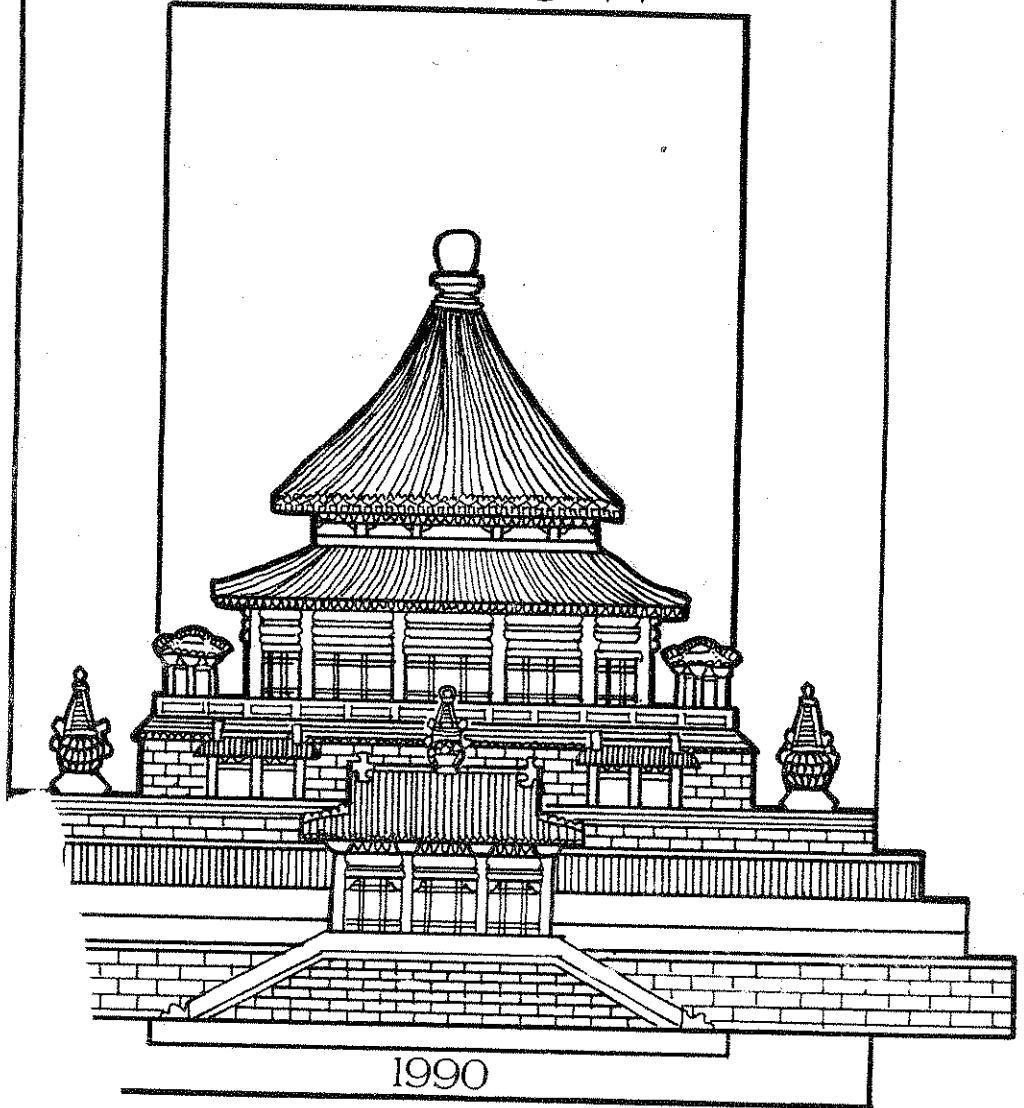


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B. C. Asian Review

University of British Columbia 75th Anniversary Issue

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gathering in December of 1988, the "purists" were offered an unsettling new focus by their own Conference President. T. Viswanathan asserted that the key to their tradition's survival was adaptation to inevitable change through, for example, cooperation with the popular film industry and effective use of scholarship and new technology in music education.

The pressures on the *guru-shishya parampara* to transform its nature are mounting. Nonetheless, conservatives fearing "degeneration" must concede that this tradition will endure as the ideal method of instruction only as long as it can accommodate the changing needs of its participants. The relationship yet lives, and that it does so may be related directly to the fact that this ancient human bond possesses dynamism and flexibility, like the music tradition it transmits.

During the early spring of 1989, my study of the *guru-shishya* tradition was enhanced considerably by interviews with music students visiting or residing in the Vancouver community. Each one had struggled to master some aspect of Indian classical music. They all held firm conceptions of what constituted the ideal student-teacher relationship; many felt that they had shared in the real thing. Despite the diversity of individual experiences, three entwined features of the *guru-shishya parampara* emerged from the dialogues, features which seem central to the tradition's definition: periods of close contact between teacher and student, mutual devotion, and the enforcement of discipline leading to self-discipline.

In this essay I shall discuss these dynamic concepts of time, love, and discipline which direct the interaction of guru and *shishya*. As an adaptive force in Indian music, the traditional relationship continues to define the identity of the disciple and instill attitudes about music — and about life.

Time

To learn Indian classical music one requires time with a teacher. As an oral tradition, transmission relies not on books but on the guru's individual guidance. Even today many North Indian musicians, possessive of their ragas or their particular

Dynamic tradition and the *guru-shishya parampara*

Laura Cameron

Very often, when we wish to insist on a particular form of behavior or attitude or value system, we simply say, "this is traditional," the assumption being that it has been handed down to us, unchanged over a long period of time. That assumption is incorrect....Nothing comes to us in a completely pristine form through the centuries.

Romila Thapar¹

Tradition is always in a state of flux. Indian classical music, shaped by the interactions of both indigenous and invading cultures, has been remade many times over in terms of instrumentation and prevalent performance genres. Yet, not all so-called guardians of India's musical heritage view renovation as a natural, healthy process.

Panicked by the fast tempo of modernization in the late sixties, the celebrated sitarist Ravi Shankar feared that classical Indian music faced extinction. In his opinion the major threat to his beloved music was the degeneration of the *guru-shishya parampara*, the sacred teacher-student relationship which fosters the preservation of musical knowledge.

Dwindling audiences for the classical "art music" concerts have served to intensify such lamentations. However, at the Madras Music Academy's annual

1 Madhu Kishwar, "An Interview of Romila Thapar," *Manushi* no. 42-43 (Sept.-Dec. 1987), p. 3.

way of rendering them, will only offer their knowledge to a select few. Although some music is now notated, the loss of his copybook was not a major hindrance to the sitar² studies of University of British Columbia Asian Studies student Peter Needham. Due to the overwhelming importance of improvisation in North Indian Hindustani³ music, the notated and the performed note are rarely the same. Savitri Devidas, a young mother and a vina⁴ player in the more systemized and composer-oriented Karnataka tradition of the South, indicated that although she learned with the aid of texts, she had to grasp the ornamentations of her teacher's rendition. Charged by the emotion infused in the music by the teacher, disciples learn more than notes; they learn feeling.

Perceptions of the ideal amount of time the *shishya* and guru should commit to each other tends to shift according to the time practically available. Surely few students now have — or think they require — the tenacity of men like the late Amir Khan, who studied singing for 35 years before taking to the stage. In earlier days, musicians were often dependent on the royal courts for their livelihood. When the 16th century Mughal emperor Akbar appreciated and patronized music, such musicians as the celebrated singer, Miyan Tansen, could live with their students without economic worries. Ashish Dattagupta, a geneticist and sitar disciple of Manilal Nag, felt that although he did not live with the guru, such a situation would have been an ideal learning environment if he had been pursuing a professional music career.

2 The sitar is a popular North Indian stringed instrument.

3 Hindustani and Karnataka music contrast in details, but they share a theoretical foundation in the ancient texts of Indian literature. This theoretical basis permits a distinction between the classical and folk traditions, although the relationship between the two is perhaps better described as a continuum rather than an actual separation.

4 The vina is a stringed instrument commonly used in Karnataka music.

Classical music has a subtle inner touch which is needed for expression. The teacher... when he plays something, it all depends on his mood. Like late at night, suppose you are sleeping in the same building and suddenly you get awake and the guru is playing something. That is something. You immediately listen to it and try to get that into your memory forever and I think that's why living with the guru is ideal.... Even if you can't stay at the guru's place, you can still devote much of your time at his place to discuss the finer aspects of his music. That, I think, can't be bounded by two or three hours class in a day.⁵

Annie Penta, an American tabla player who performed at the University of British Columbia in the spring of 1989, studied the vocal tradition of *dhrupad*⁶ with the Dagar Brothers for two years. Peter Needham spent seven months with his sitar guru, Chandra Mukherji. Although neither of these Westerners lived in residence with their respective gurus, each stressed the unstructured, personally-paced learning, with and without instruments. Peter recalled long walks with his guru through the streets of Benares; Annie smiled at the memory of her spontaneous spaghetti dinners thrown for the Brothers and their families. Gyan Halder taught Ashish tabla for fifteen years before Ashish — starving to express melody — turned his attention to sitar. Halder regularly came Sundays, but, according to his mood, he would often arrive unannounced during the week. And Ashish, dropping everything, would sit down to drum. As companions of their gurus in sometimes erratic schedules, music education for Ashish, Peter, and Annie became integrated with life.

For the past ninety years, such an intense one-on-one relationship has not been the only learning method available in India. Mass-oriented education was supported initially by men like Vishnu Digambar Paluskar, who admitted that although his institute, the Gandharva Mahavidyalaya, might not produce Tansens, he created

5 Interview with Ashish Dattagupta, February 1989, University of British Columbia.

6 Dhrupad is a style of vocal music developed in the Hindu-Muslim court period (15th-17th centuries).

Kansens; i.e., perceptive listeners with an ear (kan) for music.⁷ As music learners grew in numbers, especially after the War, the role of the musician-teacher who instructed a small class of students evolved into that of a teaching professional without the performing expertise. Vamanrao Deshpande, amateur singer and author of *Indian Musical Traditions*, claims "when... the guru himself ceased to be an artist, it was too much to hope that even his best disciple would attain the expected artistic level."⁸ Ravi Shankar commented in his 1968 book *My Music, My Life* that those trained for a diploma

...take the means to be the end and miss the spirit and soul of our ragas. It takes many years of profound study of one's own inner self and of the ragas to be able to play Indian music with the intense emotion and spiritual effect that the music calls for.⁹

Thus, until the student has had sufficient guidance from a person who has glimpsed what Deshpande calls "the Goddess of Music," his or her music will be shaped by blocks of classroom time and weary studies for exams.

This assertion, however, must be tempered by some description of the diverse range of classroom experiences. Savitri was satisfied with the individual attention she received as a young student in the small vina class at her village music school. According to Anand Paranjpe, a Vancouver university professor, harmonium-player and Indian classical music enthusiast, notable musicians have found secure jobs at diploma institutes and the higher status degree-granting universities. Although a university degree attests more to a well-rounded education than strict musical proficiency, both Peter and Anand had attended concerts of musicians citing M.A. degrees after their names, replacing or augmenting the name of a guru.

7 Vamanrao H. Deshpande, *Indian Music Traditions* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1987), p. 145.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 125.

9 Ravi Shankar, *My Music, My Life* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1968), p. 15.

Some professional musicians have come to the West to teach. Kathryn Hansen, sitarist and UBC Asian Studies professor, had the privilege of studying with Nikhil Banerjee in a series of intimate, ungraded, summer intensive courses. Ravi Shankar and Ali Akbar Khan have opened schools in the States: yet Annie found it unfortunate that the last time she went to the Ali Akbar College, the guru had begun to speak to the ever-larger classes with a microphone. Although the guru-*shishya* relationship evidently can be nurtured in a close classroom environment, it has no large institutional replacement. The ancient tradition provides for what modern relationship counsellors call "quality time" — a necessity for developing bonds of mutual devotion.

Love

To best communicate musical thought, the guru and the disciple must love one another. Deshpande writes that a guru's identity will often be defined by membership in a gharana, a style of playing that assumes the status of gharana only when it is carried over for at least three successive generations.¹⁰ Since only the *shishya* can perpetuate the guru's heritage, such love and trust becomes a crucial requirement. The guru who loves the disciple will have the impetus to teach with dedication and to freely impart knowledge. In turn, the disciple is to respect the master as a representation of the divine. Savitri Devidas agreed with this analysis, stressing that the self must be completely surrendered to the guru: the disciple feels reverence, adoration for the guru, and with "vinaya" — humility — absorbs all the guru offers. Even to the professional, the guru can remain a constant source of guidance.

Further description of the ideal love relationship is complicated by the diverse types of people who take part in the tradition. A common metaphor for the *guru-shishya parampara* that always came up in conversation with the male students was the Indian concept of the father-son relationship. A good son gives his father complete respect — "izzat" — and always tries to please him. Often the guru will prefer

10 Deshpande, *op. cit.* p. 12.

to teach his own son rather than a non-relative. But the guru need not be the real father; indeed, "guru" in the Hindu sense generally refers to someone who is not the natural father. As Ashish Dattagupta said of his tabla teacher, Gyan Halder, "he was like a father to me." Peter Needham, though a foreigner in India, also characterized his relationship in the tradition of father-son, and spoke of the "real affection" between them. For instance, when Peter was sick with dysentery, his guru personally prepared special dishes based on Vedic¹¹ remedies to help Peter recover.

A further twist on the father-son archetype is that the guru and disciple need not be male. However, some writers refuse to describe this reality as part of the tradition. Daniel Neuman, a Westerner writing on the *guru-shishya parampara*, states categorically, "only men can become gurus,"¹² women can only be disciples. Shankar describes only the *guru-shishya parampara* constituted of males, "stronger than the bond between husband and wife." Although Deshpande recognizes female students, he writes, with some disdain, that as the *nouveau riche* began to patronize classical music after the decay of the courts, wealthy women could pay for their choice of guru. But to ignore or scorn the participation of women in the teaching and learning of the classical music tradition is to slash at important roots in female musicianship at the royal courts and to stunt current growth.

Extirpating harmful stereotypes is never easy. But the process bares the inner workings of tradition, revealing that its substance is not granite law but generations of human choices, each made in attempts to negotiate the changing terrain of the times.

Savitri Devidas and her friend Kamala Sudhakar, a past student of Hindustani vocal music, felt that the roles of guru and *shishya* continue to be problematic for Indian women to cultivate because of repressive social conditions. As Kamala related, it was difficult for them to learn or teach since

11 Vedic remedies are medicinal prescriptions derived from the oldest texts of Indian literature.

12 Daniel Neuman, *The Life of Music in North India* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1980), p. 45.

...it takes a lot from your family because you have to sit alone and do all that practising — "niaz" — and maybe your kids want you to play with them and your husband wants you to do something...it's difficult, unless you are a real professional and husband understands, children understand, in-laws understand...¹³

According to the male-oriented power hierarchy, a woman's love for the guru is stolen from that devotion reserved for family. Savitri said that while parents often want their daughters to sing and play the vina in her city of Bangalore, "once they are married, they do not want them on the stage." Savitri's sister, a performing vina player, and a professional singing friend of Kamala's both stopped giving concerts after their marriages due to family pressure.

Yet Savitri was inspired by those women who are pursuing professional careers: indeed, her own vina teacher was female. Savitri did not call her "guru," but only because she, as a child, had not made a serious commitment to the music. Some young girls do. Though concerns were voiced that a female would just get married and be forced by in-laws to stop playing, Sambasiver Iyer (1888-1958), one of the Karaikudi Veena Brothers, chose the four year old girl, Ranganayaki, as his *shishya*. Iyer devotedly taught her; in return, she became his constant companion, and eventually an accomplished professional musician.

The method of demonstrating devotion becomes a prime concern of the disciple. Iyer's choice of a child indicates manipulation more than mutual consent; however, when the heart of a guru must be won in order to be accepted as the *shishya*, one must express one's devotion to the guru's music. Initially this is stressed in the mere choice of guru. As Ashish counseled, "you must seek the guru." Anand told a lengthy anecdote about his friend, Jagdish Prasad, who wanted to switch from the gharana of his father to that of Bade Ghulam Ali Khan. When the father denied the request, Jagdish ran away from home and endured much suffering on the street before

13 Interview with Savitri Devidas, February 1989, University of British Columbia.

throwing himself at the feet of Badé Chulam. Moved by the obvious love of Jagdish for his music, the guru took Jagdish as a disciple. Sometimes a further trial period is required by the guru for acceptance. Annie was welcomed the moment she sat before the feet of the Dagar Brothers; Ashish, however, had to play a few ragas for Manilal Nag before serious sitar lessons commenced.

Devotion is also expressed in ritual. The binding of student to teacher with the symbolic tying of the red thread – the "nara" – on the wrist can be a highly auspicious event; however, not all gharanas tie the thread. According to Ashish, Nag's gharana, Vishnu Puri, did not use the nara ceremony; whereas his tabla guru, Halder, conducted a homage to Ganesh and tied on the thread after Ashish made three promises: "I will not sell my learning; I will not get addicted to liquor or cigarettes; I will not play the tabla for those who would not appreciate it." Savitri had not heard of the thread being tied for Karnataka musicians; the learning process is, however, marked by specific rituals. Before lessons begin, the disciple prostrates for his or her parents, for the teacher, and then offerings and prayers are dedicated to Ganesh, the god of prosperity, and to Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge. Once the notes have been learned, the ritual is repeated before the student is given melodies to commit to memory. The ritual is enacted a third time when the disciple is considered competent to learn compositions of the famous composers, Tyagaraja, Dikshitar, and Shyama Shastri.

With the relationship in progress, many services are done for the guru out of respect, in order to acquire rare knowledge (if he or she is teaching the Hindustani system), and to win his praise. When practical pressures of economics did not prevent the *shishya* from serving the guru in his own home, labour was performed for him, his legs were massaged, and his instrument was carried right onto the stage for him. Neuman writes that "ideally, a disciple never pays tuition."¹⁴ He insists that money is only to be given as a ritual offering, if at all. Otherwise the relationship may

14 Neuman *op. cit.* p. 47. I believe Neuman is using the word "tuition" here with the meaning of a fee or a charge for instruction.

seem tainted; mutual devotion will seem suspect. Although Ashish had the impression that Westerners were often merely regarded by music teachers as easy money, Peter Needham, a sitar student of Chandra Mukherji, gave the guru a dictionary, a shawl, and sometimes bought meals. Monetary payment was not expected. Iyer, before he took Ranganayaki as his disciple, once tried to discourage a potential *shishya* by requesting a large sum of money. Such an insult was enough to keep the seeker at bay.

However, despite this evidence, the issue of money is now clouded, if there ever was a clear conception of its status. Ashish understood that in the past, if the *shishya* was wealthy, payment, if not given in cash, was generously given in kind. Peter's guru, Chandra, was not a working musician in Benares, but what Peter somewhat reluctantly called a "jack of all trades," financially supported by his brother. Ashish, Annie, Savitri, Kamla, and Anand each asserted that money is paid to professionals. Due to the very fact that they are full-time musicians, money is needed for their livelihood. The guru that made Ashish promise never to take money for his knowledge did not require tuition because he had another job and did not play on the public stage. According to Savitri, acquiring a professional musician as a guru can be a very expensive proposition; university diploma schools were seen as a less expensive, though less intensive option. But, as Annie stressed, money was just a fact of the current economic situation: the glue of the relationship was a state of mind and heart, not wallet. Rather than a signal of decay, the choice of money exchange seemingly demonstrates the ability of the institution to adopt new values and survive.

When Westerners came East to learn classical Indian music, many found it impossible to leave their cultural baggage behind. Customary gestures of devotion were often lost in the culture clash. As Peter related,

I think the most difficult gesture that Westerners try to make – a very significant gesture of your subordinate role under your teacher – is when you greet him.

Indians touch the feet of their guru and touch their forehead and I could never do that. I just could not touch his feet... it seemed so foreign to me.¹⁵

Ashish, raised in Bengal, was taught to touch the feet of elders and superiors as a matter of course. Even David Suzuki, whom he calls his guru of the genetics lab, receives such treatment. By not fully bowing to his guru, Peter did not intend disrespect, nor was it taken as such. On the contrary, he felt very deferential: he would fold his hands in the traditional "namaskar," bow his head, not show the soles of his feet (Ravi Shankar was particularly peeved by those "hippies" who did), and would be exceedingly careful around the instruments.

Along with Western manners came the introduction of Western technology into the guru-shishya relationship. Although Deshpande praises the recording machine as an excellent learning tool when used to record the guru's music, he expresses the fear that radio ruptures the bond of devotion by allowing the *shishya* to hear and love music other than that played by the guru. Yet, Deshpande also asserts that many renowned musicians, living and dead, had proudly acquired their art from more than one guru. He quotes Mushtaq Hussein Khan of Rampur:

My main training was under Inayat Hussein Khan. But then I had many other gurus. Khan Pultan Khan of Aitoli was my maternal uncle and I received some training from him. Mohammed Hussien Khan Beenvale, brother of Inayat Khan, also taught me. I learned dhrupad and dhamar-singing from Ustad Vajir Khan of Rampur. And there have been many more. *One never acquires art from one gharana; if one wants a variety of colours one must learn from many gurus.*¹⁶

True, like a string of lovers, each guru could receive undivided attention while the *shishya* was with him. However, does the radio substantially destroy the teacher-student bond, or — in a tradition that permits the *shishya* to seek new gurus — only offer a greater range of goals? Certainly a machine can never render a human teacher

¹⁵ Interview with Peter Needham, February 1989, University of British Columbia.

¹⁶ Deshpande, *op. cit.* p. 78.

obsolete in a relationship nurtured with mutual devotion. When I suggested to Ashish that radio might allow him to mimic his favorite sitar player, he replied in stunned disbelief. "Copy Nikhil Banerjee? Copy...?" Technology, like a copybook of musical phrases, remains a teaching aid, never a teacher. People can love; thus the guru-*shishya* relationship can respond with understanding and sensitivity even to changing conceptions of how love is best expressed within its tradition.

Discipline

The guru does not simply lavish valuable time and affection on the disciple; his or her role is to maintain discipline. Draconian styles of teaching are often detailed in stories about the *guru-shishya parampara*, implying that physical and mental torture is the flip side of success. According to legend, Ali Akbar Khan's father and guru, Alauddin Khan, compelled him to practice sixteen hours per day, and tied him to a tree for hours, refusing him food if his speed of learning was inadequate. Ravi Shankar writes that "Ali Akbar was born with music in his veins, but it was this constant rigorous practice, discipline and riaz that Baba set for him that has made Ali Akbar one of the greatest instrumentalists alive."¹⁷ Canes are still sometimes used to drill knowledge into the body: Savitri's sister was often reduced to tears when the guru, in the private lessons, bashed her fingers with a sharp stick the moment they did not fly skilfully on the vina. Iyer used similar punishments on Ranganayaki: sometimes he would throw her into the bathtub. Yet, despite such treatment, Ranganayaki was resolved that "his was the only way that the priceless Karakudi heritage could be transmitted."¹⁸

¹⁷ Shankar, *op. cit.* p. 74.

¹⁸ T. R. Srinivasan and P. C. Jayaraman, "The Karakudi Veena Brothers and Ten Generations of the Tanjavur Tradition," *Sruti* no. 51-52, p. 24.

Though the strict demand for progress remains a constant, the way of the stick is not the only path. As far as Ranganayaki was concerned, the worst punishment was when "I would be made to sing repeatedly the refrain, 'I will be obedient hereafter in one tempo while doing the tala with my hand in three tempos.'"¹⁹ Threats can be quite hollow, couched in the form, "When I was a disciple, my guru slapped me and gagged me and...." Ashish said the "respectful fear" he felt for his guru was not due to the worry that his guru would strike him, rather that his father would if he did not practice. But self-discipline came both from strict demands and the desire to express the music within him. Western seekers like Annie and Peter did not report physical abuse: their gurus were sensitive to the norms of their cultures (despite the fact Peter disobeyed his guru's orders and went travelling in Nepal).

Oddly enough, some musicologists seek a remedy for rough discipline techniques in modern science. Driven by a distaste for flagellation, Vijay Kumar Kichlu, the executive director of Sangeet Research Academy in Calcutta, developed a way to learn music without tears. Says Kichlu,

Improvement of voice, or the lack of it, can be tested scientifically just as you get a car gear tested. A voice that is not suitable for a particular singing style can be switched to a different style after scanning its signature in an audiometric laboratory. There is no need for subjective analysis and no need for straining the vocal chords to perform impossible feats.²⁰

The Academy's method has not developed widespread support and cannot be applied to instrumental music; however, it demonstrates the impulse that exists in India to update tradition with gadgets and laboratory research. Although such interest may produce helpful tools, lovers of classical music should be wary of "voice as a car gear" comparisons and an uncritical fascination for things technical. No less

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

²⁰ Sumita Mitra, "Scientific Singing," *India Today*, Vol. 2 July 1-15 1980, p. 33.

subjective than a guru's judgement, an audiometric scale cannot listen, respond, or reinforce the student's capacity for change and improvement. Furthermore, as I have already noted, painful punishment is not a requisite element of Indian music education; thus, Kichlu's curative machine has no static target. Problems in human relationships are best resolved by human actions. And unquestionably, the *guru-shishya parampara* will maintain its relevance and vitality only if it remains sympathetic to the values of the changing needs of the individuals who want to learn Indian classical music.

Time, love, and discipline form the basics of the *guru-shishya parampara*. The ways and means of achieving these elements are not the same between two generations, or between two people. But does the relationship resemble a tangle of multiple arms without a central deity — a unifying theme — to attach them to? Traditions support social structures. What a person considers important to the tradition will depend on personal allegiances to certain institutions, and to particular forms of society. With the help of responsive leaders like Viswanathan, changing values concerning money, women, the West, and new technology are remaking tradition. This particular tradition, the *guru-shishya parampara*, is also supporting a vast body of knowledge. The body is dynamic; furthermore, the very act of passing it on involves alteration.

Yet, I think there is a constant — it was something Annie Penta said with a simplicity as familiar as a campfire song chorus: "if you feel something beautiful, the desire is there to pass it on." Not all great musicians will teach their music to a disciple, but, being part of the performance tradition, they are at least in a position to pass on beauty to an audience. And if someone is touched, that person, given the freedom to do so, may seek its source. The rest flows from there.

Special thanks to: Ashish Dattagupta, Savitri Devidas, Peter Needham, Kathryn Hensen, Anand Paranjpe, Annie Penta, Kamala Sudhakar, Mydell S.