

Art
Daily Times
18.9.04

A recipe for the Dark Ages

I WAS INVITED TO A READER'S HOME TO be told that my column on music (The economics of culture, *Daily Times*, February 9, 2004) was the silliest he had come across in a long time. Classical music in Pakistan was no longer on the endangered list; it was dead, period. And it was absurd to waste time on so doomed a venture.

The argument was couched in terms of supply and demand. The supply of good artists was declining rapidly with professional performers having given up on the transfer of skills to succeeding generations. And the demand comprised of individuals well on their way to the other world. With no prospect of fresh sources of either supply or demand, talk of reviving classical music was a lot of hot air. The time and effort could be allocated to more rewarding initiatives.

This was a misunderstanding of my position because I had not been arguing for the revival of classical music as an art form but as an essential element in the training of all musicians. It was also a variant of the objection that I addressed in a subsequent column (Music and the market, *Daily Times*, April 11, 2004) arguing that the market's verdict on the popularity of classical music need not be taken at face value. The market is shaped by policy interventions and policy interventions in the past have been malevolent as far as classical music is concerned.

Nevertheless, there was merit in the reader's observations that the patient was beyond any hope of revival and I put his quintessentially pragmatic argument later to a musician. Look, said the musician, this music is over a thousand years old. Aurangzeb could not finish it off in sixty years and these latter day Aurangzebs would not be able to either. Leaving aside the aspersion on Aurangzeb (in

OP-ED



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whose defence the doyenne of Indian historians, Professor Romilla Thapar, has a lot to say), I found his gut response wiser than the cold analytical verdict of my reader.

There is little doubt that we have been living in the musical dark ages for the last quarter of a century in Pakistan and both supply and demand have been affected in the way pointed out by my reader. But a quarter century is a brief interlude in the history of classical music and it is altogether too pes-

simistic to write off the art form on the basis of what could well be a passing cloud, black enough as it may appear.

I mentioned to my reader that the Dark Ages in Europe had lasted half a millennium. But they were followed by a Renaissance and all the knowledge and art forms that seemed threatened with extinction had blossomed again. Why would classical music in Pakistan be any different and disappear after only a quarter century of neglect?

This turned out to be the central point of our discussion and the essence of our disagreement. The central point, because our Dark Age encompasses much more than classical music. Indeed, all rationality and objectivity seem to be under attack. What are individuals to do in such a period, which can be short in terms of historical time but much too long when measured in terms of human lives? Should they move on to more rewarding initiatives or continue to nurture their passions when the tide is overwhelming and flowing in the opposite direction, when any reward might come only after they are dead and gone?

This is an individual choice with no right or wrong answer. For me the best advice on coping with dark times was to be told to light a lamp and prevent it from being extinguished, nurturing the knowledge, skills, arts and crafts that one cherished and enjoyed. It is these insignificant lamps that shall re-ignite the fires when the times change. This is what the friars did in their monasteries tucked away in remote mountain valleys all through the European Dark Ages.

And, indeed, when we look around we find our own monasteries and our own friars similarly toiling away unheralded and unburdened by thoughts of reward. Just go to

Chitrkar in Lahore (www.lahorechitrkar.com) and you will find classes in voice, sitar, sarangi, bansuri, and tabla. Visit Sampurna (www.sampurna.sdnepk.org) in Karachi or Mazmun-e-Shauq in Islamabad and you will find institutions and individuals dedicated to keeping the performing arts alive.

Such efforts need to be supported by those who value these art forms. What we need are supporters coming together as Friends of Chitrkar or Friends of Sampurna or Friends of Mazmun-e-Shauq to contribute the resources that would keep these lamps flickering for as long as it takes for the tide to turn. There are students, for example, who want to learn but cannot afford a sarangi to practice. Sponsoring a student is only one of the ways in which we can make a contribution and encourage their passions.

The exchange with my reader reminded me of some lines from Faiz (translations by Victor Kiernan) that are apt to this discussion. Two are from *Ai Raushniyon ke Shahr* (O City of Lights):
Basta hai is kulr ki piche raushniyon ka shahr
(Behind this mist the city of lights is situated)...
Aaj ki shab jab diye jala'en unchi rakhen lau
(This evening when they light the lamps let them turn the flame high)

And two from *Tauq-o-Daar ka Mausim* (The Season of Manacle and Stake):
Bala se, ham-ne na dekha to aur dekhenge
Farogh-e-gulshan o saut-e-hazaar ka mausim
(No matter; if I have not seen, others will see)

The season of the brightness of the rose-garden and of the sound of the nightingale).

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