

Sitar Practice and Performance

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"Practice makes a man perfect" is an accepted and acknowledged dictum. It could be applied to all human activities including music. My presentation today will attempt to cover specifically the techniques of music practice, as in a gathering of musicians and music students, it seems unnecessary to dwell upon its role and significance. Before we analyze and explain the techniques of music practice there are certain aspects, which need to be considered as a general backdrop to the main issue.

Individuals learning music might have differing objectives. Some may wish to become professional performers while some may wish to take it as a preferred hobby. The intensity, rigour and depth with which music practice is undertaken would therefore differ according to the desired goals.

Every form of music making - be it vocal or instrumental - would require differing techniques of music practice. Even within the framework of vocal music it is possible that techniques of music practice for dhrupad or khyal or forms of light classical music may differ. Similarly riyaz techniques used for different categories of instruments such as blowing, bowing, plucking or percussion, would necessarily be different.

It has always been believed that one needs to put in several hours of music practice - riyaz — to become a good performer. In this context, it may be useful to consider whether "mental application" to analyze the techniques of riyaz could be gainfully utilized, to achieve the same objective without putting in long hours of practice. Effective musical "expression" obtained through long hours of physical riyaz, could perhaps be achieved through intelligent analysis-based shorter duration riyaz. Several great masters have emphasized the usefulness of "mental application" added to physical practice to achieve quicker and superior results.

All music students are not similar in their aptitudes, capabilities or even in terms of availability of free time from their vocation or other responsibilities. Modern age or jet-age implies constraints - whether in respect of money or time. Riyaz has therefore to be so adjusted to enable best utilization of available resources - and as a corollary - devise related techniques accordingly.

Students who are educated, capable and receptive are sometimes the products of "Khandani" or traditional habits. Several Khandani students resist the necessity to document or notate in writing their "talim". The Guru has to necessarily devise different techniques to teach such students - resulting into a different "mould" of music practice. It is obvious that this seminar is aimed at serious students of music as also to ensure interactions between different disciplines and forms of music. I am sure that vocalists might gain some useful knowledge from the presentations made by instrumentalists and vice-versa. Being a sitar player, I will by necessity dwell on techniques used for sitar riyaz and that too restricted to our gharana. Having considered certain important issues

which might have direct influence on the techniques of riyaz that the guru should devise depending upon the student in question, I would now focus attention on the subject of today's presentation namely sitar - techniques of riyaz. It is commonly believed that over a period of almost three centuries, sitar - both physically and stylistically - has evolved into a very versatile and popular instrument being able to effectively express the finest shades of human emotions. It is no wonder therefore that over a period of time, several individual styles have developed with individual characteristics relating to the quality of sound and stylistic presentation of the raga through the sitar. A seminar on sitar was organized by Sangeet Research Academy in 1990 during which presentations were made of as many as 6/7 styles/ gharanas of sitar. It was noted that every style or gharana had their own special features and characteristics. Being a student of Etawah or Imdadkhani or more recently called the Vilayatkhani gharana, in my presentation I shall concentrate only on the techniques of riyaz applied by our gharana. Let us start with the mental attitude that the student of sitar should cultivate towards the instrument even before commencing to play.

Respect for the instrument Sitar - the instrument, which is a vehicle for musical thoughts, should be perceived with great affection and respect. It is therefore essential that before a student picks up the instrument to play, he/she should cultivate an attitude full of humility and spiritual reverence for the instrument. With the same mental approach, the instrument should be properly tuned after practice or performance and respectfully kept in well-braced condition. Whilst not in use, the instrument should be kept in a cupboard or a designated dignified area in the room. It is essential that the instrument should be kept clean at all times to ensure that no dust accumulates on its surface. To keep the instrument clean and shining is an important qualification of a devoted student. According to tradition it is correctly believed that, One should not cross over the instrument or at no time the instrument should be touched or pushed with one's foot (with a view not to impair its dignity). To the extent possible, one should not walk over the carpet on which the music is practiced, with shoes on. If this is not conveniently possible one could cover the carpet with a clean sheet while practicing, which would ensure that the dignity of the instrument is maintained. With the above background let us initially consider basic essentials — such as sitting position, tuning the instrument etc.

BAITHAK (Sitting Posture)

Posture Body should be perpendicular to the ground and should be in a relaxed and natural sitting position. It is preferable to sit on a hard surface to ensure stability of the posture. The head should be erect and held in a natural and easy manner. While playing, both the shoulders should remain at the same level in a relaxed position, i.e., not drooping or raised.

Angle of Sitar The instrument should be held at an angle of 45 degrees from the ground, with the dand (fretboard) placed on the right leg about two inches away from the knee joint towards the thigh. The sitar should be held almost parallel to the body. The right knee should fit into the concave curve at the joint of the main gourd and the

fretboard. The main tumba (gourd) should rest on the left foot and the curvature of the tumba should fit into the curvature of the sole of the left foot.

Facial Expression The facial expression while playing the sitar should be easy and natural. It should not reflect undue tension or concern. It should be as natural as it would be, when one is communicating with people.

Mental Attitude Apart from physical posture the mental attitude should also be relaxed and tension free.

Position of the feet The right leg should rest on the thigh of the left leg and just touch the floor (without any pressure). The position of the left leg should be adjusted to ensure that the region at one-quarter sector of the gourd rests on the left foot. The left leg should be adjusted to ensure that the sitar rests in the correct position on the knee joint of the right foot at the required angle (slight variations may be required depending upon the length of the legs).

RIGHT HAND Position The right hand should be placed on the tumba in a natural manner as one would place it on a bolster. The forearm resting on the tumba should be adjusted to ensure that the plucking portion of the fingers is right above the main strings. The palm should be in a position to ensure that the natural line at wrist joint between the forearm and the palm is maintained. The thumb should be firmly placed without tension at the joint between the gourd and the fret board, and should act as a pivot. The fingers should be kept in a rounded, cupped position above the main melody (baj) string.

Wearing the mizrab The mizrab should be firmly fitted just below the joint between the first, and the second phalange of the forefinger and the gap at the tip of the mizrab should be about 2 mm.

Angle of strokes The angle at which the mizrab is struck on the main string should be almost 90 degrees in relation to the string. The tone and the timbre of the sound would vary according to the angle at which the string is struck and the specific point of the mizrab that contacts the string when struck. In jhala section the chikari string should be plucked at an angle less than 90 degrees. The source of the strength The striking force of the mizrab should not emanate from the shoulder or the forearm but from the fingers of the right hand. Hence the shoulder and the elbow should remain in a totally relaxed position free of tension. The three finger joints should together be the striking force which would vary from joint to joint according to the tone/timbre of the sound required. The span of strokes Whilst striking the main string, the span of the right hand fingers should not be too wide. A controlled span would facilitate speedier execution when required and also save energy. While playing the melody string, care should be taken to sound the jod string as well.

LEFT HAND Left arm When placed on the fret, the fingers should be placed together and form a curve to facilitate easy movements and pulling of the meends. The fingers of

the left hand should be placed on the melody string just above and touching the fret (not on the fret). The angle at which the fingers (index and the middle) to be placed should be slightly oblique to ensure that the line of the forearm and the palm should be straight and not bent at wrist. The pressure applied by the fingers on the melody string should be just enough to ensure adequate sound quality and easy movements on the fretboard. The elbow of the left hand should not be too far or too near the body but must almost hang effortlessly.

Nishan of strings The mark of the strings on the first phalange is about a quarter of an inch away from the tip of the fingers. The index finger could have one mark while the middle finger could have two marks as the index finger is normally used for the firat and pulling of two to three notes whilst the middle finger is used for pulling more than two notes requiring greater pulling power.

TUNING The basic note being 'Sa', it is essential that the first string to be tuned to the desired pitch (usually C sharp) should be either the 'tarab' string of the basic 'Sa' or the 'badi chikari' string (not the upper 'Sa' chikari). As the tuning of all other 'tarab' strings and other 'over the bridge' strings would require a reference point, it would be advisable to tune the 'badi chikari' string first. Such a reference point can be achieved by plucking the 'badi chikari' string with the index finger of the left hand. It is advisable to tune the 'Sa' string/s of the tarab immediately thereafter. Once the 'badi chikari' and the 'tarab' string of 'sa' are in tune, the 'jod' string should be tuned. All other 'tarab' strings should be tuned treating any one of these strings as the reference point. (It would be advisable to treat 'badi chikari' as a reference point as it is relatively more stable and easy to pluck). Once the 'tarab' and the 'jod' strings are tuned, other strings could be tuned as required.

BRACING THE INSTRUMENT It is noticed that the jod string usually varies from the tuned pitch to a slightly higher frequency when Madhyam or the 'baj' string is pulled even slightly. Hence the tuning of the jod string should be rechecked after pulling the 'baj' string two or three times and reset the jod string to the correct pitch. If the jod string increases in frequency every time a meend is executed, it would be advisable to tune the jod string to a slightly lower pitch than 'Sa' and then when a meend is executed, the jod string achieves the correct frequency of the required 'Sa'. Students should form a habit of rechecking the correct tuning of the instrument periodically during practice or performance.

ACTUAL PLAYING The following important points should be carefully noted before the student commences actual playing of the sitar. The index finger of the left hand should never leave the melody string. It should be in contact with the frets throughout the performance. In - 'firat', (or movements on frets) the last note of the aroha (before turning back in the form of avroha) to be executed by the middle finger. Some times in the fast sapat tans, the middle finger can also be used to play the 'in between' notes of the ascent. The thumb of the right hand should also be in contact with the fretboard and should not be lifted at any time during practice or performance. While pulling meend (a) the string is pulled laterally on the fret with the forefinger or the middle finger with the thumb at the back of the fretboard as a support. While pulling the meend in the 'mandra

saptak' the curved portion between the left hand thumb and the index finger could be in contact with the 'dand' to support easier execution. However as one goes towards 'madhya' and 'tar saptak', the curved portion of the left hand should remain away from the dand. (b) The index finger is generally used for pulling meend of upto 2 notes. When pulling more than 2 notes, it is easier and advisable to use the middle finger keeping both fingers together for support.

1a. ACTUAL RIYAZ In this section, we will consider actual techniques of Riyaz for beginners as well advanced students.

For Beginners It is advisable for beginners to initially practice movement (firat) only on the frets (without meends). The following exercises could be undertaken: Practice of right hand movements (including co-ordination of right and left hand movements) Take any "Bol" pattern e.g. Da Ra / Da Ra or Da Dir Da Ra / Da Ra Da Ra or Da Da Ra / Da Da Ra / Da Ra and execute the same with the right hand. (a) Take any one of the bol patterns and repeat four times on each fret - starting from Sa of the middle octave and going all the way up to the upper Sa in the raga structure of Yaman and then returning down the scale to the basic Sa. (b) The same exercise should be continued by playing the bol pattern two times - up and down the Yaman scale. (c) After executing the bol pattern on each frets four times each, followed by playing two times on each fret, the last exercise should cover playing the selected bol pattern once in the same manner. (Note : Different bol patterns could be similarly practiced. Each exercise should be repeatedly executed non-stop for five minutes at a time and gradually increasing the time period to 15 minutes non- stop). **1b** Simultaneously with continued riyaz of the right hand as well as co-ordination of both the hands relating to movements of frets, the student should also undertake riyaz of executing meends/ murkis with the left hand. It is recommended that short meends (not murkis) of half notes should be practiced. 1. Sa Ni Sa (on frets) - Sa - Ni Sa (in meend) 2. Pa Ma Pa (on frets) - Pa - Ma Pa (in meend) (tivra Ma) 3. Sa Ni sa (on frets) - Sa - Ni Sa (in meend) and return in the same manner. Repeat this exercise at least 25 times in each sitting. Gradually the length of the meend could be increased to cover additional notes.

Alap It would be advisable for a beginner to learn by heart a complete piece of alap structure to be executed on frets - the duration being 5 minutes upto 15 minutes depending upon the capability of the student. The teacher should assist by pre-composing the alap elaboration in different ragas. If the student is able to execute alap on frets with ease, short half note to one note meends could be introduced in the same pre-composed alap piece.

Gat It is advisable for beginners not to get involved in the execution of jod kam in the beginning. The student should learn gats both vilambit and drut after completing basic alap on frets. Depending upon the receptivity and capability of the student, he/she should be taught vilambit and drut gats with simple bols and without introduction of meends (i.e., movement of frets only). In the same manner as alap, once basic technique is observed, short meends could be introduced in the execution of gats as well.

Jhala As jhala sequence is in a sense execution of Alap with the left hand and rhythmic patterns with the right hand, it would be advisable for the student to follow the phrases of the pre-composed alap which he has already learnt by heart, in the execution of the Jhala as well. This would enable the student to complete the section of jhala playing with complete unfoldment of the raga, ending the section with a pre-composed tan / tihayi. Once the student has learnt the above stages of a performance, he should practice all the sections (as if he is playing before an audience), during his practice. It would be useful if he repeats the entire performance at least 3 or 4 times in a sitting to obtain proficiency, resulting into an impressive recital.

For Advanced Students Once the student achieves reasonable control over execution, he/she should be encouraged to do riyaz in the following manner:

Paltas According to Ustads, a palta means any phrase that is executed repeatedly. Hence there could be a palta for alap as well as for tans. We will consider both these separately.

(a) Alap Paltas It would be useful for students to practice alap based pre-composed phrases of a raga covering the middle, lower and upper scales. In other words, an alap palta should be composed to include core movements of a raga starting with the Sa of the middle octave, proceeding to the lower octave and gradually going in the antara format to the upper octave and in the end returning to the basic Sa from where the palta had started. Such paltas could be composed in different ragas for regular practice. This would help in executing the alap with "practiced ease". In fact regular practice of such alap based paltas could form the essentials for unfolding the raga through creative improvisation during a recital.

(b) Tan Paltas An analysis of tans executed by great masters belonging to different gharanas reveals that there are essentially 6 "prakars" of tans and each prakar can be executed in different ways which could be termed as tan "angs" - which are also of 6 different types. Hence it would be useful to compose tan paltas which are "raga specific" covering patterns which could be used gainfully during a performance. It is noticed that some tan paltas are composed with a view to cover all the 2.1/2 to 3 octaves, which could have limited utility in a performance. On the other hand if the paltas are "raga specific" keeping in view the requirements of tan patterns in a performance, the performer would benefit greatly as he/she could use such practiced palta -tans in a performance to great advantage.. Keeping in view the difference between "alankar" and "tans", it would be useful to compose a palta, which could be termed as a tan. Paltas based on geometrical and sequential designs, which could be termed alankars, could be avoided. Intense riyaz of alap paltas and tan paltas could be of great value in making a recital truly effective projecting a good balance between the "matter" and "manner" of the musical presentation.

Alap (Vilambit) Though the element of improvisation has been perceived to be the freedom of musical expression, it cannot be denied that it has to be disciplined by the raga swarup and specific techniques. The unfoldment of the raga structure through the alap could be undertaken in the following manner. Initially the student should be

regularly guided by the teacher to ensure that the execution is disciplined and effective. (a) Subject building - The ending phrase of a specific alap movement could be taken up as a subject, the performer building musical phrases around it. The "subject" phrase could be the ending phrase of the musical build up. Subject building could be undertaken in two ways. Firstly, through melodic unfoldment and secondly interspersing such movements with geometric designs. (b) Once the technique of subject building through the above two methods has been learnt by the performer, the following 6 tenets could be used to further enhance the beauty of execution. 1. Strict adherence to raga swarup 2. Variations in volume 3. Variations in speed 4. Introduction of emotional content (rasa-bhava) 5. Introduction of decorative elements (meends/murkis etc.) 6. Introduction of "gaps" between phrases.

Alap (Jod) The next stage is to develop an understanding of the jod execution. As this paper would deal essentially with riyaz and not talim, I am not elaborating on the role and utility of the jod kam stage. However as Riyaz is necessarily based on Talim - there has to be talim for the techniques to be employed in riyaz, I will deal with the context of jod playing and then how to do riyaz to improve its execution. Advanced students would have already understood how and why jod is introduced in raga elaboration on sitar - basically following the Norn-torn rendition of dhrupad - once proficiency is obtained in execution of different bol-patterns, it is merely a question of making artistic and prescribed use of the same in jod-kam - in all the three stages viz., jod, - madh-jod - ati-jod. In our gharana tradition the drut section of jod-kam (ati-jod), is concluded by executing "ulta-jhala" - or reverse jhala i.e., first Ra stroke on the chikari strings and balance three Da strokes on the main of Baj string. An interesting technique of playing tans interspersed with strokes of Ra on chikari strings is developed by Ustad Vilayat Khan to add variety of the repertoire of jod-kam.

Gat Even for advanced students the technique of gat playing requires stage by stage development. As for beginners, both the varieties of gats and drut should be taught simultaneously. However to start with, execution should be on frets only and after the student has acquired a reasonable control and is able to play the gats with confidence without tension, small meends and other decorative elements could be introduced.

Vilambit Gat It is not uncommon for students at the initial stage to find it difficult to fill up the gap between the execution of gats and tans. In other words, after the execution of the gat in full i.e sthayi and antara the student finds it difficult to start straight away with tans. If this is done, it would be evident that from the execution of the gat in slow tempo, the student would immediately proceed to tans which are usually executed in four times the speed of the tempo of the gat. Hence what I call "gat-kam" has to be introduced between the execution of the gats and playing of tans. Gat-kam can be divided itself into four individual sections as follows:

1. To start with play the gat with variations in different sections of the gat after having played the gat in full i.e., sthayi and antara.
2. Introduction of "behalava" style of alap.
3. Introduction of rhythmic patterns interspersed with bols executed at double the speed of

the basic tempo of the gat. 4. Introduction of short pithy tans opening the door to regular tans.

The student should practice the above mentioned stages regularly, as it would be of immense value to render a raga in full with confidence and practiced ease.

Drut-gat Even for advanced students, it would be useful not to indulge in execution of tans in the drut-gat. However short tans of 2 matras, 4 matras, 6 matras and 8 matras could be played during the execution of the main line of the gat. This would add beauty and variety to the movements. After executing the gat in full i.e., including sthayi and antara, the student should increase the tempo and go on to jhala.

Jhala The same remarks as mentioned in the section for beginners could apply even for advanced students.

General notes It will be noticed that my presentation seems to include training materials rather than material for riyaz itself. However I strongly believe that riyaz should be undertaken to perfect (over a period of time), music which has been imparted by a knowledgeable teacher, both systematically and scientifically. In addition, the following guidelines could be gainfully kept in view: Practicing bol patterns and alap-paltas and tan-paltas would be of immense value to any sitar student. These should be played continuously for a period of time (minimum five minutes to fifteen minutes and to increase it according to the capacity of the student). What is achieved through such practice is execution with "practiced ease". In other words, execution becomes possible without any mental and physical tensions. In effect, 'both the hands become "light" or tension free'. It is essential that the "conscious" and "sub-conscious" mind should be trained to function independently. In other words conscious mind should create music and the sub-conscious mind should execute the same. It is in this context that a famous dictum has been evolved viz., learn the technique, master the technique and then forgets the technique. To develop the above mentioned state of mind, it would be useful to allow the mind to wander while executing paltas. The student would gradually form the habit of focusing his conscious mind on thoughts other than the actual execution of the palta. In other words, the palta would be executed mechanically without any focussed attention through the conscious mind. Though mine has been an elaborate presentation, I have tried to co-relate the same to the existing conditions that an average student is subjected to. I have kept in mind the pressures of time and money which act as constraints to devoting long periods of time for riyaz. If tenets which have been mentioned above are kept in view, satisfactory results could be obtained by undertaking riyaz even for shorter periods. I hope my presentation would be of some value to music students present here today.

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