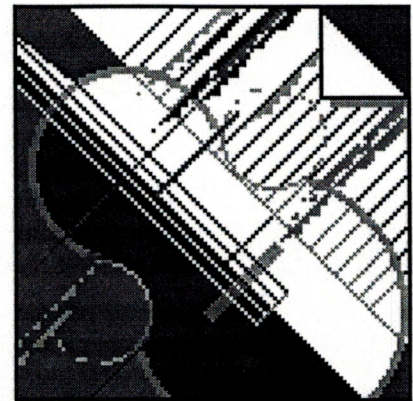


Friends of APCA

Greetings!

Our first very successful year gives me hope that, with your help, we can make a remarkable difference in the way Indian classical music, art and theater is perceived by mainstream American public in the Washington metropolitan area. The results may not be apparent for a few years to come but our patience, perseverance, and motivation will make this happen.

- Indian music, according to Francine Carol Berkowitz, Director of International Relations at the Smithsonian Institution, was taken to 'heavens' this year at the Albert Einstein Planetarium of the National Air and Space Museum. At the same time, we got plenty of opportunity for listening to some of the great musicians sitting on the floor, face to face. Music baithaks have become very popular lately. APCA sponsored four of these this year.
- Woodman Lyon Taylor, aka "Muralidhar," is an assistant professor of Art History at the University of Illinois. His close association with Indian art and culture and his holding a Smithsonian Fellowship while researching Pichavais, painted temple hangings at the Freer and Sackler Galleries, this past spring. Woodman is organizing an exhibition of these Pichavais for the Sackler Gallery, which is scheduled to open in the summer of new millenium, the year 2000. He flew in from Chicago recently to attend one of these baithaks. Here are his thoughts on Indian Music Baithaks.



HAPPY HOLIDAYS

Intimate Encounters with Music : The North Indian Baithak

Interaction between musicians and their audiences is an essential constituent of any successful Indian classical music performance. Musicians often mention how important audience responses are to them during the process of performing, where this rapport helps direct their elaboration of a specific raga or musical mode. Audiences express their responses to the music they hear through gestures as well as audible exclamations such as "vah vah!", "kya baat hay!", and "subhaan allah!", which are equivalent to the expressions "well done!", or "beautiful!" These exclamations are made within the performance itself, directly following any particularly pleasing, innovative or proficient passage of music. Not only do these responses make the musician feel that their music is being appreciated, they also allow the musician to gauge the audience's musical sophistication as well as identify particularly knowledgeable listeners.

The specific type of performance setting that allows this intimate interaction between musicians and their audiences in North India is called a baithak. The word baithak implies a small gathering where everyone is seated in an Indian fashion, on the floor. A baithak can be a gathering assembled to hear a religious or philosophical discourse or, in our case, a sort of musical discourse, an elaboration on music through a performance. The word baithak can also refer to the specific architectural spaces where these gatherings take place, be it a specific room laid out with carpets and cushions, or a kiosk where outdoor performances are held.

Paintings depicting musical performances are some of the most important sources for reconstructing the history of baithaks. This practice of intensely listening to a performance for its musical rather than its religious value probably began in the courts of Sultanate rulers during the very period after the twelfth century. During that period, poet musicians such as Amir Khusro were developing the instruments and musical forms that constitute what we now call Hindustani classical music. It was not until the sixteenth century rule of the Mughal emperor Akbar that miniature paintings include depictions of musical gatherings at court. Akbar's capital of Fatehpur-Sikri includes a red sandstone platform set in the middle of a pool where we might imagine his leading court musician Tansen performing at an outdoor baithak. Numerous paintings from the Rajput courts in Rajasthan and the Punjab Hills supply additional details of baithaks. One painting from the Hill court of a Raja Balwant Singh even depicts the activity of viewing paintings while listening to music. This leads us to the possibility of paintings depicting musical modes called Ragamalas aiding the musical appreciation of court listeners assembled at baithaks.

As court, or darbari, traditions became the cultural paradigm throughout North India, the practice of listening to classical music within the intimate setting of a baithak became a refined pursuit cultivated not only in urban centers, but also by upper-class and landowner families in remote areas. This widespread tradition of baithaks continued into the mid-twentieth century, as so eloquently portrayed in Satyajit Ray's film *Jal Sagar*, or *The Music Room*. With shifts in musical patronage, particularly after Independence, the western tradition of performing on a concert stage for audiences that numbered in the hundreds became the norm. The style of playing also changed to accommodate to fixed performance schedules and expectations of audiences that generally were not as musically sophisticated.

With this shift onto a concert stage both musicians and knowledgeable listeners realized that some very essential aspects of musical performance were being sacrificed. Not only was the rapport with an audience so essential for guiding improvised parts of the performance lost, so too was the flexibility of the baithak format, where a musician could continue playing one piece for an extended period, with an improvisatory *alaap* lasting up to an hour. Also, members of the audience could request the musician to play particular pieces or ragas and the musician could in a way educate his audience through directing his performance to the level of their understanding, even adding explanatory remarks if necessary.

The realization of this loss of musical quality has in the last two decades resulted in a revival of the baithak, both in India and now in the United States. One of the most remarkable resurgence of interest in Indian classical music has been the direct result of baithaks organized at college campuses throughout India by a student organization called SPICMACAY (Society for Promotion of Indian Classical Music Amongst Youth). These baithaks are so rewarding for musicians that most of them perform gratis. The baithaks also have significantly raised the sophistication of audiences, even in previously esoteric musical traditions such as *dhrupad*. In the United States traditions of organizing baithaks have also begun with the intention of creating the ideal setting for both performing and listening to Indian classical music. During the early 1980's, philanthropist and amateur musician Peter Stern sponsored a series of baithaks at Harvard's Fogg Art Museum. There, the very best Indian musicians performed one night in a gallery hung with miniature paintings for a select audience seated on *dhurries*, while on the following evening they played at a more public baithak in an enclosed courtyard where again the audience was seated on rugs.

Within this past year APCA has introduced this important musical performance tradition to the Washington area. For anyone interested in music, and particularly in Indian classical music, these rare baithaks are a listening and educational opportunity not to be missed.

-- Woodman Taylor

All Friends of APCA are requested to make suggestions to improve APCA web site. Address is <http://www.erols.com/gkumar/>. Please visit it often to stay in touch with APCA's future activities.

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