Abstract

AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF IMPROVISATION IN HINDUSTANI CLASSICAL MUSIC

Under the Guidance of
Prof. (Mrs.) Anupam Mahajan
Dean & Head of the Deptt.
Faculty of Music & Fine Arts
Delhi University, Delhi-110007

Submitted by:
Basavi Mukerji

FACULTY OF MUSIC AND FINE ARTS
Delhi University
Delhi-110007
ABSTRACT

It can be said that improvisation is the very essence, the soul of Hindustani or North Indian Art music where, in a raaga performance of say, about an hour, its pre-composed portion is hardly of about five to ten minutes, where as the improvised or gradual systematic extemporization, of course, within the perimeter of the concerned raaga and taala, amounts to the rest, i.e., roughly around ninety to ninety five per cent of the recital. It is through this very process that the germ of a musical idea / ideas is developed in accordance with the musical form in question as well as the performer’s style and capacity, so that it flowers into a bouquet of alluring musical motifs that make for an artistically successful, enriching performance or concert presentation.

It is well known that Hindustani Art/ classical music is fundamentally improvisational. This means that the performer enjoys a great deal of freedom in creating his own musical patterns and colour/ kind of presentation in the developmental process of the song form or musical piece within the frame work of raaga and taala. These, together with other important factors such as the chosen laya ( tempo ), gharaana ( the overall style or school ) of the performer, etc. go a long way in defining the boundaries within which the performer is free to create according to his cognitive, imaginative and psycho-motor resources.
It is mostly accepted that the present form of Raaga Sangeet or Hindustani classical music is an Indian music tradition that took shape in the northern Indian subcontinent circa the thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries AD in the courts of the Delhi Sultanate mainly from an already existing “Maargi” tradition, moderately formalized Gandharvic musical and theatrical performance practices, as well as some “Deshi’ or essentially folk concepts.

Developing a strong and diverse tradition over several centuries, Hindustani Art music has branched out into contemporary traditions established primarily in India but also in Pakistan and Bangladesh that were part of India before its historic Partition in 1947. In contrast to Carnatic music, the other mainstream Indian classical music tradition that is primarily kriti (Hindu religious composition comprising song text set to raaga and taala) based and basically practiced in the four southern states of India, Hindustani Art music was not only influenced by ancient Hindu musical traditions, Vedic philosophy and native Indian sounds but also by the Persian performance practices of the Mughals who ruled India for centuries and patronized the various arts including Art music.

This doctoral thesis seeks to study the nature and techniques of improvisation in Hindustani classical music. Although the term “Hindustani” classical music has not been formally defined anywhere, it has customarily come to mean the serious art music of north India. A custom gains sanctity and is
considered acceptable for the purposes of formal academic study when it satisfies the following two conditions:

I. It must be of immemorial antiquity ---- no one must be able to definitely recall when and under what circumstances the custom originated, and

II. It must have universal following.

This study indicates another interesting point. The large body of *alankaars*, *alankarans* and *taanas* collated in the two Appendices from some of our old and authoritative musicological Texts show the great and possibly unfathomable (on account of the vicissitudes of history) wealth of musical resources that has existed and flourished in our country over the centuries. A comparison of this existing stock of resources as found in such Texts with those that are actually found today in practice shows that, for one reason or another, contemporary practicing musicians use only some of the many tools and techniques described in them. Moreover, much of the many “new” developments and usages introduced by the twentieth century Masters that have now once again become established musical practices are seen to be not really “new”, but in fact re-discovered, perhaps unconsciously. For example, *Ustaad* Abdul Kareem Khan introduced the use of *sargam* (सरगम) in modern times, drawing inspiration from Carnatic musicians. But the use of *sargam* preceded modern Carnatic music and existed in several types of *prabandhas* (प्रबंध) described in our old Texts. *Ustaad* Bade Ali Khan’s
famous tonal shifts (*shadja parivartan*) in fact date back several centuries, as also *Ustaad* Ameer Khan’s “*meerkhandi*” *taanas*, which were applications of “*khanda meru*” see “*koot taana*”.

The point is when great trail-blazing artistes show us, from the depths of their supercharged musical genius, breathtaking novelties, it is often seen that their contribution are in the form of old wines in new bottles. Of course, this is not to belittle their stupendous genius in any way. However, serious practical musicians / performers may, it is humbly submitted, study the available Texts with advantage for who knows what other forgotten treasures they may yet reveal to the astute scholar-performer.

Moreover, as very little research work is available on the extremely important psycho social factors that influence the processes of creativity and execution of musical ideas, even though there is a slew of information by way of enlistment of the types of *gamaks* and *alankaars* available in medieval texts, this work will hopefully fill a void by providing fresh information and insight for further research.