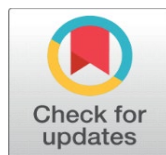


A STUDY OF STRUGGLE IN VERSATILITY IN TABLA PERFORMANCE

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ABSTRACT

Tabla is the most versatile among percussion instruments today. The challenge that it meets till date is its recognition in terms of a solo instrument. Although acclaimed worldwide for its versatility, yet the role of Tabla as a solo instrument remains undefined at large. The tabla player today occupies a decent place on stage during accompaniment and exhibits the art, at times with his repertoire, especially when he accompanies instrumental music. The rich repertoire of Tabla, which is learnt through life, finds its complete expression through solo performances. However, this is confined only to the elite artists. There is no denial to the fact that Tabla is basically an accompanying instrument. Accompaniment is a beautiful art, and every Tabla artist should be an able accompanist. In fact, the art of accompaniment does need a better craftsmanship and a greater aesthetic sense than the art of tabla solo presentation. Given to these facts, I reiterate the fact that the repertoire of Tabla finds complete expression only during a solo performance. The collection of Tabla compositions from the masters of yesteryears is huge, but platforms available for showcasing the art are meagre. And the truth is that the Tabla is the principal accompanying instrument in North Indian classical, fusion, and light music today. This is the struggle in its versatility. The music fraternity and event /program organizers need to ponder over this and improve their endeavors to encourage and promote more and more Tabla solo presentations, while Tabla still remains an accompanying instrument.

Keywords: Tabla, Versatility, Solo, Accompaniment, Aesthetics, Repertoire

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. TABLA: THE STRUGGLE IN VERSATILITY

There are different fables about the origin of Tabla. The evolution of the instrument into its shape and structure today has led to its versatility. Hence Tabla is adaptable to different playing styles of various schools (gharanas) of Tabla. It is the chief accompanying percussion instrument of North Indian Music. Because of its multifarious sounds, Tabla goes well and complements any genre of music.

The efforts put in by Tabla maestros like Ustad Ahmed Jaan Thirakwa, Ustad Habibuddin Khan, Ustad Natthu Khan, Ustad Ameer Hussain Khan, and Pt. Samta Prasad, to name a few, in nurturing the art of Tabla with their exhaustive

compositions is commendable. The contribution of Pandit Kishan Maharaj of Benaras gharana in the recent times is also immense. The intricate rhythm concept pioneered by Ustad Allah Rakha of Punjab gharana has added a new dimension to Tabla, especially for solo recitals. Today, the phenomenal Tabla of his son, Ustad Zakir Hussain has attracted the musicians around the world and paved way to several international drum projects. Even a layman in music is able to appreciate his Tabla to some extent. Also, Tabla started to stand out gradually in the area of accompaniment.

“Then, some people began to notice that the musicians—be he Ravi Shankar or Jasraj—were also interacting with the tabla. That’s how the tabla got the opportunity to break out into a solo mass act”- Prasad and Krishnan (2013)

The primary function of Tabla is to accompany the main artist. Most of the good Tabla players are only accompanying artists today. The solo repertoire learnt for years by students / artists / teachers of Tabla does not go beyond walls of practice rooms. Only a handful of artists are privileged for solo performances today. There is a need to acknowledge the efforts put in by Tabla artists in the practice and preservation of the repertoire of Tabla. On the other hand, it is important to mention that the music of Tabla should appeal to the greater mass, which would pave way for standing a good chance for Tabla solo programs. There is a need for Tabla players to delve deeper into the aesthetics of music. Artists should be able to think beyond their mere technical display. This journey should begin from learning of the Theka itself. The innate beauty of various components of Taal must be understood in their aesthetic sense. The beauty of Matra (beat), Taali (clap), Khali (waving of hand), Vibhag (division) and Sum (first beat of taal), which are basic to rhythm are imbued with a sense of poetry. Poetry is a part and parcel of compositions of Tabla. The aesthetic sense of the artist should ever guide him into enriching his music.

Mere learning of an art does not assure that the artist has mastered the aesthetics. This is developed over time and experience. The learners of Tabla should be exposed to audience in different platforms as per their progressive levels of learning. The accompanying performances of Tabla should often be interspersed with solo presentations. This kind of experience would infuse an aesthetic sense in the Tabla artist for expressing and blossoming the art as a solo entity. The complete potential of Tabla requires various platforms of different levels to express the art.

2. ART OF ACCOMPANIMENT AND THE STRUGGLE

The main artists of classical music, be it vocalists or instrumentalists (excluding tabla) have the opportunity to express themselves on stage and pour out their knowledge that they have learnt through the years. Every such North-Indian classical/semi-classical/light performance is supported by rhythm, invariably the Tabla. Though Tabla keeps itself busy by accompanying vocal and instrumental music, it falls short of its independent expression at large. In the past, tabla artists used to sit behind the main artist. As said earlier, it was the collective effort of the masters of yesteryears and the recent past that Tabla has come to fore today.

The art of accompaniment is far more aesthetic, crafty and intelligent than solo playing. Solo playing is entirely based on fixed rhythm cycle. The path is shown by the Lehra player (fixed time cycle of beats), while the pace is controlled by the Tabla player. The Tabla player is at free will to exhibit his compositions, though in a stipulated order. Hence, he is his own master. Its altogether a different story with accompaniment, which is mostly Theka-based playing (cycle of beats). Tabla accompaniment is based on the nature and temperament of the raag chosen by the

main artist. Vocal music is accompanied mostly by playing the Theka on Tabla with only a few digressions shown by the Tabla player that have to be meticulously thought over. There is more liberty, though, while accompanying to instrumental music. The Tabla player uses his craftsmanship in condensing his befitting compositions in a beautiful way and strikes a delightful balance in between him and the main artist. The aim of the Tabla player is to accompany the main artist in such a way so as to create the best music possible by complementing the music. Tabla should blend with the lead vocals / instruments in order to be perceived as music emanating from one source.

“One who does not merely keep, but properly sets the pace of music, and provides a recurring checkpoint for the rightness of singing or playing, cannot be fairly regarded as a mere accompanist. The truth is that the Tabla or Pakhawaj player is an active participant in the evocation of musical beauty, and the participation, it is obvious, is no mere accompaniment”- Saxena (1995)

Accompaniment is a beautiful art, and every tabla player should learn it. Tabla players who have learnt at least the basics of classical vocal music are at a greater benefit as far as accompaniment is concerned. If the temperament and movement of raags are understood, it is easier for the Tabla player to converse with the song or instrument. Then the Tabla playing would ever complement the main performance. All Tabla players are not adept in vocal music. Basic vocal training should be mandatory for Tabla learners. However, music schools and institutions do have vocals as ancillary / minor / elective subjects while Tabla is the major subject. Similarly, there are various combinations of major and elective subjects. The rhythm learning must go hand in hand with vocal learning and vice-versa.

Hence there is much on the plate for the Tabla to offer to music. The contribution of Tabla to North Indian Classical music as an accompanying instrument is immense. The theoretical aspects of the art of accompaniment can be read and understood through texts and music syllabi. Accompaniment in the practical sense, is learnt through experience. A Tabla performer spends most of his lifetime performing something that is not available as ‘compositions’ in text form. In fact, his performing skills of accompanying are developed by having an exposure to various artists, which is his experience. Seldom does he get chances of showcasing his Tabla repository, which he has been learning for over the years. Major portions of Tabla syllabi are populated with compositions of Tabla. The students of Tabla often feel elated by learning and practicing compositions during the learning years, ignorant of the fact that they may or may not take their learning further on to the platforms where they can exhibit the compositions in the form of solo presentations. Given to the service that Tabla offers to music in the form of a principal supporting instrument, the instrument and the artists do deserve to widen their scope of individual identity. The scope for Tabla solo performances is yet to improve, and this would put to rest ‘its struggle in versatility’

3. TABLA SOLO AND AESTHETICS

Tabla is internationally acclaimed today. It takes a lead role in fusion music by collaborating with other genres of music, and yet represents the purity of Indian rhythm.

“The styles of playing may differ, but they share common traits like putting in thousands of hours of practice, speed in the fingers, improvisations, equal mastery in flowing improvisations, the compositions, and their collaborations with artists around the world. They are not just drummers but can be called cultural

ambassadors of the greatest drumming traditions in the world.” Krishnamurthy (2014).

When the drum stands as a very important and inevitable entity, the stature of the instrument should be elevated in order to be identified as a full-fledged solo instrument along with the tag of an accompanying instrument. However, it's up to individual skills and intelligence combined with hard work that a Tabla player can make his art worthy to be at that mark of identity. Unless the artist pays close attention to the aesthetics of music combined with techniques that he has learnt, he cannot claim himself to be an impactful soloist or an accompanist. The creative & aesthetical thinking on the part of the artist is a pre-requisite for the miracle to happen.

“It's about the music, it's not about just showing people what you can do with a piece of wood with strings on it.”- Frusciante (2021).

The meaning conveyed in the aforesaid quote applies to Indian music also.

We hear musicians of different natures of music. The music of some artists may be absolutely flawless, but yet mechanical. Every time, the music sounds as a mere pouring out of his entire learning. The improvisations, the thinking beyond mere words (where music happens) is missing or rather to put it simply 'the soul seems missing'. At the same time, the music of some other artists hits the listener in a way that leaves him in awe. The music of both, the former and the latter is fine and acceptable. But the latter is thinking out of the box or to put in the musical sense, beyond the technique or skill. The years of practice has led him to be a master of the discipline of music, which ever remains under his control. His constant endeavour is to transform his skilful playing into an impeccable musical outburst from his soul, and this is the aesthetics of music. There is total involvement, like becoming one with music. The instrument at this point is an extension of the self, merely a medium to express the music within oneself.

“Musical understanding is based in a form of imaginative perception, in which metaphors of space, weight, effort, and movement play an organising role. Musical meaning does not arise through representation, but through expression and form, both of which must be explained through a theory of musical understanding”- Scruton (1999).

Coming to Tabla again, the fingers speak out the beauty imagined by the artist, the beauty from his very compositions, which are now pious tools to deliver the music that he feels within. This music is of the Spirit.

“Music expresses that which cannot be put into words and that which cannot remain silent”. - Hugo (2016)

“Where words fail, music speaks”. Anderson (2021).

That which is beyond human capacity and comprehension belongs to the spirit. The immeasurable and incomprehensible aspects of the Universe, and also the Human psyche, that bestow subtle, serene, and beautiful feelings to a human being, that profound experience which can be least expressed in words, often evoked by an object possessing a fabulous potential to let the experience happen in oneself or in the other, may be termed as a Spiritual Experience. This subtle experience in music is nothing but aesthetics.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The music of Tabla must go beyond technical and skilful learning. The tabla players may then find a more prominent place to prove themselves on the centre

stage for solo presentations of Tabla. The innate musical sense pervades in all forms of music. This innate sense fused with the display of compositions of Tabla with scientific precision would transport the listeners in awe and wonder. The aesthetic sense should be tapped by the teacher/guru in students over a period of time of learning. This may also be a God-given gift, which is seen in child prodigies today, and also in the past. The Tabla players must learn to imbibe the aesthetics gradually from the basic level of learning.

This goes to say that a reasonable amount of exposure should be provided to Tabla players to exhibit their art through various platforms of music. This would augment their confidence in unimaginable ways. And this should start happening after the student of Tabla has mastered the basics of the art. If one waits for long for this to happen, this may not happen at all. Music is a performing art. Providing platforms for performance for a student from a young age paves the way for the artful skill to blossom and flourish. Above all, an artist deserves applause and appreciation. The gurus and teachers of music must ensure that their students' learning is showcased from time to time. The day arrives unawares when the tabla player is performing a solo or accompanying in an august musical gathering.

The music fraternity (especially classical) must encourage solo performances of Tabla from time to time, by categorizing them into age groups. The foundations for such promotions were laid out already, but still have to be sustainable. Though competitions for Tabla performances are held for certain age groups, yet this endeavour should move beyond competition. The goal for such efforts should be to produce better artists and not comparison. However healthy competitions are always welcome and important, especially for young and budding tabla players. Platforms should be provided for tabla players at town / city / state / national levels. This can be initiated by the elite music fraternity and the organizers of music. However, screening the students may be done at different levels. It is good to provide small platforms to basic learners of Tabla in order to encourage them. Tabla solo performances, lecture-cum-demonstrations as well as Tabla accompaniment, all these should go hand in hand. Each aspect allows the other to grow. There would be a balance between learning and exhibiting the art. This fills the gap between learning and practical exposition and would alleviate the struggle and frustration that a Tabla player may feel in order to vent out his learning. It gives expression to the skill of the artist and to the versatility of the instrument.

Music entertains the common man, gives joy to music lovers, and provides solace and contentment to the artists. We hear some form of music almost every day. The music may be devotional, classical, light or in the form of a background music in a drama. Music is a source of joy and a happy respite for many. Yet, music is not an integral part of curriculum in schools and colleges in spite of the fact that Indian music is the cultural heritage of India. There are music colleges and universities in the country. But there are not many. The best way to protect the ancient and pious culture of classical music is to inculcate music course in schools as an optional subject, if not compulsory, to begin with. This elementary education should start from at least grade II / III at school. The plan of the course syllabus should be in such a way that it spreads across all the grades / classes of school. When the student passes out from the school, he should be having a reasonable knowledge of the music subject that he has learnt in school. Parents in the past and even today have an apprehension about their children choosing music as a career. The scope for having a livelihood in the music field is limited due to the lack of music education in a wider scale. Implementing music education from the elementary level in school curriculum would help in preserving the cultural heritage and sustain the rich legacy of music. More and more artists would find avenues as teachers and performers of

music. The inclusion of music courses in schools would facilitate more and more music colleges and universities to come up in the country, and in turn augment music learning, teaching, and performing community.

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