

Pop music on its way out

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NO art form ever remains static. By its very nature, it continues to absorb political, social, economic and even scientific influences spawned by the latest developments. The emergence of pop music in Pakistan is the necessary corollary of this phenomenon.

Since the uproarious popularity of Nazia Hasan's songs *Aap jaisa koi* and *Disco Deewane*, and the ripples created by Hasan Jehangir's *Hawa Hawa*, as well as Vital Signs' *Dil Dil Pakistan*, Western-style pop songs rendered by guitar-wielding Pakistani crooners have made deep inroads in our melodic culture.

However, in recent years, the repertoire of pop singers seems to have exhausted itself and the popularity of pop songs has shrunk. Pop music in Pakistan, claim cultivated listeners and knowledgeable connoisseurs, has already touched the apogee of its tether. This can be substantiated by the ever-increasing reliance of pop singers on the folk varieties of Pakistani music, originating from various regions of the country, specially Punjab. A large number of songs recorded in the voices of second-generation pop singers currently aired by different TV channels and radio stations are more folk than pop in their melodic content.

Almost all hit songs of Pakistani (and Indian) pop singers currently in circulation can be cited as examples to substantiate the point. Included in these songs are Ali Haider's re-created

rightly said: "Art is a human activity having for its purpose the transmission to others of the highest and best feelings to which man has risen." After listening to a love song, one realizes how compellingly a melody may capture the accent of tenderness and longing, which the composer, after using the talent and mellifluous voice of the singer, has conveyed so feelingly and with much dexterity.

The question as to how modern pop varieties of music affected our youth has been explained in the following paragraphs.

Disappointed and frustrated by a lack of creative ingenuity and inability of the practitioners of classical music to reflect the contemporary realities of life, our young generation started looking beyond their own cultural boundaries for another melodic mode to vent their creative yearnings. The dearth and ever-plummeting standards of extra-curricular cultural activities in our educational

melodic expression. Further confounding the confusion in the minds of the youth was the role of an inept cultural bureaucracy in the country that showed no concern for the promotion or preservation of our rich melodic heritage. Those dealing with cultural affairs displayed a sheer lack of understanding for the aspirations of the artists and people of Pakistan.

Adding fuel to the fire was the surgical bifurcation of Pakistan by naked Indian aggression in 1971, that further accentuated the feelings of dejection among young Pakistanis, who became disillusioned of the unfulfilled promises and also misdeeds of the politicians. They also resented the manner in which the country's cultural affairs were managed. The revolt among the youth against the iniquitous political, economic and social systems and the cultural alienation caused by it was thus reflected in their aversion to indigenous arts, including classical and

close-to-the-chest attitude of professional *gharana* musicians about imparting theoretical knowledge and performing skills to new aspirants further alienated the youth, causing a deep dip in the popularity of the indigenous varieties of our rich music.

In the backdrop of this discouraging scenario, Pakistani youth drifted towards alien pop music, enamoured by its sonic enchantment that relies on swinging beats, electronic instruments. The fast tempo of the strongly rhythm-accented pop songs, reflecting the pace of life at the fag end of the 20th century, sucked into its maelstrom the culturally-alienated youth, groping in the dark to discover new modes for creative self-expression. Thus, the modern fad of pop music was allowed to penetrate the cultural ethos of Pakistan.

As is common with other fads, the impact of modern pop music began to dissipate after about three decades of its infiltration in our cultural environment. Devoid of a strong melodic base and meaningful lyrical content, the songs "composed" by pop singers no more find a large clientele, except the songs that are clearly pegged to Pakistani folk themes and motifs. A large number of "pop" songs recently "composed" and rendered by well-known singers are inextricably linked with popular folk melodies, more from Punjab than other regions of Pakistan, starkly point to the fact that the repertoire of pop singers has hit rock bottom. In an effort to remain in circulation and stalling a full eclipse, the pragmatic among pop singers quickly shifted their emphasis by borrowing heavily from the inexhaustible treasure-trove of folk melodies of Pakistan. The shot-in-the-arm given to pop music by local folk varieties has given it a new lease of life, albeit for a short duration.

The neo-classical ghazal-singing style evolved and practised by senior Pakistani vocalists has also helped the indigenous melodic culture in braving the onslaught of Western pop music. The fact that the more attractive mode of ghazal singing has taken roots in local soil and has converted many a young and serious singer to its cause provides incontestable testimony to



number Main thaan
marjana, Abrarul Haq's Asaan
te jaanaan Billo de
ghar and Aaja tu
baija cycle te,
Jawwad Ahmed's
Uchiyaan majajan
wali and Saajana
door they aa, Junoon's



Sayonee, Hadiqa Kiyani's Buh-i-Bariyaan, Mun de mauj and Yaad sajan di aye, and Fakhir's Sohniye. A majority of our front-line pop singers are looking for inspiration to bolster their "creative" compositional skills.

Before carrying the discussion any further, it will be useful to state that no manifestation of a culture should be regarded as inferior, if it satisfies the aspirations and needs of its people. Music, an ineluctable component of our culture, deals with the organization of tones into patterns. Considered the finest of fine arts, music bases its appeal on the sensuous beauty of pleasing sounds and their ability to convey significant emotional meanings. The folk varieties of our melodic culture are pegged to human experiences and have ebullient expressive content. Otherwise, how could they have remained in circulation for many millennia, and as a moving force in the lives of the people?

A good composition or a tumultuously popular song embodies a view of real life. It conveys personal interpretations of the composer and the poet, the essence of their experiences as creative persons as well as ordinary human beings. Tolstoy has

institutions, as compared to what was available to them in the not-too-distant past, also contributed to the alienation, creating a void in their cultural activities.

Worldwide, genuine art is considered a mirror of civilization, that is created to reflect the cultural yearnings, spiritual aspirations, political hopes, social and political goals of the people. Different forms, shades and aspects of the arts and the creative outpourings of the artists act as cathartic agents, causing a purgation of the pent-up feelings mostly of the oppressed people hailing from all segments of a society. When an art form stagnates or atrophies, as has been the case with our classical music (based on an elaborate theory of intervals, consonance, modes, melodic and rhythmic patterns), its practitioners look outwards for different genres to satisfy their creative urges. In such situations, alien art forms make inroads in other cultures, temporarily lifting the moods and spirit of a culturally frustrated people.

Western varieties of pop music invaded Pakistan's cultural ethos in a similar manner. They were greeted by exuberant young Pakistani singers who willingly opted for new modes of

semi-classical music.

On the other side of the spectrum, unabated cloying of our moral values adversely affected the quality of our film music, that only a few years ago had celebrated its golden era. Our film music, that had created a number of landmarks and successfully competed with Indian film songs, also nose-dived in quality. Additionally, and as a sequel to the shrinkage of market for Pakistani movies, producers became averse to sustaining the previous level of their investments in the production of new films. They preferred to finance low-budget formula-type movies, a vast majority of which flopped at the box-office. Once extremely popular among the masses, the quality of our film music has suffered much. Senior and original composers were forced to go into self-exile, as they could not compromise creativity with the whims and fancies of uneducated financiers, often accused of using their position to sate their lascivious desires and motives.

From the cultural standpoint, the country remained barren for a considerable period of time. No new experiments were made in the domain of the creative arts, specially the traditional music of Pakistan. The

resilience and vitality of Pakistani folk music.

Like a fad that fizzles out of vogue after a couple of decades, pop music is also slowly losing its sonic charm due to a glaring lack of melodic content. For some, the change is still somewhat imperceptible, but for those who have

acquired the art of perceptive listening, the impact of change will become profound in the not-too-distant future.

It took *dhrupad* about 400 years to slip into historical oblivion. The classical style of *khayal* vocalization remained in vogue for over 300 years, before it slowly went into hibernation, and the pervasive appeal of *thumri* and *dadra* lingered on until a few years after the creation of Pakistan. These modes of melodic expression remained the vogue for so many centuries only because these were woven with indigenous musical fibres.

As against this, modern pop music, brimming with loud syncopation in contrast with the serenity of classical music, is not rooted in native soil. It is tied with an alien system of music that is heavily rhythm-accented. Its foreign content seems to have lost dynamism within a period of 20 years, after first surfacing on our melodic scene in Pakistan. In the Western context, Rock 'n' Roll music and other varieties practised by the Beatles and other groups caused hysterical obsession among the youth, albeit for a short period of time. These are now almost totally forgotten genres.