

Indian art music and the changing audiences worldwide

Dr. Suvarnalata Rao

National Centre for the Performing Arts, Mumbai, India

Introduction

At the outset let me clarify that I will not only explore the audience situation in India but would also like to talk about the situation outside India, as the Indian art music has a serious global presence today.

Whilst there is at least some data available about the audiences of Indian art music outside India in places like UK, Europe, USA and South Africa, in India itself, there is neither a reliable data nor any attempt at studying the audiences with respect to their profile (age, preference, training, geographical location etc.). Apart from the available reports this presentation is being made on the strength of my own experience of programming well over 60 events in a year for the last 12 years at a premier cultural institution in India having over 3200 members¹. Furthermore, as a native to this tradition I have been for the past four decades and more, an active member of the audience as well, besides being a musicologist and practitioner of north Indian instrumental music.

Notwithstanding the antiquity associated with this tradition and the magnitude of socio-cultural changes it has witnessed over two millennia, I will confine my presentation to the scenario in the past 100 years, including the post-independence period and also the crucial period during which the national freedom struggle was at its peak.

Role of audience in the Indian tradition

In my presentation I will regard the term “audience” with a wider connotation as “users or consumers” in various situations including, not only the audience in “live” situation but virtual audience like those over electronic and print media as well (radio, T.V., internet, published, printed audio and video material)

Listening to art music, irrespective of its parent tradition (Western, Indian etc.) is indeed an involved process, as complex as the discipline itself, with its well codified tenets. Apart from knowing the “rules of the game” audiences of Indian art music have yet another role, in the sense that they are expected to participate actively in the performance with interjections and gestures communicating their positive responses. A knowledgeable audience knows how and when to appreciate, while the performer is expected to be receptive to the audience-reaction and be inspired, and rise up to the expectations of the audience.

The quality of performance is dependent on the quality of the audience participation in this manner. It is definitely a two-way communication, where the performer and the audience share a symbiotic and mutually beneficial relationship. It is therefore obvious that the audience for Indian art music has to be not only initiated, but also knowledgeable

¹ For further details visit <http://www.ncpamumbai.com>

enough to inspire the performer by communicating their approval at appropriate junctures.

Audience Profile

During the past 100 years performing arts have been embraced by exponents from regions and communities beyond the original parameters of location, language, religion and caste. Correspondingly, the audience profile too changed. Although a desire to have homogeneous audiences led to emergence of music circles and clubs having audiences on the same wavelength, forces such as explosive growth of business, communication, media, technology, as well as drastic socio-economic and cultural changes etc. have influenced the audience profile. We observe that now the audience is heterogeneous rather than unified or homogeneous. Diversification has resulted from the above-mentioned factors and manifests in terms of taste, preference, expectation and response. To address and gratify such a stratified audience is a real challenge for a performer. There have been instances of meritorious artistes who failed to feel the pulse of the audience and hence couldn't achieve the desired success in their career.

Let us now consider in detail the factors that have affected the audiences of art music within India.

Changing scenario

1. Performance set-up

Ideal setting for an art music recital is a select and small gathering of appreciative listeners who, like the artist sit down on the carpet. Besides providing an acoustic environment, the close proximity helps to establish communication with the audience. However, today, the performance arena has shifted from small chambers to concert halls and large outdoor spaces, invariably furnished with chairs and modern Public Address (PA) systems, affecting the intimate nature of the performer-audience communication.

2. Patronage

One of the major reasons for the above change is linked to the paradigm shift that occurred with respect to patronage. By the end of 19th century, the British established sovereignty by annexing individual principalities, and with this the performing arts like music and dance that once enjoyed generous support from the native rulers became bereft of patronage. In the 20th century it was left to the masses to patronize the arts and the performance arena shifted from the royal courts to large halls. Patronage by public at large contributed to a much wider diffusion of art music, having far-reaching consequences on the life of music and musicians in India.

The authority and control wielded by a single patron was diffused to common public, who now had to pay to listen to the performance. The audience-performer relation thus had an added dimension; wherein, having contributed monetarily the audience had a 'say' in the process and could dictate its way indirectly or directly. The performer too felt obliged to "please" the crowd and perhaps play to the gallery instead of satisfying a single patron. The choice of repertoire, for instance, is influenced by the occasion and the profile of the audience. The audience often expected to be indulged and sought additional repertoire from the performer, especially at the end of the recital. Performer; knowing the

“power” of the audience to “make” or “mar” his career, resorted to oblige his “new” patrons.

Although this trend continues to certain extent even today, the story of patronage seems to have come a full circle with the entrée of a new player –the Corporates and business houses, who are not patrons but sponsors, who are more concerned about visibility to their brands rather than about the art they “claim” to support. Thus, bringing more and more commercial elements in to the art world.

3. Contribution of the media

Today, the audience has its own idea about what music should be. However, apart from a small percentage of the audience that is initiated and learned, the rest of the audience mostly acquires its ideas from secondary sources. For example, write-ups, publicity interviews, non-technical appreciative articles etc. provide base for its expectation, reception and interpretation of the musical experience. Unfortunately, the concert reviews written by well-informed critics, that used to be such a powerful tool for educating the audience have no place in the newspapers today. Furthermore, the printed works and recorded version of music are acquiring the character of definitive status. Deviations from it are not easily accepted and interpretation as a process is denied flexibility usually associated with it. In general, art music seems to be facing a stiff competition with the popular genres for time and space in print and electronic media.

4. Electric / Electronic intervention

It seems that the technology has superseded almost all processes of conventional transmission and propagation in a qualitatively different mode. Availability of the technology to record and reproduce sound from the beginning of 20th century revolutionized the way music was produced and heard in India. This led to the development of a virtual audience, an audience that could listen to music without leaving home. From a small percentage of the elite that initially had access to such technology, it soon reached the masses, having far reaching effect on the extent and variety of music that was produced throughout the century. Later, the other means of transmission like Radio and Television broadcast, and motion pictures followed, and as a result, the palette of music available to the audience today has grown immensely richer, offering a wide range of styles to choose from.

In the last few decades this has received a further boost with the advent of electronic, especially digital technology. The aspects of creation / performance, preservation and propagation of music have new meaning in the realm of digital technology, which offers yet another possibility that was hitherto unheard of – the ability to create a virtual space in which music can be heard, exchanged, learned and taught.

Like any other technology, this too is a double-edged sword having both favourable and detrimental effects on the art of music. The ease and convenience with which a large amount of ‘programmed’ music is made available has affected both performers as well as listeners, bringing in a paradigm shift in the way music is created and appreciated, besides the fact that a considerable part of the audience now prefers to move away from the ‘live’ to ‘virtual’ situation.

Thanks to the intervention of technology in the form of PA & amplification system, now we do not know what the voice, instrument or the music sound like in their native acoustic forms! The possibilities that are offered by technology to process, or manipulate and alter the reality, and also the audience penchant for it, is perhaps taking us from real to surreal world of sounds. The art music seems to vie in this manner with the popular and catchy genres, which essentially thrive on booming and artificial sound effects.

Emerging situation

Blurring aesthetic criteria

We are aware that every music tradition has its own aesthetic criteria and the validity of the musical experience is to be judged by a different set of criteria. In art music the intention of a performer is to create aesthetically pleasing music. Today, influenced by the popular genres of music, audience of art music however, seems to be nurturing 'hold-all' criteria, wishing for instant sensory gratification irrespective of the type of music (e.g. sensation that is created with bouts with percussion, speed, loudness, display of virtuosity etc).

Concerns have been expressed about such expectations and the resultant response affecting the musical quality and variety in terms of repertoire. It is feared that the improvised character of the art music will give way to pre-composed and predictable type of programmed presentation.

Craze for a broad menu

Audiences often demand for semi-art and popular genres, to be included in the recital of art music. The 'new age' audience expects not only audio but also visual gratification from the art music, which by its very nature has least appendages from the extra-musical world.

In this manner, art music seems to vie with the popular and catchy genres, which essentially thrive on loud, booming and artificial sound effects. It is noteworthy that the audiences as well as musicians have accepted and adopted some new timbres that are electronically produced- drone machine, electric guitar etc.

Value for money

The audience is conscious about its rights as patrons. They seek value for money. The heterogeneous nature of audience manifests in terms of taste, preference, expectation and response. To address and gratify such a stratified audience is a real challenge for a performer. There have been instances of meritorious artistes who failed to feel the pulse of the audience and hence couldn't achieve the desired success in their career.

Constraints of modern-day life

The changing pace of lifestyle and the challenges, especially in the urban set up, of being physically present at certain place at certain time, has affected the audience for 'live' music. Lack of time, energy, resources and also security problems have cumulatively led to shrinkage of the leisurely all-night conferences to a well-presented and packaged

recitals lasting not more than two / three hours. With plenty of musics around to choose from, young generation seems to be opting for popular and 'trendy' material.

Audiences outside India

As a result of globalization a good deal of Indian art music is now produced, circulated and received outside India. Several factors have fostered this development. Major being: the desire of the Asian community spread worldwide; to maintain traditional values and the search of the Jazz and Pop world for new sounds.

The role and acceptance of Indian art music abroad has grown since its initial impact over five decades ago. From the time (1960's) when the audience clapped in appreciation just as Pandit Ravishankar finished tuning his *sitar* on the stage, to the present day when the Indian music is considered as a major player in the world music arena with a possibility of earning a diploma at a prestigious Conservatory in the Netherlands, Indian music abroad has indeed come a long way.

Way back in 1955, the extraordinary performance of Ustad Ali Akbar Khan at the Museum of Modern Art in New York on the invitation of Yehudi Menuhin prompted critics to take Indian music seriously. The awareness for Indian art music and philosophy grew as pioneers like Pandit Ravishankar and Ustad Alla Rakha joined Ustad Ali Akbar Khan, and moved to the West in the late 1960's to play in major festivals and teach by establishing schools in various parts of USA and Europe. With the involvement of Beatles Indian music came on to the centre stage, and soon a breed of new audience was created comprising the children of the post-war materially prosperous West, who sought in the Eastern thought and culture a salvation, a way ahead for a peaceful and happier world. As a result, Indian philosophy and music became established as part and parcel of the exotica in the West.

The audience is made of two layers: the first and subsequent generations of the Indian diaspora (including migrants from India, Bangla Desh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka & East Africa) and the mainstream audience. The dynamics is changing as the level of awareness is increasing and as the subsequent generation of Indian diaspora is replacing the first generation, bringing out a quality change in the audience expectation. The surge of new migrations during 1970's helped to gain a critical mass. This audience was fed on several programmes that were run in the school & Universities, lecture demonstrations and workshops, besides recitals and festivals of touring musicians from India.

The next level of appreciation and comprehension came with establishment of local organizations and recording labels who strived hard to present full-length performances and recordings, allowing the artistes to bring out the real essence of Indian music and offer experience that is native to the tradition. These concerts became a source of aesthetic satisfaction to increasingly wide, appreciative and discerning international audience, appealing to the sensitive connoisseur as well as uninitiated concert goers.

Initially, emotion expressed through the vocal genres was difficult to grasp; perhaps due to the language involved for many non-Indian listeners, while instrumental music was

relatively simpler to appreciate. However since 1990's, the ability to attract audiences of non-Indian origin in concerts of Indian vocal music is an interesting development, definitely indicative of the fact that now there is a well-initiated mature non-Indian audience who can appreciate more difficult variants, albeit this tends to be a hardcore audience more reflective of quality than quantity of listeners.

Available reports (2002)² suggest that 250-300 concerts of Indian art music (both the north & south Indian music) are organized in North America each year by 90-120 local organizers. The average audience ranges from 60 -600, thus on an average constituting 2 % of the total population of Indian origin, whereas the attendance by non-Indian population ranges from 1-5 %. Nonetheless, when organized in big cities showcasing mega stars who have also made name in the cross-over circuit, or at the University campus, the attendance by both Indian and non-Indians can be very high up to 80 %. According to this report even after 40 years the Indian art music is yet to enter the mainstream music.

The reports from UK (2002)³ suggest that during the last 30 years the nature of the audience has changed from just being Asian to a more mixed audience. It is also interesting that the indigenous populations in continental European countries, notably France, Germany and Netherlands appear far more receptive and open minded to world music and have shown greater interest in the Indian music than their British counterparts.

Crossover

Many eminent Indian musicians, especially instrumentalists like L. Subramaniam, Vishwamohan Bhatt, Zakir Hussain, are participating in crossover events with their counterparts in other traditions. This has broadened the scope of Indian music. The audience reaction in India as well as overseas has been mixed. While purists scoff at such attempts, the younger generation regards this as a powerful strategy to attract and eventually 'cultivate' new audiences for Indian art music. Mention must also be made of several Western composers from Claude Debussy, Oliver Messiaen to John Cage and Coltrane, who have drawn inspiration from elements that are typical to Indian music-*raga*, rhythmic and improvisational aspects, which are clearly reflected in their works.

Audience building

Several attempts are being made to cultivate well-informed audiences for Indian art music, conspicuous among them are:

- Lecture-demonstrations & workshops aimed at children & youth explaining the basics of art music. In this direction SPICMACY-Society for promotion of Indian classical music among youth is doing yeoman's service. In these sessions eminent maestros participate without charging any fees and inspire the young audience.
- Guided listening sessions are organized to educate the initiated listeners who do not intend to practice the art but wish to be good listeners.

² Proceedings of the Seminar on 'Globalization & Indian Music', ed. Rao, S., ITC-Sangeet Research Academy, NCPA & Music Forum, Mumbai, (2002)

³ *ibid*

- Recitals are organized in smaller spaces without PA systems etc. to recreate the magic of “the good old days”.
- Value added comments before / during the recital
- Outside India audience building is mainly achieved through training and hands on with the performing practices through schools and organizations founded by people of Indian origin.

Future

During the past 150 years many a questions have been raised about future of this music and correspondingly about the audiences that nurture it.

What is the audience profile in future for the Indian art music? How can enough people acquire interest in traditional forms to keep them viable in a society, which is changing rapidly? Can art music compete with other catchy genres in attracting young audiences? Will it retain its identity in the sense that it can attract audiences abroad or will it become part of that amorphous indefinable World music culture? Will the attraction of this music and its spiritual and cultural underpinnings continue to attract non-Indians in the pursuit of self-discovery? Can the performers and audience cope with overwhelming amount of information that is so readily made available by the non-conventional form of music communication that seem to pervade the music scene in the 21st century? In the years to come, will a lack of critical awareness and sensibilities required to appreciate the finer aspects of life be lost at the altar of our fast paced life, crass populism and commercialism?

We are aware that cultures do not stand still and every age interprets the tradition afresh. In relation to performing arts, cultural consensus is arrived at different modes in various junctures. In the process of ‘reinterpretation’ the audiences have significant contribution. As is the case in any culture, the audiences of Indian art music have changed and the process is ongoing. Given that the situation continues to remain in flux, these questions cannot be answered with any certainty.

However, it is at least reassuring to keep in mind that Indian art music has survived for the past two millennia and more. Throughout its existence it has shown resilience as well as readiness to assimilate various external socio-cultural influences. Both in a real as well as virtual situation it always had a niche audience having specialist’s knowledge, albeit to varying degrees. It has never been the domain of the masses or laymen so to say. Now having a new home outside the Indian soil, in a way, offers further reassurance for its survival on a wider ground. In fact, recognition from outside has to some extent helped to enhance its prestige at home. Now the artistes who perform overseas have an edge over the other artistes with the audiences at home.

Notwithstanding the challenges, there is no cause for concern as far as survival of the art-form is concerned. Even some maestros who have been around for the past six to seven

decades are optimistic about the future of not only the art-form but also about attracting young audiences.

I wish to end on a positive note by sharing with you a recent development:

Recently, a movement is built through a national Forum comprising top-ranking artistes to influence the media, the Government and the other relevant policy makers to accept their responsibility and contribute meaningfully towards preservation and promotion of traditional music. Clearly, music education and audience building constitute a big part of this endeavor.
