

Good Music: Creation and Appreciation

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In India we see the music lovers and connoisseurs frequently discussing music performances. When we hear some good comments, those are mostly focused on renowned musicians' performances or towards the musicians' music those are following some established style of some celebrity. The 'good music' seems to be more subjective than objective, still the factors those make music good and a search for the definitions of good music may be an interesting study.

A music performance accepted as good by a group of listeners may be rejected as 'not so good' or even 'bad' by another group clearly shows its subjective nature. But, there are performances those are generally accepted as good by most of the listeners present in a concert hall. What makes some music widely acceptable? With this comes another question. A music performance performed in *Bhopal* if performed in *Kolkata*, would it receive similar response from the general audience? Are some elements common in any accepted good music? The question here is the effect of changed geographical references on musical values and understanding.

Good or bad is always subject to some references. The general references are the place, time and the person or the subject. This again initiates two more fundamental references; one is the performer and second is the listener. A music performance can be good to the performer and also good to the listener, a music performance may be 'not so good' to a performer but very well accepted by the listeners, and other possible combinations of good and not so good between the performer and the listeners. I recall the Poet saying long back;

*'Ekaakee Gayaker Nahe to Gaan,
Gaahite Habe Duijane,
Akjan gaabe chhaaria galaa
Anayajan gaabe monemone' [Tagore, Rabindranath/Gaanbhanga/SonarTaree]*

A few years back during some e-mail exchanges Dr. Bernard Bel [Bel, 2000] once mentioned two basic references when we discussed Good Music. He wrote:

"Perhaps you would get two definitions (on Good music), one by musicians and one by listeners. For a musician, good music is probably associated with dedication (no cheap work) and sincerity (no pretense). The musician ought to feel "in tune" with his/her creation in the same way loving parents relates with their children: a child is the parent's product but she is also an autonomous human being. In the same way, artists should consider their creation as something autonomous whose relation with the public does not affect them. In my view, therefore, "good music" is associated with a musician being modest about it. I think that the great music masters in India nurture this idea that they do not "perform" music; rather it is channeled through their medium.

For a listener, things are simpler. Good music is what makes them feel in harmony with whatever they call their deep being. A feeling of peace, indeed, most of the times, but occasionally a strong urge to change their lives and to change the world."

Old reference

We do not find many reference of "good music" in our well-known treatises.¹ We see the mention of "*guna-dosa* of *Gayaka* and *Vadaka*", i.e. the qualities and shortfalls of a vocalist or instrumentalist but not long discussions¹ on good music although we find discussions on compositions [*Geet*] that is only a part of music under today's context. The treatises discussed the "*guna-dosa*" (good qualities and shortfalls) that was focused on the physical movements of the musicians during performances.

Today the basic values for good music are generally understood as: to be tuneful, to be in *laya* and in *raga* with good *tayyari*, *layakari* and *taseer*. The major focus now is to impress the audience. *Tayyari* literally means preparation to do something. For music the general understanding for *tayyari* is the ability to perform fast passages with clarity, tunefulness and command. *Tayyari* is usually associated with *tana*-s but can be associated with any musical executions like *meend*, *murki*, *gamaka*, etc. *Taseer* refers to expected musical effect created out of musical executions. *Taseer* literally means *to be effective/effect/quality*. So a desired effect produced from one or a series of musical actions may be called *taseer*. Supposing a vocalist lands on the *Shadaj* with effective intonation, timing etc. resulting in a musically effective phrasing, this will be called *taseer*². Sometimes we hear people saying that a particular musical piece creating "*lav*"³ (meaning flame). "*Lav*"⁴ indicates towards a compelling musical effect when a piece gradually reaching musical climax. With the passage the audience's inner self gets ignited. ⁱⁱ

The quality of a particular music rendering has some subjective references. For music there are two basic references; one is the performer and second the listener. As I told earlier also, a music performance can be good to the performer and also good to the listener, a music performance may be 'not so good' to a performer but very well accepted by the listeners, and other possible combinations of 'good' and 'not so good' between the performer and the listeners. Here is a scope of long discussion. There is an important role of the listeners in the complete frame of music making. It is not only the musician who makes music but the listeners also play an important role. One point of consideration may be the general speed of receptivity of music by the audience. There is a speed of understanding of musical depictions. If the flow of music becomes too much within a short span of time the height of musical content cannot appropriately register on the audience. I have seen many musicians failing to impress the audience to the expected level when the music was quite satisfying to the musician. It happens because quite often the musician's speed of progress and going towards deeper (and more complicated) executions are not

¹ Discussion with Dr. A. B. Beohar, Reader, Department of Musicology, IKS University on March 10 2000

² We more frequently hear the usage of the terms 'Taseer' or 'Lav' in Hindi speaking areas of the country,

³ Discussion with Sh. Mukund Bhale, Head, Department of Percussion, IKS University on March 17, 2000

⁴ "Lav" generally indicates towards a particular open sound in tabla that is used in abundance in "Purab Baaj".

matching the audience's speed of receptivity. The audiences have a speed of receptivity. This will mainly depend on the composition of people forming the audience. The degree of receptivity will depend on their collective consciousness and musical values. If the speed of musical progression is too fast for the audience then the effect on the audience is a clumsy type of feeling although they accept that the technical executions very high because the executions were tuneful, crisp and clear. The same thing I had occasions to see for musicians with brilliant musical ideas. But the flow of musical ideas stream out at such a speed while there is not much of breathing space, the result is that the audience failing to appreciate the music. The same reason may be the root cause behind many less successful performances of musicians of extreme technical ability. The thing to understand is, the listeners also play a kind of interactive role as the music proceeds. The general audiences reach the optimum response level under a specific speed belt of musical progression. When this speed of music progression matches the listeners' requirements then the music registers optimum effect. Here I would like to put it clearly that I am not talking of the speed of music execution, rather I am referring to the speed of music progression. The audience must get the opportunity to play their part with the performer and this interactive process helps the music to hit its peak. The artist must give space for the listener to "fill in" in the process of creation.

I wish to recall Dr. Bel talking about the audience's role in effective music making process. He writes:

A necessary condition for experiencing rasa (aesthetic pleasure as a "gustative process") is a sufficient degree of imprecision, an incompleteness of the codification triggering the imagination (kalpana) of each auditor, thereby yielding a "second creation" (bhavana) within the field of the "unspoken". [Bel, 2000]

Again back to the main point; why rose is beautiful? It is beautiful because it is beautiful. It is difficult to express the goodness and the beauty through a medium other than the medium of expression itself. The important point is how the receivers accept a particular piece of art. Assessment of good or bad is done out of one's contextual understanding of the particular creative art-form. One can, of course, try to underline the general values of a particular art form. For *Hindustani Raag Music* the values are the archaic qualities fused with the artiste's liberty for expressions and creations. In this form of music the subtle mixture of the musicians' individuality in their performances and the retaining of the traditional values of the performed *raga* are accepted to be important. The sense of being boundless under confinement of the *raga* prescription is possibly the key. The musician takes the flight within the defined territories of a chosen *raga* and expands the provided space to generate an effect of boundlessness.

I have been wandering for a long time to find out the answer that why a music piece gets easy entry to the mass audience's hearts and the others cannot. It is not easy to define why the first stroke of *Ustd. Vilayet Khan*, quite commonly had compelling effects on the audience (initiated ones) and the "aah" expressions from the mass used to be a very common phenomena. The clear second example may be, how *Ustd. Zakir Hussein* gets such an easy entry with his *tabla* and wins the audience.

Why this happens? The possible explanation is that the music hits the mass' inner being immediately. The audience gets impressed in two ways. They get moved when the music matches their imagination and they get dazzled when the music taking some unexpected shape that is even much more beautiful than what the listeners had expected. When this happens then the musical message of the performer spreads around successfully and reaches the listeners' inner being and this is apparently one of the factors that makes music accepted as 'good music'. At this point the music starts articulating like a language. This is like an orator giving a speech on a topic with full command. An orator's speech brings in many articulations naturally. If the language is converted to some meaningless articulations still one can hear the basic effects of the intended ideas that the orator possibly wanted to express. [A closer simile is, reciting a poem with full poetic feelings.] Music has more pronounced tonal and pitch shades and this is capable of expressing ideas those are difficult or near impossible to convey even through formal languages. Music is capable to transmit subtle feelings of human and depict nature's different moods. When this happens then the music becomes acceptable to the listeners and they start enjoying the performance with complete unison with their inner selves.

Summing up

The public acceptability of a music as good seems to depend on appropriate synthesis of the musicians' extensive repertoire, intensive control on techniques, effective musical expressions and acceptability by the general audience followed by extensive and sustained promotion.

ⁱ Dr. N. Ramanathan <hemaram@md2.vsnl.net.in, the renowned musicologist and Professor & Head, Department of Indian Music, University of Madras writes on the mention of good and bad points of musical compositions (gIta) in Indian music treatises in an e-mail correspondence with the Author that opens up further information.

“They do talk of guNa-dOsha of `gIta', gita meaning music. (They even discuss the guNa-dOsha of a composition) But the music they talk about is the one used for entertainment, gAna. In the writings of Bharata, Abhinavagupta and Sarngadeva we find distinction made between music for entertainment (gAna) and serious music (gAndharva). For instance, Bharata talks of guNa-dOsha of music when he is talking about `dhruvA-gAna' the songs used in drama proper. Sarngadeva enumerates the same `guNa-dOsha' when he is dealing with prabandha. `dhruva-gAna' of Bharata and `prabandha' of Sarngadeva were music used for entertainment as different from the gItaka of Bharata and jAti-gITa of Sarngadeva which were serious art music whose goal was considered to be `dEvatA-prIti', for the pleasure from the gItaka of Bharata and jAti-gITa of Sarngadeva which were serious art music whose goal was considered to be `dEvatA-prIti', for the pleasure of gods'. -- It cannot be assumed that they did not take quality of music into consideration when talking about gAndharva. Only the quality expectations in singers and players and in music was prescribed only for `gAna'. In fact it is to drive home this point that Abhinavagupta as part of his commentary on nATyaSAstra separates the guNa-dOsha portion of 32nd, dhruvA chapter and makes it into a separate chapter, 33rd.”

ⁱⁱ Email exchanges with Dr. Bernard Bel, Université de Provence, France during March 2000.