

Musical Contests: Reflections on Musical Values in Popular Film

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The connections between Hindustani classical music and film are both deep and continuous. Whether considered in terms of artists, repertoire, compositions or instruments, classical music has had a presence in films from its earliest days. Briefly, one might say that the search of music for new loci of articulation brings it into contact with the film: like other forms of technology - print, sound recording and later radio - the film enters into the calculations of classical performers. As is well known to you, one of the pioneers of sound recording, Amarendranath Dutt, was also an enthusiast of motion picture technology. By the end of the last decade of the 1890s he was in touch with the Sen brothers, Hiralal (1866-1917) and Motilal, who gave their first public showing at Dutt's Classic Theatre on 4 April 1898.^[1] Filmed plays were shown at the Classic as a novel attraction: there are accounts of recordings of episodes from plays like *Alibaba*, *Bhramar* and *Sitaram* being shown.

The early interface between theatre and film was particularly important at the time when sound was incorporated into film. Classical artists were involved in the enterprise of filmmaking both as actors and trainers. Houses like Pune's Prabhat Studio drew upon the formidable array of talent that was now offering its services to the new medium. In fact many of the artists who were making a name for themselves in the second and third decades of the 20th century came in touch with film, some encounters being successful, others less so; some artists entering into long and fruitful relationships, others moving away after one or two films. At the same time, the more well-known artists of the time were also offering their services to the film industry. This is a story worth telling, but this is not what I set out to do.

In the earliest representations of classical music in film, we sense the importance of certain specific locations of musical performance: the court, the kotha, the temple and so on. It seems that in part at least the choice of genre and style is determined by location itself, the question of *appropriateness* appearing as an important one. The musical item and presentation would closely relate to its place of articulation, and conform to the spatial location of musical forms (i.e., dhrupad: court, thumri: kotha). At the same time we should remember that more than three decades have elapsed since the introduction of film technology, and consequently the manner of representation has acquired a dynamic of its own, and is impacted by the internal needs of the medium itself. Furthermore, the representation of music itself in film draws upon an earlier negotiation between music and drama. It is difficult to say that even the earliest uses of classical music in film are in any substantial sense 'neutral'; what is represented is inseparable from the manner of its representation. It is true of course that with time cinematic needs mould and direct even more strongly what we may describe as the inherent values of the music itself. I hope to be able to illustrate this point further.

I would like to make another point before taking up the proposed subject of my paper. Even as it is true to say that classical music in film fills out spaces created for it by the cinematic medium rather than seeking authentication in its originary forms, we must try to understand the fascination that classical music exerts upon Indian cinema. I should say that in this paper I am using classical music in its widest connotation and ignoring the hierarchy of form and style that distinguishes both the discourse and the social organization of the musical world. Even an incomplete mapping of "films about classical music" would include a number of subdivisions such as films about legendary singers of the past (*Tansen, Baiju Bawra*); religious or spiritual figures (*Sant Tukaram, Tulsidas, Meerabai*); films about the male singer as hero (*Basanta Bahar, Street Singer*); films about courtesans and kotha life, and so on. Many more would devote substantial space to episodes set in musical locations. An

obvious favourite is the kotha, and it may be interesting to note that elaborate imagining of the courtesan's life in film begins at a time when the position of the professional woman singer is become increasingly tenuous and marginalized, assailed in new musicological discourses, and pressurized by state mechanisms of control. I am reminded here of a comment by the well known dancer Munirbai of Lucknow, student of Shambhu Maharaj, who attributed the final breakup of the Lucknow kothewali community to three factors, Gandhiji, Independence and the Arya Samaj.^[2]

The usual response to the images of classical music in film would be their unreality. The kinds of musical items sung, the settings, the appearance of the performers, are products of a vivid fictionalizing imagination. I would like to argue though that the presentation of classical music in film more often than not accentuates the ideological concerns and conflicts within the domain, albeit often by exaggeration and often by parody; a careful consideration enables us to see certain discursive pressures in the field in a stark relief. The history of classical music in the 20th century is substantially one of its troubled pursuit of modernity: as the social basis of music is rapidly altered (in terms of performance loci, forms of patronage, pedagogy, musical aesthetics and so on), artists strive to come to terms with changed circumstances; some by resolutely turning their faces away from new developments, some by evolving new strategies of survival, entering into different forms of negotiation with new institutions and technologies. It should be emphasized that the process of transformation thus initiated remained (and still remains) necessarily incomplete and fragmented, making the field of classical music peculiarly resistant to theoretical generalization.

It is here that I would like to locate the significance of the musical contest, 'muqabla' or 'baazi'. It would not be an exaggeration to say that such scenes of musical duels often constitute paradigmatic and critical moments in the film texts: even when interpreted from a strictly musical standpoint, they are richly meaningful. I have chosen for the purpose of this essay four such episodes from popular films: *Tukaram* (1936), *Baiju Bawra* (1952), *Padosan*

and *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* (both 1968). The examples are intended to be illustrative rather than definitive: other episodes might have been thought of.^[3] A major omission evidently is the 'kotha' film: all my examples involve interactions among male singers, and the large body of material about professional female artists must remain unexamined at present.

However, in spite of the restriction of material, a number of issues appear for our consideration. Let me try to clarify some basic concerns. In as much as the musical contest, or pairing, leads to the expression of a preference, whether about style, or mode, or even musical competence, the sequence has to generate a competing set of cognitive markers, so that the choice supported by the film's narrative is constituted within the sequence itself. Put simply, the sequence must validate its own preferences, and the mechanisms by which it does so have a profound bearing on the image and function of classical music itself. Evidently, an important concern here is cognizability: the reasons why one performance is valued above other must be clear and unambiguous. As such, the valuation rarely depends on the subtle forms of judgement that characterize the field of music itself: at the same time, it must provide an ideological justification for its preference, and in doing so draw upon the discursive pressures in the field.

The most important concern in the topos of contest appears to be located in the question of musical sound itself. The manner in which the contrast between forms of sound operates, the distinction between the more desirable and less desirable, must seek a form of representation and validation within the film's narrative. The history of sound in Indian classical music has yet to be written, and up to now there have been only a few fragments of this history written. It seems to me that historians of music will find in the popular film a number of useful, if simplified, directions. But of course the film also directs our attention to the non-discursive elements within the field, particularly those related to the disposition of the body. The representation of certain bodily practices is also implicated in the presentation of the contest, and these are apparent to us in terms of easily cognizable visual signals.

The opening sequence of *Tukaram* may seem to be a poor starting point, as the sequence involving Tuka and Salomalo is obviously not a 'baazi' at all. Yet the questions that crowd upon us in this powerfully imagined and presented scene are those commonly generated by the contest topos. If anything, the physical separation of Tuka and Salo enables the director to make the contrast sharper. Tuka's location is solitary and natural, his style of singing deeply invested with spirituality and bereft of stylistic artifice. Yet of course this *is* art: note the skillful repetition of the word 'nirala', a momentary eruption of *tekhne* in a context which carefully eschews it. The movements of Tuka's body are also minimal. His body sways ever so slightly, and even the movement of his hands holding the manjira is attenuated to the extreme. In fact the volume of sound of the instrument in the background score is out of proportion with what is represented on the screen. In contrast, Salo's movements are sinuous and restless, as he whirls around the crowded performance space, hectoring and jostling his accompanists and his audience alike.

The disposition of the bodies of the singers reinforces the impact of the musical elements of the performance. Tuka's singing is reflective and introverted, emphasizing the clarity and sustain of individual notes, whereas Salo's contortions represent a kind of stylistic excess that is being isolated and commented on. If there is parody, it is not achieved by an obvious distinction between the 'musical' and the 'unmusical'. Salo's performance becomes suspect precisely because it reveals a certain kind of skill, in fact an overmuch of it. Even though the piece is an abhang, the reflection is as much on classical music as a whole. Tuka's singing upholds a new aesthetic of restraint and balance, whereas Salo's fast pace and use of taans reflect back on a style reviled in a long line of musicological texts for its ostentation, tasteless intricacy and overvaluation of technical skill. This tradition, as we are aware, is initiated in British orientalist musicology and culminates in the theoretical writings of Bhatkhande and Rabindranath.^[4] This is inextricably related to the valuation of the 'spiritual' element in the song, and I am

reminded of Vidya Rao's perceptive comment on the invention in thumri singing of a tenth rasa, that of Bhakti.^[5] Tuka's song thus directs attention towards the emergence of a new nationalistic ethic in music, one which has much to do with the establishment of the bhajan as a part of classical repertoire, and a reform of singing style in other forms as well.

The valuation of the devotional extends to *Baiju Bawra*, but the set of problems which it throws up are distinct. Let me first point to the fact that Baiju has the dubious distinction of his songs sung by two artists, Mohammad Rafi for the 'non-classical' items and Pandit D V Paluskar for his climactic performance in the court. One notes the wide difference in the swar and andaaz of the two artists. Nothing could better reveal the fragmented and paradoxical domain of classical music where questions of musical identity and value have to be continually reformulated and expressed through a host of distinctions and exceptions than the fact that Bharat Bhushan's wildly popular songs in the film are written by Shakeel Badayuni, the music composed by Naushad, and sung by Rafi, whereas in the court scene there is an unmistakable foregrounding of a conflict between Hindu and Muslim musical identities which is partially at least expressed in the choice of Paluskar for Baiju and Amir Khan for Tansen.

Musical histories are replete with dramatic anecdotes of musical encounters, legendary and historical. In such accounts too they serve an important ideological value. That many of them are wildly improbable is hardly the point. The encounter between Tansen and Baiju also postulates a distinction of styles, but the options are more tightly restricted than in the earlier example. Whereas the difference between Tuka and Salo's singing constitutes the point of cinematic representation, Baiju and Tansen are joined in close formal relationship. Improbably enough, the form is khayal^[6]; but the decorum of khayal gayaki precludes any major difference in the structure and content of the music. Both demonstrate skill in the elements of khayal gayaki represented in the encounter, starting with a few iterations of the vilambit mukhda, but going on soon enough to a drut khayal in Desi. A

brief sargam is followed by brilliantly executed taan patterns by both artists. I would like to emphasize the fact that however purists may shudder at the thought of such anachronisms, the film generates an image of the classical that is wholly appropriate to the immediate cinematic context. Baiju and Tansen actually sing the same song in the manner of jugalbandi, and there is more than a suggestion of the sawaal-jawaab technique in the taan-palta portion (in fact when one hears the song on gramophone record that is the impression one gets, apart from mystifying clangs at the end). Even though Baiju is victorious at the end, the result is unsupported by the musical content of the episode. The triumph of Baiju is an integral part of the film's narrative itself and therefore inevitable. Given the high standing of both artists in the music world, any violent or even obvious differentiation on the basis of musical worth would have been extremely difficult to make. In fact for many listeners Amir Khan's singing is superior. The visual markers are also understated, but we note how the shabby clothes of Baiju are contrasted with the fine robes of the court musician. Baiju is unshaven, wholly absorbed in his music, while Tansen has the regal bearing of the wealthy and successful artist. But Baiju unmistakably subsumes the force of the devotional, which is underscored by the prayer that prefaces his song. The choice of Paluskar for Baiju here is clearly no accident: immensely popular as a khayal singer, he enjoyed an even larger following for his bhajans. Son and inheritor of the mantle of Vishnu Digambar, musical reformer and notable Hinduizer of music, D V Paluskar (who actually learnt little directly from his father) brought to the performance arena in the early years of independence a distinct musical sound that proved to be highly influential. It is reported that Amir Khan chose him for the role of his victorious opponent because of "prasadik" voice.^[2] So even if the distinction of musical values here is meta-textual, residing in projection of distinct musical identities, the separation of musical values from those of narrative does not constitute any impediment to interpretation.

I probably need to justify my choice of *Padosan* as an example. The reception of the justly celebrated song 'Ek chatura naar karke singar' is clearly not in the classical register, even though the song combines in itself among many other elements, aspects of classical technique: it also contrasts purportedly 'Hindustani' and 'Karnataki' styles of singing, and is technically superb. I would like to point out that the song-text is my starting point: the bandish is basically that of a well-known bandish-ki thumri, and is printed in collections like Narahar Shambhurao Bhave's collection of bandishes learnt from Shaikh Rahatali, printed in Baroda (vol. 1, 1942, vol. 2, 1943) with the heading "Thumri, Raag Pahadi Jhinjhoti, Trital". (vol. 2 p. 93). Rahatali was reputedly a well known dancer, and connection of the bandish-ki thumri with the Lucknow dance tradition is well known. The point would however be of little consequence in the popular reception of the film. Sung by Kishore Kumar and Manna Dey, the song allows us to examine a different aspect of the presentation of classical music in film: that of parody. Let me start with the fate of the song-text. Masterji (Mehmood/ Manna Dey) begins the duel with the first line of the bandish: the second line is comically changed. (The printed text has "Thari apni dwar piya nikasa jaat". Even allowing for variations in oral transmission "ghusata jaat" sounds brilliantly suspect.) The 'karnataki' intonation and stylistic flourishes (in the alaapi and sargam section especially) create a comic mismatch of style and word. But this only the beginning of the riot. Bhola/Guru responds with a medley of sounds, before rephrasing the mukhda. The piece incorporates elements of dance, orchestra and singing: but the song in the energetic rendition of Kishore Kumar is actually many songs, dizzying changes in pitch and tonic, bewildering the poor Masterji and occasioning the profound comment "ya ghoda bolo, ya chatura bolo".

As a parody, the example in *Padosan* offers a conspectus of various technical, formal and affective features of music. Even though Bhola/Guru wins over Masterji, it is seen more as triumph of resourcefulness and cunning than a clear distinction of musical value. In fact the intrinsic value of musical

idioms and singing styles does not really enter into consideration at all. The competitors for Saira Banu's hand are physically distinguished in an absurd manner: Masterji has caste marks on his forehead and wears clothes appropriate to his role, but acquires a gilt *gajra* to wear around his hand when he dances. He also has something which looks suspiciously like a white hairband around his thick *choti*. Bhola puts on a *topi* for the contest, presumably putting on a 'singerly' disposition, Guru's paan stained mouth and artistic appearance are appropriate to his role as theatre director. The effects of parody in this sequence are impartial and even handed: no form of *music* is vindicated above another, even as the narrative decrees the defeat of Masterji to the combined efforts of Bhola and Guru.

The brilliant and overt use of parody in *Padosan* helps us to reflect on the fact that the representation of classical music in film in general contains a strong element of parody within itself: of course as students of my discipline (literature) would be aware, parody is capable of being entirely serious. Inasmuch as the effects of parody arise out of the twin processes of restriction and exaggeration, the images of classical music in popular film are often, or even habitually, invested with parodic force which isolates and foregrounds the trope of the 'classical'.^[8] In *Padosan*, unlike in *Tukaram*, the effects of parody are equally and impartially distributed, preventing a valuation on purely musical grounds, but at the same time presenting a particular kind of skill and inventiveness: Pillai Masterji is unable to cope with the dizzying technical innovations of Guru's onslaught, and ends up unable to sing his own song. The musical contest has here a satisfying narrative conclusion, but one which can never be offensive because of the profound musical wit expressed through the song, and indeed through the first half of the film.

Let me conclude these reflections with a brief look at Ray's *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne*, which is also a film about musical performers. The marginal, unsophisticated origins of the lead characters (with their ethnic and occupational surnames/appellations) reflect back on the forgotten history of

musical communities. The contest in their case is a way of finding happiness and prosperity, not as performers but as sons-in-law of kings. The 'ganer baaji' at Shundi is the entry point into this world and thus in the film's narrative an important moment in the film. The two scenes that I wish to refer to are the meeting with the ustad in the palanquin and the contest itself. Classical music here is represented entirely in terms of parodic stereotypes: the classical voice as well as the appearance of the artists themselves (though to be fair, there is a gesture towards other forms of music as well, through the inclusion of the keertan singer). To say that from a purely musical perspective they are well-executed would be an understatement. In fact it hardly matters what the music is like: the musical montage powerfully puts forward an image of the 'classical' in parodic form. There is, one feels, insider play on styles, voices and artists. There is a bit of dhrupad bol bant, of khayal bol taan, and of vilambit alaap. Why would Joykrishna Sanyal, the veteran dhrupad singer, and representative of a particularly austere and technique oriented singing style, be chosen for two sequences? Is the appearance of the second artist in the court sequence a play on a familiar gramophone record cover photograph of Faiyaz Khan? Is the thumri singer an obscure reference to the remarkable 'two-voiced' Anath Nath Bose, who sang (and recorded) khayal in male voice and thumri in female voice? The point about voice is symbolic and conceptual rather than real: apart from the mustachioed male singer singing in Girija Devi's voice, 'classicality' here is rendered in terms of what we are led to accept in the contexts as being laughable and comic in certain intrinsic ways. This is partly a feature of the cinematic context of presentation; partly it is the activation of a set of deeply entrenched prejudices against classical music, particularly visible in Bengal. The king falling asleep during the final vilambit alaap, is I think, particularly telling, reminding us perhaps of Saratchandra Chatterjee's apocryphal comment to Dilipkumar Roy, when the latter invited him to the performance of a classical maestro who apparently sang brilliantly: "That's all very well, but does he know how to stop?". To be sure, there is no way of mistaking Ray's regard for classical artists and performers in his cinema as a

whole, but the court sequence in *Goopy Gyne*, a film designed for a young audience, takes the parodic restriction of the idea of the *classical* one step further yet.^[9]

References:

¹ Michael Kinnear, *The Gramophone Company's First Indian Recordings 1899-1908*, Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 1994, pp.15-16

² Quoted in Joep Bor, *The Voice of the Sarangi*, Mumbai: NCPA, 1986-87, p. 109

³ I was a little disappointed that I was not able to get hold a copy of the Bengali film *Basanta Bahar* (1957, music direction, Jnanprakash Ghosh), which has a number of interesting musical sequences.

⁴ I have discussed this issue at greater length in "Words for Music Perhaps: Reflections on the Khayal Bandish" included in *Music and Modernity: North Indian Classical Music in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (ed. Amlan Das Gupta, Kolkata: Thema, 2007), pp.239-256

⁵ Vidya Rao, "Thumri and Thumri Singers: Changes in Style and Lifestyle" in *Cultural Reorientation in Modern India*, ed. Indu Banga and Jaidev, Shimla: IIAS, 1996, pp. 305-6

⁶ The khayal was not well known – if at all sung – in the environs of the Delhi court at the time of the early Mughals.

⁷ See article by Suresh Chandvankar on Amir Khan, available at Rajeev Patke's important website on Indian classical music

<<http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/ellpatke/Miscellany/amir%20khan.htm>>

⁸ It would be worth considering the larger question whether representations of the classical in film can *at all* avoid parodic restriction, but the question needs larger space for formulation and examination.

⁹ The following audio/film clips were shown and discussed at the time of presentation of the paper:

1. Shamsad Begum, Khayal, Puriya Dhaneshri, (I tried to distinguish the "khayal voice" of this artist as contrasted with her film playback voice)

2. Mustari Bai, Dadra, 'Sajanva bairi ho gaye hamar' (in connection with film song repertoire and links with 'light'-classical repertoire)

3. Clip from *Manoos* (1939), featuring Sundra Bai (to demonstrate differences between acting voice/delivery and singing voice)

4. *Sant Tukaram* (1936), opening sequence
5. *Baiju Bawra* (1952), court sequence, chhota khayal, raag Desi, 'Aaj gavata'.
6. *Padosan* (1968), 'Ek chatura naar'
7. *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* (1968), encounter with ustad in palanquin and court sequence.