

Seminar on *Sarangi*: Reflections from Canada

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On January 9, 1994, the *Seminar on Sarangi*¹ was held in Bombay to consider this instrument and its future. Organized by the Sangeet Research Academy, Western Region, in collaboration with the Department of Culture, Government of India, this followed an earlier *Seminar on Sitar* (1990), both events under the stewardship of Arvind Parikh. Ashok Vajpayi, representing the Department of Culture, provided continuity with the first *Sarangi Mela* which he had organized in Bhopal (1991).

The *Seminar on Sarangi* was ground-breaking in several respects. First of all, the agenda was to bring together members of the total music-making community as equal participants to discuss the threatened survival of this uniquely expressive instrument in the changing music world. For a researcher and music student who is deeply concerned with the *sarangi* this seminar was both enlightening and inspiring, for it generated knowledge and ideas, offering a model for positive intervention in the cultural life of a nation.

The organizers showed awareness of the need to have input and collaboration from all the constituencies that together give life to classical music and to the *sarangi* within it. Performers, listeners/*rasiks* [connoisseurs], patrons, and musicologists were all well represented in formal presentations and discussions, offering expert knowledge and articulating concerns particular to each. While most participants embodied more than one, or even all of these categories, it may be useful to consider each of them in turn and identify specific issues that emerged during the seminar.

The instrument

The absence of a *sarangi* maker testified eloquently to a lacuna that reflects the precarious status of this instrument: very few *sarangis* are made today. *Sarangi* players themselves know how to, and occasionally do, cover the instrument's wooden body with skin, and some even make their own playing strings from gut. All players handle setting up the bridges and inserting the instrument's forty strings; they also wash the hair of the bow when needed.

Rajesh Bahadur, student of the legendary *sarangi* player Bundu Khan (c.1880-1955; see the cover of this issue of *Bansuri*), and representing the rare point of view of an amateur learning to play the *sarangi*, rightly pointed to the problem of maintaining and even tuning this complex instrument away from the daily presence of an expert. His eloquent call for rationalizing the production and shape of the *sarangi* in turn raised the issue of maintaining

or diluting the integrity of this unique instrumental tradition. It also pointed to the fact that *sarangi* building has not yet experienced the standardizing and rationalizing impact of a mass demand from students and teaching institutions that have proliferated in India and even abroad. No wonder, for the *sarangi* is the only living instrument of classical music which has not been taken up by middle class music lovers.

Sarangi players

Appropriately, this was the most prominent group in the assembly, with representatives of different traditions and regions. At the same time it was also the most clearly delineated group at the seminar, for the *sarangi* is still essentially played only by musicians from a hereditary professional background, most of whom share a rather distinct social style and a way of living in which music and life are inseparably linked.

Nearly all *sarangi* players come from a particular social and professional milieu which has a precious culture all its own: a culture that connects these musicians with each other through bonds forged not just of making music but from a shared way of life, because their music is their life and livelihood, their family, their education, and their identity. Music is their geography and their history, even their system of beliefs, regardless of which religion they profess. Of course this is not to imply that non-hereditary musicians are less total in their devotion to music, only that they live with other options for all of those life facets. They, or their parents for them, could choose music over law whereas *sarangi* players, or their parents, could only choose between *sarangi* and another instrument played within the family. As a result, few *sarangi* players have been able to partake of the benefits of middle-class culture.

The *sarangi* players' most serious concerns revolved around patronage. There are too few concert opportunities for soloists, and the pay scale is always lower than that of other instrumentalists. This emanates ultimately from the traditionally lower status of the *sarangi* as an accompanying instrument. That status also translates into dependence for patronage on the singer to be accompanied, for today *sarangi* players are no longer engaged and paid directly by concert or conference organizers. Instead, both functions are left to the soloist to pay from his/her fee, which means he/she offers the accompanist little or perhaps does not even engage a *sarangi* player. Direct access to patrons was therefore deemed essential by the participating performers.

Another strong concern voiced was the aesthetic limitations placed on the *sarangi*, based mainly on the association of the instrument with death and mourning. The resulting specific recommendation was that on occasions of public mourning All India Radio should broadcast quiet music by a variety of instruments, not just *sarangi*.

Listeners/Connoisseurs/Critics

This very important and diverse group included knowledgeable listeners as well as journalists-writers who, together with others, represented the media. Connoisseur associations were represented by, among others, the Society of Indian Record Collectors. Beyond that, at this seminar the category of *rasik* extended to all those present regardless of their identity. Their special appreciation of the *sarangi* was in fact what created a unique solidarity among participants.

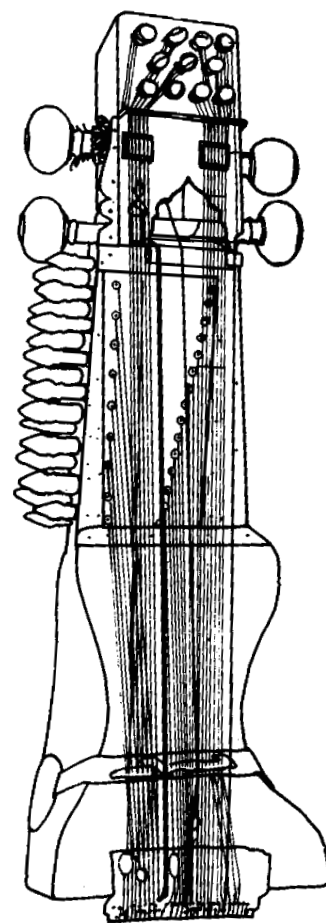
Aesthetically, listeners differed from performers by appreciating the particular sonic flavour of the *sarangi* which is based on traditional associations with love and separation. Listeners also continued to appreciate the special musical partnership between *sarangi* player and singer, notwithstanding the *sarangi* player's subordinate position in the relationship.

Patrons

Patrons clearly have the ultimate power to effect change and improvement in the *sarangi's* situation. Institutions, both governmental and privately sponsored, are primary here. Conceiving, sponsoring, and organizing the seminar itself constituted a major act of patronage initiated and carried out by Arvind Parikh. Government was represented by the Ministry of Culture through Ashok Vajpayi. The public media, especially All India Radio, were also represented; so were teaching institutions. Concert organizing societies like SPICMACAY were there too.

But *sarangi* patrons also included vocalists who employ *sarangi* players as accompanists for concerts or practice. A recorded interview by Kishori Amonkar highlighted an ambivalence toward *sarangi* players who are deemed too soloistic yet should nonetheless have outstanding competence.

The *sarangi's* status as an accompanying instrument becomes an impediment to the lustre of its image as a solo instrument. This translates into lower concert attendance; hence an "affirmative action" commitment was proposed for concert organizers to feature at least one *sarangi* recital per season. Likewise, the *sarangi* should receive a full National Programme on All India Radio rather than sharing it with its erstwhile accompanying partner, the *tabla*.



Perhaps most important of all, there was a genuine concern for the survival of the *sarangi* heritage along with a desire to search for ways in which to further facilitate the transmission and documentation of the skills and accomplishments of *sarangi* playing.

Scholars

This group included musicologists as well as specialists on the *sarangi* who could offer a broader perspective. Institutions of music research and teaching were represented, including Bombay University, SNDT University, Bharat Bhavan of Bhopal, and Sangeet Mahabharati. Their presentation focused on aspects of history, including the past association of *sarangi* with folk music and with courtesan establishments, something from which performers clearly wish to be dissociated. For historians of music their concerns served to raise the issue of purpose, and for foreigners they raised the question of their role vis à vis local experts and sensibilities.

Personally, I see scholarship on the *sarangi* serving a broader goal as well: to help interpret, contextualize, and document the milieu of hereditary music making and feudal-mercantile patronage, that unique musical amalgam resulting from highly professional musicianship, generous personal patronage, and aesthetic connoisseurship coming together in a partnership that has social as well as musical roots. More than any other domain of Hindustani music, the world of *sarangi* playing retains musical memories and practices from that milieu, even as its outstanding protagonists are striving to transcend it. In their ethnographic studies of *sarangi* players music researchers are offered a special opportunity to glimpse a collective lifeway that has been determined by, and devoted to, creating and transmitting music; such studies create an informed background and help the field to move positively in the direction which this seminar has initiated. Yet to be effective, this scholarship must be done in partnership with the musicians, and it must support their musical and personal goals as a community.

Doing such research also means addressing a number of contradictions that the seminar brought to the fore: 1) According to *sarangi* players many of them are underemployed, while according to vocalists and others there is a shortage of *sarangi* players; 2) Connoisseurs speak of the unique attractiveness of the *sarangi's* sound, while *sarangi* players demand release from the confines of the instrument's specific identity; 3) The music/musicology community is taking initiatives to expand the scope of the *sarangi* and its music, but there is little in terms of initiatives to expand the constituency of its players – even at this seminar no one particularly called for cultivating amateur *sarangi* players who would become the lobby group for *sarangi* concerts and for equitable fees for *sarangi* players.

Until today, then, the *sarangi* remains beyond the pale of middle-class practice and continues to be associated with a lower social class of hereditary specialists, some obvious exceptions notwithstanding. *Sarangi* players therefore stand apart, oriented to each other within the community more than toward outsiders, due to their social isolation.

The organizers of the *Seminar on Sarangi* showed an immediate sensitivity to the need to overcome this gulf so as to create equivalence as a basic condition for a dialogue among all participants. As a major step they encouraged the gathering to choose Hindi, not English, as the seminar language so that members of the musician community who do not use English much could be full partners in the discussions. This may have reduced the comprehension of some foreign participants, but it resulted in *sarangi* players being heard.

The Sangeet Research Academy is to be congratulated for initiating an important dialogue that has yielded valuable knowledge. This seminar will help orient further action toward strengthening the enriching presence of the *sarangi* in Hindustani music; it also stands as a fine model for such efforts on behalf of other musical traditions.

Notes

1 The participants in the *Seminar on Sarangi* were as follows:

Inauguration: Prem Lata Sharma.

Key-note speakers: Ashok Vajpayi, Joep Bor.

Participating *sarangi* players: Ram Narayan (Chief Guest), Abdul Latif Khan, Dhruva Ghosh, Hafizullah Khan, Hanuman Prasad, Inderlal Dandha, Iqbal Hussain Khan, Liyaqat Ali Khan, Moinuddin Khan, Rafiq Ahmed Khan, Ramesh Mishra, Ramzan Khan, Sagirruddin Khan, Sultan Khan.

Speakers – Vocalists representing different *gharanas*: Firoz Dastoor, Ghulam Mustafa Khan, K.G. Ginde, Kishori Amonkar, Shobha Gurtu.

Speakers – Foreign musicologists: Daniel Neuman, Regula Burckhardt Qureshi, Neil Sorrell, Marianne Svasek.

Speakers – Indian musicologists/critics: Rajesh Bahadur, Rajiv Vora, Shriniwas Rath.

Moderator: Arvind Parikh.

Regula Burckhardt Qureshi's interest in the sarangi arose out of her background as a classical cellist and from her deep involvement in Indian Muslim culture. She has studied sarangi for almost 30 years. Her major contribution to ethnomusicological literature is her book Sufi Music of India and Pakistan; Sound, Context and Meaning in Qawwali (Cambridge University Press, 1986).