

Interview with Mani Kaul on Dhrupad Music

Angela Lehr, Mumbai, November 2006

What can be said about the tuning and playing of the tanpura? How to tune it? How to play it?

These days musicians are sometimes forced to use the tanpura machine, which plays like a drone in harmonic combinations of tones in relation to the variable tonic pitch called Sa. The machine houses a computer chip that is dedicated to produce a mathematically precise relationship between tones.

The real tanpura made of wood and gourd and metal strings is however neither harmonic (in the western sense) nor a drone. For instance, in a properly tuned tanpura, there is a hairbreadth difference between the pair of Sa strings (called jodi) where you can hear a subtle, almost imperceptible difference between the two strings. A 14th century music text, Sangeet Samay Saar, named this extremely subtle *heard difference* as responsible for the birth of shruti. From a western perspective this difference will fall short of the idea of absolute pitch and therefore considered out of tune. For Indians this displaced condition of tone called shruti is the very life of music.

The natural tanpura is also capable of producing extraordinary overtones. One must play the tanpura to hear an 'orchestration' of overtones created by the timing, rhythm and pressure of finger movements. You do not just play the strings and hear their clang, clang. But then even the production of overtones depends upon how the bone bridge on the tanpura is prepared. It must reach a shape that perfectly curves on both horizontal and vertical planes. Preparing the bridge is called making the javari, a difficult task indeed.

What is your definition of musical depth? How to reach it? For example: you start the performance from sa, with almost nothing, then how to reach depth and not to go only from tone to tone?

Unless the tones, known as swar, are transformed into specific shrutis (the displaced swars) for a specific raga, the truth of that raga will never be established, even if you are a virtuoso, in total control of your instrument or voice. Unlike swar shruti is an open situation of a tone - it breaks the tonal barrier or the limits of a tone and is able to thoroughly delve deep into the raga. You will never get tired of hearing an accurate shruti a hundred times if you are a real connoisseur of music.

Every raga is as individuated as a human being. Though there are, always, just the same twelve tones, like the finite parts of a human body such as head, nose, ears etc, like human beings two ragas are never alike. You will never find two faces or two ragas alike. The individuation of a raga alone will lead you into its depths.

How to create music that is a reflection of one's disposition ("svabhav")? How to create music that is born out of one's disposition? How important is the musician's svabhav for dhrupad music? How to create music with a distinct personal musical "vision"?

This cannot be ordered. You cannot train for it. There are no exercises that can enable you to understand and know your svabhav. If you make conscious attempts to become your svabhav you will end up becoming your own caricature.

You do not sing or play your svabhav, it is your svabhav that makes you sing and play.

When one learns to relinquish all effort, when one becomes effortless, the svabhav naturally arises and beautifully manifests itself. Nothing needs to be done except understand and leave the mind and heart alone to assimilate the knowledge. We make an effort to eat but do not make any effort to digest the food we have eaten – it is the same with knowledge: we make the effort to listen and then leave the mind to digest the thought.

Irony: when we listen to truthful discourse or truthful music we forget we are listening. Paradox: if we are not listening than who is?

Certainly you should not get into a daily 14 hour riyaz (as some Indian musicians are fond of claiming) to understand your svabhav! You will just become hoarse. That kind of long, obsessive session may happen a few times in a year, but it is unthinkable as an everyday practice. Musicians who claim to do that must be invited and kept in a house under strict watch and made to do the 14-hour riyaz every day for a whole year. Make them really do it for 14 hours every day and see its effect it has on them after a year. Just as an experiment - they can be paid for the enterprise.

The real truth lies in a Hindi phrase called 'swar ki maar' – the words describe what happens when the tone whips your imagination, when the truth of tone lashes at your heart and mind, when the majesty of music makes you powerless, that is when a true musical vision is born. In my film 'Siddeshwari' I have used a small line recorded by one of Siddeshwari's disciples. Siddeshwari says, "Kaumudi, hamein nahin maloom kaun gaa rahaa hai" (Kaumudi, I do not know who is singing when I sing).

Every tone in truthful music is so precise that within seconds, from the very beginning of the performance, the form of the raga ("svaroop") is established. How is this musical quality achieved?

Through deep immersion in the very individual qualities of a raga. True immersion (visarjan) is giving up oneself to the sea of music. In truth every karma (action) is immersion in whatever you are engaged with, like a child absorbed in play - only then there is hope of knowing your svabhav. Certainly not in impressing others and foolishly getting impressed with yourself.

How come that this quality is hardly found nowadays in classical North Indian music?

The desire to become "the fastest sitar player alive", the fastest in the world will finally kill the life of Indian music, make it a bore. You cannot snatch stars from the firmament whatever speed you are able to acquire by a rigorous riyaz. But speed is indeed the most forceful and compulsive contemporary sensation. Cars are flying, minds are sitting bogged down at the steering wheel.

If you take recordings of many different musicians most lightly you will hear many different versions (srutiwise, svar bhed) of a raga. So is there an absolute form of a raga? Is a raga objective?

The truth in Indian philosophy has been heard for centuries. You read the Upanishads and find words that a modern day spiritual teacher might use. What one hears of philosophy from one's Guru your Guru hears of it from his Guru, who in turn hears of it from his Guru and so on. Even in philosophy in India the real conversation between Guru and Shisya happens through elaboration of Shruti, what has been heard rather than Smriti, what has been remembered. A future Guru will therefore never distort what he hears from his Guru. And yet no two Gurus will use the same language, the same explanation, the same discourse. They are never alike. They are two different being in two different times, totally free of each other. If the Shisya was a mere rubber stamp the great Indian tradition will die with the succession of one generation. Historical contexts of all kinds change the material appearance of a new being.

In this way the musician, a complete being in him/herself, shall follow a path never traversed before. When a Guru is neither subjective nor objective only then he is able to appreciate the real nature of the disciple. As an artist the same Guru is subjective and objective at the same time. A raga has the same quality. It is subjective and objective at the same time. A raga well sung cannot remind you of another raga. It is not as if the scales of ragas have not changed during the course of

India's musical history. You just have to pick up a two hundred year old text and look up a particular raga by name and you will be shocked to find at least one unfamiliar tone in the raga. The spirit of a raga is not ultimately dependent upon tones - the raga is elsewhere. How come Raga Bhoopali and Raga Deshkar and even the real version of Raga Vibhaas have the same scale? You see a tree, its architecture and color and you immediately know it is a mango tree. If you see just a section of a fruit you will be able to say it belongs to a mango tree. In the same vein if you hear two tones in three seconds you can make out to what raga those tones belong - there lies the objective truth of a raga.

The subjective truth is more complex. The great maestro and my teacher Ustad Zia Mohiuddin Dagar once decided to play Marwa with two madhyams. It was the strangest of experiences I have ever had hearing the recording of a two-madhyam Marwa. There was absolutely no mutilation of the original raga and the pathos introduced by shuddha madayam was extraordinary.

While playing a phrase an emotion arises. How to elaborate on that emotion? How to sustain it?

From one thing to another, from one swar to another, from one shruti to another - almost how a river moves from one point to another. Once the river passes a point it is never the same again. To ordinary eyes it is just water flowing and nothing else.

It is different when you move with a preconception of the whole structure of a raga - in my view preconception is a wasted effort when it comes to elaboration in Indian music. The Indian way is totally different. It has differently resolved the relationship between part and whole when compared with what has been done in the west. In the dominant western tradition parts make a whole and a balance between parts is what any structure is all about. In India that relationship between part and whole works differently. In the cultural realization here, each part resonates the whole. It functions like a part with all its sensuousness but at the same time it resonates the whole. Therefore an half an hour recording of Yaman will be known as Yaman, a ten minute recording of Yaman will be known as Yaman, a ten second recording will be Yaman, and two seconds of Yaman recording will be Yaman too. You see, once the raga is established, all the tones on its scale are not needed to present the svaroop of a raga.

Why do nowadays musicians talk about 22 shrutis? According to Ustad Zia Mohiuddin Dagar every tone can be (at least) divided in 7 tones (3 up, 3 down); what is your view about this? Which one is the right or the better system? Or are both systems good in their own way?

Because there are 22 shrutis and 7 swars, some Indians might stretch their imagination as they are prone to and think of the famous Greek mathematical constant called Pi. Twenty-two upon seven is approximately equal to 3.14159, which is the ratio of a circle's circumference to its diameter in Euclidean geometry, and has many uses in mathematics, physics, and engineering. Perhaps in Indian music too! Who knows it might have some use for our imaginative scholars too.

As far as I know I have only read about the 22 shrutis in old books and of course read the names these shrutis that have been precisely provided. Certain tonal relationships with the preceding or succeeding tones are also given which may help you decide on the exact condition of, say, Chandovati when it comes to Sa or Aalapini when it comes to Pa. But why 22? Anybody's guess. Of course there is no harm in speculating on these issues as long as you create truthful music. However, there is no account as to why this number.

Ustad Zia Mohiuddin Dagar had a simpler and yet profound solution, which is easier to demonstrate on the rudra-veena. A normal tone, which can be termed sadharan, is surrounded by three augmented conditions and three diminished conditions, up and down, making in all 7 divisions of each tone. If we go by the twelve tones we have on our natural scale and seven divisions of each tone, we end up with 84 definite and distinct variations. My Indian mind immediately wants to jump to the conclusion: these shrutis might be something similar to the 84 erotic postures in Kamsutra, why not call them 84 tonal postures! Well...

This division was termed as svarbheda by the Ustad. As a practice in itself there is nothing new in the concept. Musicians of different gharanas have spoken of 'gira hua' and 'chadha hua' swar. Broadly speaking the svarbheda is a development on the natural realization of Indian music that the natural scale is essentially a defective scale. The west saw the defect of natural scale as a problem for its project of harmony and orchestration; Indians saw the defect as a mark of individuated beauty in the system of raga. About two hundred-year-old text emanating from the royal publishing house of the kingdom of Jaipur provides grids known as yantras for each raga. The code against every swar speaks of for instance '3 matra gira hua' or '2 matra chadha hua' swar, matra being the measure for tonal differences. Some people have suggested that one may not be able to follow the svarbheda if one decides to sing or play fast. The only answer I can give to such an innocent remark is that most musicians are not able to take care of the raga itself when they get into their fast, faster and fastest gear, what to speak of svarbheda!

How can one play fast without destroying one's personal vision (svabhav) and the purity of the raga (svaroop)?

There is a limit to how fast one can play. Mere speed is no big deal. That is pleasing when you hear a qawaal like Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan- with that kind of passion and that kind of music speed works. There speed appears to break material limits and transport us into an ephemeral spiritual world. It certainly gives rise to a semblance of a spiritual world. That's how I am able to feel, that is all. My apologies to anyone offended by statements – I am not even a performing musician.