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Listening Habits of Hindustani Classical Music Learners: Patterns, Preferences, and Their Impact on Raga Perception and Performance

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Abstract

Listening plays a pivotal role in the training of Hindustani Classical musicians, influencing their perception of raga, improvisational skills, and stylistic refinement. With the proliferation of digital platforms alongside traditional guru-shishya methods, understanding learners' listening habits has become essential for modern pedagogy. This study aims to investigate the listening patterns and preferences of learners of Hindustani Classical Music (HCM), comparing their engagement with classical and popular renditions, and assessing the impact on their performance skills and creative development. A quantitative research design was employed. Data were collected from 134 undergraduate, postgraduate, and doctoral students across six universities through a structured questionnaire. Findings indicate that learners are engaged with varied genres but prioritise classical music and the style in which they are getting trained. While popular renditions are common, the Guru's recordings and classroom demonstrations remain equally or more valued. Regular listening was reported to enhance raga recognition, improvisation, and performance, with both traditional and contemporary practices contributing to artistic growth. The findings are significant for music educators, curriculum developers, and performers. By understanding students' listening preferences and integrating structured listening assignments—combining live concert exposure with curated digital content— institutions can enhance training outcomes and preserve the depth of traditional pedagogy while embracing modern accessibility.

Keywords: Hindustani Classical Music, listening habits, raga perception, music pedagogy, digital platforms, performance skills.

Research Paper

Introduction

Listening is one of the most instinctive yet intellectually engaging human activities, enabling individuals to perceive, understand, and respond to the world of sound. People listen to music for various reasons—for relaxation, emotional expression, cultural connection, or spiritual experience. Several studies have proven the positive impact of music listening on various psychological, physiological, neural, and diverse aspects related to human mental and physical health. In the context of music learning, listening goes beyond passive hearing—it becomes a deliberate, analytical, and transformative process. For students of HCM, listening forms the very foundation of their artistic growth, enabling them to internalise the essence of musical sound and emotion.

Svalina (195) emphasised practising listening as an active and iterative exercise, in which learners repeatedly engage with the same musical material, attending to a different expressive or structural dimension each time. Through such sustained attention, students develop heightened sensitivity to tonal nuances, rhythmic subtleties, and emotional intent, leading to independent interpretation and deeper comprehension. Another study highlights a similar emphasis that musical emotions are co-created and shared among listeners; the act of listening thus becomes both social and introspective (Alaghband-Zadeh 20). Active listening, therefore, is a tool for music

learners that cultivates aesthetic appreciation, improves improvisation skills and creativity, boosts technical precision and emotional expression— the qualities essential for mastering the art of raga performance and improvisation.

This study aims to identify the primary sources and patterns of listening among learners of HCM. It will also examine how their preferred musical styles influence their understanding of raga structure and overall musicality. The research will explore how sustained and intentional listening impacts their performance abilities, including recognising ragas, improvising, playing in tune, and refining their style. The study will compare the listening habits of students who sing, play instruments, or do both. It will also examine how teachers, peers, and the learning environment influence students' musical preferences and listening habits.

The scope of the present study is limited to understanding their listening habits, preferences, and perceptions, and how these relate to raga-based performance and musical development. It focuses on learners of HCM who are receiving formal training at various academic levels, including undergraduate, postgraduate, and doctoral programs. The research does not aim to evaluate technical performance skills in detail but rather to highlight how listening contributes to artistic and cognitive growth within formal education settings. The findings are intended to support curriculum design, teacher training, and the integration of active listening as a core pedagogical tool in Hindustani music education.

Listening plays a vital role in understanding and performing HCM; yet, most existing studies have focused either on traditional guru-shishya pedagogy or on general music appreciation. Few have examined how students of HCM engage in listening within academic and contemporary learning environments. As digital media continues to expand, learners increasingly rely on recordings, online platforms, and virtual lessons; however, the influence of these practices on their understanding and performance in the context of HCM remains underexplored. Recent research on the listening habits of University of Hyderabad students reveals similar trends, in HCM, dictating a strong preference for digital audio platforms, such as Spotify and YouTube, for everyday music consumption. This study also indicated that younger learners tend to favour film and melodic music through digital media, reflecting how technology has redefined listening accessibility and musical preferences. This growing reliance on digital listening highlights the need to investigate how such practices affect raga perception and learning among Hindustani music students (Mehta and Pyasi 11–13).

The authors aim to address these gaps through a quantitative examination of listening patterns, genre preferences, and the perceived impact of listening on raga-based performance among learners of Hindustani music in universities. It also examines how students develop listening skills within both traditional and digital frameworks, and how these habits influence their artistic development, concentration, and emotional connection to ragas.

Institutional Learning and Listening Practices

In traditional Hindustani music education, the guru-shishya tradition is an ancient system in which musical knowledge is passed down orally from guru to disciple. As Okada Emi (496) explains, in classical music, the performance, teaching, and listening of ragas are intertwined, each aspect enriching the other in a continuous cycle of artistic development and appreciation. Students would spend years listening to their teachers and absorbing the nuances of each raga before performing. Even in modern institutional settings, listening remains an essential part of learning. Learners listen to bandish-s, alap-s, and master recordings to absorb the style, expression, and presentation. This type of active listening develops intonation, memory, and improvisational ability. It teaches students to differentiate between ragas, understand their character, and reproduce them with the correct feeling and emotion. As Neuman (426) explains, he has students practice the raga without naming it and sing the swara-s without naming them swara-s. Disciples often learn music by being in the company of their guru, living with them and participating in their daily activities. The guru-shishya tradition is not merely a formal education, but a deeply spiritual relationship in which the guru guides his disciple.

Sentiment and Raga Perception

Understanding how listeners perceive emotions in ragas provides valuable insights into the affective and cognitive aspects of music comprehension. Velankar and Sahasrabuddhe's pilot study (91-98) demonstrated that even novice listeners can perceive emotions associated with ragas, suggesting that listening plays a direct role in developing emotional sensitivity. For classical music learners, repeated and attentive listening can deepen their ability to connect emotional expressions with raga

structures, thereby enhancing both interpretive skills and the authenticity of their performance. This connection between listening and emotional recognition provides a basis for analysing how learners' preferences influence their raga-based performance. Mathur (1) explains that in HCM, ragas constitute specific combinations of pitch intervals that are potentially capable of evoking specific emotions. Swara determines the emotion experienced in a raga, while rhythmic regularity and tempo control the level of arousal. Specifically, our results showed that 'minor second' is a direct predictor of negative valence.

Physiological Implications of Listening Habits

Music listening habits, particularly for learners of HCM, are crucial for both their physical well-being and performance. Music listening habits are not limited to enjoyment; they can also impact a listener's health and performance. Ishida et al. (799) caution that irregular or excessive listening can have a negative impact on the auditory health of young adults. For classical music learners, who often engage in prolonged listening sessions via digital devices, these findings raise serious concerns about listening practices. The implications extend beyond health to performance quality—as auditory fatigue or auditory strain can impair the nuances of a raga. Emami et al. (3) explain prolonged exposure to loud sounds can damage the delicate hair cells in the ear, potentially leading to hearing loss over time. Additionally, excessive stress can increase the risk of hearing problems by triggering the release of harmful hormones. Therefore, auditory patterns should be studied not only for their educational value, but also for their physiological stability.

Psychological Outcomes of Listening

Listening to music fulfils multiple psychological functions such as regulating mood and arousal, enhancing self-awareness, and facilitating social connection (Schäfer et al. 205). Of these, mood regulation and self-reflection often emerge as more dominant motivations than social interaction (Schäfer et al. 205). Music listening is also widely employed as a coping strategy to manage stress and anxiety, contributing to psychological stability and emotional balance (Kong and Wong 1). Empirical studies suggest that listening can reduce self-reported anxiety and may even positively impact physiological markers, such as blood pressure and cortisol levels (Panteleeva et al. 1; Linnemann et al. 406).

Music plays a key role in modulating sadness and reinforcing positive affect, offering benefits for both psychologically healthy individuals and those experiencing depressive symptoms (Wang et al. 1). Particularly in older adults, music listening promotes relaxation, mood regulation, and life satisfaction, thereby enhancing overall well-being and sense of agency (Laukka 1; Sella et al. 1). The impact of music on cognition and affect is also shaped by the nature and context of listening—happy or uplifting music, for instance, has been linked to improved executive functioning and processing speed (Sella et al. 1).

Individual differences, such as personality and the intention behind listening, significantly determine music's psychological outcomes. When listening is driven by goals such as relaxation or emotional release, it tends to be adaptive; however, obsessive forms of engagement can have counterproductive effects (Rossi et al. 1; Morgan and Marroquín 1). Moreover, passionate involvement in music can contribute positively to well-being when it is harmonious, but negatively when it becomes obsessive or compulsive (Powell et al. 1).

Methodology

A convenience sample of students aged 18–25 and 25 & above was drawn from university music programmes in India. A structured, closed-ended questionnaire was hosted on Google Forms, and the link/QR code was shared via WhatsApp with 150 prospective respondents. After screening for completeness and quality (removing partial and outlier entries), 134 valid responses were retained for analysis. Participants were enrolled in undergraduate (UG, n = 20, 14.9%), postgraduate (PG, n = 96, 71.6%), and PhD (n = 18, 13.4%) programmes and studied Hindustani music. Specialisations included Vocal (n = 88; 65.7%), Instrumental (n = 30; 22.4%), and Both (n = 16; 11.9%), indicating that some learners pursued both vocal and instrumental training. Ages ranged from 19 to 45 years; 70 respondents (52.2%) were 18–25 and 64 (47.8%) were 25 & above. Within the 18–25 group, there were 28 males (40.0%) and 42 females (60.0%); within the 25 & above group, 42 males (65.6%) and 22 females (34.4%). Overall, the sample comprised 70 males (52.2%) and 64 females (47.8%). Data were collected between August 6th and 20th, 2025, and analysed using Microsoft Excel.

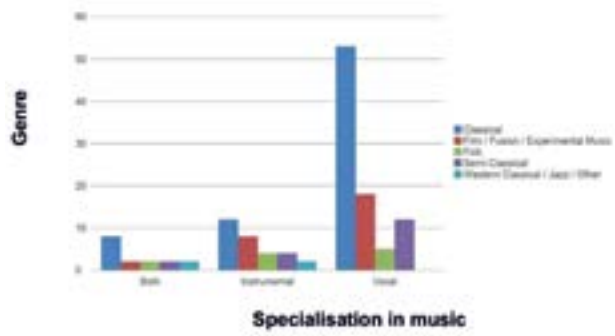
The data collected from 134 valid responses, encompassing undergraduate, postgraduate, and doctoral students, provided valuable insights into the listening habits and patterns of learners of Hindustani music. The findings reveal results related to the frequency of listening, genre preferences, duration of

engagement, and the perceived impact of listening on performance skills. They also highlight variations based on academic level, gender, and specialisation in vocal or instrumental music. The following section presents a detailed interpretation of these findings.

Results and Discussion

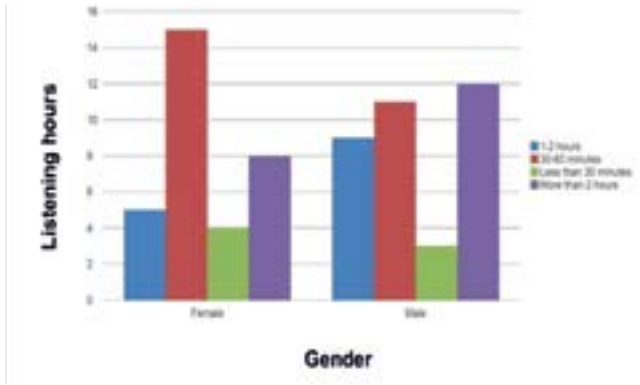
Listening Preferences and Habits

Genre Preferences among Learners



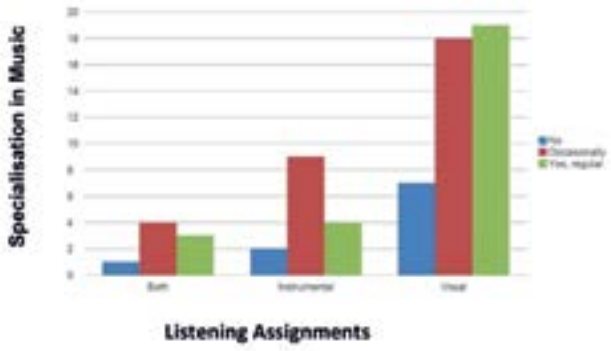
A large majority of instrumental learners (around 80%) prefer classical music, making it the most dominant genre in this group. A smaller percentage, about 10%, listen to film or fusion music, and roughly 10% prefer semi-classical or other genres. In contrast, vocal learners display more diverse preferences. Around 40% of them prefer film or fusion music, about 30% like semi-classical, and nearly 20% enjoy classical music, with a small percentage listening to folk or other genres. Learners who study both vocal and instrumental music are very few, and their preferences are distributed across genres without a clear pattern, though classical and film music are slightly more common among them.

Gender-wise Listening Duration



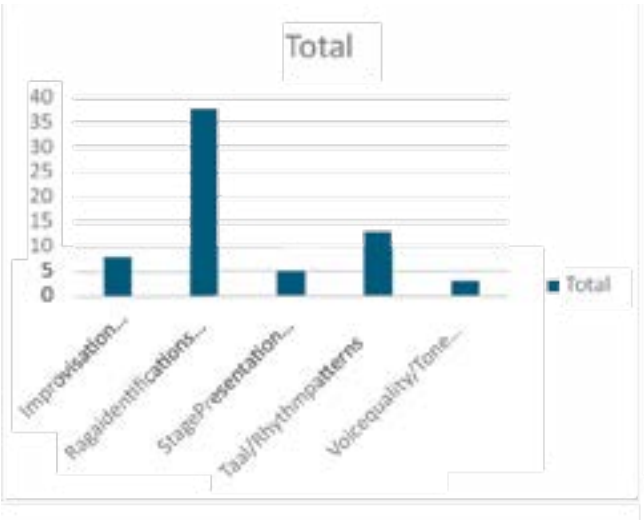
The data show a clear difference between male and female participants in how long they listen to music. Among females, 46.9% listen to music for 30–60 minutes a day, 25.0% listen for more than 2 hours, 15.6% for 1–2 hours, and 12.5% for less than 30 minutes. Among males, 37.5% listen to music for more than 2 hours, 34.4% for 30–60 minutes, 28.1% for 1–2 hours, and only 9.4% for less than 30 minutes.

Frequency of Listening Assignments



The analysed data show that 38.8% of learners receive regular listening assignments from their teachers or tutors. A slightly higher proportion, 46.3%, reported that such assignments are given occasionally, and 14.9% stated that they do not receive any listening assignments from their respective Faculty or Gurus.

Aspects of Focus during Listening



The data indicate that a majority of students (56.7%) focus primarily on raga identification and development while listening to music, suggesting that understanding the melodic structure remains central to their listening practice. Taal and rhythm patterns (19.4%) and improvisation techniques (11.9%) were the next most observed aspects, while comparatively fewer students paid attention to stage presentation and styles (7.5%) and voice quality or tone production (4.5%). This

pattern reflects a predominant emphasis on melodic comprehension over performative or tonal dimensions in students' listening habits.

Classical and Popular Listening Preferences

The data reveal that a majority of respondents (89.6%) reported listening to popular songs based on classical ragas, while only 10.4% did not engage in such listening practices. This suggests that a substantial proportion of learners and listeners are drawn to contemporary or popular renditions of classical ragas, reflecting a blend of traditional and modern listening habits.

Sources of Listening and Practice

In response to the question "What types of content from recordings do you use for your practice?", the findings indicate that Guru's recordings are the most frequently used source, reported by approximately 85% of respondents. Stage performances were mentioned by about 70%, followed by film songs (around 35%) and online tutorials (about 25%). These results suggest that while traditional learning, guided by the Guru's expertise and live performances, remains central to practice, a growing number of learners are also incorporating digital and popular media content, reflecting an evolving blend of traditional and modern learning approaches in Hindustani music training.

Challenges and Suggestions for Improvement

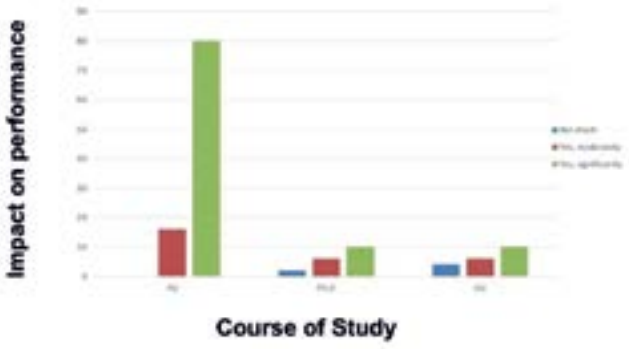
In their responses, students identified lack of time due to academic commitments, difficulty in understanding complex ragas, limited access to live concerts, and distractions on digital platforms as the primary challenges in maintaining their listening habits. Among these, time constraints and difficulties in comprehending complex ragas emerged as the most frequently reported concerns.

Students also emphasised the need for regular guided listening sessions, exposure to live and fusion concerts, and opportunities to interact with experienced musicians to cultivate a deeper appreciation for music. They recommended incorporating structured and guided listening sessions, playlist-based learning, and active listening practices within the curriculum to enhance their understanding towards the aesthetics and technical aspects of raga and develop consistent listening habits.

Impact of Listening on Musical Growth

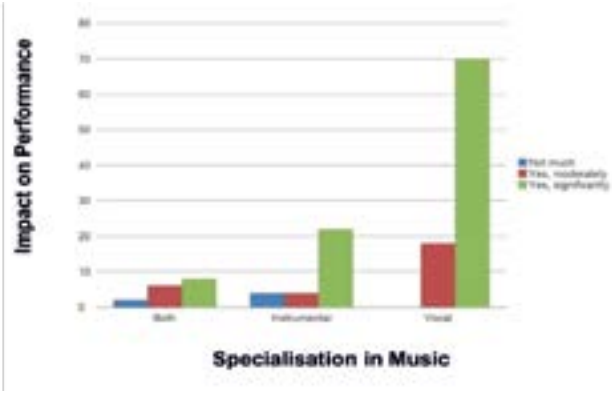
The influence of music listening on musical growth was evaluated based on participants' responses to the questions posed by the researchers. The key findings are summarised below.

Perceived Impact among Different Academic Levels



A large majority of PG students (80%) reported that listening has significantly improved their performance skills, while 15% indicated a moderate impact, and only 5% felt it had little to no impact. Among PhD scholars, 60% reported a significant improvement, approximately 30% indicated a moderate impact, and 10% reported no significant impact. For UG students, 50% experienced a significant impact, 35% reported a moderate effect, and 15% stated that there was little to no impact.

Impact by Type of Learner



The data show that 70% of vocal music learners reported that listening has significantly helped them in their learning process. A smaller group, about 18%, said it has helped them moderately, while only a few reported that it has not helped much. In the case of instrumental learners, 22% reported that listening has helped them significantly, while a smaller percentage indicated that it has helped moderately or not much. Among learners studying both vocal and instrumental music, 8% said listening has helped significantly, 6% said it has helped moderately, and around 2% said it has not helped much.

Conclusion and Relevance of the Study

This study highlights the crucial role of listening in Hindustani music training, showing that it is supportive for developing raga perception, improvisation, and overall performance skills. The findings demonstrate that students' listening preferences reflect a synthesis of traditional and modern practices—ranging from Guru's recordings and live performances to digital and popular renditions based on classical ragas.

Understanding these listening preferences, along with their impact on musical growth, will help educators design teaching strategies that balance traditional guru-shishya methods with digital and contemporary learning modes. Regular, structured, and guided listening not only enhances technical and analytical understanding but also nurtures emotional sensitivity, creativity, and interpretive depth. Hence, contributing to a broader understanding of how listening functions as both a pedagogical and aesthetic practice in modern Hindustani music education, bridging the classical heritage with evolving modes of engagement in the digital era.

The present study opens several avenues for further exploration. Future research can be expanded to include learners from diverse geographical and institutional contexts—such as traditional gurukuls, university departments, and online learning communities—to compare variations in listening habits across pedagogical settings. A longitudinal approach may also be adopted to understand how sustained listening practices influence raga perception, improvisational skills, and stylistic evolution over time. Comparative studies between Hindustani and Carnatic learners, or between vocalists and instrumentalists, can further illuminate genre-specific listening behaviours. Finally, insights from such studies can be integrated into pedagogy by designing structured listening modules that balance traditional sources with modern digital resources, thereby enhancing raga comprehension and overall musicality.

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