

MSM Musicology

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What Music Means To Me

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ABSTRACT

The author talks about two defining influences in his musical career: his father, whom he addressed as 'Pitaji' and his guru, Shri Vinayak Kunte, fondly known as Kunte-guruji to his students. Pitaji taught him, by example and precept, what emotive singing meant and the nuances of poetry appreciation and Urdu pronunciation (talaffuz). Kunte-guruji acquainted him with the richness and profundity of Hindustani Classical Music and the perfection of musical notes or "sur". He also showed, by example, the need to lead a simple, uncomplicated lifestyle to experience the divinity inherent in music. Finally, the author also learned from Kunte-guruji the need to pass on one's learning to others and go out of one's way to do so.

Key Words: Father's influence; Guruji's influence; Hindustani classical music; Kunte-guruji; Longfellow; Pitaji; Poetic license; Poetry appreciation; Shailendra; Shakeel Badayuni; Shelley; Sur perfection; Talaffuz; Urdu diction

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Introduction

One can go on and on about how music is divine, a means to tune into the consciousness within or to establish communion with one's inner being, to listen to the harmony of the spheres, to experience calm and bliss, to enjoy with like-minded friends, to converse with the great masters of yore, to establish a rhythm of life, to express one's creativity, and give vent to one's artistic urges. And, one would not be far from some profound truths if one does.

My concerns are somewhat more mundane here.

For me, music arouses a myriad of memories. They are some of the most tender and most fulfilling, besides being important landmarks in whatever little variety adorns my musical life. I shall list here two formative, defining influences. One is of my father, whom I called *pitaji*, and the second is of my *guru*, Shri Vinayak Kunte, whom we all knew as *Kunte-guruji*. To tune in to what they stood for, to actualize the nuances of their performance and reaffirm their ideas about music is the greatest activity that I can perform. And the most fulfilling. That, in essence, is 'What Music Means To Me'.

Let me talk about the first influence.

The first influence, *pitaji*

My earliest memories of music are of my father's singing. He was a maverick of sorts, a man of modest means who would go out of his way to help others, who enjoyed the good life but had a peculiar contempt for the obsession with money and wealth he found around him. He would get into a mood and sing in his rich baritone voice for hours on end, to no one in particular. He was a great fan of the legendary Saigal, and his contemporaries Pankaj Mullick and K.C. Dey, and a great appreciator of Talat Mahmood, and later on of Mohammed Rafi too. He was one who voiced his opinion in the 60s that he preferred Asha Bhosale's voice to Lataji's because he found her more versatile. This at a time when Lataji ruled the musical world and often the only person who gave a chance to Ashaji to sing was the great Music Director O.P. Nayyar. *Pitaji* enjoyed singing new numbers of Ashaji in his rich baritone, almost like Saigal singing Ashaji's songs. And while he smiled and felt embarrassed, he carried on regardless. The voice still rings in my ear, the song of a man who sang from the heart, whose voice emoted every word that escaped his lips. I feel blessed to carry forward that legacy (Singh, 2016^[3]).

He also had a great sense of poetry. He went to great lengths to explain the subtleties and nuances of the lyrics of a song and got into the skin of the poet to understand what the poetry conveyed. The first he taught me was a lovely

poem by the great English poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, “A Psalm of Life” (Longfellow^[1]), and this part of which I still remember by heart:

*Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time;*

*Footprints, that perhaps another,
Sailing o'er life's solemn main,
A forlorn and shipwrecked brother,
Seeing, shall take heart again.*

He first pointed out that the poet's middle name was “Wadsworth,” not to be confused with “William Wordsworth,” who was another poet. He explained the meaning of the lovely metaphor, “Footprints on the sands of time.” He explained what “o'er” meant - that it was a poetic licence for the word “over”, so as to help in the recitation. And what the word “main” meant (it means the sea). How can life be a “solemn main” for some? Why the “forlorn or shipwrecked brother” sentence. How, it gives courage to the despondent to take heart and carry on, not losing hope, when the “footprints on the sands” are seen. And how, finally, and this was the most important lesson he taught, one should try to lead one's life so that one left an impress, howsoever small, “on the sands of time.”

To the tiny, impressionable mind, it was ennobling to hear him expound so effortlessly on the meaning of a poem. He did not have to persuade me very hard to learn it by heart. Having understood its meaning, I was myself motivated to learn it.

The incident that follows is noteworthy. I must have been in the V or VI Grade. One day, the English teacher was absent. One of the office staff, a learned senior who I remember had a very good handwriting, came to engage the class. He asked the students to come to the blackboard and write anything in the best hand possible. The usual hesitation among students was noticeable. Friends egged me on. I just went to the blackboard, took the chalk piece, and wrote out part of the Longfellow's poem quoted above. Just like that. The class gasped in wonder, but what I still remember is the open-mouthed look of wonder and awe on the wise man's face. He was nonplussed. Gathering his wits, he asked almost in a whisper, “Who taught you this?” And I was proud to say, “My father.” The look of admiration on his face for the man who could teach such a lovely poem to his son at so tender an age, a poem not in any syllabus and not for any examination but just for the love of poetry itself - that look is still etched in my brain as one of the fondest memories of my childhood.

What applied to English poetry was equally applicable to *pitaji's* music. He could never sing a song just for the music or for cheap thrills. The meaning had to be heart touching. Then, the music had to be soul stirring too. And, finally, the rendition by the singer had to convey the sense of the poetry and the mood of the music. Any disparity and it would jar him which he was quick to realize and point out.

The First Song of Childhood and the Farewell Number

For me, one of the greatest moments in my childhood was the first Hindi song he taught me. I was like any other youngster, so very reluctant to learn singing. When a tiny tot, he sat me one day and said, "I will teach you a song of childhood." And proceeded to teach me:

"O, bachpan ke din bhula na dena..." (YouTube^[4])

Just remembering him sing in his baritone gets the eyes to cloud over even today. In grateful thanks for the great childhood he gave me and the immortal gift of aesthetics and music appreciation that has been an enduring aspect of my personality.

I had never seen him refer to any book for the words of a song. We did not even have a radio at home. I just wondered how he mastered the words so well. And then I knew. The true appreciator of poetry that he was, the words left an indelible impression on his heart. For it to flow from there to his throat was, therefore, effortless.

I have heard him sing for hours, into the wee hours of the morning at times, without any accompaniment, to no one, for no applause, simply because music welled up in him. He often urged me to sing with him, but I was like any typically inhibited son, imbibing the music, but not adding my voice to his.

There was a traditional farewell function as we were to leave school. College beckoned and all the excitement of being a young man, and being no longer treated like a mere kid. That was the time he suggested a song. He did not force it on me, but said, "See if you would like to sing this song". This was the second song he taught the shy reluctant teenager. It was a long forgotten melody even in his time, "*Ruk na sako to jao, tum jao...*" (YouTube^[6]). It goes like this:

Ruk na sako to jao, tum jao (Repeat)

Ek magar hum sabki hai fariyaad

Kabhi hamari bhi kar lena yaad (Repeat both lines)

Hum to tumhe na bhool sakenge (Repeat)

Tum chahe bisarao, tum jao...

Ruk na sako to jao, tum jao....

*Pyara ratan bichadta ho jab panthi
Kiska hriday na bhar ata tab panthi
Kintu hamare ansu se tum
Kamzori na dikhao, tum jao
Ruk na sako to jao, tum jao....*

*Jane kab phir mile purana saathi
Jane kab phir mile prem ki paati (Repeat both lines)
Aj bichadne se pachele tum (Repeat)
Ek bar muskao, tum jao...
Ruk na sako to jao, tum jao....*

He explained that “*paati*” meant a letter; it was a poetic licence for “*patra*,” and what poetic license meant. He also explained that the original singer said, “*bichudne*” rather than “*bichadne*” The latter is correct, so it should be pronounced that way rather than like the original. Even when he sang the Saigal numbers, he never copied his style or his intense nasal twang. His pronunciation of words was always impeccable. This was an important lesson to learn, for often cover singers ape even the mistakes of the original singer, something he strongly disapproved of.

I remember the still silence in my classroom in the 11th Grade when I sang this song during the farewell function. The classmates were stunned. After I finished, there was silence for a while and then the applause of friends. I came to know later that our School Principal had tears in her eyes as I sang.

It was not a very popular song, ever. But that was not important for him. His likes were never dictated by what was popular. It was solely by what appealed to his heart. And he justified singing as an art where, if the song did not tug at your heart, you had no business singing it.

He had a great fascination for melodious sad songs. He sang the beautiful song of Poet Shailendra sung originally by Talat Mahmud to explain why he liked them:

*Hain sabse madhur woh geet jinhe
Hum dard ke sur mein gaate hain (Repeat)
Jab had se guzar jaati hai khushi
Aansoo bhi chalak ke aate hain (Repeat) (YouTube^[5])*

(Sweetest are those songs which
We sing in the notes of pain
When joy crosses its limits
Tears brim over.)

Pitaji matched this with the line from Shelley poem “*To A Skylark*,” which said something similar (Shelley^[2]):

Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.

For the young me that was an important lesson to learn. It helped to shape my likes and dislikes at that impressionable age. At a time when the young were busy thinking of thrills and seeking joy through singing foot tapping numbers, I learned that pain, separation, and unhappiness could be equally soothing if expressed in music and song. A conviction which remains with me till date. Not that I abhor the joyous and mirthful, but the depth and intensity that pathos can convey cannot be ever matched by any mirth, howsoever liting.

Urdu Diction and Subtleties of the Language

For *pitaji*, the correct pronunciation (*talaffuz*) of Urdu words, the language in which most filmy *ghazals* and other memorable songs of yesteryears were written, was a *sine qua non* of Hindi cover singing. So that I could know the language, he requested a polished Muslim gentleman who used to visit our house almost every Sunday to teach me the language.

The story goes like this. This young man had been helped by *pitaji* to complete his education. He was his colleague's son. The colleague expired unexpectedly, which left the family with little means to educate the boy. But the boy wanted to study further. Somehow *pitaji* came to know of him and helped him all through his education. *Pitaji's* logic was, well, we Hindus complained that Muslims were more prone to violence, that many were uneducated and lived in poverty and unhygienic surroundings. But what did we do to uplift them? Hence, he did his bit for this boy, who remained ever grateful to him, but somehow they lost touch with each other.

Meanwhile, the young man settled down to a good job and got married. Many years later, he accidentally met him one day in a train. He asked *pitaji*, "Do you remember me?" *Pitaji* looked at him for long but could not. He said, "I am ..." It still did not register. "Your colleague's son. You had helped me study. With God's grace, I am settled well today." And then it struck *pitaji*. He was pleased beyond words. He said to *pitaji*, "I want to come home one day and seek your blessings." He spoke impeccable Urdu. The Dilip Kumar and Naushad style of Urdu. *Pitaji* invited him to come over whenever he desired.

He came home the very next Sunday and said, "You have done so much for me. What can I do in return?" *Pitaji* was nonplussed. He was not used to taking any return of favours. He only knew how to give, not to take. He said something like that's ok, I am so happy you thought of doing something for me, etc., But the young man was adamant. *Pitaji* thought for a while then said, "Ok, if you are so insistent, do this. My son is bright in studies. But I want him to sing too. And unless one knows good Urdu, one cannot sing quality filmy songs. Will you teach him Urdu?"

He was more than willing. Books were bought and my first lessons in Urdu were started. I learned from this patient gentleman the correct pronunciation of guttural words, which are a characteristic of the beautiful language. How it's "ghazal" not "gajal," "Ghalib" not "Galib," "saghar" not "sagar," "qayamat" not "kayamat," "gham" not "gum," "phool" not "fool," "phir" not "fir," "mujhe" never "muzhe," "nazaaqat" not "najaakat" – all these subtleties of the language I was fortunate to learn at an early age. Sundays were the days this young man came, and we all ate special mutton dishes cooked exclusively by *pitaji* for us.

I owe a deep debt of gratitude to both these souls, *pitaji* for teaching me the nuances of singing, and his protégé for introducing me to the delicacies of the beautiful language that Urdu is.

Guruji's influence

For me, music means to articulate and present the essence of music and its nuances as I got it, and learned it, from two important influences in my life. One, my father, who taught me, by example and precept, what emotive singing was. That I have mentioned in the first section. The second, my most revered *Guruji*, Shri Vinayak Kunte, whom we all affectionately called *Kunte-guruji*, at whose feet I imbibed whatever little I know of Hindustani classical singing. I will deal with that in this section.

Kunte-guruji was the quintessential teacher. Simple tastes, uncomplicated lifestyle, no craving for fame or fortune. His greatest love was his *tanpura*. I remember the affection with which he cradled the fortunate instrument to his heart as he tuned her, and then sang holding her so close to his self. And how the instrument responded to his gentle strumming. The sweet, melodious, well-trained voice, and the well-tuned *tanpura*. Just the two sounds in his simple abode filled my mind with a sense of divinity which music can arouse in an earnest seeker.

I remember one early morning when *guruji* was teaching me *Raga Lalit*. It is an early morning *raga*, sung just before sunrise. The feeling of the *raga* is that while it is meant to usher in the day, and the sunrise, one must also remember how shallow are the mundane preoccupations that bog down the ordinary mortals that we are.

The *tanpura* held to his heart, he was teaching me the *raga*. I followed the intricacies of the *swaras* in the *raga*, the way the two *madhyams* were to be combined, and the way the *komal rishab* was to be lightly brushed while descending to the *sa*. Both of us were immersed in the intricacies of the *raga* as it unfolded around us and engulfed us. The room was full of the divine sound that emanated from two mortals: divine not because of us, but because the

raga was being rendered in its purest form by a *guru*, and a disciple who was trying his level best to just follow what his *guruji* taught. And as the two of us were immersed in the sublime sounds, I gently opened my eyes. I distinctly remember the shining first rays of sunlight entered *guruji's* room and fell close to his feet. The rays were blessed to be welcomed in the house of such a noble soul, whose whole existence, whose very *persona* represented the purest form and pursuit of music, its Classical form. Whose very *raison de etre* was to experience and expound for the welfare of his students, the purest of music in its most sublime form.

Caring for Students

I started learning classical music from him during my medical internship. It was possible for me to visit his house then. Invariably, he was seated waiting for me, with the *tanpura* ready, before I arrived. In case I was delayed, I could hear *guruji* already expounding the *raga*, with eyes closed, the *tanpura* tugged close to his heart. It gets the eyes misty to just remember the pure soul singing. I would often just sit, listening in raptures, to the smooth and gentle expounding that he did. His languorous *alapi* flowed effortlessly, and the cascading *taans* later shook his nimble frame but never a whisker of being out of tune. Ever.

Then came House Physician's posts. I had to stay in the RMO quarters at KEM Hospital. How was music to continue now? I told *guruji* about the difficulty. He did not think even for a moment. He said, "*Me yenar tumhala shikwaila.*" (I will come there to teach you.) I was dumbfounded. The reason he gave once, "*Doctarancha chukla nai pahije*" ("Doctor should not miss his music lessons".)

What was that unique bond of music that made him do it? He could see the sincerity of the student, perhaps. He could see that a doctor was trying to do music. There had to be no obstacle of any type in his way. And for that, the great gentle soul travelled nearly an hour by train and walked 15 min by foot to reach my hostel. And I do not remember him being late even for a single day or missing the day for any reason. I would get delayed at times, working in the wards or handling an emergency. But he was always there, every Tuesday and Thursday, 3.30-4.30 in the afternoon, on time, the *tanpura* tuned, hugged close to his heart, and already singing. I cannot help the misting of the eyes just thinking of what all he did for me. This was for 1 full year, at KEM, and it continued for 2 years and 1 month when I was at Sion Hospital.

And not once did *guruji* grumble, or talk of the hassle, or ever ask the fee be raised for all the efforts he was taking.

Where do we get divine souls like this any longer?

And I learned. Two important lessons. One, the nuances of flawless rendition. Second, and more importantly, to go out of one's way to help someone else actualize his musical quest. To never allow any obstacle to come in the way of the flowering of music in anyone who came in contact with you.

I was blessed to learn it first hand from my *guruji*.

Flawless Rendition

This is something I learned the real painstaking way from him. There was to be no compromise on the perfect rendition of a *raga*. Not one blemish was tolerable. Even the *alapi* and *taans* had to be rendered the way he did. If an extra *sur* was added and was part of the *raga*, he would say, "*Tumcha chukla nahin. Pun me ghetu tasa ghya.*" (It's not that you have erred. But do it my way and see how it feels.) It was irritating at times, for the logical mind that I had, I thought why should he object to a variation which was true to the *raga*. But after I had, in fact, got rid of my resistance, and actually rendered it the way he taught, I could really find that it was a more melodious and better presentation.

His persistence was well worth it.

Second, and much more importantly, he could never tolerate any *besur*, singing out of tune. He would spend any amount of exasperating time to get the perfect *sur*. He would not proceed ahead unless it was mastered. If it took the whole session to get one to sing in tune, so be it. But in that there was no compromise. And when the perfect *sur* was attained after the entire struggle, the *tanpura's sur* vibrating in harmony with the vocal chords created a sublime atmosphere. Often, we only had sessions of *alapi* stretching for whole sessions. No *taans*, no *taal*, no nothing. Just the pristine sound. That made me realize that human sound, rendered as music, indeed was sublime.

A Final Word

Such, indeed, was the presence I was blessed to learn from: the feet of my *guruji*. For me, music has no meaning if it does not embody the essence of music as my *guruji* taught me. No compromise on hard work. No compromise on *sur*. Never to allow any other considerations except the pure pursuit of music to vitiate any relationship connected with music. To hug the sublime sounds that emanate from a gentle, simple soul by becoming one, as also to hug the sublime sounds that emanate from a pure instrument like the *tanpura*, close, very close to the heart. To live a simple, uncomplicated life, immersed in music and the love and affection of like-minded others.

That is what music has come to mean to me.

That is what will always remain the essence of music, whether we mortals remain or not.

My *guruji*'s music lives on, within me, and through me passes on to so many around me. His mortal presence may not be there. But the immortal gift of music he so benevolently passed on to me, without holding back, ever, that is one of the fondest memories I shall carry till the very end of my existence.

To continue to live in, and through music, and to carry forward the selfless pursuit of music and pass it on to others, this is what music means to me, now, and always will.

Conflict of interest

None declared.

Declaration

This is my original unpublished article, not submitted for publication elsewhere. Parts of this article were published as two articles in the series, "The President Speaks his Mind," in *Sargam*, the periodical of Swara Sampada. Used here with permission.

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About the Author



Ajai R. Singh MD is a consultant psychiatrist and editor of the Mens Sana Monographs. He is also a poet-singer-composer. He has written extensively on issues related to conceptual issues in psychiatry, bioethics, philosophy of psychiatry and conceptual foundations of the pharmaceutical industry.