**The Intellectual Virtues in Music**

**The key to learning about the music of foreign cultures is increased critical listening.**

[Irtiza Shafaat Bokharee](https://www.nation.com.pk/columnist/irtiza-shafaat-bokharee)

May 03, 2024

It is necessary for music practitioners and art critics to move beyond stereotypes that reduce Eastern classical improvisation to mere “mystical passion” and Western music to “rigid rationalisation.” There’s more to the tale, and there is a need to problematise this seemingly common sense-based assertion noticing that a whopping majority of artists and aficionados on the circuit fall prey to these reductionist logics in Pakistan. There is also politics at play: with those coming from a lineage-based kinship network refusing to accept the “ataayis” (novice amateurs, according to their understanding of the term) as equals and lacking rootedness in their own culture, whilst those with a Western-based entry point into music employ classist tropes to reduce the “mirasis” to mere imitators, unable to adjust to the realities of a dynamic state of affairs that is always in flux. It is a rather unfortunate situation, at best, and I have experienced the highs and lows of negotiating with these static conceptions being employed in practice, which make the process of making music in a group setting extremely tense, and often counter-productive.

[18pc people quit smoking after cigarette prices raise: Survey](https://www.nation.com.pk/05-May-2024/18pc-people-quit-smoking-after-cigarette-prices-raise-survey)

While it is impossible to discuss the nuances of these cultural tropes in a single-column entry, I will try to make some key arguments, right in line with some of my earlier published work in the sociology of music. Firstly, the inability of the Western approach to understanding the rational and social foundations of the Eastern classical music approach, i.e the North Indian classical approach, in Pakistan, predominantly, is a consequence of White, European settler colonialism, where the local subjects were programmed to accepting an inferior status in society, in effect rendering them “docile” and incapable of participating in any activity that required the higher mental faculties or intellectual reason, which was only “biologically” ordained to the colonial masters. This overt racism led Lord Macaulay to assert that the whole intellectual edifice of the locals in South Asia was equivalent to one European library, and it is shocking to know that he was one of the framers of the education policy of the British monarchy that was introduced for the locals, littered with shades of the “white man’s burden.”

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Specifically, the raga-tala system and its notational grammar, which form the basis of classical (khyaal/dhurpad) improvisation are rigid, rational, and require a lot of disciplined effort, and authenticity. This is exactly why not every scion from a musical heritage turns out to be great, and why it takes on average, 20-30 years of rigorous practice, to be able to render a single raaga, in the improvisational frame whilst maintaining fidelity with the tradition. This failure often boils down, not to any technical weakness, but a lack of intellectual quotient which brings with itself patience and endurance. Forming one’s style, and gaining acceptance from other masters, requires even more time, as professional jealousies, the weight of material conditions, and an environment of religious orthodoxy break the drive of most aspirants, who switch to lighter, and less demanding forms of music, to make ends meet. While it is reductionist to even claim that the Eastern framework relies merely on melody and not harmony, the presence of a fixed root note, and not much possibility of changing the mode, requires the performer to then creatively narrate the intricacies of the raga, remaining within the bounds of structural rules, and this often elicits feelings of “mystical passion” and “etherealness” in the listener. The performers causing this transcendence are not some celestial beings that the Western onlooker often fetishises and exoticizes because of lack of context in the building blocks of the art form. Natural talent can only take you so far, the rest is practice, hard work, luck, and often finding the right kind of marketing strategy, even if classical music has always had a niche market. Networks and connections are everything.

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On the other hand, Western classical music might have some tendencies of rigid rationalisation, especially during modern times and the advent of bureaucratisation, technical dynamism and standardisation of music, in terms of sheet music and sight-reading. However, even during the era of Beethoven and Bach, you could find instances where solo intervals for instruments in songs with fixed structures allowed for impromptu improvisation. It also needs to be reiterated here that while Eastern ensembles are generally smaller, 4-7 people playing at once, Western ensembles are much bigger, often incorporating anything between 20-50 instrumentalists. This makes rigid notation necessary: if everybody started improvising, the only result would be a horrible cacophony.

Moreover, to reduce Western music to just sight-read ensemble playing misses out folk traditions from where the blues and jazz styles emerged. Whether it was resistance gospel, Afro-Cuban percussive styles, Latin rhythms and chord structures, the blues-jazz movement was all about situational improvisation and breaking away from the limitations of structural design and often “White man music.” It is a point of concern, however, that in contemporary times, motifs, chord-changes and rhythmic tendencies, which were once intentionally revolutionary and progressive, and hallmarks of jazz, have been standardised to become formulaic exercises taught at conservatories: case in point, Miles Davis and John Coltrane standards. Mass culture in a social media age is mediocrity writ large. In the Pakistani context, being able to start one’s musical journey in the Western framework is often a matter of privilege, and there’s a class element at play. Upper class musicians with supportive parents will have access to the latest equipment and studio paraphernalia, even without the talent. And many turn out to be one-trick ponies, without generalising. But the greatest stories coming out from the music industry in Pakistan are local musicians on shoestring budgets, putting to shame their rich, but ultimately, average counterparts. What the local desi musician lacks in theory and suave mannerisms, he often compensates for them in the practical realm. At the end of the day, music is a performative art form.

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With the right kind of balance, both seemingly different traditions can come together to create beautiful music. The key to learning about the music of foreign cultures is increased critical listening. But, without empathy, and a lack of historical context, the process can often be extremely antagonistic and chequered, leading to resentment and friction. What Bhatkande demonstrated was an opportunity for music scholars and practitioners from the East and West to find common ground in the basic modes that underpin both traditions, and I can say with my experience that his work helped me overcome the risk of getting under the wings of phony instructors who invoke fake mysticism without the intention of imparting true wisdom. Eventually, the State will have to intervene, and provide avenues for the younger generations to study music practice and vocational ethics formally. Only then, will common grounds be found, leading to broader social change and acceptance of diversity and pluralism, and beyond the commodity fetishism of the developmental sector.

[Muqam urges opposition to be constructive, not confrontational](https://www.nation.com.pk/06-May-2024/muqam-urges-opposition-to-be-constructive-not-confrontational)

Irtiza Shafaat Bokharee  
The writer is a faculty member at the Department of Political Science at Forman Christian College University.