

Some Thoughts on the Meaning of *Riaz* in Hindustani Music

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Practice and exercise are essential components of any acquired skill, be it artistic or otherwise. The importance of *riaz* – musical practice – is not only explicitly recognized in the Indian musical tradition but it is also prominently emphasized and accorded a most elevated status. Given the prominence of the concept in Hindustani theory and practice, it could be assumed that Indian musicians practice more than the musicians of most other traditions in the world. *Riaz* actually embraces a wide range of ideas, from the practical and social to the ideal and spiritual. Ethnomusicologists such as Alan Merriam (1964) and Paul Berliner (1991) have recognized the importance of studying learning processes, as they reveal much about conceptual aspects of a musical culture.

Neuman (1980: 61, 69) reports that among contemporary professional Hindustani musicians the sacred aspects of *riaz* and musical activity in general are clearly subordinate to the practical, “secular” ones. He traced this dichotomy to the “archetypal” historical figures of Tansen and his teacher Swami Haridas (ibid.: 60). Neuman’s study, like most modern studies of Indian music, focuses on the activities of professional musicians and excludes non-professional esoteric practices.¹ The North Indian Muslim professional milieu seems to be rather high profile in comparison to Middle Eastern cultures where professionalism is often downplayed (Faruqi 1985: 16-18; During 1984: 19). Nonetheless, Hindustani professional musicians usually acknowledge the sacred dimension of music, even if it is not fully actualized or integrated into their activities (Neuman 1980: 61). This stress on the ideal nature and purpose of music, here in the form of musicians feeling obliged at least to acknowledge it, is the deepest layer of musical meaning; it points beyond the individual to the conceptions and values of the culture, and still further, beyond culture to the universal human need to acknowledge the transcendental. This ideal, while often absent on the surface, is tacitly present and ultimately justifies the existence of the music. One must bear in mind, however, that unlike our Western orientation, traditional² cultures (including India to the extent that it is still traditional) tend to blur the sacred/secular dichotomy. Without wishing to minimize the mundane aspects of *riaz*, which are treated in detail by Neuman (1980), Sorrell (1985: 67-92) and Kippen (1988: 127-31), this paper will focus on an etic (i.e., objective) interpretation of how *riaz* corresponds to various features of Hindu-Muslim spiritual practices and concepts.

Parallels between sacred and secular practice

The process of *riaz* and the social structure of the *gharana* [family-based musical tradition] system and the *guru-shishya parampara* [master-disciple relationship] is strikingly similar to the organization and practices of Sufism in India and throughout the Muslim world. It is well known that until relatively recent times the majority of Hindustani musicians were Muslim, and that Sufis played a vital role in Indian Islam and in the development and maintenance of Hindustani music.³ While there are substantial differences between spiritual and musical practices/concepts, many similarities are also evident. Prestige of initiatory affiliation to a pedigree *gharana* corresponds to that of the *sisila* [genealogical “chain”] of successive Sufi *sheikhs* [head, authority] of a particular *tariqah* [branch]. In the same way that a *tariqah* maintains a living *sheikh* – an authority that is passed on to the most worthy disciple – *gharanas* (especially *tabla gharanas*) traditionally maintain a *khalifa* [head, authority] (Kippen 1980: 53).

It seems obvious that the figure of the musical master is modeled on that of the *sheikh* or Hindu *guru*. Both the spiritual and musical master demand love, respect, devotion and total obedience (Neuman 1980: 33). The disciple in both domains is completely subordinate and without individuality, like a *tabula rasa* awaiting the master’s imprint. Likewise, the relationship between master, student, and fellow students is akin to the father-son-brother relationship in both initiatory and musical establishments. The *sheikh* and the music master both serve as a source of explicit teachings and as general models of lifestyle and comportment. Transmission of esoteric, secretive teachings also characterizes both institutions (ibid.: 50-53). If we extend this further, *riaz* may be viewed as corresponding to *zikr* invocational practices in Islam, the primary means by which the novice elevates his/her level of consciousness. In addition to universal *zikrs* commonly shared (analogous to musical repertory shared by many *gharanas*), Sufi *sheikhs* frequently impart a personal formula to an individual adept that is never to be divulged, even to other Sufis (compare, for example, legends of the secret repertoire of a *tabla ustad* [maestro], which may only be imparted on his deathbed to his principal student).

When done properly, *riaz* connotes prestige on a number of levels. It is often the standard by which a musician is evaluated by his/her peers: the more dedicated the *riaz*, the better the artist (Neuman 1980: 31-43). Dedication is the key, since *riaz* reflects dedication to one’s *guru*, the art of music, and ultimately (or ideally) one’s dedication to God. The sacred/secular dichotomy seems to resurface regarding the prestige of *riaz*: on the one hand there is a secular romanticism associated with the self-sacrificing artist (a concept equally valid in the West) and on the other a *bhaktic* [devotional] tendency whose purpose is to transcend the mundane realm. Ideally the surface appreciation of “art for art’s sake” is

subsumed by one of “art for God’s sake”. I shall return to this *bhaktic* dimension of *riaz* throughout the remainder of this paper.

From a purely objective and pragmatic point of view, the integral virtuosic nature of Hindustani music itself necessitates rigorous practice (see Sorrell 1980: 67). The uncompromising technical demands of all genres require the performer to be musically and physically in “top shape”: anything less will be insufficient to carry the style effectively. The sheer mechanics of digital and vocal technique are frequently taken to extremes that go beyond average human capabilities. These mechanical standards are complemented with the more subtle, intellectual demands of the musical language of *rag* and *tal* [the melodic and rhythmic systems]. In contrast to the physical strength required by mechanical technique, the definitions and identities of individual *rags* and *tals*, along with their potential



for development, are extremely subtle and complex, and require years of careful concentration and study in order to “understand”. Both the mechanical and musically intellectual techniques, however, require extreme precision:⁴ of body (and instrument) and mind. Their union allows for the release of musical energy, which is ultimately contingent on Divine Will. This union of complements as a source of creative energy corresponds to processes that characterize Indian philosophy: cosmically, the union of *purusa* [subtle dimension of manifestation] and *prakriti* [gross manifestation] is the cause of all manifestation; *nada*, causal sound, arises from the union of *prana* [breath] (Na) and *dah* [burn] (Da); *tala* itself is the union of *tandava* [movement] (Ta) and *laya* [rhythm] (La).

Riaz is the means by which the music student, having received instruction in both mechanical technique and musical definitions, “puts it all together”. Having imparted the information, the teacher can only provide guidance and supervision of the student’s individual journey towards internalizing and actualizing the music within him/herself. *Riaz* itself, then, turns into the ultimate lesson where the student interacts with the traditional structures on his/her own individual terms; indeed, Hindustani musicians often regard *riaz* as an art and an end in itself (Neuman 1980:36). The experience of *riaz* fills in the unteachable and inexpressible elements of the transmission process. The traditional conception of knowledge in India (shared also by the ancient Greeks and the Chinese) is that of an identity of knowing and being. Knowledge is active and must change the substance of the individual. Without actualization through *riaz* the master’s knowledge has been imparted but not transmitted. The integrity of the entire musical tradition depends as much on *riaz* as it does on the *guru-shishya parampara* – perhaps more so, as it requires

somewhat less effort to impart what one already knows than it does to actualize what one does not know. The importance of *riaz* to the integrity of the musical tradition is explicitly demonstrated in a famous passage of the *Natyasastra* where Narada is shown the *rags* broken and defaced from careless performance and practice.

The Arabic word *riaz* came into North Indian languages via Persian. Above the meaning of “lucubration”, “laborious study”, the Persian usage of the word usually denotes “mortification”, “rigour”, “asceticism” (Haim 1961: 354), meanings that are generally reserved for describing self-discipline toward a spiritual end. This usage of the term generally applies throughout the Middle East. Two facts emerge to illuminate the Indian appropriation of the word. Firstly, the convention of rigorous practice is not usually held among Persian musicians, who in general practice relatively little (During 1984: 99; Simms 1991: 97). Secondly, the South Indian term for musical practice, *sadhana*, is a Sanskrit word denoting virtually the same meaning as the non-musical origin of *riaz*: striving, austerities and practice toward a spiritual end. It seems as though the Persian word was transposed from an initiatory, spiritual context to a specifically musical and perhaps exclusively Indian one (in that musical practice as a spiritual endeavour is uniquely Indian and generally alien to Middle Eastern cultures). The word *riaz* retained its spiritual basis but was applied to specifically musical pursuits, and came to include other less spiritual concepts as well.

The literature is full of fantastic (and perhaps fanatical) accounts of the extremes to which *riaz* is pursued by Indian musicians: tying one’s hair to the ceiling to prevent sleep; sitting among scorpions; the forty-day *chilla* [see below]. Punishments levied by teachers against the student for insufficient practice are often more brutal than the rigour of *riaz* itself (getting thrown through windows, pulling ears with red hot tongs). I recall someone describing the process of *riaz* as consisting of three stages: first one must sweat, then bleed, and finally cry before success is attained. There is an undeniable sense of mortification in musical *riaz*, engaging or subordinating the body toward a higher goal (ironically, this engagement leads to an interior disengagement), transcending the flesh in order to develop the soul. Without wishing to overstate the fact, there seems to be a correspondence here to mortification tendencies that characterize *bhaktic* and ascetic strains of Hinduism (and to a lesser extent Sufism). These austerities run the gamut from piercing the flesh for hours at a time, to long-term commitments of standing on one foot, day and night, continuously for ten years. The word *chilla*, used to denote the forty-day *riaz* intensive, is highly suggestive since in the Middle East it usually connotes some sort of physically and psychologically demanding spiritual initiation – the specifically Indian usage of the word is discussed by Neuman (1980: 41) and Kippen (1988: 129). In cases where the musician primarily employs *riaz* to gain musical skill, there seems to be an underlying devotional criterion that demands absolute, and occasionally extreme, physical sacrifice.

Practice and performance

The differentiation of practice and performance in Hindustani music is a complex matter upon which there is some disagreement among writers. In his discussion of creativity in general, Nachmanovitch (1990: 66ff) warns of the difficulties that can arise when a player makes a rigid distinction between practice and performance, “exercise and the real thing”. He continues, “The Eastern idea of practice... is to create the person, or rather to actualize or reveal the complete person who is already there” (ibid.: 68). Sorrell, in a section titled “Practice into performance”, affirms this non-distinction (1980: 74). In contrast to this holistic, integrated approach to making music Nachmanovitch (1990: 69ff) also recognizes the importance of maintaining the above-mentioned dichotomy: the player needs privacy in order to experiment, make mistakes and “put it all together”. Ultimately musical practice lies in the balance of these two poles (ibid.: 72). Neuman, however, explicitly highlights the clear separation of *riaz* from performance amongst Hindustani musicians, suggesting that it is indeed vital not to confuse the two activities (1980:40). The musicians must indeed make a distinction between the two because the content of what they practice and what they perform are quite different. Moreover, musicians never “rehearse” the entire exposition of a *rag* and composition (Sorrell 1980: 80); if there were no conceptual differentiation, then the music itself would be the same in both situations.⁵ Perhaps Hindustani musicians are



referring to the integrated perspective when they speak of needing less practice because of the efficiency of their *riaz*. Because they “know how to practice” (Neuman 1980: 36-7), their level of realization tips the balance in favour of non-distinction. Nevertheless, even accomplished masters maintain regular, if shorter, periods of *riaz* as a distinct activity, especially if they must perform and for some reason feel “rusty” (see Kippen 1988: 129).

The development of the player’s powers of concentration (Neuman 1980: 38; Kippen 1988: 128-9) seems to relate to the practice/performance dichotomy. *Riaz* is the means by which concentration is developed, sustained concentration being a prerequisite for performance. One can, of course, afford to have lapses in concentration in the privacy of practice, whereas such a lapse in performance would seriously disturb the flow of the music. Likewise, the ability consistently to sustain one’s concentration would tend to blur the distinction between performance and practice; given that the player has achieved and commands the mechanical and intellectual techniques through past *riaz*, the sole remaining

condition for “performance” is concentration. Concentration is indeed the end toward which various spiritual exercises are the means; through concentration we transform ourselves, uniting knowledge with our being. The master musician, having “become” the music, would theoretically have transcended the need for the support of *riaz* (although, as we have seen, this is often not the case in practice).

The alchemy of *riaz*?

As a musical activity ideally directed toward spiritual development, one of the most interesting things about *riaz* is how it relates to the wide range of exercises in Hinduism (and Sufism) that employ sound as an “alchemical” (i.e., using sound itself as a transformational agent) means of spiritual development: *mantra/japa/sabda* yoga, *zikr*, *bhajan* singing [Hindu devotional genre], etc. (see Beck 1989). It is clear that while this dimension is the ultimate conceptual deep structure of *riaz* in Indian culture, it lies well outside the ordinary experience of the average professional musician. Neuman draws a parallel between the ideal and the actual notion of *riaz* with that of the “achievements of the saints and kings and the unrealized aspirations of ordinary people” (1980: 43).

The most immediate alchemical link between practical and ideal *riaz* would seem to exist in vocal *riaz*. This necessarily follows from the primacy of vocal sound associated with the above-mentioned yoga traditions. The initial exercises in vocal training, described to me in 1992 by Pandit Vidhyadar Vyas, seem to lie on the cusp of *sabda* yoga techniques. A brief description of the exercise follows:

Breathing deeply, one sustains *madhya sa* [middle-range doh] for as long as possible in the course of a single exhalation, paying careful attention to the maintenance of steady pitch, an appropriate timbre, and relaxed vocal cords. Using the scale of the diatonic Bilaval *that*, one descends stepwise through the *mandra saptak* [lower octave range] using one breath per *svar* [note]; upon singing the lowest comfortable note, one returns stepwise to *madhya sa*; then repeat. The exercise should begin using *omkar* [or *akar*, the open vowel sound “ah”], which after several repetitions may be replaced with *sargam* [solfège]. The exercise proceeds very slowly, taking up to five or six minutes to descend from and return to *sa*. After repeating this cycle several times, one may proceed by repeating the exercise singing two *svar* per breath, increasing to three, four and five *svar* (and, of course, shortening the duration of each *svar* accordingly) until one completes the entire ascent and descent with one breath; one would then attempt to sing as many cycles as possible with a single breath, alternating *omkar* and *sargam*.

Attached to this exercise were largely practical prescriptions that lent the exercise a sense of ritual, a common feature of *riaz* (Neuman 1980: 38). It is to be practiced immediately after waking up; after completing one’s toilet, one should drink a glass of water, and sit

comfortably centred on the floor. It should be done for no longer than forty-five minutes, after which one should rest the voice for a half hour, silently doing errands or having breakfast. One should then return to the exercise, working upward from *madhya sa* to the top of one's range, again to a maximum of forty-five minutes. Once one advances with this practice, cycle repetitions can be reduced so that one may exercise the entire range in the first session, repeating the same in the second. The ritualistic prescriptions or regularities that often characterize *riaz* are meant to establish an environment that is conducive to concentration, and which generally demarcates the session from other activities in which one engages. Nachmanovitch (1990: 76) notes that such ritual preparation contributes to the effectiveness of the session which naturally flows through three phases: invocation, work, thanks.

While differing in significant ways, such preliminary vocal exercises (especially in the "slow phase") engage the faculties that are used in *mantra/sabda* yoga exercise: slow controlled breathing, regular repetition of sound, relaxed posture/performance, vocal control, and concentrated listening. The degree of focus and absorption that arises from this exercise is extremely intense, instilling in the singer a psychic equilibrium and interiorization that takes one well beyond a normal musical experience. Vyas agreed that, while being excellent for developing musical sensibilities and technique, it was indeed an efficacious meditative technique.

We have seen that the ability to develop one's concentration is an important aspect of *riaz* (Neuman 1980: 38). Indeed, sound is a powerful medium through which to develop one's faculties of concentration (Beck 1989; Frischkopf 1990). There is, however, no common measure between the ends to which *riaz* and yoga are used as a means. While *riaz* could theoretically be channelled into a more exclusively alchemical pursuit it is, of course, a means to acquiring an artistic skill. The concentration developed is of an entirely different order than that which is developed in yoga, the intricacies and complexities of musical sound in fact detract from the processes at work in *mantra* yoga.

Whereas *riaz* aims at musical/artistic perfection and may symbolize one's "inner development" toward that end (Neuman 1980: 34), the yogic uses of sound, by contrast, aim much higher at human perfection, which may be defined here as ultimately to surpass our ordinary selves and to transcend the human condition. The ideal spiritual efficacy of *riaz* is not alchemical (although it could theoretically be used in this way) but is rather *bhaktic*. One dedicates one's work – be it chopping wood, driving a cab, or playing music – to God; the specific act is irrelevant because one integrates one's particular vocation into the realization of one's personal God (Embree 1988: 321-2). Everything and anything is a means to this end. While the majority of Hindustani musicians have until recently been

Muslim, these *bhaktic* tendencies have interwoven with Indian Sufism since the beginning of the Hindu-Muslim encounter. It is an orientation that is in fact entirely concordant with exoteric Islam (indeed, much more so than gnostic, alchemical, or ascetic ones). From a certain perspective, it is this *bhaktic* orientation that accounts for the Indian tendency to “make everything sacred” and subsume it within a holistic framework, blurring the distinction between sacred and secular.

Conclusion

Having concluded that *riaz* essentially reflects the spiritual modality of *bhakti*, we must also recognize that it cannot be viewed exclusively as equivalent to chopping wood or driving a cab: its status is immediately elevated by being an art, the traditional function of which is to reflect archetypal beauty and *lila* [play]. It is also subject to a certain ambiguity which frequently characterizes the position of music in many cultures. While a full treatment of the concept of musical ambiguity lies quite beyond the scope of this paper, we may conclude by reviewing briefly the features of *riaz* that are subject to it.

The most obvious ambiguity would be the sacred/secular dichotomy of *riaz* and music itself. While musicians concentrate on the practical applications of *riaz*, they often outwardly maintain its devotional purpose, a convention they may simply repeat without much thought. This ambiguity is further highlighted by Muslim musicians who may also take recourse to the devotional function in order to detract from the controversial legal position of music in Islam (the enormous volume of polemic literature, both for and against music, extends from the ninth century to the present, and is one of the most explicit expressions of musical ambiguity to be found in any culture). As a result of the dichotomy, the prestige and value placed on *riaz* is of an ambiguous nature: that of secular romanticism on the one hand, and a genuine *bhakti* or gnosis on the other. The development of musical concentration, the routine or ritual, the self-mortifying aspects of *riaz*, and the effects of vocal *riaz* are ambiguous to the extent that, while directed at musical development, they may occasionally interface with spiritual techniques or aims. By virtue of its intermediary or essentially ambiguous nature, music may oscillate between the two poles of sacred and secular (remembering the traditional “blurring” qualifications made above) or partake of both simultaneously in various situations and according to individual orientations. This “flexibility” accounts for the wide range of conceptions and functions music performs in Indian culture, and indeed many other cultures as well.

Notes

- 1 Indeed, few ethnomusicologists have investigated such esoteric activity in any culture; a notable exception is During (1989), whose study of Iranian Sufi *tariqahs* and other esoteric groups (i.e., the Ahl al-Haqq) appears to set a precedent in the field.
- 2 Tradition is used here in the sense it acquired from Rene Guenon and Ananda Coomarswamy, i.e., the transmission of principal wisdom of the nature of reality. From this perspective, a traditional culture is one in which such a metaphysical orientation unifies, informs and directs the culture as a whole (see Nasr 1981).
- 3 This sweeping generalization is not meant to gloss over the fact that these are enormous and complex topics in themselves.
- 4 Etymologically related to *riaz* is the Arabic word *riazyat*, “mathematics”, symbol of precision.
- 5 To be fair, those who espouse the identity of practice and performance are likely referring to the degree of seriousness and concentration required of the former.

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