in the series of rhythm cycles of the tala

For generations, the traditional aesthetic values of the *gharanas* have been kept alive by passing them on orally within the *guru-shishya parampara* (the teacher-student tradition). The *gurukul* system required a student of music to live with his guru for many years. In living with his teacher, the student not only internalised the theoretical aspects of the tradition, but also developed a living understanding of his guru's creativity. He witnessed his guru's interactions with other creative minds. These experiences were essential to the growth of the student and inculcated an understanding of the ethos and the particular aesthetic of his *gharana* in his mind. Thus, these *gharanas* evolved into identifiable sub-genres of Hindustani music. They represent particular approaches to composition, melody and rhythm and their interrelationships.

In the year 1962, my father, Vamanrao Deshpande wrote *Indian Musical Traditions* – the first book of its kind that attempted to compare the aesthetic ideologies of the various *gharanas* of Indian classical music. This, of course, was when the advent of the radio and easier means of communication was starting to broaden the traditional limits of exposure to music. In his book, my father analysed the music of the prominent *gharanas* comparatively, but the book hinted at the idea that students of music could now study the aesthetics of the different *gharanas* comparatively and then construct their own individual amalgamation – their own style, their own understanding of the art they had chosen to practise. He spoke, for example, about the Agra *gharana*'s focus on the tala and the Kirana *gharana*'s focus on the swara and suggested that the artist could maybe look for a golden mean which, incidentally, my father found in the Jaipur *gharana*.

My father's research for writing this book saw him inviting artists from various *gharanas* to our house and establishing dialogues between them. I was a witness to such discussions that involved artists like Pt. Bhimsen Joshi, Pt. Kumar Gandharva, Pt. Vasant Rao Deshpande, Smt. Mogubai Kurdikar among a host of others. These ideas later inspired me to start documenting artists of different *gharanas* by recording them using audio equipment that was increasingly becoming accessible. The archive that had thus started to take shape was later registered as a charitable trust and christened the 'Samvaad Foundation'.

As its name connotes, Samvaad represents and is synonymous with establishing a dialogue between exponents of the traditional values of the

gharana system. With the help of monetary grants from institutions like the Ford Foundation, we invited practically every living vocalist – well known or obscure – who mattered, to reside at Samvaad for weeks on end and extensively recorded their singing as well as their ideas about music, improvisation, the devising of an *avartan*, the aesthetics of a raga – all of this in the presence of other musicians and students of music. The archive, which can now boast of about 10,000 hours of recorded audio, likens itself to a palette, the colours of which represent the myriad traditions of our music and can be used by today’s musicians to create their own individual blends. We also have about 3000 annotated (written) unpublished compositions and a host of published anthologies of annotated compositions. Contrary to the contemporary belief that audio recordings are a better means of documentation than the older method of annotating compositions, it is worth mentioning the merits that annotated compositions can offer. For example, listening to Ustad Abdul Karim Khan sing a *bandish* like *jamuna ke teer* tends to make the student assume that there can’t be any other way to interpret the song, but reading the notation of the same song without having heard the recording, allows the student to then sing it in his own way. All of this helps students to develop a completely individual understanding of the composition – within the context of his exposure, training and temperament.

Our aim at Samvaad was to try and capture the key to, or the essence of improvisation in Indian classical music. We believe that the surest way to approach something as fundamental as ‘the essence of improvisation’ or ‘the basic structure of a raga’ is to study the *gayaki* of a variety of musicians through the ages. My guru, Pt. Kumar Gandharva made his disciples listen to a variety of recordings of pastmasters and contemporaries – he even imitated many vocalists of old before us to give us a live taste of their style. His guru Prof. B.R. Deodhar purposefully exposed him to the music of the various singers who used to frequent the Deodhar School of music, thus allowing him access to a vibrant ethos of diverse aesthetics. This prevented Kumarji from being thrust into one restricted ideology of music. This approach was unheard of in those times. I use my archive to similarly expose my students – and, of course, myself – to an even wider range of music. This is a phenomenon that many musicians of generations before ours completely missed out on. It must be said, though, that we can’t claim to have invented the idea of comparative study. Ustad Amir Khansaheb, for instance, imbibed the *gayaki* of the Kirana and Bhendibazar *gharanas* as well as the style of Ustad Rajab Ali Khan. Pt. Gajanabuva Joshi let himself be influenced by the styles of the Jaipur and Agra *gharanas*, while anchoring himself to his Gwalior roots. There are also sensitive artists among my contemporaries today who are open to the aesthetics of styles foreign to their *gharana*-training. Still, the very concept of the *gharana* implies a sort of lopsided development where one aspect of a musician’s craft (the one his *gharana* advocates) scales incredible heights while the others are neglected.

As much as propagators of our music's 'glorious past' would hate to admit it, the utopian silver lining of the *gharana* system was not without its cloud. When, for instance, a *shishya* had the occasional opportunity to listen to a musician from another *gharana*, the new dimension this exposure might have added to his music was promptly outlawed by his guru. "*Kaan kharaab ho jayenge*" (It will spoil your ears) he was told. Many insecure gurus made their students learn compositions and patterns of improvisation by rote, rather than teaching them how to play this wonderful game of creating and improvising, of building and creating patterns within rhythm cycles on their own. Many *shishyas* ended up aping their guru's voice and style. They mindlessly stuck to the melodic phrases their gurus preferred and some even ruined their own voices by forcing themselves to sing in their guru's pitch. An archive like Samvaad presents the student with a much larger picture of the tradition of his art and leaves him with no choice but to absorb all that it offers him and then find his own place in it. The option of listening to his guru's guru, for example, shows the student the way to approach his roots, negates the tempting easy-way-out of blindly imitating his guru and challenges his own identity in the context of his tradition. An archive like Samvaad can make musicians aware of the possibility of having multiple artistic voices or personalities within them. Today, my study of the various traditions in my archive enables me to enter into the role of a vocalist of a certain *gharana* if I want to and then switch back – just like an actor plays a part in one film and a completely different character in another film.

Of course, the technology that made the archive possible also gave us satellite TV, the internet and public amplification systems that could amplify our inherently intimate, chamber-concert music to thronging audiences of thousands. The market-oriented, public relations culture that this brought about has caused today's musicians to look at music as a product for mass consumption rather than the creative process that it is. The many gurus that used to populate a city like Mumbai have been outnumbered by event organisers and public relations agencies. Inevitably, students of music now want to finish their study quickly so that the grand music festivals across the country can turn them into the next big thing. The ragas they sing are awkward syntheses of melodic phrases that audiences are familiar with and more often than not, just acrobatics within the scale of the raga. Inadequately trained young singers are lured away from committing themselves to the study of music by the glamour of television, playback singing for films and over-hyped music competitions.

Most colleges, universities and other institutes of music education have, unfortunately, failed to alleviate these problems. Children sent to learn music in these institutes are made to learn definitions of musical terms and then answer written examinations. They are made to mug up compositions followed by melodic phrases composed by their teacher and then regurgitate them before an examiner who then informs them that they now 'know classical music'. They

are never allowed to experience music-making as a beautiful, joyous experience that is relevant to their day-to-day life. The very concepts of the raga and the tala that make our music so enchanting and flexible are used as shackles to bind the student down in the confines of irrelevant technicalities of grammar. Apparently these institutes take the term ‘Gurucool’ too literally and take immense pride in their air-conditioned premises. The guru should be a tool – an instrument through which students are inspired to constantly widen the horizons of their art.

In this scenario, an archive can show today’s musicians their own tradition for what it really is, without hammering a set of values or irrelevant prejudices on them. It can make students of music aware that they have ready access to a form of art, the study of which can set them on a life long quest; that they are a part of a tradition that can give them pleasure of a higher order than fame, money or market survival ever can.

At a more immediate level, an archive can offer a musician an atmosphere of music that just doesn’t exist in contemporary society. My recent foray into the realm of the *thumri* is the best example of how an archive can accomplish this. I could not find an environment in society where the art of *thumri* singing (a lighter form of classical music) was actively being practised or listened to. So, I turned to my archive and the approximately two hundred and fifty *thumris* it has gave me all the exposure to the culture of *thumri* singing that I needed. It allowed me to relive the era when this form of art was in practise in society. I realised that I had been underestimating the potential this form of music held and overestimating myself in assuming that I could sing *thumris*. In 21st century India, this would not have been possible without an archive. Similarly Kumarji had never really been exceptionally interested in the music of the Marathi actor-singer Balgandharva while the latter was alive and actively performing. But Kumarji’s later study of his records came as a revelation and gave rise to a new interpretation and an independent identity of the songs that Balgandharva had sung as part of his plays on the Marathi stage. Archival material is always available for an artist to reinterpret throughout his career as his sensibilities develop.

The immense value that an archive therefore holds as a safeguard of our rich legacy is apparent, but sustaining an archive and making people aware of its value and its utility presents a challenge. Musicians have started considering themselves accomplished too early lately and are very eager to start performing and producing albums with big music companies. They are reluctant to face the challenges an archive offers and do not seem to have the commitment that serious, consistent study demands. The music education institutes that we offered our services to had certain inhibitions, initially, about the utility of the archive. To quote a department head I once met, “The artists in the archive don’t stick to the ragas as they have been printed in our textbooks”. Many teachers wanted us to expose their students only to the ragas listed in their

examination syllabi. Happily, the situation seems to be changing a little now. We have been having successful monthly guided listening sessions (with varying guides) in collaboration with institutes like the music faculty of University of Bombay, the SNDT university of Bombay, The Lalit Kala Kendra of Pune, the Madhya Pradesh Government and SPICMACAY, to name a few.

Interestingly, our guided listening sessions have sometimes received a more overwhelming response than pure music concerts usually do. The listening sessions we conduct don't just involve playing back recorded audio. My exposure to the music in the archive enables me to actually perform and demonstrate the music of the *gharanas*. Along with our archival material, these sessions become very appealing. For lay audiences, being able to appreciate and enjoy archival recordings that they would not have been able to fathom on their own holds great value. The experience of such a listening session also forces them to look at the music they are familiar with in a new light. Just like recommended reading is an integral part of any good educational programme, guided archival listening must be made compulsory for serious students of music. Students of a guru of the Jaipur *gharana*, for example, have never heard the *gayaki* of Gwalior. Very often, they haven't even heard the musicians that made their own *gharana* what it is. Gurus have often brought such students to Samvaad to expose them to its treasures.

An inexperienced student let loose in a large archive will not be able to make much productive use of it, which is why these listening sessions must be guided. Besides being guided through the contents of the archive, the student will also need help to be able to appreciate recordings of styles he is completely unfamiliar with. He will need a guru to tell him whether his understanding of all that he has heard at the archive is adequate and to point out the many things he is likely to miss. The problem that crops up here is that of the guides. To be capable of guiding students in the archive, the guide will have to be familiar with the philosophy of the archive and the music of the archive. He will have to be able to analyse the music comparatively and make students capable of carrying out the analysis for themselves. It goes without saying that he will have to be a performing musician and a skilled teacher. Such people are hard to find, but suitable candidates can be trained for this purpose.

An archive, therefore, cannot be called an alternative to the *guru-shishya parampara*. It must be seen as a formidable, inescapable tool that today's musicians must avail of. The importance of a guru cannot be underestimated but an archive can add whole new dimensions and wide perspectives to a student's craft. It can free him from the traps of stagnation and unnecessary *gharana* orthodoxy. An archive is a permanent refuge that musicians like me can keep coming back to for new insights, inspiration and new paths for the artist to follow on his never-ending quest for perfection.

-Satyasheel Deshpande