

THE PRODUCTION OF AURA IN THE 'LIVE' AGE OF GRAMOPHONE RECORDINGS

From the vantage point of the early twenty first century it is difficult to imagine a time when Hindustani music was not celebrated and its musicians not romanticized. Open many newspapers in most urban Indian centers and descriptions of musical performance, replete with colorful metaphors, passionate statements and spiritual claims, are easy to find. All the more surprising, then, to read music journals or books prior to Indian Independence only to find scant mention of musicians and a scattering reflection of their performances.

I will here trace this shift in discourse about musicians and their music from pre to post-Independence India. I propose that the *musicians'* public role in the emerging modern era was that of a *native informant*. His place was to provide raw data for musicological inquiry and its project of recovery. As native informant, the musician was to disclose musical compositions but he was not to stand as a biographical subject. He was therefore placed at a distance from musical discourses, named only when his music was condemned and elided when music was celebrated.

A significant shift occurred after Independence. The *musician* emerged as a biographical figure of the nation and Hindustani music was understood as entering its golden age. What is unique about postcolonial musicians is that they appeared before the public in multiple sites, all of which converged after 1947. Musicians were still heard over the gramophone and radio, but now their names and biographies were beginning to appear in print-media (newspapers, journals and books) and their singing bodies appeared on stage. Thus, the presence of the *musician*, for so long mediated through disembodied channels, was finally appearing in embodied form. I propose that the celebrity-effect of the Hindustani musician was significantly enabled by this deferred encounter and its peculiar consequences.

Pre-Independence Coverage

I would like to begin with a description of a pre-Independence musical performance. The description comes from the 1917 report of the *First All India Music Conference* held in Baroda. The predominant theme of the conference was musicological and the report is detailed in its coverage. When the report arrives, 58 pages later, at musical performances, however, the language of description thins. Of performances, the author writes, summarily and in passing,

Then the two daughters of Rao Saheb ... sang the "Mohan" Raga followed by Vachaspati ...

This was followed by a performance on the flute by Mr. Fredilis. *Then* Imdadkhan of Indore played the "Multani" and "Bhimpalas" Ragas on his Sitar and was followed by his son who played the "Pilu" in a dashing and attractive style.

Galam-u-ddin [] Khan ... *then* sang the "...Sarang" and the "Bahar" Ragas, while Jamalyddin [] Khan, the eminent Binkar, followed on his "Bina" by a "Jait...ashri". Kallankhan of Jaipur *then* sang a song in the "Purva", a very rare Raga.

At this stage, the President rose and ...¹

... and so much for music. Music is narratively routinized through a sequential account. The author of these minutes, so meticulous in his historical reportage, becomes an annalist in the face of music.

My point is not to critique the author but to point to an absence, pre-Independence, of a public narrative form to describe musical performance. When we look elsewhere, we find the Hindustani musician is otherwise a rare species in the early twentieth century's published deposits of written reflections, emerging if at all, only through lists. The list-type fall under two categories, reportage of conferences/music festivals where we get an inventory of performers, or as markings of information retrieval.

Take this statement from *The Indian Music Journal* in 1913:

... A Phil-harmonic Society is established with the following objects:—

To interpret the ancient works on Indian music...

To **preserve and reduce to their proper notation** the best Musical Compositions at present sung by the celebrated musicians and singers of India now living, such as Fiaz Mahammad of the Baroda Durbar, Tanras-khan of Hyderabad, Alla-Diya of Kolhapur, Abdul Kareem of Baroda ... [the list goes on]

It is needless to say that good singers are fast disappearing *and their compositions*, if not preserved in some permanent form, are likely to perish with them, and thus be lost to the world for ever.²

As exceptional as these document are, giving historical density to anecdotal legend, they remain dry. These artists are not offered for biographical presentation but are listed only with respect to those compositions retrievable from them. As such, the cameos mark the extent to which the musician can live in the emerging national discourse—namely as a *native informants*.

But things will soon change and to anticipate and partially explain that change, I want to focus on a sign of crisis that emerges in these reports. For these lists also indicate the preservationist effort of a "fast disappearing" repertoire—"good singers are fast disappearing *and their compositions*, if not preserved in some permanent form, are likely to perish with them, and thus be lost to the world for ever."

We note this archival anxiety elsewhere. For example, from a 1912 issue *Indian Music Journal* we read, "...thousands of *compositions* are **everyday being lost** owing to their being not

¹ *Report of the First All-India Music Conference* (Baroda, Baroda Printing Works, 1917), pp. 58-59, emphasis added.

² *The Indian Music Journal* 2, no. 2 (January and February, 1913), p. 99, emphasis added.

recorded and [we] will not fail to take prompt measures to rescue these *precious gems* which are *easily slipping through our fingers...*"³

Compositions were being lost, thousands of them daily, "owing to their being not recorded." The sentence, pushed to its semantic limits, suggests that in the *absence* of recording technology such compositions would *not* have disappeared, a dialectic of potential capture and experienced loss that I believe is central to the modern connoisseur world of Hindustani music.

The obsessive focus on *composition* indicates a corresponding indifference towards *performance*. Note that the object of crisis is neither the musician nor his music, but rather his *repertoire* of compositions. The composition, precisely *the one* musical entity that could be captured and stored, appeared fragile. As we have seen, we rarely have the opportunity to read a concert review let alone a statement of concern about performances missed or performance repertoires lost to time. That would soon change. And what partially accounts for the change, I propose, is the historical relationship between the gramophone and the live public performance.

Post-Independence Coverage

One of the earliest post-Independence concert reviews appears in *The Bharat Jyoti* on November 14, 1948, by Mohan Nadkarni:

A musical concert was being held in Hubli on the occasion of the death anniversary of the late Khan Saheb Abdul Karim Khan some years ago...

There was pin-drop silence as Sawaii Gandharva appeared on the dais with joined hands. The **eyes** of the audience were riveted on him. A feeling of great expectancy was abroad. Soon the Tamboras were tuned to the Nishada note, and in the quiet hours of the star-lit autumn night, the solemn strains of puriya steadily flowed from his divine voice...

We were being transported as it were from this mundane ... life to a new world of fancies—of musical fantasies. The worthy disciple was rendering Ragas after Ragas in **his Master's voice** [the insignia of the Gramophone Company]. Hours were **fleeing away** like minutes. Our souls were lost in his melody. Many of us shed silent, idle tears when he plaintively sang.

... He charmed his audience by singing Khansahib's *well known* Thumris and Bhajans with that typically emotional fervour⁴

The dawning age of the public concert is accompanied by a new narrative form—the newspaper concert review. I presented the long quotation to give both a sense of the florid style that will come to dominate the newspaper columns and to present a contrast to the pre-Independence discourse on the musician and musical performance. This concert description is totally devoid of

³ *The Indian Music Journal* 2, no. 1 (March and April, 1912), p. 15, emphasis mine.

⁴ Mohan Nadkarni, *The Bharat Jyoti*, 14 November 1948, emphasis added.

the minimalist inventory/annalist style that marks earlier descriptions and is suffused instead with a none-too-restrained language of adjectives and metaphors.

Note as well how the gramophone stands behind the live performance. The review makes reference to the crowds' delight when the musician sings *that* set of songs *already encountered* through gramophone. "He charmed his audience by singing the Khansaheb's *well known* Thumris and Bhajans with that typically emotional fervour." "The Khansaheb" refers to Abdul Karim Khan, the famous teacher of Sawaii Ghandarva. The Khansaheb's "well known Thumris and Bhajans" refer to Abdul Karim Khan's gramophone recordings and not his concerts.⁵ The "charm," then, emerges from the correspondence between *those* gramophone songs one listens to and those same songs one is hearing in person.

THE DEFERRED PERFORMANCE

What I would like to suggest is that the ennoblement of the musician in general and the production of the celebrity in particular is tied to the post-Independence emergence of the concert stage, more specifically to its sequential appearance—as the last in a long line of musical encounters that began, in 1902 with the gramophone and then moved to the radio in 1928.

Consider the following origin tales, all told by significant actors in the world of Hindustani music. The authors express the factors behind their interest in Hindustani music. In each instance the gramophone or radio stands at the origin point of inspiration.

My early familiarity with the music of Bade Ghulam Ali Khan ... goes back to the early 40s—through his *radio* recitals as well as his commercial discs that were frequently broadcast from various AIR stations. It is difficult to remember the number of times I must have heard him *'live'* in Bombay a decade later, till his death on April 23, 1968.⁶

My early familiarity with Panditji's [Krishna Rao Shankar Pandit] music is *of course* through the *radio*, as is *probably the case with most music lovers* *The opportunity to hear him* at a full-dress concert came my way as later as in 1949 when he was featured by a music circle in Bombay.⁷

⁵ Though I have categorized Abdul Karim Khan as a *legend* and not a *celebrity* (the celebrity, recall, meets the public audience through the convergence of the four media of radio, gramophone, concert stage and newspaper write-up), I should say that he had a more significant public presence than most legends. We can be certain, however, that Nadkarni is referring to a sense of familiarity regarding the gramophone recordings and not concerts. "Let me make it clear, at this stage," writes Nadkarni elsewhere, "that *I did not have the opportunity to listen to live concerts* of Abdul Karim Khan or Abdul Wahid Khan. My familiarity with the former's music is only through his commercial discs, while in the case of the latter, I had several occasions to listen to his radio broadcasts for nearly two decades." Mohan Nadkarni, "Kirana gayaki and its pioneers," *Screen* (2 Feb, 1996), emphasis added.

⁶ Mohan Nadkarni, *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, 4 May 1986, emphasis added.

⁷ Mohan Nadkarni, *At the Center* (1982), p. 26, emphasis added.

I *first heard* Amir Khan on the *radio*—way back in the early 40s. I still remember his Asawari in that 15-minute broadcast from AIR, Delhi... A decade and a half *later*, I heard the Ustad at an evening *concert* in Bombay in 1955.⁸

9

10

11

12

There is a certain frankness to these statements. They emerge almost incidentally, as if the originary mechanical experience was taken for granted. Mohan Nadkarni's exposure to Panditji's music was, "*of course* through the radio *as is probably the case* with most music lovers."¹³ In each case, however, there comes a definitive "later." "The opportunity to hear him ... came ... *later*"; "And *later*, it became my privilege to be known to her quite closely"; "I ... heard [Bade Ghulam Ali Khan] live ... a decade *later*."

We are in a historical decade, then, where the musical encounter is in transition. The radio and gramophone dominated the exchange but something was happening, the listener and singer were meeting. What are the implications of this deferred appearance of the flesh-and-blood musician?

AURA: THAT "LIVE" EXPERIENCE

In 1944, [a concert] was held in the Bombay University Convocation Hall. An artist from Punjab presented Raga Marwa and a thumri, *as they had never been presented before, and will never be presented again*. This was how Ustad Bade Gulam Ali Khan *introduced himself* to lovers of classical music in Bombay.¹⁴

We are facing, I propose, an aesthetic appraisal possible only in a gramophone age that crossed the concert stage. Music is typically understood as ephemeral. Unlike other art forms it exists only when it is performed. "Painting," we read in Walter Benjamin, "is superior to music, because, unlike unfortunate music, it does not have to die as soon as it is born."¹⁵ The

⁸ Gurudev Sharan, *Times of India*, 15 Feb 1976, emphasis added.

⁹ P.G. Burde, *Times of India*, 27 Sept 1992, emphasis added.

¹⁰ Mohan Nadkarni. *The Indian Post*. 25 Nov 1989, emphasis added.

¹¹ Gangubai Hangal, *Free Press Journal*, 11 July 1999.

¹² Bhimsen Joshi, "The Versatile Vocalist," *Times of India*, 12, Nov 1978.

¹³ Mohan Nadkarni is a major music critic. Based in Puna with columns appearing regularly in Bombay he was one of the first authors of a new genre—Hindustani music criticism. The first review of his that I have come across was written on November 14, 1948 for "*The Bharat Jyoti*." It was a review of Sawai Gandharva's concert. Interestingly, the review was in reference to a concert held "some years ago."

¹⁴ G.N. Joshi, *Down Melody Lane*, (Hyderabad: Orient Longman Limited, 1984), p. 52, emphasis mine

¹⁵ Leonardo in Walter Benjamin (249) "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn, (New York, Schocken Books, 1969), 249.

gramophone, we are told, radically shifted this situation. "Sound," writes Alan Weiss, "*which had previously been deemed ephemeral* and unstructured, is now the gateway to eternity."¹⁶

In the Hindustani context, however, music gets experienced and expressed as ephemeral *only after* it became mechanically reproducible *and* personally encountered. After nearly half a century of listening in a manner determined by mechanical repetition—one could always place the needle back to the beginning—the listener was suddenly confronted with the ephemeral. Note how the musician's greatness is narratively enhanced by the fact of reproducible inadequacy. It is not that the author never heard a rivaled rendition of *Marwa*. It is that the *musician* could only fail to duplicate such a feat. This failure contributes to the magnitude of his standing. Bade Ghulam Ali Khan's performance was wondrous and, by extension, so was he, *precisely* because he could never again reproduce it.

These expressions become common after 1947 but first emerge ten years earlier in one of the first biographical mentions of a musician in 20th century writing. Not ironically, this column comes in the form of a memorial concerning Abdul Karim Khan (1872-1937).

...The writer's most precious *memory* of Abdul Karim is his 'Lalit' that he sang *once*, but could *never duplicate*. Not all the gold of the Indies could *buy that Lalit*.¹⁷

The musician is born in the annals of biographical history, it seems, on his deathbed. Interestingly, so too does his music, which *only now* dies at its birth. Note how this remembrance identifies a performance in its particular instance, as something that occurred "once" and never again. This is a curious statement given that all Hindustani concerts occur once and never again. But here the singularity of performance stands out, and it does so because it is tied, negatively, to purchase and duplication. The performance, then, while not directly encountered through the gramophone, seems to have been experienced through a similar objectifying structure of expectation. But removed as they were from mechanical forms of data-storage, performances took on a new quality of evanescence. A concert was structured through the logic of mechanical reproduction even though it was neither heard through the gramophone nor recorded by one.

I am suggesting that by the 1940s the nature of listening had changed. Habituated by half a century of the gramophone, the connoisseur suddenly faced the live musician. Used to repetition he now heard only passing melody. Such is the auratic experience par excellence. The performance was marked, after all, by "its unique existence at the place where it happens to be." But whereas Benjamin claims that aura is "that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction" I suggest that the aura of Hindustani music is that which proliferates in the gramophone age *once* it intersected the concert stage. Aura is signified through a new culture of listening, one that is characterized by a sense of temporality that inheres in a new concept—the "live" performance. The "live" performance emerges post-Independence in two senses, as a public concert site and as a commonplace term. Interestingly, the term appears initially in quotes, as if it is somehow untrue to itself. One accounts for the out-of-place-ness of this "originary"

¹⁶ Alan S. Weiss, *Breathless: Sound Recording, Disembodiment, and The Transformation of Lyrical Nostalgia*, (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press: 2002), p. 19. Emphasis added.

¹⁷ *The Journal of The Music Academy of Madras* 5, no. 1-4 (1934), emphasis added.

experience through its deferred appearance. The live is awry precisely because it cannot be replayed.

Conclusion

I would like to suggest that the gramophone transformed certain aural habits by normalizing the repetition of listening. This, in turn, impelled a new phenomenon known as the "live" performance, which had the novel and distinct quality that it could only be experienced as a single, momentary and evanescent instant. Consequently, for connoisseurs of Hindustani music, the possibility of the unrecorded event was invested with new opportunity and apprehension. Listening was now accompanied by the threat that music emerged only to disappear. And with the threat of a musical performance that could disappear at its point of articulation, so to did the status and stature of the musician become invested with a new value—moving from native informant to a biographical subject of the nation.