

If Bisht is seriously interested in exploring the differences between the Hindustani and Carnatic systems of music, he might devote some time to a patient reading of the following: 'Carnatic and Hindustani Music: Some Differences' (*Sruti* 97, October 1992); and 'North Indians and Carnatic Music' (*Sruti* 209, February 2002), with a sequel in *Sruti* 211 (April 2002).

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Use Real Tanpura

I would like to respond to the letter of N. Krishnaraj of Chennai about tanpura vs. electronic devices (*Sruti* 243). I have been a professional tanpura player for visiting Indian artists on international concert stages for many years. Over the years I have come to appreciate greatly what is possible with a good tanpura and a lot of patience and devotion. I practice the art of jivari, make bridges, repair instruments, etc. Whereas Krishnaraj does not want to enter into the arena of discussion, I would like to put in my view, not only as a professional tanpura-player, as much as a music lover and a listener. And I hope to be able to voice it in a sensible and respectful way, because I really care about this. My ultimate loyalty is to Saraswati, if I may say so.

Let's face it: there is no way an electronic device can replace the natural and living sound of a properly tuned tanpura, or even better, two tanpura-s! I realise I must be more Catholic than the Pope himself in these matters as they say around here, because I cannot understand why so many good and otherwise subtle musicians put up with these electronic replacements of the real thing, why they are willing to sacrifice the inspiring and subtly shaded living sound of a proper tanpura in favour of a lifeless artefact. All I can think of is apart from immediate practical reasons (electronic devices perform on demand without needing tickets, hotel rooms, food and time/patience) is that travelling artists who do not bring their own trusted tanpura player (s) are unsure of both the players and the instruments, so they use electronics to be sure.

However, I think this an assumption, if not an illusion, as often the sruti-s of real tanpura(s) and the electronic device move away from each other,

whereas two real tanpura-s will converge into a dynamic blend. With one real tanpura and an electronic box, the pure resonance of the tanpura is masked by the fixed sound of the electronic device if it is set too loud. In my experience, they actually stand in the way of "perceiving Nada". So for me, they spoil the mood. If I take great care to prepare a beautiful-sounding tanpura at the desired sruti for a particular artist who then brings 3 (!) electronic devices to the stage, what can I do, but wonder?

Actually, with so many musicians just turning knobs instead of tuning tanpura-s it is no wonder that good tanpura players are hard to find. Though the electronic tanpura-s get better all the time (at least some recent types are stable) they have no artistic quality and always give the same sound as you cannot adjust the jivari or microtuning per 'string'. So you get a one size fits all-sound, the same gray drizzle every day. The use of electronic devices is, let's say, an epidemic. Then, in the near future, who will be able to appreciate the subtle differences between the madhyama of Malkauns or Bagesree, the komal dhaivata of Darbari or Gunkali, etc. Saraswati must be weeping over our lack of devotion. Now I know that within a few years there might be a type of electronic device in which you can select a proper tuning for Malkauns or Bagesree. Is this really good for music?

On the other hand, everything should be done to ascertain the availability of trained tanpura players and well-maintained instruments. I remember they used to say: having good tanpura-s is half the concert won!

I feel this is an enormously important issue with a lot at stake, and we must be willing to think seriously about this. The daily dealings with a real tanpura is a blessing for a musician, a continuous learning process in which we also learn patience. Every aspect of the tanpura needs attention and patience. Does a musician no longer need patience and humility in these fast-paced times before Music? What will be the changes in our music when these electronic devices are used over a long period?

I favour open discussion because I feel this is very important.

Martin Spaink
by email