

Exclusivity in the writing of the performer artists: A case study of “Along the path of music” and “Enlightening the listeners”

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Synopsis: Dr Prabha Atre was born on 13 September 1932, is a front ranking vocalist in the field of Hindustani classical music. She is awarded Padmashree, Padmabhushan and Sangeet Natak Academy etc awards for her remarkable contributions in Hindustani classical music for more than 65 years. The rich background in singing, composing, and teaching has made Dr Prabha Atre remit the exceptional authentic benefaction in various areas of music. She has proficiency in both traditional and academic music fields.

Most of the time only critics or scholars write on music without having any real-time performing experience. Whereas a very few musicians and performers share their knowledge and actual experience on music, through their write-ups and documents, so undoubtedly the knowledge-based scriptures from a top performer like Dr Prabha Atre hold a special significance. This write-up highlights the essential take aways from her two books; ‘**Along the path of music**’ and ‘**Enlightening the listener**’.

Keywords:

- **Khayaal:** Khyal, Khayaal or Khayal is the modern genre of Hindustani classical singing in the Indian subcontinent. The name is inspired by an Arabic/Persian word meaning "Imagination"
 - **Sargam:** Singing abbreviated note names (sol-fa names) in a performance
 - Natyaa Sangeet:** Songs in Marathi drama
 - **Murki:** This is a cluster of notes rendered periodically.
 - Kan:** grace note produced by slightly touching upon a neighboring note from above or below
 - Gamak:** a massive shake between two notes repeated several times
 - **Meend:** a slow glide from one note to another
 - Raag-ras:** a particular mood associated with the raga according to old masters
 - **Raag-Samay:** a specific time attributed to present a raga by tradition
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Musicians can transform their thoughts into their compositions. People say that music is an outcome of an organized sound. [1] But I believe that music is an outcome of an organized mind. Music is thinking and thinking about music is part of that process. Many musicians confess that they create original music by organizing their thoughts in their minds and concentrating on music production. As a famous Chinese philosopher, Lao Tse said: "Those who know do not speak, those who speak do not know." Dr Prabha Atre is one of the few musicians who attempt innovation in music, which not only requires a clear mind, but it also demands endurance, determination and courage. Her utmost quality is her quest for knowledge that makes her search for the answers to her questions. She is modest in her approach and courageous to accept the insecurities of life, unlike other musicians who carry a false ego.

Dr Prabha Atre quoted in **Along the Path of Music** [2]

*“On several occasions, one has seen foreign artists giving Talks or writing about their art from different perspectives. Indian Musicians, however, are rather indifferent in this matter. They think that music means merely performing, i.e. singing or playing an instrument. Even on occasions when questions are put to them about their music, their response is: **We can't answer all that. We perform according to what our guru has taught us.** See what you can get from the music that we present. One of the reasons for this attitude could be their lack of formal education. Moreover, there is also this general notion that to talk or write about music is a waste of time. Someone who cannot perform gives, talks or starts writing about music. Due to these very reasons, there is hardly any writing on music by the musicians themselves.*”

An excellent example of her unconventional approach can be seen in the first six chapters of her book 'Along the path of Music.' The first chapter explains how she got into writing and why she kept at it. The honesty of her style is utterly enchanting. She pens down her life's learnings

without any exaggeration and restoration. Subtly she shows her awareness and makes it clear how the encouragement of others has helped her in marching ahead.

She says "With my educational background, I was able to look at music with keener insight. Having studied science and law, I had got into the habit of scrutinizing everything, including whatever came under the label of 'tradition'. All this must have left its impact on my music and some of the listeners must have noticed its effect. I had acquired a distinct status in the world of music as an 'educated artiste'. That might have been the reason why Jeevan Kirloskar, the editor of 'Rudravani' requested me one day for an article. Usually, I would have refused because the writing was not my field of activity. But as usual, Aabaa started his familiar refrain, "What is the harm in attempting," and I wrote my first article. Aabaa used to inquire daily, "Have you finished writing?" and I would reply, "There is still a little left." I did not feel satisfied. Finally, I somehow managed to complete the article. I told Aai, my mother and Aabaa, "you two read it first; see if you feel it is alright; only then we will send it. Otherwise, we will send our regrets to Mr Kirloskar". Both of them read the article. They thought that it was 'fine'. They also made some suggestions. Aai and Aabaa were quite knowledgeable about the literature. I was sure that they would not indulge in undeserved praise just because their daughter wrote it. After receiving this approval, the article was read out to some friends who appreciate literature. When they too said that it had come out well and also offered some suggestions, I revised it, gave it a final finishing touch and sent it for publication. The thought as to what people would say about this article crossed my mind frequently but there was nothing to do except wait for that issue of the magazine to come out. 'Rudravani' had its office in Pune and I was in Mumbai. Suddenly one morning Shirish Pai, a well known Marathi poet called, "Prabha, I read the article. You have written very well." I was thrilled. If Shirish Pai liked the article, I could be sure that it was reasonably good.

The whole citation breaths an individual touch. She seeks out the advice of her family and friends; and explains her anxiousness to see the reaction of others. She doesn't hesitate to show her excitement when people appreciate her endeavors. Not a single moment does she give the impression she is taking on a better-quality position to her audience, whether they are listeners in a concert or readers of her writings. Nowhere does she take the attitude of saying 'I know all, you better listen to me.' Instead, we feel she is a cook who invites the guests into the kitchen and shows what is going on under the lids of the pans that are merrily sizzling away. This makes her work valuable because it is a fundamental rule of methodology that we should show the reader how we have arrived at our conclusions, rather than merely presenting the findings as some irrefutable monolithic truth.

The next five chapters in the same book also let us look under the lid of the pan. But this time she frankly discusses the people she has learned from and those that have influenced her. Again, her approach is fundamentally poles apart from the majority of biographical profiles that praise the greatness of revered gurus. Her awareness of the subjectivity of taste comes out beautifully in the following passage.

It is, indeed, very unfair to compare the rose and the jasmine to establish which of the two is superior. Will these people ever understand that it is more important to point out wherein lies the beauty of the rose and how the fragrance of the jasmine forms its distinctiveness.

Of course, even when she is very restrained in voicing mere opinions and prefers to follow the path of reason, there is a moment when a critical note will have to be pronounced. On the same page, she says:

Moreover, their conditioning, their learning done within the confines of a specific system gives them a perspective, which they find it difficult to set aside. But because they have a powerful medium like language in their hand with which they are familiar, they succeed in convincing the typical listener that the music that they find good is the ideal music. This music forms a golden mean[...] There is nothing final or nothing like a golden mean in any art.

In these passages, we find an outspoken criticism of writers who come up with the most tortuous reasoning to try and make plausible that the music they like (and usually the tradition in which they follow) also happens to be superior to other styles. If we preach tolerance, unfortunately, we cannot put up with intolerance. Tolerance, therefore, is perforce intolerant of intolerance. Similarly, an open attitude to different types of aesthetics has to look at aesthetic schemes in which rose and jasmine are organized hierarchically with skepticism.

Prabha Atre opens the chapter on 'Music Making' in her book 'Enlightening the listener', with a remarkable statement;

Music has been an integral part of human life and has been functioning at various levels, from prayer to entertainment. In India, as in other parts of the world music has taken man to spiritual heights, it has eased the pressure of his relentless labour; it has given expressions to his emotions and creativity. It has also filled his leisure time with entertainment that the listener also takes part in the creation of music indirectly, especially when there is no written music but extempore structuring having unlimited potential. In such circumstances, the listener's open response plays a vital role in giving shape to music. In a live concert of Indian classical music, the presence of an initiated listener who is conversant with the concepts, material, technique

and end structures, makes a lot of difference even at the level of entertainment.

It shows how much reflection has gone into her work. In the first part of this quote, she covers the enormous depth of music. Only a few people interested in classical music have shown such sensitivity to the fact that music goes far beyond the artistic traditions alone. Then immediately she highlights the importance of the listener, who often gets forgotten in any work on music. The chapter on Music-making covers 61 pages, and it is one of the most critical studies on Indian music in the twentieth century because a highly regarded vocalist has written it.

In the book 'Enlightening The Listener', Dr Prabha Atre gives her interpretation of the differences between the traditional and modern music. The first chapter, which takes up about one-third of the book, is an introduction to the basics of Hindustani classical music highlighting the vocal. It may have been written many times before. Still, Dr. Prabha Atre explains it well; also, the most experienced listener shall pick up something novel and motivating from her analysis.

Her helpful section on vocal ornaments, thanks to the accompanying recording, is much more apparent than mere verbal description could ever be. She also has created some charts that show associations and differences between various forms of music. These are entirely original and ingenious, and yet the relations and distinctions still seem undeniable once she points them out. The real crux of the book, however, are the numerous short essays or sub-chapters which build on the information in the first essay and give persuasive arguments that how much of what qualifies for collective wisdom in Indian music needs to be reconsidered.

One of her biggest concerns is the fact that the University system produces scholars, and the gurukul system produces artists. Dr Prabha Atre sees the strength and weakness of both cultures. She boldly suggests that the reason the gurukul system requires years of work to create great artists is that it is not very efficient. Because so little theory gets taught, it is difficult for the artists to expand what they know to new territory, or to overcome blocks and obstacles to their development. The University system, on the other hand, often produces people who can pass exams and do research about music theory, but do not learn how to perform. She suggests a variety of specific solutions to these and many other problems, based on her experience as a teacher: creating more performance opportunities in universities and utilizing modern technology such as the voice recorder and the metronome to speed up the learning process.

As explained, it is rare for musicians to do this, so most of the time we get compilations of ideas made by musicologists

who have their knowledge from a variety of sources: books, interviews, recordings and possibly training under a master. The authority of the scholar – musicians writing on music comes from within, from the knowledge that they possess themselves, from their reflection. The authority of the musicologist is based on the academic discipline, which implies that the sources must be referred extensively and accurately.

A very few musicians have written about music in the twentieth century. Foremost among them are Pt. Omkarnath Thakur, Pt. ND Vyas, Pt. VR Patwardhan, Pt. SN Ratanjankar and Pt. Ravi Shankar. The latter has given us a profound insight into the course of Indian music through his biographical work. The others have published mainly in Hindi, with a focus on raga theory with transcriptions in Sargam. As such, to my knowledge, this chapter is exceptional and should be a starting point for any study on the method of performing Hindustani classical music. Again, we can get some insight into the reasons that moved Dr Atre to set out on this job;

In the west, one approach to Indian Music has been through its value in yoga and meditation. There is, of course, a small group of serious listeners, connoisseurs, and even practitioners whose approach is from a purely artistic, academic and intellectual point of view.

As a performer, I am always curious to know how people react to music. The response, especially of an uninitiated Indian listener and a foreigner, in particular, has stimulated me to think about music from different angles.

It is evident in her work that she has made a colossal effort to reflect on the most uncomplicated matters – which usually turn out to be the most difficult to explain clearly.

In her article about 'The role of taal of bandish in khyal' Dr. Prabha Atre indicates some salient points regarding the expression of raag.

The purpose of the classical form khyaal is to project raag's personality, its mood and convey its musical meaning. Taal which enters with the bandish takes subsidiary position. Most of the time, it remains simple and repetitive.

The subtleties of a raag are best to experience through aalaaps, slow music phrases, that allow exploration of a raag note-by-note. These phrases can have their structures, movements and tempo, different from the accompanying taal. Therefore, to avoid continuous obstruction by the rhythmic structure of accompanying taal, it is maintained at a comparatively slow pace by some artists. Although in this case, musical phrases seem to float loosely on taal structure, they generally start identifying themselves with taal, as they approach 'sam' the starting point of taal.

In another article she opens the question of *raag* and *ras* even more prominently:

1. Raag attributes to specific ras. But often the theme of the song text is contradictory to the ras, E.g., raag Bhairavi is supposed to convey karuna (pathos) ras. However, the desired theme of the song-texts in Bhairavi seems to express raag inherent ras quite adequately.

2. Quite often the themes of the song-text of *vilambit* (slow) and *drut* (fast) *khayaals* sung one after the other in the same raag are diametrically opposite. At times, the languages of the two khyals are different. At times, artists mispronounce the word, not knowing the language. However, the so-called raag-ras do not seem to get affected.

3. Almost every raag, irrespective of *ras* appears to create a lively, happy atmosphere when it enters into a fast tempo. All this goes to prove that raag- character, raag mood are intrinsically related to its musical material and its treatment. Its characteristic phrases and their flow give it its musical identity and beauty.

Some more points to consider:

1. Over the years, some raags have changed considerably, retaining their old names. What about their ras?
2. What is the ras of mishra raag evolved out of the combination of two or more raags?
3. What is the ras of a newly created raags?
4. Does an audience-Indian or non-Indian experience the same intensity of a particular raag performance?
5. When different artists present one raag, does a listener experience the same ras?

All these queries need to be addressed scientifically.

She also explains about the time theory that is still adhered to by many artists:

Various other aspects make one think about the relevance of raag-time theory:

1. When one listens to film songs, naatya sangeet (theatre songs) or devotional music based on a particular raag, the raag- time principle does not even remotely cross his mind. On the contrary, he seems to enjoy any raag any time.
2. Radio, TV and recording companies can record any raag any time and that does not seem to have any effect on the presentation of the raag. It is during the public performance that time is imposed on a raag to manifest mood.
3. One can practise any raag any time according to his convenience and that does not seem to affect or tarnish the mood of the raag or its character.
4. Carnatic music is considered more tradition-bound, yet it does not follow the time theory strictly, Hindustani Music with all its flexibility still advocates the time theory.

What about *mishra raags*? Why should *Bhairav Bahaar* and *Yamani-Bilaawal* be presented in the morning only? *Bahaar*

and *Yaman* are night raags. Why shouldn't these raags be rendered at night also?

If we would have to adhere to the time theory harshly, then there is a threat of losing raags which fall outside the concert timings. Isn't that a significant loss to Indian music?

Concepts like *raag-ras* (mood), *raag-samay* (time) are deeply embedded in our psyche due to age-old traditions. Though they have lost their relevance and context with time, still they are followed blindly. Ain't these need to be tested scientifically?

Culture always provides new pathways to humans. If tradition starts harming progress and growth, then it needs to be redefined. In such circumstances, it does not get broken or mutilated but gets rejuvenated to provide direction.

It is not only that she just questions the application of time theory in the number of contexts, but in the final paragraph, she also raised the points that new pathways must come from within the tradition and calls for a renaissance of it. Again, at all times, she invokes the necessity of taking an objective, scientific look at these time-honoured practices and never shuns innovation.

Dr Prabha Atre compassion to the phenomenon of music has been discussed above to the different levels of society and culture where music plays a role. Once she states;

Whether classical or popular, vocal or instrumental, north or south Indian, Indian or Western, the fundamental constituents of music tone and time are the same all over the world. The difference in various musical traditions lies in the approach to these constituents in terms of selection of the material, its treatment, arrangement, expression and presentation of the resultant structures. That is why every culture has its music. On one side, music is the universal language of humanity, but on the other, it is very culture-specific.

Dr Prabha Atre writes in 'Enlightening the listener', that *film music has had a constructive influence on Hindustani classical Music, because it has forced khyaal singers to work on the beauty of tone in their singing, and not just focus on imagination in improvisation. She also has an instrumental series of exercises for learning a melody, sargam and tabla bols are each absorbed through separate forms of practice.*

Sargam is her passion, and she wrote her doctoral dissertation on the subject. Dr Prabha Atre points out that no singer marks every single note he/she sings with a *sargam* syllable, especially during those long ornamented passages called *murki*. The choice of sargam syllables thus determines which notes the singers consider being

fundamental and which are mere ornaments. It shapes up the melody so that it cannot go duplicate by an instrument or a poetic verse. The increasing importance of sargam is also an indication of the artist's constant need to free herself from the word and to express the raag as a pure abstraction with its own unique musical meaning. Dr Prabha Atre envisions this trend as essential for the development of Indian music.

Again and again, I am amazed by the broad reflection and the vast comprehension that oozes from her thoughts. What she says is so essential to any understanding of music that probably every book on music should start from here. There is no claim to superiority of one type of music or another; in simple and clear words the common and the differential of all kinds of music is indicated.

At various points, Dr Prabha Atre delves deeply into the workings of Indian music, in her usual succinct manner. An excellent example is her extensive and essential discussion about the singing of *sargams* in Indian Music that I will not reproduce here as it would take up too much space. However, from the same article, I would like to quote a passage about *meend*:

Indian music does not consist of note points lying distantly apart, but of graceful lines joining these points. These lines or glides are called *meend*. *Meend* is an indispensable feature of Indian music. Expressions like *murki*, *harkat*, *khatkaa*, *kan*, *aandolan*, and *gamak* are all embellishments to make *meend* more beautiful and enchanting. However, their use is restricted to the realm of decoration, the essential ingredient for connecting the notes in a phrase being the only *meend*.

It is crucial because it precisely what makes Indian classical music so distinctive. It not only pronounces that *meend* is the basic type of linking note points to each other to which all other embellishments are subsidiary, but also it sets off Indian Music from Western Music, where the focus is on discrete pitches.

One could go on examining Dr. Prabha Atre's insightful approach to Indian music, which betrays enormous reflection. From my calculations, she must have worked on her first English language book off and on for more than ten years. It is a small book, and therefore very condensed. I have not said a word about Dr Prabha Atre as a performer, as a composer, as a teacher and as a human being. I have experienced that as a performer, teacher and composer, she is familiar enough since she is one of Indian's top musicians.

[3] I would just like to add that I feel that the person Dr. Prabha Atre to be very much like the scholar, musician and writer. Her personality is very enchanting, bright, open-minded and honest and always a 'lady' who approaches all subjects with dignity and refinement. She has not only done

a tremendous job of describing music from the musician point of view, but she has also indicated the lines along which music, teaching, composing, listening and criticism could and should develop. She has also stated the importance of music in education, psychological development and society in 'Along the path of Music'.

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