

Performance Spaces of Indian Classical Music

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ABSTRACT: Indian Classical Music has its roots in the Vedas, which were chanted to the accompaniment of musical instruments. The place around the sacrificial fire can be considered as the first performance space. One of the oldest documentations of musical performances can be found in Bharata's Nāṭyaśāstra. Nāṭya consisted of drama, dance and music and was performed in playhouses. Later, music was a part of "saṅgīta" and flourished due to royal patronage. Music was also performed in temples as a part of rituals. Palaces and temples continued to be the prime spaces for music performances for many centuries. Halls and auditoriums dedicated to music performances came much later. With the advent of the microphone and the emergence of acoustics as a science in the West, auditoriums with acoustically designed interiors were constructed. Advances in sound technology have enabled huge open spaces such as stadiums to be used for musical performances. All India Radio and Doordarshan started the use of studios for recording performances. Now, studios are widely used for the recording and production of compact disks and cassettes. Advancement in technology thus continues to pave the way for innovations in performance spaces.

Keywords: Indian Classical Music, Performance Spaces, Playhouses, Royal Patronage, Temples

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I. INTRODUCTION

Indian Classical Music originated from the Vedas. From the three note scale of the *Sāma Veda*, the seven note scale was derived over several centuries. Performance Spaces of Indian Classical Music have also been evolving along with the music itself. While the space around the sacrificial fire was used for Vedic chants during the Vedic period, classical music slowly began to be performed in spaces like playhouses, temples and palaces. Today, Indian Classical Music is performed in a variety of different spaces like temples, acoustically designed auditoriums, multi-purpose halls and even open spaces. This paper gives an overview of how the performance spaces for Indian Classical Music have evolved over the centuries.

Performance Space in the Vedic Period

The glory of Indian classical music can be traced back to the Vedas. During the Vedic period, Vedic chants were accompanied by musical instruments. The space around the sacrificial fire can thus be considered as the first performance space for Indian classical music.

Playhouses

One of the oldest treatises on music available to us is Bharata's Nāṭyaśāstra. This treatise is placed between 2nd century B.C. and 2nd century A.D. by scholars. During that period music was a part of "nāṭya", which was an amalgamation of drama, dance and music. The performance of nāṭya took place in playhouses. Bharata gives the description of these playhouses. There were three kinds of playhouses-

- i. *Vikr̥ṣṭa*- The rectangular playhouse
- ii. *Caturasra*- The square playhouse
- iii. *Tryasra*- The triangular playhouse.

Each of the above playhouses is further divided into three, based on size. A playhouse can be *jyeṣṭha* (large), *madhyama* (medium) or *avara* (small) depending on the length of its sides. It can have sides a hundred and eight, sixty four or thirty two units long. The units are given in terms of both, *hastas* and *daṇḍas*. Thus, when we consider both units, we have eighteen types of playhouses [1]. Bharata describes the interior plan of the playhouse. He gives the position and dimensions of the stage and also the position of the green room. He describes the construction of the playhouse starting with the selection of the site for building. The playhouse was a performance space for Indian classical music till about the 2nd century A.D.

II. TEMPLES AND PALACES AS PERFORMANCE SPACES

In the next phase, music was one of the triad that constituted “*saṅgīta*”- *gītam*, *vādyam* and *nṛtyam* (song, instrument and dance). Temples formed an important part of Indian culture. People thronged together for festivals and other celebrations in temples. Through the media of festivals, temples became an important preserver of Indian culture. Even to this day, music performances are regularly organized by temples to mark important festivals and other occasions.

Music was a prominent part of temple rituals. *Raṅgamaṅtapas* and *Navaraṅgas* were a part of the temples’ structural plan. These were the spaces in the temple where music was performed either as a part of dance performances or exclusively. Most often, these spaces were situated inside the temple, right in front of the sanctum sanctorum. Musicians and dancers used to face God and their performance was an offering. This was also called *raṅgabhogā*, an offering of stage performances.

While most of such performance spaces were inside the temple, we come across numerous examples of temple performance spaces being outside the main temple and meant for a bigger audience. This is usually seen as another *maṅṭapa* outside the core of the temple consisting of the sanctum sanctorum. The *Kūttambalam* of Kerala temples is a very good example of such a performance space.

Temples were thus not only a religious centre but a hub of cultural activity. This way, they played a huge role in preserving and protecting Indian culture, especially during the times when outsiders attacked India. Thus, temples were an important performance space for Indian classical music.

Royal patronage was another important contributor to the preservation of Indian Classical Music. Music and dance performances regularly took place in the royal court. Musicians who came to the king from far and wide seeking patronage, would perform before the king, and were rewarded suitably.

Mānasollāsa or *Abhilāṣitārthacintāmaṇi* by King *Sōmēśwara* is an encyclopaedia that talks about the various activities of the king. In this treatise written in the twelfth century A.D., King *Sōmēśwara* describes musical performances that took place in the royal palace. He gives the seating arrangement of musicians on stage as follows- “The *vāggēyakāra* is seated in front with excellent male vocalists seated on either side of the *vāggēyakāra*. Close to them are the flautists. Behind them, female vocalists with sweet voices and behind everybody else are the players of *Mṛdaṅga* and other percussion instruments” [2]. From the perspective of acoustics, this seems to be a perfect arrangement as the instruments which are the loudest, like the *Mṛdaṅga*, are right at the back and softer instruments like the flute and even the human voice are placed right in front. This ensures uniformity of sound when it reaches the audience.

Pārśvadēva in his *Saṅgītasamayāsāra* talks about another interesting feature- *Vādanirṇaya* or musical contest. During the days when India was ruled by many kings, every royal court had many musicians of great merit. Often, musicians from outside the kingdom would approach the king seeking patronage. The musician would exhibit his talent before the king. The king would then honour the musician. Many a time, such a performance culminated with an open challenge by the visiting musician to the king courtiers to beat him in a contest. These contests would take place before all the important dignitaries of the royal court. *Pārśvadēva* gives the seating arrangement of the audience during such a contest [3].

There are a number of such references in our treatises which talk about musical performances in palaces. They, along with temples, contributed significantly to the preservation of culture and thus were another important performance space in the history of Indian Classical Music.

Until the past century or so, performance of Indian Classical Music mostly happened in temples and palaces. Concerts were also organized in smaller spaces like the homes of *zamindars* or landlords who were rich and could invite musicians to their homes to perform.

III. THE ADVENT OF THE MICROPHONE

The advent of the microphone in the late 19th century brought about a revolutionary change in the area of music performances. The spaces which were earlier small enough for the musicians to be heard began to expand in size. Size was no more a constraint and more number of speakers could easily ensure that the sound was heard throughout the space. This enabled the construction of bigger halls exclusively for music. Concerts started slowly moving from temple and palace spaces to auditoria and halls designated for cultural performances such as dance and music.

There have been constant improvisations and advances in sound technology. While concerts used to be performed with just one microphone before, each musician was given a separate microphone later and today there are contact microphones for instruments and even sound boxes which produce different effects and can instantly change the quality of sound emerging from instruments.

Advances in sound technology have paved the way for huge open spaces to be used as performance spaces for classical music. Classical music is no longer confined to a few art lovers and connoisseurs, but is being taken to the masses in different forms such as instrumental ensembles and fusion music.

IV. ACOUSTICS EMERGES AS A SCIENCE

In the early 20th century, due to the efforts of Wallace Sabine, acoustics emerged as a science and began to be studied extensively. The desirable and undesirable qualities of an auditorium were enlisted. Parameters needed to describe the acoustics of an auditorium were defined. Different materials were investigated for their suitability to be used in the construction and interior design of auditoriums. After this, auditoriums with preset values for parameters like reverberation time began to be constructed. Halls that were built earlier began to get the interiors designed to have suitable acoustics for music concerts.

Some of the desirable and undesirable characteristics of an auditorium are enlisted below-

1. Sound should be uniformly distributed throughout the auditorium.
2. Noise from outside permeating into the auditorium should be minimised.
3. Sound should not be coloured, that is, it should retain the original character.
4. The audience should feel enveloped with the sound. This stresses upon the importance of lateral reflections [4].
5. There should reign a sense of musical warmth. This is achieved by ensuring that lower frequencies are clearly audible.
6. There should be no echoes.
7. There must be clarity when rapid musical passages are being sung. The notes should not tend to overlap one another.
8. A wide bandwidth of frequencies must be supported.
9. There should be no shadowing. When a part of the structure projects in such a way that it blocks sound- both direct and reflected, a “dark spot” is created. There is no sound in such spots. Shadowing can also be caused when a major portion of the sound is lost at some points in the auditorium.
10. The performers should be able to hear themselves clearly. The sound that they hear should be close to what the audience hear.
11. When two waves coming in opposite directions superimpose in such a way that their phases are exactly opposite, they negate out each other and a “dead spot” is formed. If a member of the audience is seated in such a spot, he/she will not hear anything as a result of this phenomenon. It has to be ensured that no member of the audience is sitting in such a spot.
12. The hall should neither be too high nor too long. A hall that is too high will result in loss of sound. A hall that is too long will have too many lateral reflections resulting in loss of clarity of sound.
13. It is desirable that every member of the audience, irrespective of whether they are seated near the stage or far from the stage, has the same aural experience.
14. The stage should neither be too high nor too low. It should be just right so that the audience can look straight ahead and listen.
15. The seats should have approximately the same absorption coefficient as that of a human being.
16. There should not be any loss of sound from inside the auditorium to outside. This calls for effective sound insulation.
17. The machines used inside the auditorium like fans and air conditioners should be noiseless or produce minimum noise.

Acoustical design can be incorporated either at the stage of building the auditorium or later as a part of its interior design. In addition to the above, there are many more characteristics of auditoria and guidelines for good sound for both, the performer and the audience.

V. STUDIOS

The emergence of acoustics as a science and the invention of the microphone paved the way for the creation of studios and recording of music. Cassettes and Compact Discs became the order of the day. All India Radio began to record and broadcast music programmes from its studios. The television was not to be left far behind and started recording and telecasting music performances.

The recording studio was designed very differently from an auditorium. The studio became a space exclusively for recording music and not performing before an audience. Hence, the acoustical parameters for a studio had to be different from those of an auditorium where performances took place before an audience, in order to enable noiseless and flawless recordings.

A studio typically has multiple rooms, one for each instrument. Extraneous noise is almost absent. The walls are highly sound insulated. Highly sensitive microphones are used for recording. Reverberation is minimised. Recording in studios opens up the possibility of recording individual tracks and then merging them post recording. The digital era has also made editing of music possible. Today, studio recordings have become an important means of preserving the tradition of Indian Classical Music and passing on current knowledge to the future generations.

VI. CONCLUSION

Indian classical Music has evolved from the Vedic chants of the Vedic age to today's fusion concerts. Performance spaces of Indian Classical Music have also evolved alongside. From the space around the sacrificial fire to playhouses to temples and palaces to acoustically designed auditoria and huge open spaces, Indian Classical Music has bloomed and is reaching out to the masses. Advances in sound technology continue to pave way for many more innovations in the design of performance spaces and also the way concerts are performed. At the current rate of technological development, many more innovations in Indian Classical Music performances can be expected and are awaited.

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