

5

Interaction of Musicians and Audience during Performances of Hindustani Classical Music

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Introduction: “The Refined and the Ordinary”

In an earlier study, Goehr writes about ‘The Quest for Voice – Music, Politics, and the Limits of Philosophy’ that:

“The aesthetics of sonorous transcendence offers the following rhetorical prescriptions: Divine composers should be neither seen nor heard, to underscore the mystery both of absence and of genius. Performers and their instruments should be heard but not seen, but ‘heard’ only as imperfect pointers towards the transcendent. And audiences, to complete the triad, should be seen but not heard, but ‘seen’ only in the sense of each listener being present to grasp the work in the privacy of his or her own contemplative experience. A traditional impetus lies behind these familiar aesthetic strictures: the more civilized the event, the ‘higher’ and ‘finer’ the condition, the less the appearance should be of ordinary, everyday behaviour and ordinary, everyday tools.” (Goehr, 1998: 144).

Farrell describes in result of the audiences’ conditioning about the perception of Hindustani music the following: “When Indian musicians first started to perform to large audiences in the West the laid-back reaction of the listeners was often a source of puzzlement. One eminent *tabla* player from Delhi not only found this response extremely rude but further speculated that the music itself must appear extremely dull if allowed to flow over you in this seemingly non-participatory manner for then the interesting and subtle changes cannot be perceived. (Farrell, 1988: 192; in personal communication with a *tabla* player from Delhi)”.

Hindustani classical music is construed as an esoteric musical form which is not deeply understood by those who have not learnt it to a significant extent, despite the fact that Hindustani classical music fascinates people even when experienced for the first time. Today, Hindustani classical music is recognized as a musical form which has acquired its fame on the stage,

also as a scholarly subject and as a performing art form in which the performers interacting with their audience. This paper is designed to discuss the importance and different ways of interacting among and between musicians and audience during performances of Hindustani classical music. Following the introductory view on the refined and ordinary knowledge on music in general, there will be observations and analysis on how musicians of Hindustani classical music have recently drawn attention of audiences within their culture and abroad towards their performances that are taking place mainly indoors. Musicians are endeavoured to avoid audiences that makes noise which is irrelevant to the event and, therefore, to propose ways how to enjoy a performance.

Observation: Different States of Interaction

To the performer, it is always important to observe what type of audience is to be entertained before he starts performance. Those who are conversant with Hindustani classical music prefer to listen to a performance following the respective tradition without borrowing of integrating elements of music from other musical forms which is considered as taboo in Hindustani classical music tradition. Mostly, the conservative audience tends to prefer the *ragas* to be sung according to the time theory of *ragas*, which is considered as being very important in creating the mood of any *raga*. In fact, being a conservative performer causes the *raga* to be lived and evoked. We can assume that once the performance is continuing according to the tradition and when it is really impressive, the audience should be involved in the performances and remains calm except making some interjections during the performances such as *wah, ahh, kya baat hai* (The way Indian music is appreciated by a co-educated Indian audience). Sometimes the musicians who are performing on the stage appreciate themselves on their performances each other in this way. Indian people use to express their satisfaction by spelling such words whatever they feel something appreciable. Therefore, this habit is not done deliberately or purposely during performances if the audience is really impressed. Such interferences in performance cannot be count as irrelevant noises provided such expressions of appreciation from the audience make the performer encouraged and evoked.

Four audiovisual recordings of renowned Hindustani classical musicians are selected as examples to examine the interaction of musicians and audience during performances. These examples are publicly accessible¹ and links of each example are provided in the reference section of this paper. Six excerpts were taken out from four recordings and presented in a single file.² Only the third performance contains three excerpts that were compiled from different sequences of the same performance. Further material can be exploited in numerous video clips accessible via the Internet and on site in archives around the world.

In this paper, we follow the chosen examples. The first example (video 05-01, 00:00-01:19) shows a *tabla* performance of Zakir Hussain and Yogesh Samshi held in India. This performance was arranged as a tribute to Satguru Jagjit Singh Ji in an informal gathering. The date and place is not exactly given, as well as the technical background of this recording. In the beginning, Yogesh Samshi continues playing while Zakir Hussain and other admirers appreciate the performance by verbal acclamations and body gestures. When Zakir Hussain plays, the same behaviour is shown by Yogesh Samshi and other admirers. The harmonium player attentively continues the *lehera*, a cyclical musical riff, during expressively enjoying and admiring the ongoing performance. Both *tabla* players perform various rhythmic compositions alternatively while each is becoming a part of the audience alternatively. Almost all the members of the audience tend to reckon the meter by striking their palms together, counting fingers and waving hands. When the rhythmic compositions reach the *sum*, the staring point in Hindustani music metre, the audience and the performers express their approval and satisfaction especially through nodding, smiling, laughing, murmuring with each other, and abrupt body movements. Zakir Hussain frequently keeps the *tabla* in tune by hammering on the *gatta*, the wooden wedges, and the *gajaras*, the edges of the frame of each drum, so, that he and the listeners can experience the performance without being disrupted due to producing melodically mistuned rhythmic strokes. It is obvious that the musicians who play in a very traditional way appreciate their own performance supported by a knowledgeable audience. This video excerpt mainly implies that the performance can be appreciated not only by the listeners in the audience but also the musicians who are accompanying

¹ The four audiovisual recordings were downloaded from <http://www.youtube.com>.

² Using Pinnacle Studio Software 10.1.

and anticipating their own performance on the stage. The polarity between musicians and audience is de facto abolished through the state of interaction.

Another video excerpt (01:20-2:54) is extracted from a recording that shows Bela Fleck, Zakir Hussain, and Edgar Meyer performing in front of an “uneducated” audience. The majority of listeners was ignorant towards a traditional *tabla* performance. Place, date and technical data of the performance are not given, however, it might be in the time between 2003-2009 considering the characteristic appearance of the musicians. The chosen excerpt shows a sequence where only Zakir Hussain performs. In this sequence, the performer spells the *tabla bols*, verbally imitating the *tabla* strokes that are used to memorize and communicate playing patterns, which are usually presented in traditional *tabla* recitation. During this attempt of the performer, many listeners in the audience felt forced with laughter due to their lack of knowledge in the *tabla* tradition. Subsequently, Zakir Hussain instinctively starts to play other creative and attractive rhythmic patterns that are not generally played in traditional *tabla* performances. This attempt can be assumed as successful given that the audience became more attentive to the performance and remained calm. This example of performance in an environment of an “uneducated” audience implies that the flexibility of performers in applying different musical skills and virtuosity can divert an ongoing performance into different directions according to the taste and background of different audiences.

The third sequence (2:55-5:26) shows the vocalist Nusrat Fathe Ali Khan with an accompanying vocalist – both playing the harmonium – and the *tabla* player Tara Khan in another performance held outside India. They stay closely with the tradition of *khyal* performances in fast tempo. Date and place were not mentioned in the source, but we can assume that this recording is not older than 10 years considering the recording quality. Besides a special dramatic setting, the musicians control the attention of the audience by applying various performance techniques such as:

- sudden silence,
- increasing of speed,
- gradually increasing and decreasing of volume,

- simultaneous and imitative play in the call-response technique which is called *jawab-sawal* in Hindustani music tradition and
- expressive gestures that can be considered as exotic to an extra-cultural audience.

This kind of performances which generates a special perspective of aesthetics cause mostly wonder, astonishment, and curiosity among the audience. They are to impress especially an extra-cultural audience as well as an “uneducated” audience, e.g. people unfamiliar with the respective performance culture.

The last sequence (5:27-6:36) is a historical recording of the Hindustani classical vocalist Ustad Salamat Ali Khan accompanying himself on a *sur mandal*. The name of the *tabla* player is not given in the source where this recording was obtained. We can assume that this recording was made approximately in the 1960s in Karachi. During the performance, the vocalist explains how this performance style, called *Multani Kafi*, has to be performed. He demonstrates how a specific music idiom is sung in two different traditions with changes in certain nuances. Such kind of theorizing a phenomenon and special nuances within a music idiom can be perceived only by a knowledgeable audience. The hands and head of the vocalist move likely to embody different pitch hierarchies in his vocal renderings. He adds further strong facial expressions and gestures to include the audience that takes part with responsive body movements. It is shown that the singer engenders to present musical combinations more attractively and enthusiastically after he is elicited by the audience with more efficacious appreciative behaviour.

Discussion: Knowledge and Cultural Approach as Key Indicators

Generally, Hindustani music is not performed where there are no admirers or special regard to this kind of music. However, there might be people with lack of knowledge though they are fans who are interested to experience Hindustani classical music in gatherings. For example, audiences abroad India, who are not familiar with North Indian culture and are lacking of knowledge on Hindustani music might be enthusiastic music fans in general. In our opinion, this kind of audiences doesn't tend to view Hindustani music through the lenses of purity and tradition. The gap in

cultural understanding among the audience – as seen in this case – does not automatically mean that the audience may not interact. However, the way of interaction modifies the communicative aspiration of musicians which might influence their performance quality. Kalpana Ram (2011: S164–S165) puts it: “One can similarly overestimate the status of classical theory in the present. Audiences do not need to know the intricacies of such theories to respond with appropriate affect and emotion. Even if audiences knew nothing about *srīngara rasa*, the *rasa* of eroticism and love, the dominant *rasa* of spectatorship would still be one of pleasure and it would still be tied to the aesthetics of elaboration I have singled out for initial exploration. The slowed elaboration of *rāgas*, the slowing down of narratives to take in varied subject positions, all these generate pleasure by taking what is ‘given’ and putting it together in a fresh way that brings shared delight. This sharing goes on not only between performer and audience but also between members of the audience who feed off one another’s bodily gestures of appreciation – the shaking of the head which begins almost immediately in a good concert, the murmured ‘*bēsh*’, ‘*vāh*’, ‘*kyā bāt*’, the varied hand gestures that indicate levels and different kinds of appreciation, from enjoyment of a technical flourish to a surrender to the emotion in the performance”.

The nature of interaction of audience with performers in Hindustani music can vary in different audience types. Many subtle aesthetic perspectives that a performer intends to express to the audience through music are mostly needed to be adhered with facial expressions and body movements so that the audience is enabled to interpret and experience them precisely and authentically. If the *raga* is performed with appropriate expressions, gestures, and sometimes verbal explanations about the current performance, the audience should always be aware of what that performance means musically and in terms of its interactive potential. An experiment regarding the visual perception of expressiveness in musicians’ body movements that was conducted by Sofia Dahl and Anders Friberg (2007: P435) implies that “specific emotional intentions in music performance can be communicated to observers through movements only.” This statement may apply to performances of Hindustani classical music as well. Visual communication seems to be of utmost importance to its musical understanding. Further, the immediate interaction contributes strongly to the success of any performance. This might be one reason for a relative low

percentage of fixed audiovisual products consisting Hindustani classical music that is distributed through modern media if compared with other kinds of music performances within South Asia.

When the listeners are those who are not encultured in appreciating Hindustani classical music and, nevertheless, they are grown up in a typical North Indian culture, they may also enjoy Hindustani classical music provided that they can understand many aspects of the performance related with their culture and some particular musical expressions which are perceivable and enjoyable without studying music. At least, some listeners may identify the music performed with devotional and nationalistic inspiration and consider it as their own music, though unable to appropriate it to oneself. Regarding this matter, Clayton quotes Vijay Koparkar from an interview as following: “Vijay Koparkar: One of my concerts was at Sawantwari [near] Goa. It is just like a village, not a city, and the audience is the layman audience. Ninety percent of the people, they don’t know the theory of the classical [music]. [...] I have started with Shree [*rāg*] and jhūmrā [*tāl*]. Both of the things were difficult to understand, but from that day I never underestimate the audience, because they were enjoying every beat and every sam and every sur [note]. [...] So they are coming with me to the sam in jhūmrā tāl. It is very difficult, jhūmrā. [...] (Clayton, 2007: 14).

Many North Indian performers who have entertained audiences of different cultures are to a certain degree ignorant towards North Indian music. In such instances, the performers have entertained them by performing such musical aspects which often produce aesthetics such as feeling of sudden surprise, astonishment on rhythmic virtuosity, and rarely others such as aesthetics of romance, compassion, ecstasy, spirituality, which are considered as the most important to the music played. In the following scheme some further aspects on types of audiences are drafted. In an article focusing on communication between musicians in a *raga* performance Miell, Macdonald and Hargreaves (2005: 364f.) proposed different dimensions of communication of which three are important in this context:

- 1) the identification of performers and audience with the performed music,
- 2) the expression of status in terms of knowledge on music among the audience,

3) and the encultured musical understanding that allows for an authentic experience of music.

In the following scheme, the perspective of the audience’s objective possibility to understand, respond and enjoy the performance of Hindustani classical music is added to the mentioned dimensions (figure 1).

An extra-cultural audience might be as well enjoying a musical event though not participating in full identification or marking a certain knowledge status, however, this audience can be attracted by various means. The same applies to those who may not have sufficient knowledge on Hindustani classical music. The most deciding characteristic depends on, therefore, how open the audience appears throughout the musical performance to their culturally “others” or other musics respectively. If this openness exists, performers can stimulate a positive musical experience that helps the audience to gain the missing knowledge.

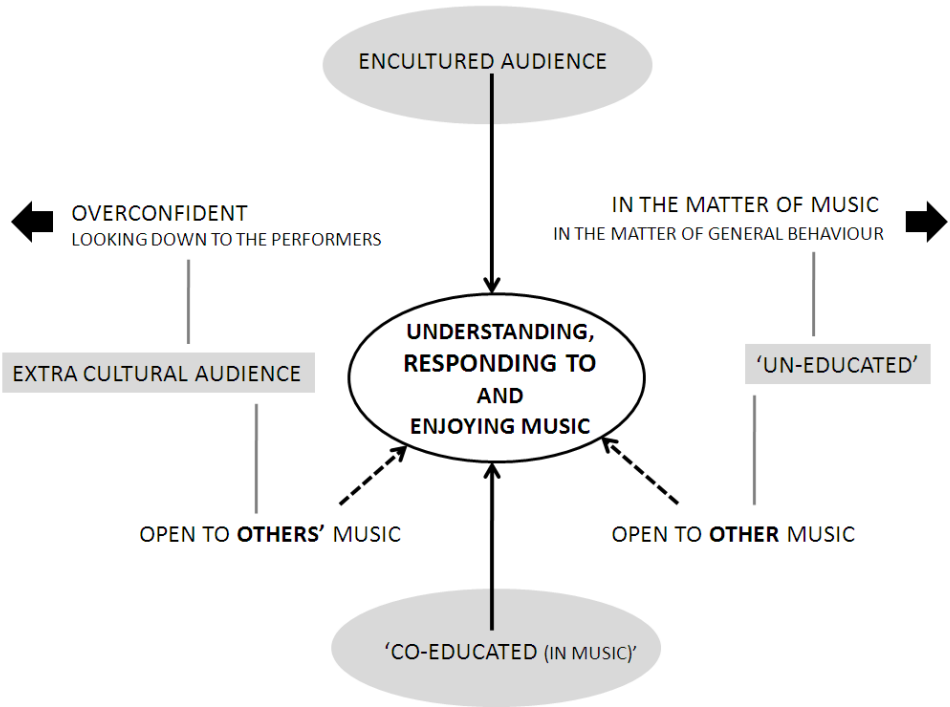


Figure 1: Perspective of the audience’s objective possibility to understand, respond and enjoy the performance of Hindustani classical music.

Conclusion

Hindustani classical music has its inherent qualities which have an extensive ability to hold the attention of multi-type audiences within the performances. In fact, Hindustani music has its own limitations, style, and facet which represent its distinctiveness in the classical music sphere. As Hindustani music is not bound in fixed scores, the performer plays and sings with relative freedom, which is highly necessary for improvisation. Therefore, performers can create musical combinations as expected by the audiences and have the opportunity to expose their own outstanding or distinguished talents within the respective music arena. Mostly the experienced performers can understand whether the audience really takes pleasure in his musical presentation and thus proceed according to the immediate feedback.

Recent performance conditions and environments of Hindustani classical music challenge not only performers but also their audiences. Both performers and audiences go through a process of mutual compromising. We should observe attentively, which new ways of expressivity and responsiveness arise from this process.

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