

Music – Food for the soul

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Search for bliss in each and every note of music and rhythm that you produce with your voice or instrument. Most importantly, remember that 'silence' is also a musical note of extreme enjoyment if treated correctly. Use rhythm to heighten the enjoyment of the notes as one would add depth and shadows to a painting. This advice from my father is the cornerstone of the music that I produce and present.

The basis of my music is a natural progression of my father's, due largely to my very early involvement in his music and the gradual changes in the environment of our different upbringings. His, in a rustic border village in the North-West frontier region of the Indian subcontinent in the early part of this century, mine in the cosmopolitan environment of Malaysia (then Malaya) with access to radio and later television in the second half of this century.

In Punjab, where my father was born and spent all his formative years, the influences ranged from as far west as Egypt, Turkey, the Middle East and East Mediterranean, to Afghanistan. From the East, the influence was from the whole of the Indian subcontinent which appears to have influenced music farther eastward through Myanmar (Burma), Thailand to Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia. For this reason I now find that I can pick melody lines from this huge chunk of South Asia including Southern Russia and use them to produce our compositions.

From the age of about four I absorbed our traditional music and accompanied my father's hymn singing from age ten on harmonium (an Indian keyboard instrument) accompanied by **tabla**. Meanwhile I was also listening to Malay, Chinese, blues, jazz and Caribbean (Calypso) music; Jim Reeves, Elvis Presley, Harry Belafonte, Louis Armstrong, Julie Andrews, Cleo Lane and so on. My horizons were much wider than my father's but I loved his passionate folk style tainted with Indian **ragas**, a mix which remains the mainstay of our group's improvisational style of music.

Choice of accompanying musicians

From experience I find that the Western 'sheet music' musician has difficulty in accompanying and understanding my method of music. Such musicians are used to fully structured music. I do not write my music. I learnt my music by ear. Also, musicians who are fully absorbed in traditional folk styles not compatible with Indian folk music have difficulty to adapting to the greater degree of freedom my music offers. I found a very experienced Irish fiddler and a Celtic harpist unable to accompany me comfortably, whereas a Spanish flamenco guitarist, a Greek bouzouki player, a blues guitarist, a jazz saxophone player, a gypsy violinist, a jazz flautist and even a Vietnamese zither player adapted to the style quite comfortably.

At the cost of over-generalising, I must say that 'academic' musicians, those who have degrees from Universities, notably western, seem to have difficulty with my music. They normally want hours and hours of practice with me before they are prepared to join me on stage because of the prevalent belief amongst them that music must be 'tight' and 'structured', even if it is supposed to be improvisational. Self-taught musicians

appear to fare very well, besides proficient jazz and blues musicians. Musicians who are prepared to open themselves to the non-denominational, non-religious, yet spiritual upliftment our music provides and who are proficient with their instruments fare the best.

Structure of renditions

Each number that we present has a basic structure. First, there is a melody line or **raga** line which is presented vocally in the Punjabi or Urdu languages from the Indian subcontinent, or Malay. Some English lines are now being introduced. Most lyrics are from the holy scriptures of the Sikhs, the 'Guru Granth Sahib' and Sufi sayings. The melody is interspersed by instrumental and vocal improvisations. The rhythm is played on **tabla**, assisted by the **djembe** (African drum) and **yidhaki** (didgeridoo). The yidhaki is used both as a base drone note (substituting the **tanburra**, an Indian one-note four-stringed instrument) and for rhythm and embellishing.

The basis of improvisation

The 'melody' part of each composition could come from virtually any source as long as it can be associated with an Indian **raga** scale first worked out on a keyboard - in my case a 'harmonium'. Within one octave, primarily, Indian **raga** scales have a maximum of seven notes and a minimum of five, sometimes with variations in ascent and descent. Once the scale is established, each musician is able to improvise either totally on the same scale or with embellishments with sympathetic or compatible notes; or even compatible sub-scales as long as the 'base' scale or **raga** is discernible at the completion of an improvisation, so that the melody line is not lost.

It depends on each composition as to how closely the improvisations should stick to the **raga** scale on which the melody is based. In most cases sympathetic notes are permissible. In some cases complete sub-scales are used. If a conventional **raga** is used as the basic melody then the improvisations would adhere closely to the **raga**

scale with permissible sympathetic notes, of course. If, for example, the composition is based on say the 'C' major scale then the improvisations can use compatible minor scales which return to the 'C' major scale on completion.

An example of a 'C' major rendition is our invocation' called 'Mool Mantr' or as now developed, the 'Multichant'. The melody is based loosely on Elvis Presley's 'Wooden Heart' played on the 'C' major scale which is called Bilawal in the North Indian **raga** system. An improvisation could use 'A' flat, 'B' flat and 'C' sharp for enhancement returning to C major on completion. Another improvisation could use the 'C' major scale with embellishments using 'E' flat. Of course improvisations are not limited to any octave just as the melody can extend beyond the middle octave. Semi-tones and quarter-tones are used for further embellishment.

Sometimes the interspersed musical interlude, (which is normally the improvisation section) can be in the shape of common traditional melodies which are compatible to the scale being used. For example, we find that a recent composition in the 'D' major scale played in a six beat cycle can accommodate 'Scarborough Fair' and 'Minuet', in between other improvisations in the same scale. The base melody is a traditional sufi qawali sung in Pakistan.

Finally, improvisations can either stick to the base rhythm, off-beat or free range called **alaap** in my language. For example, we were attempting a particular five (ten) beat rhythm number called 'Tu Thakur - You are the Lord' - for our second album, 'Mystical Traveller'. All the non-Indian musicians were having problems with the rhythm. I told them to ignore the rhythm completely and just improvise on the **raga** scale required. We ended up with a very interesting number where the rhythm is only held by the vocals in the melody line.

Fusion

An area of special interest is fusion. My interpretation of fusion is the bringing together of compatible styles, melodies or tunes from different parts of the world. For example, a very common blues strain happens to be a South Indian **raga** scale called **Kalavati**. We have developed a number called 'Qawali Blues' which explores this combination. Another example is a classical Vietnamese piece based on a pentatonic scale called 'Hoi Nam'. It is the same scale as a North Indian **raga** called **Bhopali** or **Bhoop Kalyan**. We developed a rendition called 'Milap' (Meeting) from this combination. The potential in this area is vast. It brings traditional renditions from different parts of the world together without losing the traditional authenticity yet giving them a global feel.

Practice

Practice is seldom done as a group. There is a reason for this. The essence of each performance is the edge provided by the spontaneous improvisational style of performances so that no two renditions of the same number are exactly the same. This also allows 'guest' musicians to be used at short notice. (It normally takes only a few minutes to find out whether a particular musician can adapt to our style.) Our flautist, Cicilia Kemezys, who has a jazz background, resides in Canberra. Scales of new numbers are sometimes relayed to her by phone! She, like all other musicians, practises improvisations on the provided scale. Cicilia has been known to play numbers which she has not even heard before! Recently, multi-talented musician Lindsay Pollack was able to join us in concert on the saxophone with about ten minutes notice and gave a commendable account of himself.

The problem with such music is providing each musician the space to present an improvisation. The music can become cluttered if not adequately controlled. This problem is solved with eye contact of each musician with me. It does not take long for each musician to find his/her space within each rendition. It is of

course very important that each musician is fully proficient with each different scale being used.

Conclusion

Though our lyrics are mainly non-English, we find a tremendous rapport with audiences who are able to 'feel' the music. We believe we are creating a genre of 'soul' music which has got very little to do with deep South, American 'soul'. Some purists of Indian classical music have problems in coming to terms with our treatment of Indian **ragas**. I accept my father's philosophy that **ragas** should be used as a vehicle to express oneself especially in song and not just rendered as main compositions. As for non-Indian musicians or musicians not fully conversant with the treatment of classical Indian music, that fact should not be an obstacle as all they need to do is to understand **ragas** as basic scales and use these scales to create their own improvisations. In fact, too deep an understanding of individual **ragas** and associated restrictions could sometimes become inhibiting limitations to free expression and spontaneous improvisation. Though limitations are necessary, they should be kept to a minimum. The reason for music is to give the soul a sense of freedom and spontaneity not imprisonment.