

Appreciating Hindustani Music
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Lecture 1
Hindustani Music - A World of Colour, Romance and History

[Music]Namaskar. Welcome to the course Appreciating Hindustani Music. What we just heard was a performance of Khayal which is one of the genres that constitute Hindustani music or North Indian classical music. The vocalist Bhuvanesh Komkali is a young master and grandson of the brilliant musician Pandit Kumar Gandharva, whose ground breaking approaches in the last century to the aesthetics of Khayal have left a deep impact upon this world.

The composition that we heard incorporates the name Sadarang. And this was the signature of Niyamat Khan, who was a musician in the court of the Mughal emperor Muhammad Shah, who ruled in the early decades of the 18th century. Niyamat Khan or Sadarang as he is better known is credited with popularizing the Khayal form. And so, it is that the composition that we had is believed to be nearly 3 centuries old and it has been carried through the oral tradition from teacher to disciple.

The composition was in Raag Bihag set in the time cycle of 16 units called Teentaal which text in Braj which is a dialect of Hindi. The text is “Churiyaan baar baar karkayi Tihare bolana bina chatiya dharkayi”

The text of the composition is in the voice of a woman who is anxious that her love is not speaking to her. She says again and again I rustle my bangles to draw your attention and without you speaking to me my chest pounds.

There are layers of cultural resonances in the imageries employed in this and other compositions that constitute the repertoire of Khayal. Here for example, the lady rustling her bangles to attract her lover's or her husband's attention suggests the code of behavior for women or young brides who may not speak to their husbands except in privacy in the traditional society.

And yet she let us him know of her yearning through the gentle act of rustling her bangles. The composition also evokes the nayika bheda or the types of heroine, a typology that was first promulgated in texts like the Natya Shastra which is almost 2 millennia old. Khayal compositions depict Nayika's in various moods and situations- bliss of love, agony of separation, anxiety of the weight, jealousy over the other woman, angry with the errant lover and so on. But romance is not the only theme we find in these compositions praise of the majestic to playful deities of the Hindu pantheon as well as of the merciful creator Karim Kartar of Islam. Sufi saints such as Nizamuddin Auliya and their grace are at the heart of many compositions.

Seasons and festivals such as Holi too are described and celebrated in these compositions as also the innocence of young brides and grooms. And we also have compositions about music itself, its

intricacies, the challenges of mastering this art and its liberating power. But while a particular form of composition is central to Khayal, Khayal is more vested in abstract improvisation around these compositions.

The performance you heard surely bore this out with various kinds of improvisation woven into and around the composition. So, Khayal then is a genre of North Indian classical music or Hindustani music in which compositions with text on varied themes anchor expositions of raga set in time cycles called tala. There is a great deal of improvisation around the compositions while following expectations of raga, grammar and precision of tala.

Khayal is only one of the genres that comprise Hindustani music the others being Dhrupad which is uh on general consensus and older genre and instrumental music. These three genres all the three genres-involve presentation of ragas through composition and improvisation set in tala.

Khayal in its present form probably has a history of around 300 years, but can be traced back several centuries to older musical practices. Dhrupad has a longer history of around 500 years while instrumental music in effect draws from these two traditions and this course is about these three musical genres.

Now, Indian classical music is regarded ancient, and it is ancient in the sense that it can be traced back to misty beginnings in the Vedic chants, through an entire Veda the Samaveda is about the rendition of Vedic hymns or richas in chants. Word and sound were profoundly of important and subject of deep investigation by ancient thinkers.

And some schools such as the Vaiyyakarana or the grammarian school equate sound with the ultimate reality and they called it Shabda Brahman. Music was also an integral part of Natya or theatre and theatre it was acknowledged was a Kridaniiyaka that is it was for play or for entertainment.

So, the legacy of the sacrality of music on the one hand and the secular purpose of music as entertainment are both found in contemporary Hindustani music. Indian classical music carries with it simultaneously the legacies of the sacred Vedas and esoteric reflections on the mystical properties of sound and also sensuous entertainment.

The flowering of various regional musical expressions as detailed in texts of the medieval period point to music being a presentational art form for over 2 millennia while, also affirming the diversity of musical expression. The story of Indian classical music is the story of ancient musical practices enriched by local expressions. A great tradition taking along with it, little traditions of various local cultures and tribes as it gives expression to its people's innermost feelings and yearnings as only music can.

North Indian music also reflects the tumult of Islamic invasions that brought exotic influences of the invaders and later settlers. It is rich in lore of manic obsessions of its practitioners over perfection where a kadak bijili taan or a fast melodic run delivered at lightning speed in intensity killed the singer who was practicing it.

It includes stories of masters pursuing music to evoke the creator spurning earthly rewards as well as stories of eager kings and emperors vying with each other seeking to adorn their quotes with the best musicians of the land. It carries with it stories of families of musicians guarding

closely their musical wealth, their musical repertoire only passing them on within the family. Compositions given in dowry to the groom's musical family.

Stories of the yearning and grit of young men, who ran away from their homes to find a guru who would be willing to impart to them this music. There are other stories that have been erased and buried in recent history such as the story of the Tawaif's or courtesans who were repositories of this music, but were cast away as part of modern India's anxiety to cleanse itself of what would then perceive to be immoral institutions.

The chapter of Hindustani music story currently playing out speaks for the resilience and power of the music as it rose from the crumbling edifice of royal patronage when the British usurped power. And when music moved from Suarez for connoisseurs into public spaces where this subtle and complex music seeks to win over lay audiences.

Yehudi Menuhin, violin maestro Yehudi Menuhin says this and I quote “The first image of Indian classical music is that of continuity beginning and end are lost in the eternities of the past and the future. Unlike the evolution of our own music in reference to western classical music. Unlike the evolution of our own music in the recent centuries which is marked by action and reaction by towering figures wresting new sounds, new principles of organization from their material thus reflecting the changing conditions of man and society. Indian classical music has continued and perturbed through 30 centuries and more with the even pulse of the river and with the unbroken evolution of a sequoia tree” End quote.

Just as no river is entirely unperturbed Indian classical music is not a placid stream. Nevertheless, the truth in Menuhin's statement about continuity from a distant past is undeniable. For example, many of the terms including central ones like raga, tala, swara terms that are widely used in contemporary musical traditions are many centuries even millennia old even if the meanings may have subtly changed.

Some basic principles of music making too have ancient links, but undeniably the music has undergone significant even paradigmatic or paradigm shifting changes over the centuries. So, when we say that Indian classical music is ancient we need to know both its truth and be aware of the limits of that claim.

Ancient as it may be Indian classical music is practiced and patronized avidly by well travelled men and women of the 21st century who pursue this music passionately. Now, terminology like classical music raise questions about meaning and assumptions and we will consider these issues soon, but what this expression refers to is unambiguous.

North Indian classical music or Hindustani music encompasses the worlds of Khayal, Dhrupad and instrumental music or Vadya Sangeet. After some preliminaries we will look in some detail at the concept of raga which is at the heart of Indian classical music and then at tala. And after this we will enter the world of Khayal and more briefly of Dhrupad and instrumental music.

While the focus of this course will be on the performance aspect of these genres some amount of historical scholarship will be referenced to offer context. I, Lakshmi Sreeram will be your primary instructor in this course and Srijan Deshpande is co-instructor. The course has benefited immensely from inputs by senior musicians and scholars all of whom we are deeply indebted to.

I must mention with gratitude particularly Pandit Satyasheel Deshpande and Pandit Ritwik Sanyal both very eminent and senior musicians and scholars who have offered modules specifically for this course. Putting this course together for NPTEL has been an exciting journey and we hope you find something to take away from it.

Thank you all for joining this course.