

# **'Teaching Indian music at a distance: a perspective from the UK',**

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This article describes the recent treatment of Indian classical in the curriculum of the (British) Open University in recent years which has formed part of our curriculum. This includes a major video-based project aimed at introducing the basics of khyal performance, produced in collaboration with Veena Sahasrabuddhe.

## **Introduction**

The Open University (OU) is a the fruit of uncommonly creative and progressive thinking in the late 1960s - an institution established with the bold intention of offering University level education of the very highest quality to those who had been denied access to conventional universities, which would use the latest in technology to make 'distance learning' something other than a cheap substitute for the real thing. (The OU now prefers the tag 'supported open learning', since our network of local tutors around the UK and Europe make the 'distance' label misleading.)

Since admitting its first students in 1971, the OU has grown into the UK's largest university. For the last 30 years or so, the OU has offered a wide variety of courses: each course is based on a set of teaching

texts which the students work through (generally in their own homes), usually tied in with TV programmes, audio or video resources, 'home experiment kits' (in the case of science courses) and so on. Students are expected to attend a number of tutorial sessions in their own local area: their assigned tutors also assess written assignments. Some courses also offer residential schools.

From the beginning, music was one of the subjects the OU taught within its Arts curriculum - and one which raised a few eyebrows, since it was not immediately apparent how one could teach music at a distance! The doubters have long since been silenced: the OU Music Department is amongst the very best in the country, as assessed by government bodies auditing the quality of both teaching and research. What we have found, in fact, is that although we cannot teach practical musical skills, we may be at an advantage in some other areas.

For instance, when I teach a class at a conventional university, I might describe a particular musical feature, and play an extract from a CD to illustrate it: some students will get the point, others will not catch it first time, and it can be difficult for me as a teacher to judge whether I have got the point across. In an OU course I can explain in writing, and instruct the student in the text to "Now listen to CD3, track 4, and listen for...": a conscientious student will play the track as many times as it takes to get the point. Thus, although the quality

of the educational experience clearly owes a lot to the student's commitment, OU courses offer the potential for education of the very highest calibre.

University music curricula in the UK have changed since the 1970s however: one of the big changes has been a gradual wearing down of the exclusive attention given to canonical works of Western classical music. Popular music, and music from beyond Europe and North America, are increasingly seen as important areas of study. By the 1990s, the OU Music Department's exclusively Western output was looking increasingly anachronistic, and the decision was made to hire an ethnomusicologist - the author of this essay. (In case the reader objects to the term 'ethnomusicology', I sympathise: nonetheless, it is a title I have inherited and have to live with for the time being...)

I was appointed in 1995 with the brief of expanding the cultural breadth of the Music Department's offering, and asked to contribute to a new course which had been planned. This course was entitled "AA302. From composition to performance: Musicians at work". The course begins with a discussion of the social background to musical performance, before moving on to discuss composition and improvisation, notation and editing, performance, and finally reception (the structure, needless to say, reflecting a particularly Western conception of musical production which I was unable to challenge).

My contribution was to fall into three areas: an essay at the beginning of the course discussing different ways of conceptualising the relationship of musician to society; a section in the middle on the concepts of composition and improvisation; and a final section on reception. The first of these used a variety of case studies, largely drawn from the ethnomusicological literature, from Africa, South America and South Asia. The second, on composition and improvisation, used major case studies on khyal and on Sundanese (West Javanese) gamelan music; and the last section on reception introduced the modern (and contentious) notion of 'World Music', and of cross-cultural reception in general.

### **Khyal: A video introduction**

This, then, was the context for our khyal project - a section of a much larger course, something which I designed specifically to highlight general issues of composition and improvisation. What goes on in a (khyal) performance? If the music isn't written down, how is it learned and remembered? If each performance is different, what remains the same? The questions are obviously aimed at the majority of our students who would be familiar with Western music, but not at all knowledgeable about any variety of Indian music (although one would have to have lived a life of considerable seclusion to have avoided hearing instruments such as sitar and tabla, names such as Ravi

Shankar, or snatches of Hindi film songs, in Britain over the last 30 years).

Clearly, to address these issues I would have to make the material accessible with the minimum of technical vocabulary, and completely avoid areas (such as history) which many people would consider essential to the understanding of Indian classical music. The best approach, I thought, would be to record a performance, and then an interview and demonstration with a top performer: I would then be able to cut the different elements together, in order to use the performer's commentary to clarify what was going on in the performance. The key thing was to get the right performer, who must be approachable and articulate, and speak fluent English, and also be indisputably a musician of the highest calibre. I had no doubt that Veena Sahasrabuddhe would be the ideal person - experience had taught me that she is a top-class performer with an uncommon gift for explaining aspects of her art in words.

Working with a superb BBC producer, Robert Philip, whose enthusiasm and eagerness to learn about this music was a great support, we set about planning the project. I contacted Veena, and was delighted that she agreed to participate, and also to help arrange the concert performance which we would film in Pune. Robert and the BBC set up the filming crew and arranged the logistics, and we made the filming trip in April 1996. We survived one considerable disaster,

in that our concert programme had been arranged out of doors and was interrupted by an unseasonal downpour: for a while total disaster loomed, but we were able to reschedule an early evening performance as a late night event, and bring much of our audience back. Veena suffered as much stress as anyone, since the time change necessitated a hasty change of programme (in the end she performed Rageshree, which we used for the course, and Madhukauns, as the major items). The following day we filmed an interview with Veena in her dining room, and an extensive demonstration session in her teaching room, with the help of a couple of her students.

Back home, editing went roughly according to plan. Despite the help of BBC staff in compiling a rough transcription of our interviews the job fell mainly to me. In more familiar contexts, BBC staff would have compiled detailed shotlists (charts of what happens in the rushes when): in this case, no-one bar me knew what was going on, which meant I had to deal with that job too, and direct the editing process in great detail, with the help of the time code which had been overprinted on my copy of the rushes. Also at this point, I designed subtitles to clarify certain points in the process, and also designed an on-screen 'clock' to show the progress of the tal for a little while (my aim was not to teach tal in detail, so much as to demonstrate the existence of such a temporal framework).

Finally, with Robert Philip's input, and constructive criticism from colleagues and from our editor, the material saw the light of day, and was studied by more than 700 students in its first year of presentation, 1997. By the end of its life, this course will have been studied by more than 5,000 students - this possibility to reach large numbers of students is one of the great attractions of the job. Feedback we have received has been entirely positive - it seems that most of the students find this a welcome and refreshing change, and that any initial worries about studying something so 'foreign' are dispelled by the accessibility of the material. A great benefit here is Veena herself, who comes across as a person of great charm and warmth (which, indeed, she is). When I have used this material in conventional teaching situations, my British and American students frequently express their admiration for her awesome talent - something the video seems to convey well, since this reaction is much less common when I use only audio examples.

Subsequently, we have arranged a version of the khyal project - a video, with an accompanying booklet comprising my original teaching text and a newly-commissioned essay by Veena - which is sold separately as a stand-alone product. Although the OU has not managed to make this available at a price which many individuals can afford, it has been purchased by a number of university libraries and is being used for teaching in conventional contexts. This is not uncommon: the nature of distance teaching is that it forces the

academic (in this case me) to think through the project in great detail, working out exactly what it is that must be taught and deliberating over the best pedagogical strategy. Once that is done, it is no surprise that the resulting materials can be adapted for use in more traditional settings.

The key pedagogical strategy here was one of engagement - as is the case with most OU material. Rather than saying, in effect, "this is what you must know, now go away and learn it", we ask students to engage with the teaching materials in an active way. To give a flavour of the teaching style, for example, one of my key activities reads as follows:

#### **Activity**

In a moment I shall ask you to watch the first section of the video [in which Veena's explanations are intercut with sections of the live performance].

Below is a list of the technical terms that are used and explained in the video, laid out in the order in which they occur, so that you can find them easily. For some I have added explanations, which may include additional information not on the video. [...]

As you watch the video, I want you to use the list of terms for two activities.

1. Listen out for mention of the terms listed. Pause the video and read my notes as each term is mentioned, to ensure you understand the term and how it is used.
2. In the places where I have *not* supplied notes about the stages listed, listen to the explanation that is given on the video, and then pause the video



and make your own notes based on the information you have heard, answering the following questions in each case.

- (a) In this stage sung with, or without, drum accompaniment?
- (b) Is it sung to a particular text, or if not how is it vocalized?
- (c) How would you describe the rhythmic and melodic style (i.e. fast or slow, free or strict, flowing or broken, etc.)?

Once the student has completed the exercise, I provide my own answers for comparison: in practice of course, some students will read my answers before watching the video, but this does not seriously undermine the teaching methodology.

Thus, the students are not asked to memorise facts about Indian music - what facts could they learn which would be of any use to them? They are expected to involve themselves in a (probably unfamiliar) performance and finish the course with, hopefully, a much deeper understanding of the nature of musical performance in general, not just an appreciation of Veena Sahasrabuddhe's Rag Rageshree in particular.

It is not possible to train somebody to *perform* music using distance teaching methods. It is, however, possible to teach a great deal *about* music. There is, in my opinion, no great secret - simply, as with any teaching, one needs a clear understanding of *what* is to be taught, and to think through a clear pedagogical strategy. This will, of course,

differ according to the media available. I look forward to hearing of more such projects, from around the world, in years to come.

## **Publications**

Clayton, Martin (1996) 'It never rains here in April... Filming music in Pune' *India Magazine*, October 1996.

\_\_\_\_ (1999) *Khyal: Classical singing of North India*. Video, c. 45 minutes with accompanying 20pp A4 booklet, OU Worldwide (ETHNO VC01).

\_\_\_\_ (2000) *Time in Indian Music: rhythm, metre and form in North Indian rag performance*, Oxford University Press, ISBN 0-19-816686-9.

A link to the OU Worldwide website can be found on the publications list of my web page, [www.open.ac.uk/arts/music/mclayton.htm](http://www.open.ac.uk/arts/music/mclayton.htm)

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