

The Music-making Spectrum An Indian Perspective

Ashok Ranade

Introduction

Composers, the composing process and compositions obviously form a continuum. The trinity consists of three notably autonomous, self-sufficient and yet mutually influencing entities that function to bring into being a larger activity described as music-making. I use the word spectrum to emphasize that each of them has a distinct color of its own and they are in no way uniform or identical components of an efficiently carried out mechanical process. However it is equally important to note that the three individual entities merge into each other and the lines dividing them often become considerably blurred.

A word about the verb “to compose”. To compose is essentially to bring together, and so on. However, what is brought together seems to be especially intangible. The usage of the term brings this out. Perhaps in the earlier phases of culture it would have been possible to say that Valmiki composed the *Ramayana*. But the situation has since changed radically and composing, etc., appear to be closer to music.

Relevance to the Indian situation

In India there is a strong feeling that composers – understood as makers of potentially significant (skeletal or complete) musical works, or producers of those works which are pre-composed, and may or may not be performed – do not exist. It is argued that Indian performers themselves compose the music they present while they are engaged in the act of performing. They achieve this feat by employing strategies such as improvisation. It is argued that at the most, skeletal outline-compositions described as *bandish* are pre-composed and their composers can possibly be identified. Otherwise the composer and the performer are indistinguishably rolled into one.

In brief, it must however be admitted that this situation is largely confined to art music, generally known as classical music. Secondly, conceptually as well as actually – even in art music the composing act imperceptibly precedes the actual performance of the concerned music. Thirdly, in spite of protestations to the contrary, much of art music presented today is pre-determined, predict-

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able because it is nearly pre-composed due to practice-procedures and on account of highly codified and well-imbibed procedures of elaboration of musical ideas. Finally performers' natural anxiety to "succeed" has led to a situation in which more and more music is pre-composed – especially of the instrumental kind.

In sum, to discuss each member of the trinity separately – or in combination or with flexible focusing – is surely relevant to the Indian situation.

The categorial sextet

In examining the workings of the trinity and the larger phenomenon of music-making, it is of course necessary to remember that music-making in India takes place in six categories and an exhaustive and representative statement on the Indian condition will require attention to the sextet. Streams of primitive, folk, religious, art, popular and confluence musics have been enriching Indian music for many centuries and the scene becomes more challenging when the regional musical variations are closely examined and the global angle is given its due.

Under the circumstances I have opted to discuss some characteristic features of music-making in India selectively without trying to focus on any single member of the triad. I have also avoided confining the discussion to any particular category.

Song and music

Perhaps one distinction needs to be noted at the outset. In the categories identified earlier, the proportion of song and music varies. For example, one may say that in art music the song is pre-composed while the music is not. On the other hand in film music both are pre-composed. It would mostly be the same in folk and religious music unless the circumstances are exceptionally different. In early centuries there was a form of reciting stories: ballad-singing, in which stock descriptive passages were pre-composed but other changes suitable to time and place were made extempore (वृणक्त). In confluence-music both song and music are likely to avoid the pre-composed state.

The ancient conceptual framework and its relevance

The term composer points to the essential act of bringing together multiple forces, aspects, features or processes but perhaps the term has a closer connection to the performing impulse. In the Indian context an early parallel

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term used is *vaggeyakar* वाग्गेयकार and this term is obviously confined to music and that too of the vocal variety. The word/text aspect of a composition is known as *vak* or *matu* and the melodic/musical aspect as *geya* or *dhatu*. A person proficient in both is known as *vaggeyakar*. With its typical and awe-inspiring thoroughness *Sangeet Ratnakara* संगीत रत्नाकर discusses the characteristics and types of composers in the third chapter called *Prakeernakadh-yaya* प्रकीर्णकाध्याय (verses 1-11).

The term has gone out of circulation and for strong reasons. Firstly, the term overstressed the vocal mode of music-making. Instrumental music, which has carved out a prominent place for itself in recent times – cannot be fitted into the *vaggeyakar* framework without major modifications. Secondly, the term concentrated on music of the art category. Thirdly, when the *anibaddh* अनिबद्ध mode of music-making became more prevalent, and as the concept of music became more inclusive, the structural aspect came to be emphasized and consequently the term *sangeetrachanakar* संगीतरचनाकार has proved more acceptable. The *anibaddh* music was so described because it did not adhere to rules or suchlike but also because it was conducive to spontaneity.

This short foray into traditional musicology was meant to suggest that both music and music-making have considerably changed during the centuries. Consequently, ancient concepts and their way of mapping musical universe will have to be carefully balanced against conceptual analysis and the performing reality of the recent and contemporary situation.

Deviation from or conformity with the prevailing: The first composing step

On most occasions composers initially take off from an accepted, established framework through a selective movement away from it. To have ready-made plans or outlines to conform with or deviate from, is indeed a fortunate entry-point into the composing world. The deviation of course does not guarantee that such a beginning will result in “creation” – but that is a matter for a later discussion. Expectably, there is no definite sequence in the deviation-process, but in the final analysis one realizes that reference-lines already provided by the tradition have helped the composer in a major way by notably facilitating the composing process.

For example, the preferred *gharana*-way, established genre-conventions, accepted style of performance and so on, help in art music to undertake the deviation and register it as such. The basic concepts of *raga*, *tala*, *prakar* and *bandish* prove effective shaping agents at a more specific or technical level.

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Additional concepts derived from the foursome have also a role to play. The enormous number of possible, basic *raga*-scales, genres and their hierarchies, well-codified embellishments and the like – all these have obviously helped the process of composing in art music. The place of pride given to *jod*-compositions is also an instance of largely pre-composed music.

Composing within and for a culture: response to the three cycles

In religious and folk music some other interesting points emerge. These two musical categories have a major cultural responsibility of responding to three cycles in human life – and that is the first and firm launching platform they enjoy. In religious and folk music, the prescription to respond musically to birth-death, day-night, and seasonal cycles enables composers to work with less tentativeness. Creating time and space for the society to participate and also to receive certain experiential charge is the main motivation for the composers' work. It is therefore not surprising that composers working in these categories invoke divine inspiration, *guru*'s orders or promises made to him, the king's or a patron's wish, for example, in order to undertake composing which can rely on many tried out and accepted strategies of molding musical material and gain acceptance for their music-making ventures. It is often very aptly maintained that in these categories new music is not composed or created but it is re-created! The music is as if floating in the air as the community-wish – waiting to be formally composed or created!

Craft as a composing stimulus

Often there are compelling composing conventions that channel the desire to compose – irrespective of the category of music concerned. For example, a tune or a subject or a theme is “given” – that is, in these matters there is no choice for the composer. In other aspects he is free to choose his own ways. Thus his composing options are in a way reduced but the craft or competitive spirit appears to bring into play different kind of stimuli – otherwise not powerfully projected. In many Indian regions folk and religious music is made by holding competitions variously known as *dangal*, *akhada*, *kalgi-tura*, *sawal-jawab* and so on. These competitions are even known to touch micro-levels in the composing-process. For example, one party would perform first and the competitor would be expected to follow the same tune or same rhythmic pattern, for instance, and that too extempore – in their composition!

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Music and other arts

Performing traditions in India have been fundamentally composite. Theatrical music, musical utterance or delivery, movement-oriented language-use, versification cast in pictorial moulds or motifs have therefore been abundant. In other words, under such circumstances composers receive a firm base from conditions or conventions formulated by other arts. Genres have accordingly been crystallized and won wide approval.

Notable story-elements also feature in many compositions as a strong composing base. Deep-rooted myths help as the characters are known in some form and symbols rarely fail to energize composers. All such instances bring to the foreground the relationship music has enjoyed with other arts as well as with different areas of life not directly connected with music.

As I have argued often in the recent past, today the composite element is staging a comeback in various modes and for varied reasons – cultural as well as aesthetic. Music-composers are responding to the situation according to their perceptions and abilities. Consequently arts and crafts other than music are assuming important roles in music-making.

Music-composer and the non-auditory senses

In the act of composing, a more subtle influence has been the operations of the multi-sensory human palette. Interestingly, the traditional statement about the five natural elements and senses associated with them sets up a provoking hierarchy. It is of immediate interest to us because the ‘principle of sound’ occupies an important position in it. In a tabulated form the hierarchy can be noted as follows:

Element	Physical property	Physical character	Sense organ
Sky	sound	absence of resistance	ear
Air	touch	movement	tactile organs
Fire	vision	heat	eye
Water	taste	liquidity	tongue

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Earth	smell	roughness	nose
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In other words, an inherent interrelationship is postulated between sound and other elements.

Apart from this ancient inter-sensory relationship and hence the essentially multi-sensory experiential world we live in, modern researches have incontrovertibly established synesthetic perception as a fact of life. The related literature points to bio-neurological pairings of senses as partners in sensory reception. In these pairs one sense receives the actual stimuli while the other joins in the sensory processing even when it is not actually stimulated. One may say that while one sense is excited two are aroused and the experiential horizon is extended to the receiver's benefit.

The visual and the auditory are linked in this way. Thus it is not surprising that visual content finds its way in the composing act through verbal descriptions of the visually appealing matter. Song after song sings about the bride's beauty, the bridegroom's handsomeness, the emperor's splendor, Krishna or Radha's enticing looks, the evocative power of the black rain-bearing clouds and so on, as visual experiences leading to music-making. Next to the visual is the olfactory that empowers composers.

In passing it must be noted that the musico-aesthetic critical terminology and the phenomenon of *ragamala* painting also refer to the synesthetic aspect discussed here.

Audio for the visual

It is of course to be expected that with the six musically active categories, situations will arise when music is made for experiences essentially connected to other senses. Analyzing the situation when music is made for the visual, we get a neat conceptual map of what happens. Going deeper into other sensory initiatives, one may be able to come to a more exhaustive exposition. But it is hoped that the present focus on the audio-visual combination will prove illustratively useful.

When the audio is designed or composed for the visual, the following functional guidelines come into operation:

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1. The active agent's basic thrust helps moving towards the final visual experience. At the same time there is something like the final handshake. In other words, both aspects are finally to be completed in each other – so to say!
2. The attempt is to attain a dynamic equilibrium. Both audio and the visual recognize and consciously respond to the structural and medium-related nuances that make them what they are in themselves.
3. While being on their joint march, frequent interchanges take place in their respective authority to ensure the fruitfulness of the entire endeavor.
4. The larger cultural rhythms also influence the undertaking. Bergson's observations about predominance of time-arts over the space-arts, or Coleridge's aphoristic reference to "the tyranny of the eye" are pertinent pointers to this cultural truth.

Operation of the aesthetic principles in specifically art-contexts

The functional guidelines for the joint audio-visual operations are also in action in non-art efforts. However, more direct aesthetic principles supplement them and the activity becomes clearly art-oriented. Musico-theatrical or musico-cinematic expression would be good examples of the art-oriented audio-visual collaboration. The following major principles come into action, which is complex, continuous and comprehensive:

1. Time, space and causality are processed and undergo an essential change of character. For example, time would become rhythm and *tala*, the ether-space would be transformed into the performed, resonating and influenced space, and causality would be expressed as logical sequence and plot. All transformations aim at creating a different and other world – qualitatively distinct from that which mundane existence otherwise offers us.
2. Sensory competition to obtain an expressive scope becomes a reality. Synesthesia provides another prominent example of the multi-sensory roles that prove to be aesthetically useful. In the final analysis, all art is desirous of bringing about multi-sensory enrichment.
3. As mentioned earlier, time-arts enjoy ascendancy today because of the overall human cultural situation.

4. The verbal, non-verbal and the linguistic begin intensive exploration of expressive nuances in their respective domains.
5. The final goal appears to be the creation of a state in which “arousal of imagery” coupled with symbolization make the work evocative and not just meaningful!

Are there new principles, theories and so on in operation?

Without taking an either/or position, it is possible to say that today music-makers in all performing roles tend to describe their artistic success or aesthetic excellence with the term *rang* and rarely in terms of the traditional *rasa* theory.

There are some reasons for this preference. Artists in the field of performing arts often use this term, that is the *rang*, to refer to their success or otherwise in performances. Secondly, I see a possibility of verbalizing the conceptual structure that is in action in this phenomenon. And finally, I also feel that the *rang* concept has a philosophico-aesthetic ancestry in the Indian tradition.

1. I submit that performers’ *rang* रंग corresponds to Bhartrhari’s indivisible, universal and noumenal *sphota* स्फोट.
2. An important characteristic of the *rang*-theory is that it represents an unclassifiable emotional/intellectual experience. Ambiguity of the highest order reigns supreme in the *rang*-state. Thus, one to one relationship of music and emotion and so on is ruled out, and so is the identifiable, clear music-meaning relationship. The *rang* theory surely covers more areas in music-making today than the ancient *rasa* theory.
3. At a micro-level the theory refers to performance as an act of dance, drama and music and so on. As already indicated, performance at this level points to choice of modality (audio, visual, kinetic, mixed and such-like), genre-exploration and selection of presentation-technique, for instance. Bhartrhari’s *madhyama vac* corresponds to it. It must be remembered that Bhartrhari’s concept of *vak* वाक् was not essentially and rigidly confined to voice understood as *kanthadhvani* कंठध्वनि. He felt that the *vac* is the expressive power of the animate as well as the inanimate world. For various reasons, the concept was narrowed to denote human voice that was to be processed to become speech.

4. Actual performance is the next step. Artists are required to translate the performing design they have conceived into actual tangible entities so that their intentions are turned into receivers' experience. A majority of experiential features may be traceable to specific performing components at this level. Similarly, each performer's individual genius in the activity can also be perceived. Bhartrhari's *vaikhari vac* is the conceptual parallel.
5. Bhartrhari's *sphota* is manifest through *dhvani* as the meaning-invoking force. The agency of performance achieves the same for the performing artist. Performance becomes what it is when a dynamic equilibrium is attained between performer, the performed, and the receiver. Thus a circular process takes place and that is communication. Even though the performer is the initiator of the activity, the moment it begins, all three members of the triad are dynamically involved. All are mutually influencing agents in a larger process.
6. The *rang*-theory has other implications too and can be discussed in the context of Bharata's four ways of *abhinaya*, because when viewed in the proper perspective, Bharata's *abhinaya* corresponds to the totality of communication.

The composer's journey

Is it possible to hypothetically trace the movement of a composer to the point he reaches composition? I put down the following as a possibility.

1. Unless he is stimulated into action by actual auditory sensation, he is likely to begin by attending to an auditory image of some kind of sound. Musicians may describe it as a nucleus of notes, a rhythmic pattern or words as sound-patterns, for instance. Sometimes a composer may be activated into attending to visual or olfactory images and suchlike. The main point is that the beginning is marked by attending to an image, which is something much more than mere sensation.
2. In the next phase the image is processed by perception and this invariably results in creation of contexts for the received image. A contextual perspective to images means the image does not remain isolated. It gathers other similar as well as contrasting images around it, and the composer is compelled to assess and evaluate the potential of the image-material he is engulfed in. In this task his acquired knowledge, past experience and his conception of the final goal help him. The assessed, evaluated body of

images is finally sorted and acquires the stature of imagery. Imagery is distinguished from images or their body because it is richer, in all likelihood multi-sensory and more importantly it possesses a primary form or a seed-form of the proposed work.

3. What follows is the more constructional part of the composing process. The seed form is to be actually realized into an identifiable work. At this stage, the composer's technical virtuosity, his ability to modify the original design if required without losing its essential identity, and his capacity to anticipate the performing necessities and difficulties so as to keep room for contingent maneuvering of musical forces at disposal, all come into play.
4. In some cases this will be the end of the composer's active music-making as he may not be involved in presenting the work. But in some situations of Indian music-making the composer is also the performer, or he is actively engaged in the act of performing. On these occasions he is further required to successfully arouse musical (or performing – one wonders!) imagery in the receivers' minds and this imagery must be similar or near-similar to what the composer has experienced and shaped into existence. "Imagery arousal" is a crucial test for a composer who holds that "communication" is important and believes it to be the end of his music-making.

In conclusion

To go deeper and farther is in reality to discuss the nature, role and functioning of the creativity in Indian musical behavior. While touching on music-making acts we have touched the zone of creativity. In a larger attempt the issue then would be: Can all music that is made in various categories be described as creative? We will need another occasion for making forays into aesthetics and philosophy, for example.

Contributors

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