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The Fundamentals of Tabla Accompaniment with Khayal Gayaki

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Abstract

The tabla instrument being a "Taal-Vadya" - (instrument used to establish a rhythm cycle) is widely used to accompany the khayal style of vocal rendition in the north Indian classical music. It can be said that it lays the foundation on which the music gets established. Hence tabla accompaniment plays a vital role. Though the vocalist is in the mainframe, a lot depends on the quality of accompaniment. However, the detailed analysis on the fundamentals of accompaniment is not available.

It is said that the accompaniment cannot be taught as it is a practical subject and has to be self-learnt with experience by practicing with the vocalist. However, the key concepts for the successful accompaniment can be listed down and standardization can be done. Intellectual ability to understand the requirement of this music is a key lookout. It not only requires proficiency in tabla as an instrument, but also requires an analytical approach.

The documentation of these characteristics will help the pursuers to establish the base and the approach needed in this field. Therefore, the research is carried out to explore and note down the key aspects of accompaniment of khayal.

Keywords: Tabla, accompaniment, khayal, gayaki, laya.

Introduction:

Tabla accompaniment with khayal gayaki is considered to be a tough task and needs a specific approach to attain mastery. Role of the accompanist is to maintain the constant rhythm throughout the performance and support the vocalist.

One who has gained mastery over the tabla repertoire may or may not be a good accompanist. Although the mastery over the instrument is a must have for any accompanist (Kumari, 2019).

Accompaniment with khayal gayaki is altogether a different journey. The very first thing in the khayal accompaniment is the laya (tempo) of the bada khayal, mainly known as vilambit, is very slow and it is to be kept constant throughout the performance. This needs a mature and stable musical mind. After the bada khayal comes the chhota khayal which is in the drut laya (faster tempo). Both the compositions have a complete contrast with respect to the laya. To maintain the same tempo is difficult to achieve unless actually practiced regularly with the vocalist. Another key lookout is the discipline and self-control. It is utmost important to understand the fact that accompaniment is completely a supporting role and should never

overpower the vocalist. One has to play whatever is musically suitable for that particular moment and not something for individual perks (Shukla, 2003).

Many times, we can see a fixed pair of accompanists with the vocalist. The reason for this is the comfort given and capability to enhance the overall performance. This is possible due to the detailed study of the accompaniment principles.

The khayal gayan style has prevailed from the previous two centuries. Khayal means idea and imagination. In this rendition, the artist explores a raga with his creativity and imagination. This makes every performance interesting and adds a new dimension. This gayaki has won the hearts of the people and has dominated the music field with its peculiar characteristics. Not only has it flourished in India, but all over the world with its musically rich rendition and repertoire. Vocal music has the apex position in the Indian classical music as compared to the instrumental and dance categories (Banavat, 2013).

The book "Tabla Sangat Evam Kalakar" by Dr. Bhimsen Saral, *"Khayal aur thumri gayan me tabla sangat ki bhumika"* by Ronu Garg, are some of the studies previously done in this field.

However, the key aspects towards a standard way of accompaniment are not discussed in detail. Also, what is to be done to achieve this approach is a gap. Though it is a very practical topic, exploration has been less in this area.

The aim of this research is to study and list down the fundamentals of tabla accompaniment with khayal gayaki.

The following points can be listed down as the fundamentals:

1. Tuning of the Tabla:

Tuning of the tabla in the required swara (pitch) is the first thing any accompanist must be able to do precisely. It needs very meticulous attention and skill, to be able to match to the standard swara. This comes with experience as well as by practicing and paying attention to the details. This can be achieved by:

a) Practicing tuning of the manual tanpura: Although it is majorly related to the vocal music, accompanist must practice this to develop the fine-tuning skills and accuracy.

b) Following standard tuning procedure: Follow the 90:10 ratios that is the major tuning has to be done by adjusting the gattas so that the pitch is nearly matched. The rest 10% fine tuning is to be done on the gajara (The values are just for understanding purpose). While tuning on the gajara, divide the tabla face clockwise into 8 divisions and number them 1-8. Then slowly adjust the pitch of position 1 lower or higher as required. Then move to the opposite division and do the fine tuning. Follow the same procedure for all the 8 divisions. By tuning the opposite divisions, equal tension is distributed all over the face of the tabla and the instrument gives a stable tonal quality (Mulgaonkar, 1999).

It is very important to note that, the Dagga has to be tuned as well. Many of the artists are not aware of this. The tonal balance of the tabla and the dagga is achieved from this. It should be in shuddha gandhar swara with respect to the standard swara. It is very important to note if the

gandhar swar is not within the chosen raga, then it should be matched with the madhyam swara. Tuning of the bayan is highly dependent on the swaras in the raga. Tuning it in a swara which is not included in the canvas of the raga might disturb the vocalist.

2. Laya (Tempo):

Laya can be generalised as the Tempo or time interval between the beats (matras) of any taala. This is the most important factor in the accompaniment of khayal.

Majorly, the laya is classified into 3 types: Vilambit (very slow - one matra in two seconds), Madhya (medium-one matra in one second) and Drut (Fast-two matras in one second). The khayal performance starts with the vocalist showing the required tempo by hand gesture. The required tempo of the taala in the bada khayal is usually very slow (vilambit) and accompanist needs to constantly maintain the same throughout the performance. Failure in maintaining it impacts the performance as the tempo is standardized for these compositions. All the characters played on the tabla have to have the same weight each time they are played so as to avoid mismatch of time intervals. As a good accompanist one has have sense of at-least 8 divisions of a single matra in vilambit Laya (Mishra, 2005).

The stability in the laya can be achieved with some exercises such as

a) Reciting Dugun, Tigun of the Taalas
b) Practicing along with the metronome

However, it should be noted that the metronome is to be used only to attain perfection in the time intervals. The theka should not be mechanical like the metronome. Also, the accompanist must be able to adapt to the different types of Layas as it varies according to the composition.

3. Knowledge of Gayaki and Gayaki ang:

Khayal gayaki has different styles within which come from different gharanas. The prime gharanas are Gwalior, Jaipur, Kirana and Agra. It is mandatory to know the characteristics of each of these styles to be able to accompany well.

Some of the traits are as follows:

Gwalior: Vilambit Ektal, teental, jhumra and tilwada are amongst the major taalas in this style. It gives equal importance to the swara and laya pradhan gayaki. Layakari is done prominently demanding a responsive accompaniment along with it. It is also known for the madhya laya ki gayaki (style in which compositions are rendered in the madhya laya). However, compositions with vilambit Laya are also sung. The madhya laya tempo is not easy to be played and creates an ambiguity if the accompanist isn't used to it.

Jaipur: Vilambit Teental, jhaptal, and rupak are amongst the major taalas. Ektal is not very frequently used. It has the balance of swar pradhan and laya pradhan gayaki. However, the intricacies are more and overall rendition is bound by the laya.

Kirana: It is known as swara pradhan style, that is the melody is given utmost importance. Vilambit ektal and jhumra are amongst the taalas used. Aalapi and expression are given main priority demanding a simple accompaniment. Laykari is not very prominently done. Taan kriya is another key factor.

Agra: It has the influence of Dhrupad Dhamar style hence laykari is aggressively done demanding responsive accompaniment. Overall style is highly driven by the laya pradhan gayaki. Vilambit Ektal, Teental, Tilwada are amongst the major Taalas (Deshpande, 1985).

From the above points we can infer that there is so much of versatility within the khayal style, with each style demanding different type of accompaniment.

Gayaki ang is the knowledge of the flow of the rendition. As the khayal style is extemporary, it demands ability to understand the situational needs and play accordingly. This comes with experience as well as listening to the performances of the maestros.

4. Theka:

It can be termed as the standard rhythm and is based on the taala structure. To explain the concept of theka we can look at the following example. While playing the drut teental, we stress on 1^{st} -5^{th} -13^{th}beat, but when the same theka is played in the vilambit laya, the stress points are 1^{st} -6^{th} -14^{th}. Here we can clearly see, the structure of same taala can change as per the laya and as per the musical needs. The theka attains a melodic character by such subtle alterations. During the initial 2-3 cycles of the performance, it is advisable to play a simple theka to attain the stability in the laya and let the confidence build up (Saral, 2014).

5. Nikas:

The sounds that are produced from the tabla can be referred to as nikas. Ability to understand and produce the appropriate nikas suitable during the accompaniment is intricate work of art. It requires complete blending of the artistic mind, tabla repertoire into the vocal rendition. Certain matras or beats are played with more weight (known as “bal”) than others. Such prime areas of the theka have to be highlighted very clearly. For example, the first matra of any theka and the concluding part of the cycle. Techniques like meendkaam, ghiskaam are used to to enhance the aesthetics. Prominent sound produced at the chaati area is also a major requirement of the khayal gayaki.

6. Discipline:

Discipline means to understand the primary role, which is to support and not dominate in the performance. It can be pictured as one's shadow which follows with the movement but never crosses the path. This is the key difference between a solo performance and accompaniment. There are some great examples of the maestros who are one of the best when it comes to the tabla solo field, but refrain from any individual show-off during accompaniment. This way of switching the roles is the maturity and discipline (Goodway, Samuel, Thomas, 2020).

7. Adding fillers:

Knowing when to add the fillers (mukhda, mohra, tihai) is a skill which few attain. It should add value to the overall performance but should not disturb the vocalist. The balance needs to be maintained precisely. In case of ati vilambit laya, as there is so much of gap between the two matras. This gap needs to be filled by adding some characters. However, the filler material should be selected from the context of that particular theka and should not be random. It is important that the vocalist gets the clear insight of the theka. The main area to be filled is when the vocalist takes rest during the initial 1-2 matras. It can also be done at the end of the cycle which gives the hint to conclude the thought. During layakari phase, there is a scope for adding some entertainment value to the performance with the proper knowledge, experience and understanding the style of rendition (Garg, 1997).

8. Interaction:

A sidelined factor which is very crucial in the performance is, being responsive towards the vocalist. This style of rendition may take some time to reflect on to the people as it builds up slowly. Therefore, it is important to be active in the performance to let the confidence build up. Not being active might create ambiguity whether the performance is going in the right direction or not. However, in all the cases, the responsiveness should be genuine as well as positive.

9. Boosting the positives and covering up the negatives:

There is always a chance of error in the vocal performance due to many factors. Sometimes it may be due to miscalculation, sometimes it may be due to inattention. At this point, when it is clear the error might happen, the role of accompanist is to help the vocalist to get back on track. The error has to be covered up well. Doing this is the real team work and accompanist is truly successful.

Conclusion:

From the above study, we can conclude that the tabla accompaniment with the khayal gayaki has many important factors which need to be studied thoroughly to provide a good accompaniment.

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