

A revered destination

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The performance stage for musicians (for that matter most artists) is a destination – a revered destination arrived at after crisscrossing all kinds of paths and roads. The stage gives an intense focus of spotlight to the artistic power and talent of the performer. A live performance is yet another journey as there are no safety exits like retakes or restarts as in recorded music. For musicians, it is the result of their riyaz with sound that has to permeate through to the audience. Through their music in melodic, harmonic and rhythmic cycles, much has to be depicted – moods, emotions, nature.

Whatever the structural form the artist endeavours to give them, live performance spaces are deeply organic in nature – the audiences' preference for genres, the architectural features of the venue, the promoter/sponsor's bias – the canvas is wide and changing for the performance space.

A much acclaimed sixty-year old pianist from Vienna arrived in Kolkata (on an invitation tour) to perform and play the pianoforte – an instrument he had enjoyed musical fidelity with, since the age of six. A lot of mail (performance specifics, piano requirements) had been exchanged between the process-oriented Western pianist and his Indian hosts. On the day of the performance the artist arrived at his venue two hours prior to his performance, for a sound check (a luxury hotel and his multiple hosts). To his mild surprise there was no sign of the piano. In the email exchanges his hosts had listed multiple options of the

piano and had added a postscript that Kolkata had a rich Western classical music tradition. The mild surprise changed to mild panic as an hour slipped by and there was no sign of the promised instrument. The hotel manager very affably asked the pianist if he could sing as he was a musician! The bemused musician very quickly replied he could not. In the meantime, the multiple hosts made their appearance and all pulled out their mobile phones to call the person in charge of the piano procurement. Guests and listeners had started arriving, and the upright piano from the lobby was hastily dragged in. The hotel piano was more for interior decoration than serious music playing, though it had pedigree! The intrepid musician experimented with the keys. He realised he had to be the artist of the impossible. With just a few minutes to go, he ran his fingers over the arthritic keys. His fingers made friends with the keys, cajoling them, then he took the audience on a journey with Chopin. In all this he made a conscious effort to not let the pitfalls of administrative mismanagement come between him and his music. With the recalcitrant piano he went on to make his music a moving and evocative force.

After sincere praise for the recital had abated, one of his hosts sheepishly apologised for the glitches. The pianist, in measured tones, praised his hosts for their general hospitality but wished that equal or more attention had been paid to the piano. In utter surprise his hosts exclaimed "But you played so well!"

The pianist put on his best professional tone and said, "My music remains my soul and I nurture my soul despite all odds. Because of the stiffness of the keys I had to rearrange some harmonic sequences and work around some crescendos. I do wish the script of the email had been adhered to!" The pianist and his hosts were not on the same book, leave alone being on the same page.

An old SPICMACAY (Society for the Promotion of Indian Classical music and Culture Amongst Youth) hand said, "Being on the same page as the artist is a basic requirement and sometimes we get that one thing so wrong despite best intentions." He recalls that artists like Kishori Amonkar were very particular and exacting about spaces. "Being a veteran of hundreds of concerts, she is one artist with whom the learning curve is always high as you interact with her. From her I learnt the nuances of the sharpness of the sound, where to place the photographers, basically anything and everything that goes to make a performance. It is all about the sovereignty of music and nothing else."

Pandit Shiv Kumar Sharma recounted in a conference (conducted by *The Hindu*) how he did not like any dilution of his classical stage. Once, in a classical music concert he was asked to play his composition for the film *Silsila*. He felt strongly about diluting the podium he was performing on, yet when he saw the eager faces of a section of the audience, he very quickly played a dhun from his film composition for exactly a minute and returned to classical music. As the concert was coming to a close, he

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was again asked to play his film music. This time around he politely refused and said while he respected his popular musical compositions too, he did not like to meddle with the classicism of the stage.

At a classical concert in Chennai, an up-and-coming singer was disturbed midway through his performance by the buzz of cell phones in the audience and the crackling of mikes. His distraction got the better of his music. A veteran kutcherigoer chided the artist saying: "Ignore the distractions and sing freely like a bird." Soon the young singer, reacting to the stentorian command, actually forgot the crackle in the mikes and sang

like a bird. It is interesting to observe how the space transforms the mental frame of the artist. In an enclosed auditorium distractions add a dissonance to the music, whereas in a kalyana (marriage) kutcheri, classical musicians take the distractions in their stride and continue regardless.

Listening to music as a collective activity has been an elemental social act since ages. When the performing space was around the fire, listening and performing norms were instinctively formed. The norms cannot really be defined by any tag. The listener makes a choice to attend a concert; the music takes him to a plane where consciousness shifts as the liquid rush of the

magic of sound takes over. The artist, through his arrangement of music notes and silences, expresses his musical composition to induce emotions, and capture the listeners' attention.

The late Pandit Bhimsen Joshi once said: "Sure we must get a good stage, lighting, sound system and all... but ultimately we must sing like Swami Haridas (Tansen's guru) who only sang for the gods. It's all about paying attention". There was much wisdom in the senior kutcheri-goers words: "Sing (or play) freely like a bird." The inner space of an artist's mind synergises with the space on stage.

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