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Techniques for effective vocalism in Indian classical music and their relation to the purpose

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Abstract

Music has always been an integral part of the society and universal in nature. On a closer look, one often wonders what really is the true purpose of music and how can one work on one's musical skills to achieve this purpose. The word 'effective' means "successfully producing the result" and 'vocalism' refers to "singing". The purpose of music refers to the aim or intention of performing the act of producing music. Is music for the self (swaantah sukhaaye) and to express that deep joy/emotion, or ras-nishpatti, or self- discovery, a combination of these, or something else? Can the purpose be different for different musicians and how it will impact the riyaaz? What is the true meaning of "Aanand" (heart's joy) and how it is different from "Manoranjan" (entertainment). This research paper aims to explore the relationship between these two aspects (tools- techniques and the purpose) to get more clarity on practice and performance of Indian Classical vocal music. It would encourage students of music to ponder over their art and fulfil the aimed purpose of their music in their lifetime. Music is universal in nature and has always been an integral part of the society. On a closer look on music, one often wonders what really is the true purpose of music and how can one work on one's musical skills to achieve this purpose. The word 'effective' means "successfully producing the result" and 'vocalism' refers to "singing". The purpose of music refers to the aim or intention of performing the act of producing music. Is music for the self (swaantah sukhaaye) and to express that deep joy/emotion, or ras-nishpatti, or self- discovery, a combination of these, or something else? Can the purpose be different for different musicians and how it will impact the riyaaz? What is the true meaning of "Aanand" (heart's joy) and how it is different from "Manoranjan" (entertainment). This research paper aims to explore the relationship between the two aspects (tools- techniques and the purpose) to get more clarity on practice and performance of Indian Classical vocal music. It would encourage students of music to ponder over their art and fulfil the aimed purpose of their music in their lifetime.

Keywords: Tools, Techniques, Purpose, Voice, Sadhana

Research Paper

In Indian Classical Music, over the years, there has been a fair amount of emphasis on the technique to develop the tools of effective vocalism. Various thinkers, artists, researchers have experimented with different techniques and suggested the ideal ones to future generations. Needless to say, this is an important aspect of any music. It is only with the correct technique that an artist can achieve the purpose of the music. This brings us to the next question—What is the purpose of one's music? The word purpose refers to "the reason for which something is done or achieved". It is imperative to understand the purpose for the more focussed use of tools and techniques.

Before proceeding further, it is important to understand the meaning of some of the terms used in this paper. The word tools refers to "a thing that helps to do a job or achieve something". Furthermore, the word technique means "a particular way of doing something". The word "effective" refers to

"successfully presenting the result that you want". Vocalism, as per collins dictionary, means

"singing, especially with respect to technique or skill". The word "self discovery" refers to the process of aquiring insight into one's own character.

The tools of effective vocalism

Every student & practitioner of Hindustani Classical

Vocal Music wants to sing effectively. There are certain tools which help in this process. Some of these tools are described in this section.

1. Voice

Voice is "the sound produced in a person's larynx and uttered through the mouth, as speech or song". Voice needs to be developed by careful attention, training or study. For music to be effective and pleasing, the voice needs to be sonorous and soothing with a continous and uniform sound. A lot of attention has been paid to Voice Culture in the west. In the past few decades, there has been some research in this subject in India by Indian Classical Music practitioners as well. Pandit Omkarnath Thakur in his book "Sangeetanjali" has mentioned the process and importance of Swar Sanskriti (Voice Culture). He talks about Mandra Sadhana, which will be discussed a bit later. What one needs to understand is that the voice is one of the most important tools of effective vocalism which has to be controlled and taken care of.

2. Swara

What is Swara? The term itself gives a clue about the meaning. "Swa" stands for "Self" and "Ra" stands for "shining forth". The word "note" is often used to describe Swara but this is not entirely apt. A note can be produced mechanically, but a Swara is something more. In the book "Alaap, A discovery of Indian Classical Music" it is explained that "the concept of Swara is based on the assumption that there are two faces to a musical sound: an inner face and an outer face. The outer face is what we are accustomed to calling a note. The Swara is born when the inner face comes into being and shines through the outer note."[1] It is often said that "Swara is god". Hence we need to recognise its importance as a necessary tool for effective vocalism. After all, the great musicians of the Kirana Gharana (style) of music would say "Sur gaya toh sar gaya" (If you leave the swar- go out of tune, you lose your entire head.)

3. Raag

A Raag is a melodic framework for improvisation in Indian Classical Music. It is a central concept of Indian Music. Raag is such an important part of our music that some scholars believe that the real name of our music is not 'Sangeet', which refers to a combination of music, dance and drama but 'Raga Vidya' or the knowledge of Raag. There are several Raagas like Raag Bhairav, Raag Yaman, Raag Bhoopali, so on and so forth. It is the Raga that sets the mood for the music. Each raag is associated with a specific emotion. When sung at the right time in the right manner, it makes the singing more effective and soothing.

4. Taal

In Indian Classical Music, the vocalist is accompanied by a purcussion instrument- the Mridangam, the Pakhawaj or the Tabla–which provides the measure of time. The word "rhythm" has often been used as if it were an equivalent of the word "Taal". However, these two are not the same. Rhythm is physical and universal. Taal belongs to intellect and is similar to language. Rhythm does not need language, Taal does. This is why the Mridangam, Pakhawaj and Tabla use bols and mnemonics to preserve their roots in human utterance.

5. Breath control

Good breath control is the next tool for effective vocalism. There are many long phrases in music which require uninterrupted singing. Working on Damsaas (breath control) is of utmost importance.

6. Tanpura

The Tanpura, which is a traditional long-necked plucked string instrument, is used in Indian Classical Music to provide a continous harmonic drone. In old recordings of the All India Radio, it can be heard that the voice of the singer is gelling with that of the Tanpura completely, almost dissolving in the sound of the Tanpura, making the final recorded piece sound melodious. Singers of all times have emphasized the importance of using a Tanpura and even though the electronic one has become popular, the manual Tanpura has stood strongly at its place even now. Pt. Kumar Gandharva used to say that only when the canvas of Swaras is beautiful (created by the sound of the Tanpura), can the musical picture be painted on it.[2] No Indian musician is complete without his Tanpura. It has a special relationship with the musician. It is one of the most mysterious instruments ever invented. Only someone who tunes it perfectly can understand its true power. The Tanpura, hence, is an important tool for effective vocalism.

7. Kaku

Kaku is the change in sound of the voice to express the feelings of mind such as anger, fear, joy, mourning and other emotions. It is the modulation of sound to help in singing more effectively.

8. Alaap, Taan, Gamak, Khatka, Murki, Meend are other important tools of vocalism as they help in the development of the Raga and in enhancing the aesthetic aspect of the music.

9. Gharana

Renowned vocalist Dr. Ashwini Bhide Deshpande, in a lecture demonstration, has talked about Gharana (Style of music) being a tool to achieve the purpose of one's music.iii Every Gharana has certain unique attributes and style that help a vocalist to express in an effective way. Gharana teaches you how to walk and is important in the beginning of the learning process. Once the student learns to walk, he/she can run anywhere.[4] Hence, the Gharana is an important pathway to singing effectively and achieving the purpose.

The techniques of effective vocalism

After discussing some of the tools of effective vocalism, let's now look at the techniques involved to refine each tool for the tool to work at the optimal level.

1. Techniques for Voice culture.

In his book, Sangeetanjali, Pandit Omkarnath Thakur talks about "Mandra Sadhana" as a technique to train and control the voice to sing effectively. So, what is this Mandra

Sadhana? Every morning before sunrise, tune the tanpura and from the first note (Sa) of your scale, go lower and lower as much as possible. Usually this would be about 4-5 notes below your initial note. Make your voice stable on this note and sing it multiple times keeping each repitition long. This will help in developing a tuneful voice. The book also mentions the post practice foods to be taken by the student and the precautions to be kept in mind while doing Mandra Sadhana.[5]

2. Swara

The "Mandra Sadhana" technique mentioned earlier is also useful in bettering the Swaras. Furthermore, Alankar patterns (Palte) in morning Raagas like Bhairav or Todi can be practiced with care to fine tune swaras. Tuning the Tanpura regularly also helps a great deal in understanding the swaras better. Pandit Kumar Gandharva used to say that the Swayambhu swaras (harmonics/ overtones) from the Tanpura need to be carefully heard and then the voice needs to be matched with those overtones.[6] This helps in finding and sustaining the true swaras and make vocalist more effective.

3. Raag

Our music is a "Guru-Mukhi Vidya". This means that it is transmitted from one generation to the next through the oral medium. This is because a Raag is not a mere scale. Each Raag has it's own unique attributes and intricacies which need to be carefully learnt from a Guru. The slow and careful development of the raag is a lifelong topic of study for a student of Khayal music. This is why our music is called "Raag Sangeet". Aspects such as learning from a Guru, practicing, listening, reading about the raag, performing, all lead to a better understanding of the Raag.

4. Tanpura

It is important to know the technique for tuning this 4 stringed instrument correctly. The middle two strings are called Jodi ki Taar (Pair of strings) and are tuned to the higher Sa

(Madhya Saptak/ Middle Octave Sa). Next, the forth string (closest to tuner) is tuned to the Mandra Sa (Lower octave Sa). In the end, the first taar (farthest to the tuner) is tuned to Pancham. It should be ensured that the tanpura is played with the correct technique. "From the Pancham, Madhyam or Nishad to whichever notes the Tanpura has been tuned, the plucking gives an impression of four notes being struck but the sound feels like a steady holding tide on a beach, the waves of sound retracting all their backward steps, reaching back to the source which seems poised on an eternal present, the tenseless 'Now' of the Vedanta".[7]

5. Breath control

Apart from 'Mandra Sadhana', exercises like Surya Namaskar, swimming, Pranayam such as Anulom Vilom (better when performed with Kumbhak) help a great deal in breath control.[8] The sitting posture while performing these exercises or singing should be comfortable with the back straight. Indian Classical Music involves diaphragmatic breathing or belly breathing which means that when a note is uttered, the belly goes inside as the Swara comes out during exhalation. One hand can be placed on the belly while singing to check that.

Purpose

The purpose of music refers to the aim or intention of performing the act of producing music. In the book "Alaap, A discovery of Indian Music" it is stated that:

"The purpose of Indian Music is not to create a fine singer, or artist, or performer, but a new type

of person. With the singer who has attained Swara, music grows and opens into new dimensions. He steadily loosens the strangle hold of the rules of music in a subtle way. He does not flout[9] them. He merely interprets them in a new way. Suddenly the tension of having to lookout for transgressions[10] of our music's pervading grammer is gently removed and in its place a wondrous bliss takes over. There comes the wisdom that Raga and its grammar are only means and not ends in themselves."[11]

Even though the effort to develop Swara begins mechanically, as the seeker goes along the journey, it becomes a spiritual effort. As a devotee, he longs to attain Swara. The future is uncertain, with the student never being sure of what lies ahead; he walks the path only with trust and faith in his heart.

He realises that the obstacles in his path are intrinsic, both psychologically and spiritually. But once he starts on this journey, there is no looking back. The student realises that while the immediate goal is the voice, there is more happening to him than just the immediate thrill of a swift and clarified voice. He starts to understand that he can reach the goal only after a long and untiring effort.[12]

In our music, Sadhana plays a very significant role. As far as spirituality is concerned, Sadhana involves going inwards and getting hold of your interior energy body. Sadhana involves going through various stages: first stage is the learning stage where one learns from the Guru. This is the early stage wherein one practices music. Then as you gain more and more knowledge, the practice becomes more intense. The learner has to intensify the number of times by-hearting by repeating the same thing over and over again to get good technical proficiency. That's when the learner gets to a point where there is a transformation from merely practicing to Riyaaz where the student practices again and again for many hours together. This process continues and a time comes when the student further steps it up to another level, which is of Sadhana, which requires a tremendous amount of sacrifice. Most of the time of the day is spent thinking, analysing, practicing, creating music and using his internal energies to continuously achieve a state of absolute bliss.[13]

"Sadhana pulversises and recreates a person's inner world. Any Sadhana undertaken seriously does this, but the musical Sadhana does this more simply and directly. It is so all-consuming that at the end, the student is a changed man. He is now aware that while he was trying to become merely a good musician, he had also undertaken a spiritual journey unwittingly, and arrived in two places at once, a musical highland and a spiritual highland. He sees and feels the oneness behind all created things.

There are no more religious and national frontiers, no bigotry, no intolerence."[14]

Pt Mallikarjun Mansur, in his autobiography- Rasa Yatra, says "I believe that the primary "duty" of a singer is to sing. It is to give joy to the hearts of his empathising listeners."[15] He further writes, "Life for me has been a Sadhana- to win over the Goddess of music. In the beginning of this Sadhana, I was engulfed by innumerable problems. But this satvik anand or divine joy I derived from music has rendered all these problems insignificant.[16]

The person who is in search of music is also in search of infinite. The ultimate bliss, about which our ancient sages have spoken, is experienced by the seeker at the end of his search for music.[17]

"Jin khoja tin paiyaan, gehre paani paith" (He who has searched in deep water, has found). This line by Sant Kabirdas is apt for the seeker of music.

The process of delving into music is both complex and demanding. There is a need for copious sacrifice. It is a strong assertion, the purpose of which is transformation. If transformation does not occur, the purpose is forfeited. Then the act of pursuing music is merely a hobby or a profession.[18]

"The most curious result of the long discipline of Indian Music is that the person who enters it and the person who comes out of it are no more the same. For the true musician there is no difference between Sadhana, music and life. Human considerations of wealth, fame or power lose their significance in the light he has seen."[19]

Another purpose of singing can be to liberate oneself and attain a feeling of eternity. In the book

"Alaap", it is stated, "The singer is not compelled to express himself through the accepted canons of musical orthodoxy or the special style of his Gharana, although most of them do so most of the time. Their voice and the sound of their instruments become transparent. A creative economy pervades their style and provides a compelling authority to their music, that transcends traditions and inheritance, even of the families that have reared them. Their art is larger than the rules of

musical laws and fomulae. Their truth is their own law and their own right."[20]

Indian classical music has been linked to spirituality. Great Indian musicians have often been looked upon as saints and seers due to them being gifted with exeptional spirit. This is one of the reasons why the word "spiritual" is often used to describe Indian music.

Indian classical music has spiritual content in it's literature. This is why it is closely associated with religion and Bhakti.

Following is the text of a bandish in Raag Shankara which depicts the Grandeur of Lord Shiva:

Shankar Mahadev dev
Sevat sab jaake
Jata mukut sees gang
Vahan teri ati prachand
Gauri ardhang sang
Bhang rang saaje

We see that a basic and vital quality of Indian music is that it gently grows as in a trance. It gets the humankind closer to the truth, which is the still and luminous centre of enlightenment.[21]

Referring to the Sadhak, the book 'Alaap' states, "Then, one day, when the fever has passed from him and he is lucid again, he knows that he has arrived. The world is not the same again. He brings a strange sadness and joy, a disquiet too, into the lives of those who hear him, a strange sense of the awesome meaning of life. His voice begins to prefigure the tragic transience of life, it's unceasing flux, but also that which is behind life, unchanging, eternal, tranquil and blissful."[22]

Relation between Tools-Techniques and the Purpose

Indian Classical Music is considered to be spiritual and God's own creation. As a beautiful story about emperor Akbar and legendary Tansen goes: on being asked by Akbar that why Tansen's rendition was not as good as the rendition of his Guru Swami Haridas, he replied "I sing for you, the emperor among men. But my master sings only for the lord and creator of the entire universe. Herein lies the difference."[23] This reveals the true quest of Indian music.

In order to attain this degree of excellence, the tools-techniques are merely a physical means and they need to be taken to another level to relate with true purpose of the music. The "liberation" a musician attains is when his music gets redefined and opens into new dimentions. He has attained Swara but the rules and regulations are interpreted in a new way. The wisdom that Raga and its grammar are only the means and not the end starts prevailing. The voice and the sounds of instruments become transparent. The art becomes larger than boundaries of rules & regulations.

The "freedom" attained by practicing a single note for years is due to spaciousness of that Swara. Each note starts showing various facets and moods and the singer can take the note anywhere with great ease. The note shows directions, texture and the ultimate shine of silk. From being a mere note, it is now poised with eternity.[24]

Some tools and techniques have been mentioned earlier. However, there are many more tools in our music. Taan. It can be daunting for the student to try and master every such tool. So which tool(s) should he/she focus on? Here comes the aspect of purpose. What are you using a tool for and to what extent is the use of this tool justified, is what truly matters. If you have nothing to say, but you keep singing just because you can; just because you have a trained voice and so you are singing one taan after the other when it has no purpose. Hence, the focus should be on finding the purpose. Why am I singing? What is the very objective of my singing? If you find the purpose, means will follow. And then even if a tool or two is lacking in your singing, it will be alright as long as you have the purpose.

If you don't have the purpose, even if you have all the tools, it doesn't matter. It remains a mere exhibition of tools. It doesn't touch the soul.[25]

Pandit Dinkar Kaikini defined Sadhana as "the course of action and procedure one takes towards achieving a certain goal."[26] This is the first of three stages of development as a musician and comprises identifying a goal, forming a plan to achieve the goal, and acting upon it. The second stage is Sadhya, or realisation of the goal. Sadhya, however, is not the final phase, because reaching the goal does not necessarily equate to mastery of the goal. Thus, the final stage is Siddhi, the ability to achieve the goal or effect whenever desired—it is complete control over the goal. "In that state of mind, during Siddhi, whatever you utter musically engulfs everybody". These three phases are important for the disciple to keep in mind as guidelines for self-evaluation and constant reflection. The moment a student stops understanding the purpose of his practice, the effort becomes futile."[27]

According to Pandit Dinkar Kaikini, "First you have to decide what to achieve, then how to achieve it, and when you do achieve it, you should feel a satisfaction of achievement. This satisfaction is for furthering your own development–it is like tasting a nice sweet. After enjoying it, you may ask, 'How is it made? What are the ingredients? What are the proportions?' Then you will be motivated to start making the sweet on your own, and you will know the value of it"[28]

Conclusion

The journey of Indian Classical music has its own set of hardships; however it is a beautiful one. The singer builds an intimate relationship with its aspects- Swara, Raag, Taal, Tanpura and they gradually open up to the seeker. Like a flower opens up slowly and comes to life, from bud to blossom; similarly, an artist blooms slowly and achieves the desired goal/purpose.

From the foregoing discussion it can be understood that Indian Classical music is not just for mere entertainment but has a deep effect on the mind and soul. The journey in search of Sur, and Raag is a long one, filled with difficulties. However, the musical fruits of the effort, at various points, are sweet and delightful.

Pandit Dinkar Kaikini has said, "There is only one thing common between human beings, and that is emotion. All the rest differs- height, colour, language- but emotion at the core is the same. This emotion is connected to the soul, and that is what touches listeners. Good music is never enjoyed by the mind- only by the soul. Our music is not Manoranjan- it is Atmaranjan."[29]

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