

## Of microphones and acoustics

Chitra Srikrishna

Who amongst us has not been at a concert where the singer kept on asking the sound engineer to adjust the volume? Worse yet, I remember one or two concerts marred by repeated tweaking of the sound system throughout.

The frequency with which such issues come up means that I often hear such questions as “Is the reason many a vidwan is constantly asking the sound to be turned up due to hearing damage from ever-louder kutcheris?” or even “Is this volume-induced damage the reason that some artists don’t know when they go off-key?”

### Natural concerts

More than once I have found myself wishing for the days of yore when concerts were natural, presented *without* any microphones. Luckily this last year I had an opportunity to attend a number of concerts in such a setting under the auspices of Dhvani India Performing

Arts Society of Central Ohio in Columbus. To be fair, these concerts were not without their share of initial hiccups but on the whole, they have led me to a greater appreciation of the need for such concerts.

Several weeks ago I attended a house concert hosted by Dhvani in which the lead performer was a young vocalist, Madhav Iyengar, supported by Srikanth Mallajosyula (violin) and Vijay Ganesh (mridangam). The intimate setting and, more important, the unamplified voice and instruments allowed the audience to experience music in not just a natural but a nuanced manner. I felt there was a greater rapport between the audience and the artists without the trappings of a stage setup. This was not the first time I was attending such a concert. Last year Padma Sugavanam had presented a vocal concert for the Dhvani audience, when she was supported by Sandhya Srinath

(violin) and Vinod Seetharaman (mridangam).

Of late there has been a resurgence of such natural concerts without microphones—at homes, temples, even parks. I can only imagine how such concerts would have sounded in an earlier era when set in the acoustically-engineered royal durbars.

### The argument for microphones

My own gurus, other performers and friends repeatedly say why singing without a microphone is not only impractical but possibly unhealthy. “Use the microphone and avoid singing full-throated; conserve your voice,” has been a constant refrain during my own training. Singers, particularly those performing frequently, worry about straining their vocal chords or even losing their voice, if they perform without microphones.

Beyond conserving the singer’s voice, concerts without microphones can come with their own challenges for the performers and organisers. If it is a vocal concert, the singer has to be qualified on several fronts to pull this off. It is a true test of the real quality of a singer’s voice without any enhancements (or distortions) by the microphone. In classical music, the singer undergoes training for years to meet not just her guru’s but the discerning audience’s performance bar. Even with meticulous planning of a concert and a well trained voice, the artist may not be able to deliver

(L to R): Vijay Ganesh, Madhav Iyengar and Srikanth Mallajosyula

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on the expectation set by the organiser and audience. The voice of the singer may lack the volume to reach beyond the first few rows. The notes in the lower octave and a stretch in the higher octaves may be inaudible. This may even happen in a concert with microphones, but the problem gets enhanced when there are none.

The accompanying instruments in a Carnatic concert such as the violin and mridangam or even the tabla and harmonium in a Hindustani concert can drown out the voice owing to their natural sounds. The mridangist may have to temper his playing which is not easy and could hinder his skill on the instrument.

The audience need to be disciplined and not make any sound. Even a cough or a whisper can disturb the listening experience in such a setting. The organiser has to make sure that the setting has good acoustics.

### Organic experience

Given these well intended and understood concerns, do I believe there is not just a case, but a need for natural concerts without microphones? Absolutely! In my view the natural sounds of the ensemble in such concerts, provide an organic listening experience rarely felt in a concert with microphones. I would urge rasikas, organisers and artists themselves to actively

support such natural concerts. This may require some public debate and discussion.

*(A number of “mikeless” chamber concert initiatives have been undertaken over the last few years at Chennai. At least two such programmes—by Charsur and The Artery—are now active. —Editor)*

*(The author, a musician, blogs at [chitrasrikrishna.com](http://chitrasrikrishna.com))*

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