

## The HINDU – 17.10.2014

### Classical music for the common man

**Jawhar Sircar**

RICH REPOSITORY:“India’s musical legends such as Pandit Ravi Shankar (in picture) are available to us today through All India Radio’s recordings of their performances at Akashvani Sangeet Sammelans.”— PHOTO: PTI For B.V. Keskar, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru’s Information Minister from 1952 to 1962, Hindi film songs were a strict no-no where Akashvani was concerned. In his opinion, the mission of the public broadcaster was to encourage only classical music. Keskar had to face a lot of pressure and ridicule for this rather obdurate stand, but there is no doubt that had it not been for him, Indian classical music — which by nature was meant primarily for the elite — may have never reached and enthralled the common man.

Among other methods, Keskar introduced the Akashvani Sangeet Sammelan to achieve this purpose. The Sammelan started with a three-day concert on October 23, 1954, at Sapru House, New Delhi. This October marks the 60th year of this festival that has helped immensely in popularising Shastriya Sangeet and making it an integral part of India’s composite culture.

Keskar’s intervention was timely because pandits and ustads had just lost the support of some 600 princes and nawabs of British India. In the 1950s and 1960s, very few cities and institutions had public funding for organising annual music concerts. Though the Presidency towns of Madras, Calcutta and Bombay had their own versions of the All-India Music Conference in the early decades of the previous century, support to classical music was rather sporadic. Keskar’s message was simple: the state would take over the role of princely patrons and ensure fair play through a system of grading artistes to ensure that the best received their due. It was not a perfect plan, but it ensured that a transparent system was in place. Keskar started first with the National Music Programme and then branded the Akashvani Sangeet Sammelan as a reliable and steadfast patron of the arts.

Initially, only internationally renowned music experts were invited and concerts were broadcast live, but as the Sammelan spread to other important cities of the country, All India Radio (AIR) decentralised its broadcast to regional networks. Thus Akashvani reached the common man in a way that classical music never had before. Regional classical artistes vied with each other to participate in this grand exercise. Besides this, Akashvani archives served as the repository of the nation’s cultural wealth by preserving these invaluable recordings. Just as Vividh Bharati played a stellar role in democratising popular music among the masses, the Sangeet Sammelan did wonders for classical music. Almost every famous vocalist or musician was honoured to perform at the Sammelan.

India’s musical legends such as M.S. Subbulakshmi, D.V. Paluskar, Ali Akbar Khan, Ravi Shankar, Bismillah Khan, Pannalal Ghosh, Kumar Gandharva, Semmangudi Srinivas Iyer, S. Balachander, Bhimsen Joshi and many others are available to us today through recordings of their performances at the Sammelans. The best renditions of living legends such as Balamuralikrishna, Kishori Amonkar,

Rajan and Sajan Mishra, Debu Choudhary, Amjad Ali Khan, Vishwa Mohan Bhatt, T.N Krishnan, Hariprasad Chaurasia and Shivkumar Sharma are now part of AIR's archives.

Those were the golden days of Akashvani before television captured the imagination of the nation. But artistes continued to perform even after colour television was introduced in 1982. Sammelans every year began on the same day in October, though a few were even held in December as sarkari funds were unavailable. However, the number of days of the Sammelan reduced from three to one in the late 1980s, as it was becoming increasingly unmanageable and expensive.

While some events have a mixture of Hindustani and Carnatic music, eight events are meant solely for Hindustani and four concerts are reserved only for Carnatic music. A judicious mix of senior and junior artistes can be found at the Sammelans. The senior artistes of today recall with pride how they had performed on the same platforms as earlier legends. The Sammelan brochure of 1987 for instance shows veterans like Sharan Rani Backliwal, Ali Ahmed Hussain Khan, C.R. Vyas, Bimal Mukherjee and Basavaraj Rajguru rubbing shoulders with the unrecognisable young faces of Vishwa Mohan Bhatt, Budhaditya Mukherjee, and Parveen Sultana.

There are plenty of anecdotes to be shared about these Sammelans. When Savita Devi, the renowned vocalist, ended her performance at Vadodara in the late hours of the night of one Sammelan, the audience simply refused to get up, even after being repeatedly told that the evening had ended. The artiste had no option but to continue singing for another hour until the crowd was satisfied. Arvind Parikh still remembers how he was signalled desperately by Gajananrao Joshi at the Indore Sammelan to race through the last part of his recital, as he was to make space for Bismillah Khan's shehnai. Joshi's watch was running ahead of time and it was only when the audience greeted his announcement with laughter that he looked at his watch and went red in the face.

Shanno Khurana recalls how she was compelled overnight to perform in Lucknow in the mid-1980s because Madhuri Mattoo was unable to do so. After a very satisfying performance, she went home, but she soon received a call from the panic-stricken programme officer who informed her that the recording equipment had failed and that they would lose their jobs if she did not come to the studio once again and redo the entire performance from memory. How official records were fudged and the applause of the audience was brought in at the right intervals remains a mystery.

Today, music has been digitised and commodified but good content still remains the king. One such source of excellent content that renews the cultural vigour of the nation is thankfully alive and kicking — even at sixty.

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