



Culture Talk

Learning music without lessons

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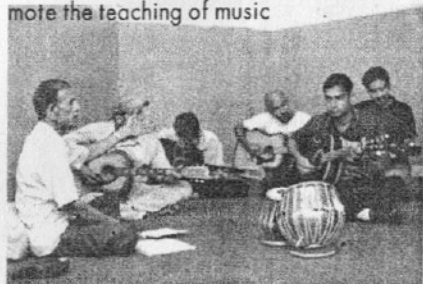
HAFIZUR RAHMAN says that in the absence of private schools and academies, various government agencies connected with culture have done nothing to promote the teaching of music

Music and the love of music have received such a boost in Pakistan during the last three or four decades, and acquired such widespread popularity in both town and village mainly owing to television, that a foreign observer who does not know the facts would think the country must be teeming with music academies and training institutions and peripatetic music teachers. Whereas the truth is that there is nothing of the sort to be seen anywhere.

Today, I propose to talk about the teaching of every kind of music except classical music. There are different rules and arrangements for a person to acquire proficiency in classical music. Those young men (not young women, for girls are not taught in this part of the subcontinent) who belong to the established families, the *gharanas*, have their own automatic system since music among them has to run in the family, while amateurs from among the general public have to look for an ustaad otherwise. All this makes it a complex issue and needs an article by itself to do justice to it.

Before Partition there were numerous music schools everywhere, at least in all the towns and cities, where boys and girls were given instruction in music by qualified teachers who were, sometimes, well-known singers and instrumentalists. All colleges, except Islamia colleges, had music classes, and, if you lived in Lahore, you could graduate in music from the Punjab University. It would be worthwhile to inquire if the university still offers music as a subject.

Then, of course, there were teachers who bicycled from home to home and usually taught the sitar to young girls, as also vocal music. This went on long after Partition, and I believe there still



are many such "masters" because nowadays you see more and more of girls taking to music. But their teaching continues on the old lines — they first impart instruction in *sargam*, the seven basic notes, thus building up a grounding in classical ragas. I am old fashioned enough to believe that that is the only true method to learning music; that is, you must be acquainted with the classical ragas and then go on to anything else, even pop music if you like.

My very first introduction to a music master was in 1935-37 when my father was posted in Gujranwala. My mother wanted to learn to sing and to play the harmonium, and Father got a long-bearded old *granthi* from a local *gurudwara* to do the needful. She



realised much later that she had no ear for music and gave up after a year, and the only benefit of the *granthi* was that since I used to sit by my mother's side during the lesson, I acquired a

passable proficiency in the art, although I too wasn't much good.

I am telling all this to my readers with a purpose. In those days, maybe because of the influence of the more cultured among the Hindus and Sikhs, it was considered civilised for women to have something to do with music and painting and even dancing. My mother didn't go in for painting and dancing, and confined herself to music, and sometimes when the more informal of family friends came for a visit she would send for the harmonium and regale them with what she had learned from the old Sikh.

My mother was followed by my sister, in the early fifties and sixties, with the still ubiquitous "master" bicycling up for the thrice

weekly lesson on the sitar. She had a well-developed sense of music and learned quickly, but then gave up when she got married. What a coincidence that her daughter also took to the sitar in her time, and I still have a photograph of hers, sitar in hand, published on the cover of a Karachi magazine for the young, somewhere in the seventies. She was very good at drawing too and is now in the US with her American husband and works as a graphic artist.

This was learning at home. But young people, who really had the talent, joined one of the numerous schools and academies and developed into good singers and players of the sitar. If I were to take the trouble of drawing up a list, I could give you the names of at least twenty well-known persons of Lahore, including lawyers, doctors and businessmen, and even politicians, who were in their teens in the years before 1947 and turned into good amateur musicians. Some of them still practise at home.

In the absence of private schools and academies, what have the various government agencies connected with culture done to promote the teaching of music. I am told that at some of the radio stations, there were arrangements

for training since musicians of all varieties congregated there. I would have to do some research to find out if this is still the case, but I am too old to collect the facts. Perhaps Mr Saeed Malik, that most prolific writer on music and music-makers for *The Nation*, could do an article on the subject or guide some of the younger writers on the newspaper's staff.

The Pakistan National Council of the Arts, as well as some of the divisional offices of the Punjab Council of the Arts, and of course, the Lahore Arts Council and the Karachi Arts Council, have maintained regular music classes. This may go to their credit, but it certainly is not enough and has been, at best, an erratic arrangement. What is needed are at least four or five high-level music academies under the aegis of these councils which should be giving out diplomas, and even degrees after a three-year course.

In the face of all this, I now ask you to go back to the opening words of this piece. Music and the love of music have really received such a boost in Pakistan and acquired such widespread popularity in both town and village (mainly owing to television) and there is such a profusion of singers, both male and female, that one begins to wonder from where they acquired their expertise and their keen musicality.

The answer is that they were all self-taught to start with. They felt there was music in them and they began to sing and play. It is true that some of them, on their talent having been discovered, took some valuable instruction in voice culture and *sargam*, but for the vast majority of them it was a voyage of self-discovery and self-development.

This is something unique. In my experience I have never heard of a similar case in any modern civilised country. We are at par with India in music, and yet that country is chock full of music academies. I think this is not only unique, as I have said, but a phenomenon of which we should be rightfully proud, though it does not absolve the official cultural organisations of their responsibility and neglect of the matter. To them I would say, there is still time to take purposeful action. ■

Sadequain for all

The immense popularity of Sadequain and the acceptance of his art was due to him evolving a form of expression that the majority of population can associate and relate with



The master's masterpieces.

To charge a hundred rupees for entrance to an exhibition seems incredible in a country where even the doctors are pestered to reduce their rates — and life-saving drugs are sought on a discount price (if not free). But the public — contrary to all assumptions — paid the ticket and is still paying to go and see the work of Sadequain at the Mohatta Palace in Karachi.

Why is Sadequain so popular? Compared to other artists of the country, Sadequain enjoys a special place. His work is seen and appreciated

since the gallery owners, academics, patrons, buyers and critics all converse in this tongue. Any utterance in this medium is regarded synonymous to quality, and to be well-versed in English shows that the artist is aesthetically in tune with the international world.

Due to the limitation of the language in our society, many artists find themselves alienated from the general public. However, Sadequain appeared distinct from this crowd.

stood and appreciated here. It is, therefore, not unusual that an ordinary viewer feels closer to Sadequain than any other artist (not even Chughtai or Allah Bux, who with all their comprehensible art were still exclusive painters).

Sadequain's art has a close link with the language, perhaps the closest of all. Beginning with the earlier imagery that was constructed as Kufic script to his figurative works and calligraphy, all reveal the linkage to the language of people. Most

stant poetic themes such as man being in an eternally miserable state and exposed to all kinds of inner and external tyrannies were recurring motifs on his murals as well as in his oil paintings. One factor about Sadequain making a connection between poetry and visual art is the fact that he himself was a practicing poet, acquiring Sadaq as *takhallus* or *nom de plume* for his earlier writings. Many collections of quartets by him were published later in his life.

This fascination with the language manifested in another form in his art, as calligraphy. The early interest of Sadequain



By Quddus Mirza

art

work is seen and appreciated by all sections of people in Pakistan.

The reason for this probably is connected to the structure of language. Here, like many other post-colonial nations, there is a divide between the national language and the one imported by the colonial rule. It would be needless to go into the details about its effect in the society, and how this separation has evolved into a system of privileges as anyone read-

ing this article (printed in an English newspaper of Pakistan!) must be aware of this situation.

The linguistic condition, which exists in the society, mostly in its educational institutes, repeats in the realm of art as well. In this arena, the clash of languages operates in a decisive, yet not so obvious manner. Though it is believed that art has a universal vocabulary, Pakistani art in fact mainly revolves around English. Its teaching, discourse, documentation and its criticism are all done in English — which a very limited number of literate population (again not a large figure either) can comprehend.

The artists of the country are strangely placed in this situation. Most of them have the background of training in Urdu, but once they achieve a level of success in the domain of visual art, they transform themselves. They adopt English for their expressions on art



Maybe because (not an abhorring feature as believed by many idealist painters and sculptors around us) he was an outsider to the group of established artists of country. And it is not astonishing, that during his lifetime, he was perceived to be merely a showman by the artists and art teachers. He was blamed for enjoying patronage of the government and after his calligraphic period, was accused of being a subservient of the Zia regime. Although his presence could not be avoided, he was not really acknowledged or welcomed in the art institutions at the time.

By adhering to the tradition via language, Sadequain made himself the most accessible and approachable painter. It is due to the usage of poetic themes from Urdu language and the manner of employing the narrative elements in his paintings that his work is widely under-

of his figurative work can be classified as narrative art.

There is another streak of narrative art in fashion these days which subscribes to the western influences of naive art or Indian examples of promoting primitive imagery. Instead of this superficial 'sublime' and contrived narrative art, Sadequain offered the obvious meanings through his canvases, to the ordinary spectators. Several of his paintings were even conceived on specific verses by Ghalib and Iqbal. For example, the hands carrying decapitated heads, men walking near gallows, a man facing the blazing sun, figure of an artist painted as the fasting Buddha and all the other such visuals from the popular Urdu poetry depicted the illustrative mood. In many ways, those paintings became visual equivalent to verses.

In addition to that, the con-

... as calligraphy. The early interest of Sadequain in the art of scribing, his fondness for writing poetry, and perhaps the support and patronage from rulers, may have all contributed in his shift in the last years of his creative life.

But it can have another explanation: that is related to the artist and his audience. The art in our surrounding produced through training at art schools has always survived as an exclusive activity, limited to a minority. Sadequain was an artist neither educated at the art schools nor attached to the art circle (which is a closed circle in its literal sense), and through out remained an aloof personality. So in an attempt to bridge his solitude, he sought the kind of art with maximum popular appeal — calligraphy was chosen as a right genre to achieve this goal. (As it is not a secret that religion is often used in our environment for getting the public support. The term like Islamic Socialism is one of those examples from the political history of our country).

The immense popularity of Sadequain and the acceptance of his art was all due to his evolving a form of expression that the majority of Pakistani population can associate and relate with. Thus it does not come as a surprise that only the work of Sadequain, especially his calligraphic pieces, are reproduced on facades of humble houses and in small shops situated far from the art world.

