

BEFORE we go into music, did you ever think of why a note is musical and sounds pleasing to the ear and what is ugly noise? The same instrument can sound a harmonious note and when played off-key, a bad note.

Think of it, there are so many schools of music, the major being South Asian and the other, Western. Along with these are so many others, but how did all these schools agree on a scale of music. In South Asia, it runs as *Sa Re Ga Ma Pa Dha Ni Sa*, and in the West with Western sounds. These notes can be transcribed into either mode and have the same pitches. Moreover, the same is common with all other schools of music.

I play the guitar, harmonica and the sitar. Here, I commence with the harmonica. The ideal way to learn is to pick up the basics of an instrument from someone and through written notes, and start playing on your own. I recall fooling around with the harmonica at the age of 19 in Teheran, where my father was posted. I used to walk up and down the balcony, hooting and humming on it. After many hoots, one day I realized I could play any tune I wanted to! So now my harmonica is parked on my side table and I can play or improvise a tune.

The harmonica is perhaps a bit limited on its own. So before this, I got an acoustic guitar and learnt a few chords. Then I wanted to play by learning musical notes from a book. I got a book that had a handful of songs. The first song I learnt to read was *Apache* by The Shadows. But there was a problem. Some songs had sharps or flats throughout. I could play those, but how could I render these in chords? I asked my tutor who used to play the piano and in hindsight, the solution was very simple. Chords are played as shown, no sharps or flats. The process of learning how to read music was so tedious that I still remember some of it.

I now have an acoustic and electric guitar. The guitar requires finger flexibility when you reach out to play a chord. And at times, I have a harmonica for support and simultaneously play the guitar, harmonica and hum.

Then I play the sitar, that commenced before I left for England to study architecture. Indian music is different from Western in that it is not written in music notes and are replaced by written notes such as *Sa Re Ga Ma...* Each *raga* has a pictorial denotation, so you can imagine its mood and it carries with it a few words rendered in Purbi (a lovely Hindi dialect) or in Hindi itself. You can sing this and then render the notes on the sitar. There is a difference between South and North-Indian music, too. Each *raga* is different in its ascent or descent. If you think-of *Raga Yemen* that goes down *Sa Re Ga Ma Pa Dha Ni Sa*, all notes are sharp, and when you work your way up you avoid the note *Pa*. Why is it so? That is the tonal character of the way the *raga* is played and is the reason why when you hear it, you recognize it as *Yemen*. From the beginning, I became accustomed to playing in "Gayaki Ang," this is a vocal style of rendering music. You develop a musi-

Music and background

Art. Saw

BY A.M. SAYIED

cal ear to tune the sitar, as each string has to be tuned to a certain pitch. A sitar requires practice and incessant stamina.

Also, playing the sitar requires a lot of finger strength. There are different thicknesses of the main string you play on. It is good to get used to the maximum thickness of a sitar string, that is referred to as "four" or *chaar* number. Pulling sideways on this will put pressure on a beginner's fingertips as you can stretch the string through five notes. If you are at *Pa*, you can stretch it to *Sa*. It requires a lot of strength to do this and when you play, you constantly move the string horizontally to the fret. Your fingertips will harden up as you go up and down the scale and pull the string sideways.

Initially, you learn exercises and repeat them back and forth for, say, a hundred times. I have heard of young musicians who turn into ustadhs going up and down the scale, practising each exercise in a sitting for a thousand times. Ustad Raees Khan, an international celebrity, said he used to wake up at four in the morning and practice until seven, and then sit down again at midday and practice and then again at nights. In a competition as a teenager, he played non-stop for 18 hours until his fingers bled!

I can follow a sitar player as he plays, or if my sitar is tuned to a scale, I can copy a recorded sitar. Then there is the tabla that accompanies the sitar. The tabla was initially derived from halving a dholki into two. A favourite classical beat is referred to as "Teen Taal," that sounds easy, but is complex in its breakup. It consists of 16 beats, but are broken up at 1, 5 and 12, that includes a *khali*. I will not get more into the tabla as it will deviate from our discussion.

Playing the sitar along with the tabla requires practice. A *raga* begins at the eleventh beat, and ends at ten, so you recommence the *raga* when it comes to ten or start improvising then. Therefore, you have to know it through intuition, otherwise the beat will pass you by and then you have to know when to catch it again.

Initially you have to sit at the tabla

and learn to play the basics to see where the prominent beats are. Therefore, I have a pair of tablas on which my tabla *nawaz* plays as I play the sitar. I have three sitars, one to play on my own and the other two to play with my sitar ustad when he comes twice a week. Everything we play is rendered through improvisation, there are no music sheets.

A *raga* is composed of certain ascending and descending notes, it is essential to stick to these. Playing any musical notes is not the same as playing a *raga*. Then there is your creativity on how to render this. Perhaps, through this, you can

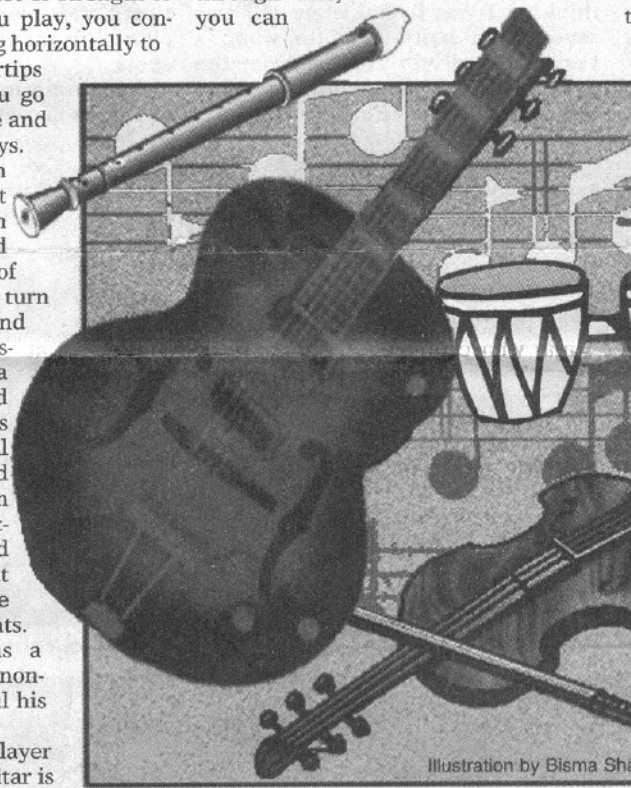


Illustration by Bisma Sha

actually expand it, as this is one of the so many instruments you can express yourself through. Over the years, I have learnt around 15 *ragas* and leave it to my ustad, Sajid, to suggest which one we should play. Once you have learnt to play the instrument, you can have a go at any *raga*.

At the beginning, you commence with an *alaap* to a *raga*. This sets the tonal quality and the mood of the *raga*. It requires a lot of practice, as you are constantly pulling from one note to the other, and have to know exactly when the note is precise or you will sound off-note. Therefore, from the beginning, you have to get used to constantly pulling the string to a different note. Usually, there is no tabla accompanying this, but at other times the tabla

d its and

see commences at a very slow beat.

re. As you play with the tabla, at times
on you can play in a different scale and
lay catch up with the original beat. But
to you have to be good as your play clash-
to es with the tabla. At other times, there
he is a thing known as the *tia*, meaning
we repeating the same note thrice and
iza catching the tabla when it comes to its
ain tenth or first beat. This is also difficult,
t is as you have to catch the rhythm at the
any right tabla beat and intuitively you rec-
ay- ognize it. Then, if you are good at play-
ivi- ing, there is a *noa*, meaning you repeat
ps, a *tia* thrice.

If you want to play a *dhun*, you can
do so with a lilting beat at other *taals* at
the tabla. A *dhun* is limited in scale,
but it is good to know a few
as, at times, you or if you
are playing for a group, will
want to hear something
lighter with a different
beat. At times, when the
tabla accompanies you, you
must allow the tabla to
innovate. The sitar
recedes into the back-
ground as the tabla
player takes off.

The nerves of my right
arm went dead after an
assassination attempt on
me, and it took me four
years to get enough
strength back to play the
main string loud and clear
and perform a fast *jhala*. A
great sitar ustad can live
comfortably, but can never
become a multimillionaire
as compared to Western
musicians. This is due to
the fact that our audience
can spend a lot of money on
listening to movie singers
or ghazal or qawwali per-
formers. However, they
know very little about the

the sitar, sarood, shehnai, surbahar and
ress other instruments.

s, I There are many books written on
ave music, most of them in Hindi. A big dif-
rich ference between India and us is that in
ave Hinduism, music is an integral part.
can Whereas in Bangladesh, music is a part
nce of their cultural heritage. There is just
the one person in the whole of Karachi
aga. who can repair the sitar, and that is
are indeed a very sad state of affairs.

the What does it take to become an
hen ustad? That is a good question and my
and reply is it takes a lifetime to achieve it,
gin- and you have to have an indomitable
ant- will to get there. Think of the ultimate
ote. in sitar players named Vilayat Khan,
any- Imrat Khan, Raees Khan and Ravi
bla Shankar. As a Ustad, when you pick up
the sitar, there is no one like you. ■

to lucrative vocations and build
careers. Music is at best considered
a pastime and a rare aesthetic need.
'ALL MAY ASK: Who will throng to



ma Shaheen



Culture Talk

Not for a pastime!

HAFIZUR RAHMAN says music should be taught as a subject in educational institutions and music training centres should be set up

Photo
Culture Nation
24.11.02

How many of us in Lahore, or in any other big city of the province, know that before partition the Punjab University also offered music as a subject. One could do MA in music, classical music and before one did that many colleges enabled one to take it as one of the compulsory subjects in BA. The university department was headed by a Kashmiri pandit.

One may well ask why there are no private schools, when there is a mushroom growth of computers or commerce institutes. The answer is simple. The latter provide avenues to lucrative vocations and build careers. Music is at best considered a pastime and a rare aesthetic need. You may ask: who will throng to music schools as they do to computer and commerce classes?

But that is not true. People are sure to patronise music-teaching institutions. You have only to look around you to realise how music has become an integral part of our lives. There are as many shops of music cassettes as of property dealers. Let me give you just one example. If you try to look for a car or wagon or even a taxi cab without a cassette player you are not likely to come across one. You may roam the roads and streets for days only to be disappointed.

And if you still contest my point, try opening a music school and see what happens. You may face a problem finding suitable teachers for it, both men and women, but there will be no shortage of pupils. The matter is such that by its very nature it does not confront us as a serious issue. People are not pining or agitating to learn music. But if an opportunity for the purpose does become available, I can bet that the school will be swamped by eager learners, and girls' parents wanting to know the details.

It is just like a new kind of recreational facility. If there is no park in a locality, the local residents are not going to raise the



issue in the assembly or take out a procession in favour of having one. But let the authorities just build a park and then see how crowds converge on it in the evenings, and more so on Sundays and holidays.

In Islamabad the music classes of the PNCA are very popular, but what should a young man or a young woman living in Rawalpindi do if they desire to join them there? In Lahore too the Arts Council holds music classes, but Lahore is not the whole of Punjab. Does not one in big cities like Faisalabad and Multan (to name just two) crave for a place where they can

revel in music to their heart's content and feel uplifted? And the other provinces too?

It is pointless to look up to the government to do the needful. The urge in the people must manifest itself in the form of private enterprise. I am always surprised at one phenomenon. You can see new bands and pop groups coming up every day. Young boys who have the musical instinct, and who, without taking any lessons, become vocal and instrumental experts and capture the hearts of large audiences. A couple of these Pakistani groups have won world fame. How

did they do it without any training, without an encouragement from society and, in some cases, in the teeth of opposition from parents?

This phenomenon only goes to show that the love of music, the urge to indulge in music, which some of our religious types describe as something devilish, was overpowering in these youngsters and became more important for them than acquiring a craft that would lead to quick material prosperity and prestigious jobs. But this happened in the domain of pop music which has swept the world like a whirlwind.

The case of classical music is somewhat different. There are not many devotees of this form of music. Even rarer are teachers, who can appreciate and inspire new devotees and are also adept at communicating the art to others.

With classical music, the one-teacher-one-pupil affair is a luxury that not many can afford and is also a waste of opportunity. The need is for a place, an institution, however small and unpretentious it may be, where lovers of a *tadi mauseqi* can foregather and drink at the fount provided by a genuine practitioner who may be making some money but who essentially is interested in propagating this celestial art form. At the moment, eager devotees of classical music go and beg some *ustad* to accept them as students, which the *ustad* does as a great favour.

The best way out would be if the Radio Pakistan and PTV start classes in popular and classical music and for improving skills in the playing of various instruments. They won't have to go out of their way to do this favour to culture as they are the repositories of music in the country and they have the personnel and logistics needed to teach music of every kind, and they do not require a financial outlay for the purpose. In the bargain they can earn some money too.

I say 'some money', because the fee should not be high. It should be just enough to pay the teachers. If the two electronic media agree to undertake this noble work, the world of music teaching will benefit. In the case of PTV five excellent centres would immediately spring up, while Radio has more than two dozen stations in the country and each of these can arrange music classes without any bother or extra expense. The investment will be in genuine art, and fulfil a long-felt need, something unique for official bodies in this country to do. It will be a great cultural achievement. ■