

Appreciating Hindustani Music
Dr.Lakshmi Sreeram
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras
Lecture 2
Classical or Shastriya - What's in a Name!

What is classical music? The expression classical music primarily refers to western polyphonic music of the 18th century including works of Mozart, Haydn and others. How then is it applicable to the very different music that Hindustani music is, what does it mean to call it North Indian classical music? While musicians and listeners lay people freely use expressions like Indian classical music, musicologists and historians are not always comfortable with it.

Other countries too identify one or the other tradition of their music as their classical music. What such a designation or such a description of a music achieves is primarily evaluative. In the sense it privileges that music. So, to be classical is to be of great value, it is to be cherished and such evaluative thrust of this word is problematic today. Because it can be argued and it will be argued that folk music or popular music have their own validity and their own value.

The word in Hindi and other Northern languages for the for these genres of music that is Khayal etcetera is the Sanskrit Word Shastriya. There is that which has shastra. Shastra is a body of rules we have for instance Dharma Shastra which set out the code of living for a Hindu. We also have disciplines like the Gñaya shastra which is a system of philosophy or Alankara shastra which is concerned with poetic excellence literary theory and so on.

So, when we say the Khayal is Shastriya, we call it Shastriya sangeet. So, when we say Khayal is Shastriya, it certainly means that this music is regulated by a body of rules or shastra and it is true that there are rules governing the content, performance and pedagogy and so on and it is also equally true that we find abstract theory about the aesthetics of this music, especially beginning in the mid 20th century.

Like in every other sphere of its cultural life, India has immense diversity in musical traditions in expression. Hindustani music Khayal, Dhrupad etcetera evolved along with and the nestle amidst these various other genres. They impact each other indeed seep into one another and often there are hazy boundaries.

So, it is a good idea to have a broad picture of these other genres and the plays of Hindustani music amongst them to understand what we mean by classical music here in contrast with these other kinds of music which are not called classical. There have been attempts to categorize various genres of music in India.

Broad schema that was proposed by eminent musicologist Dr. Ashok Ranade identifies primarily five categories of tribal, folk, popular, religious and art music. Later on he added confluence music too. He suggested that the variety of music in in India can be accounted for in these

categories, but he also acknowledged that these categories are fluid and dynamic.

Now, it is hard to exactly and exhaustively define or identify the features of Indian classical music to answer the question what makes it classical what makes Hindustani music classical, but included in them certainly our complexity of melody with raga at the heart of all melody vast repertoire of composition. Tala as a cyclic time measure improvisation through various strategies and a textual tradition of technical discussions of music.

We will see in what follows that other traditions of music in India in North India too have these features in varying degrees. For example, we have folk music traditions whose melodic sophistication is almost on par with Hindustani music. The songs of the Rajasthani Manganiyar and Langa communities exhibit melodic complexity that one might find in art or classical music.

I will play a short clip of a simple folk song from Bhojpur and follow it with folk song from the Manganiyar tradition. In fact, Manganiyar and Langa musicians also talk of ragas and engage in some spontaneous improvisation. Do listen.

And then we have traditions especially in North which straddle the classical and folk in other ways. These include a great deal of improvisation around compositions such as thumri, chaiti, kajari, etcetera. So, these forms are improvisation driven very much like classical music and the compositions, too, bear similarities to those sang in Khayal. In what seems compromise, these are referred to as semi-classical. Let us listen to a short clip of Pandit Satyasheel Deshpande's rendition of dadra. [Music].

Moving on to religious music we have temple music traditions such as the Haveli Sangeet in the Krishna temples of the North or kirtan of the of gurudwaras. And these compositions are serious and dignified with very rule bound expectations of presentation of compositions. And all these are hallmarks of classical music and these compositions are all in ragas and talas. For instance, we have Pushtimarg Sangeet or the Haveli Sangeet. These compositions have close resemblances to dhrupad compositions and historically there are links between the two. Let us listen to a short clip. [Music].

The links to all these videos are given below in the description box and I encourage you to listen to the entire clips. Now, what follows is from the repertoire of religious music of the six, the text that is being performed here is attributed to the medieval mystic Kabir.

And in this performance the performer is demonstrating a major raga from the Hindustani repertoire Raag shree. [Music].

And finally, we have a rendition of Raag shree by the marvelous Khayal vocalist the late Srimati Veena Sahasrabuddhe. This she also is rendering Raag shree. And this is acknowledged as classical music or art music. This is Khayal. [Music].

So, these are just a few genres of non-classical music and there are many more genres, but they all share hazy porous boundaries with classical music. Musical genres in India are ancient with complex histories of give and take, one genre or form of song influencing evolution of another genre or form of song with neither geography nor chronology, a simple linear movement.

North Indian traditions of temple music called Haveli Sangeet are historically very close to the

dhrupad traditions in their compositional repertoire and structure. And many songs and so form some forms of song and performance are close to folk traditions and yet involve considerable improvisation and sophistication characteristic of Hindustani music which is classical music. These various categories are fluid, we cannot precisely say where characteristics of the classical end and where folk or religious takeover.

Scholars like A. K. Ramanujan have pointed out the folk classical continuum in the context of literary traditions of India and. So, it is also with music. The problem here as elsewhere is that categories such as classical, folk etcetera were originally developed in western societies and are not easily transposed into a vastly different cultural matrix like the Indian.

And indigenous traditions or genres of music were identified as one or the other of these categories during the national struggle of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The political upheavals and agendas of the time being an undeniable factor in such identification. V. Raghavan a scholar and a prolific writer talks poignantly about the compulsion felt to define the classical. He says in a quote "foreign visitors and musicologists too frequently ask us what our folk music is and what our classical music is and what we understand by these terms?" In any case contemporary India since independence takes great pride in its sophisticated traditions of classical music and vibrant folk music traditions and these are political categories too. State patronage is extended to musical genres in news music performance based on how they are categorized.

And with such political and economic imbrication these categories are dynamic with demands for new inclusions. For example, there is a serious campaign by the government of Orissa to get odyssey music a recognition as the third system of Indian classical music. So, this then leads us to the issue of what is expected of a genre in India to be pronounced classical.

Some of these expectations are number one that it be presentational music. The music itself is the focus and the centerpiece of the event. That is it is not part of another event like say a temple ritual or a wedding or something like that in which music is also rendered as part of the event.

Hindustani or Carnatic music performances are usually the centerpiece themselves. They are the main event. Antiquity: in their present forms these traditions are about 250 to 500 years old, but they have a continuity with musical practices dating back millennia and this in fact, can be traced through a textual tradition which is a next hallmark of classical music in India.

That is classical music of India the various traditions they have a textual tradition that is texts written in Sanskrit primarily and also other vernacular including Persian and Arabic. And these have been written over centuries discussing the music of the times and they offer clues regarding the historical evolution of the music as we have it today.

Systematic pedagogy: a long period of training and practice is needed to gain mastery over this music whether to perform it or even to listen to it with an understanding. You have norms of aesthetics. There are broad expectations stringent expectations of tunefulness staying in time respecting raga rules, the integrity of the composition etcetera.

Classical music is also expected to be weighty as opposed to flighty or easily impactful. Vazandhar, Gambheer are some of the expressions that we use. And connoisseurs form an elite

class among listeners, Jankaar Rasik as we call them. And to gain connoisseurship is also a matter of years of listening and exposure. And these traditions finally, they have a core repertoire that is regarded as a standard and the source of validation for current practices.

Now, some of these are applicable to other genres of music in India as well. So, what can be said without reservation is that the denotation of Indian classical music is for most part unambiguous though not uncontested. Classical music of India comprises the two traditions of Carnatic music of the South and Hindustani music of the North.

In fact, these two have much in common including the fundamental principles of raga and tala. Hindustani music like everything else in the North came under the impact of Islamic culture and the period of nearly 8th centuries of Islamic invasion and rule have shaped the music to give it a flavor and texture that is completely different from the Southern Carnatic music and Hindustani music as I have said earlier includes Khayal, dhrupad and instrumental music. In this course that is what we will take a look at.

There is another closely allied genre that includes the compositions; composition forms of thumri, chaiti, hori, etcetera. They have a unique aesthetic and presentational style and we did sample it earlier in this video. And as I mentioned there these are clubbed together as semi classical simply because they are not concerned with presenting ragas, but with emotive elaboration of the text of the song.

But this tradition also has grown in close contact with classical forms with mutual influence and we will take a very brief look at this tradition too at an appropriate place.