

VINAY MISHRA AND THE ARTISTRY OF THE HARMONIUM

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ABSTRACT

Vinay Mishra is an accomplished Indian solo and accompanying harmonium player born and brought up in Benaras and currently residing in Delhi serving as a faculty member of the Department of Music, Faculty of Music and Fine Arts, University of Delhi. The rigorous training of both vocal and instrumental music under veteran Hindustani Music virtuosos, the academic and scholarly scope built up till the degree of PhD in Music, the realizations, and understandings on music must have conspicuously made an impact of his practice and artistry as a harmonium player. Harmonium was originated in the west and adopted by Indian musicians in the colonial era which was brought up to the present day through many artistic, cultural and political controversies, and obstacles.

This work focuses on discovering the insights of the harmonium art of Vinay Mishra. Hence, his academic background, musical training, musical career, his playing style as a soloist, general techniques and techniques of accompaniment, sense of machinery, perspectives on raga Taal, and thoroughly the tuning methods were studied in-depth through personal conversations and literature resources where it was observed that modern Hindustani harmonium artists favor a typical natural tuning method over the 12 equal temperaments of the common keyboard instruments. According to him, the stable sound of the harmonium was the reason to be vocal music- friendly in classical and light vocal music accompaniment which was only interrupted by the equal temperament earlier and was later overcome by the artists and harmonium makers.

The idea was also raised that apart from gaining the basic command of an instrument, a Hindustani instrumentalist may learn and practice all other aspects of Hindustani music from the teachers of other forms too. Vinay Mishra's thoughts of machinery, musical forms, compositions, applying Hindustani vocal, and plucking string instrumental ornamentations on the Harmonium were also reviewed.

KEYWORDS

Harmonium, Hindustani music, Equal temperament, Natural tuning, Consonance

INTRODUCTION

The harmonium was invented in Europe, and initially it was a foot bellowing instrument. The harmonium discussed in this paper is the hand bellowing harmonium, which is also identified as the Indian harmonium. The hand bellowing Indian harmonium is undoubtedly an adaptation of the foot bellowed Western harmonium by Indians. The modification of the hand-pumped harmonium was well compatible with the Indian setup of music performances as it allows the harmoniumist to be seated on the ground with other artists. In contrast, the number of octaves decreased up to 3, which generally cover the tonal range of an Indian singing composition and mono melodic expressions (attributed to Indian music) were carried out predominantly with one hand playing while the other engaged in the bellowing. Apart from these modifications, Ghose also added drone stops for accompanying classical music (Brockschmidt, 2003: 19). This harmonium began to replace the sarangi as the principal melodic accompaniment for Hindustani Music. Later, more advanced experimental modifications, such as scale changing and 'collapsible to a suit case' model, were added.

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Despite the appropriative measures made on the harmonium by Indian harmonium makers, there have been severe rejection and criticism on its usage in Indian music since the beginning of the 20th century. According to Rahaim (2011: 662; Abels, 2010), three major objections to the harmonium are as follows.

1. The harmonium cannot glide smoothly between discrete notes.
2. The tuning is wrong.
3. The harmonium is a Western instrument.

All these objections carrying acoustic, cultural, aesthetical, social, psychological, and political phenomena led the harmonium to be officially banned from Indian radio from 1940 to 1971 (Abels, 2010; Meddegoda, 2013). The violin as a Western instrument got adopted to Indian music far firmly than any other Western instrument but still provided less ground for such political controversy. This presentation will throw a light on how Dr. Vinay Mishra as a post-banning era-harmonium artist has overcome or attempted the objectional facts on the harmonium other than the ones caused in the social and political context.

VINAY MISHRA – HIS LIFE AND CAREER

Born in Bihar to a middle-class Brahmin family, Dr. Mishra developed his absorption into music with the help of his family background. He took his training on the harmonium from several gurus (masters) of various disciplines as follows.

- 1) Ustad Mahatab Khan – harmoniumist
- 2) Pt. Appa Saheb Jalgaonkar – harmoniumist
- 3) Sanjaya Guha – sitarist
- 4) Pt. Ulhas Kashalkar – vocalist
- 5) Pt. Madhup Mudgal – vocalist
- 6) Dr. Ashwini Bhide – vocalist
- 7) Pt. Harish Tiwari – vocalist.

His debut performance as an accompanist come harmoniumist at a mass public concert was accompanying the famous Hindustani classical singer Ashwini Bidhe Deshpande took place in Banaras in 2001.

ACQUIRING THE HARMONIUM

Acquiring the harmonium has been an accidental incident for Mishra.² Vinay Mishra obtained his bachelor's degree in Hindustani vocal music from Banaras Hindu University. He earned his

² “It was an accident that I chose the Harmonium. I wanted to become a Vocalist. I took vocal training from Pt. Rajan and Sajan Mishra and Pt. Channu Lal Mishra. But during the year 1999–2000, while I was following my bachelor's degree, I suffered from laryngitis very badly that the doctors advised me to not to talk nor sing. Since then, the time of 2–3 years was a tough time for me. The music was inside me. It wanted to come out in any medium. My Grandfather used to play harmonium that I had been experiencing since my childhood. So, the harmonium had a soft corner in my heart. During the three years I practiced all my musicality on the harmonium 'cause I had no choice. I did not know any other instrument”. (Mishra & Komangoda, 2020). This incident tallies with the ideas of the modern writers such as Rahaim and Qureshi that the harmonium gained a swift acquiring by the Indian society

master's degree in the same discipline from Delhi University, and MPhil and PhD from Delhi University specializing the harmonium. He is currently serving as a guest lecturer in harmonium at the Department of Music, Delhi University.

Mishra believes that music is the same but the different disciplines may merely require practices of unique techniques (Mishra & Komangoda, 2020). This is proved on his own musical training under several masters of various disciplines such as vocal, sarangi, and sitar. Hence, he affirms that learning and practicing of ragas and talas, and acquiring Indian tonal intonation are the highest priorities for him (Sinha, 2017). According to him, there are two aspects that a harmoniumist has to cover in training. One is accompanying vocalists following their dynamics and singing style where all the glissandos, oscillations, and continuous tone are required (Mishra & Komangoda, 2020). Although the harmonium has been claimed to be incompatible with these dynamics, modern harmoniumists have overcome them with appropriative techniques that he, too, follows. The other is to cover the aspects of solo performances where high-speed movements of melodies and other musical ornamentations unique to instrumental music like 'Jala' and 'Jod alap' will be employed.

He believes that a harmonium solo performance should not follow the 'khyal' vocal style but its alap improvisation style helps in the improvisation of harmonium solo performance (Mishra & Komangoda, 2020). Apart from them, Mishra states that he has practiced his repertoire taking every key as the tonic of the keyboard and one who wishes to excel in the harmonium should also do so (Sinha, 2017).

PLAYING STYLE

Vinay Mishra describes his performances mainly in two types (figure 1).

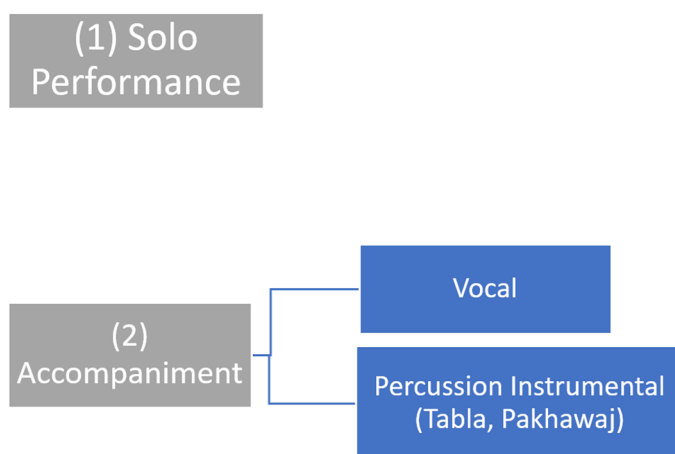


Figure 1: Differentiation in performing types according to Vinay Mishra.

VOCAL ACCOMPANIMENT

In a vocal performance, he would follow the main vocal artist or artists mainly that would make a heterophonic texture of sound but still more resonating rather than clashing the sounds. The main artist would pause for some rest while the tabla meter is still running so that space will be filled by the harmonium accompanist. The harmonium accompanist will follow the main composition of the

due to its quality of easy to make sound and the force it made for musical egalitarianism even though he hails from a musical family background.

vocalist and do some improvisation like ‘alaps’ and ‘taans,’ which are fast melodic improvisations until the main artist would give the sign that he or she is to start again.

Mishra says that he has about 30 harmoniums tuned to many keys (of the standard keyboard) in natural tuning that he would select one according to the requirement of the main artist’s desired tonic of the concert (mostly based on their gender). He mentions that there are also sets of two harmoniums tuned to the same key but having different tonal qualities to support different artists among the 30 harmoniums.

PERCUSSION ACCOMPANIMENT

For Tabla and Pakhawaj percussion accompaniment, he would use a harmonium tuned to the key the main percussion instrument is tuned to. An introductory ‘alap’ of the particular raga will be played in the beginning. Thereafter, a metrical melodic loop called ‘nagma’ or ‘lehera’ will be played on the harmonium on which the main percussion artist will do the improvisation.

Throughout the performance in a particular ‘thala’, the ‘nagma’ will be employed on the same raga and normally there are three speeds a percussion recital done as ‘vilamba’ (slow), ‘madhya’ (mid), and ‘druta’ (fast) so the ‘nagma’ may have slight differences in the three speeds. Sometimes, he makes variations not breaking the metrical circle and the raga to enhance the beauty of the performance (Mishra & Komangoda, 2020).

HARMONIUM SOLO PERFORMANCE

According to Vinay Mishra, a solo performance will follow the basic principles of any other performance including accompaniment but differ at points of its unique appliances like the set composition, speed, and improvising materials such as ‘Jala’ and ‘Jod.’ Vinay Mishra says that he is very much comfortable with the black keys of the keyboard that he uses the D sharp as the tonic for his solo performance. He is more into the ‘Gatkari’ style of playing which most of the plucking string instruments like sitar and sarod follow where rather shorter tones employed and speedy rhythmic improvisations done and no longer glissando parts done like vocal music.

Though the general techniques that a Hindustani music comprises such as ‘gamakas’ (oscillations), ‘meend’ (glissando), and ‘aandolan’ (slightly raising and allying the pitches) have been founded challenging for the harmonium. Vinay Mishra believes that a raga can still be well constructed without them so he manages his solo performance accordingly.

PERSPECTIVES ON THE HARMONIUM MACHINERY

According to Mishra, the body of the harmoniums should be made with the 25–100 years seasoned Burma teak wood that impacts on the good sound resonance and keeps resistance to any weather as he mentions. He only uses **vertically** positioned two free reeds (figure 2) to set harmoniums.

According to him, vertically positioned reeds in contrast to the reeds positioned both vertically and horizontally provide balanced sound between the double reeds, and those harmoniums give a good height to the keyboard that makes the hands of the harmoniumist seated on the ground more comfortable in reaching it.



Figure 2: View on the inner harmonium (picture courtesy: Vinay Mishra, Mishra, 2021).

He preferred a harmonium with one ‘bass’ (informal term) set (lower, ex; middle octave A=220 Hz) and the other set ‘male’ (higher, ex; middle octave A=440 Hz) reed set to accompany a male singer while a ‘male–male’ double reed set harmonium for a female artist, which makes sense on his acoustical approach to the beauty of the accompaniment.

TUNING

The harmoniums imported to India from the west were normally tuned to 12 equidistant intervals within an octave that Vinay Mishra thoroughly denies its compatibility for Indian intonation. Many musicians have engaged in experimental works in overcoming this challenge, and Ustad Abdul Kareem Khan has made the first trial of tuning a harmonium to Indian music (Sinha, 2017). Vinay Mishra’s natural tuning systems have a major principal of being directly or indirectly consonant to the tonic which is called the ‘Sa.’ His tuning system can be merely related to just intonation or pure intonation. He states that he has transposed D to the key D# on harmonium for the reason he finds it comfortable to play on the black keys.

Indian Note	Ratio	Mishra’s Tuning (Hz)	Key Name	12 ET Tuning (Hz)
Sa	1	220	A	220
Re	1x9/8	247.5	B	246.94
Ga	1x5/2	275	C#	277.18
Ma	1x4/3	293.33	D	293.67
Pa	1x3/2	330	E	329.63
<u>Dha</u>	1x5/3	366.666	F#	369.99
Ni	1x15/8	412	G#	415.3

Figure 3: Table of comparison.

According to Mishra, the tonic ‘Sa’ provides consonance basement to the major 3rd (Ga), 4th (Ma), and 5th (Pa). The 5th (Pa) provides the consonance basement to the major 2nd (Re) and major 7th (Ni) while the major 3rd (Ga) provides the basement for major 6th (Dha). Vinay Mishra’s tuning system can be demonstrated as follows, using the ratios on the frequencies of the notes of ‘Shudh Saptak’ (Major Scale) assuming A3=220 Hz as its tonic (figure 3).

Mishra mentions that other than the keys of the ‘shudh saptak’ he keeps the other five keys (‘vikrit swar’) as it is tuned to the TET system I explained in an earlier writing (Komangoda, 2020) which will be demonstrated as follows taking A3 as the tonic (figure 4).

Indian Note	Western Key	Frequency (Hz)
Komal Re (<u>R</u>)	A#	233.08
Komal Ga (<u>G</u>)	C	261.63
Teevra Ma (<u>M</u>)	D#	311.13
Komal Dha (<u>D</u>)	F	349.23
Komal Ni (<u>N</u>)	G	392

Figure 4: Table of comparison in absolute frequencies.

CONCLUSION

Vinay Mishra getting trained under many gurus in various disciplines to develop his harmonium playing shows that uniformity of the elements of Hindustani music makes less boundaries to the medium of its expression or either some of Indian instruments and voice have no significance to each other in their repertoires.

The tuning method on the major scale tones that Mishra follows shows a link to the harmonic series of the fundamental tone (Sa in this case) which can be considered as just intonation or pure intonation tuning.

But according to the viewpoint of intonation of Indian musicians including Vinay Mishra, an idea of primary and secondary fundamental tones can be found. As the ‘Sa’ acted as the fundamental tone for Ga, Ma, and Pa, Pa constructed out of Sa acted as the fundamental (secondary) tone for Re in the same Sa–Pa relation and Ni on Sa–Ga relation. Ga acted as the fundamental (secondary) tone for Da on Sa–Ma relation. This will be simplified in the following chart.

One major challenging outcome of this tuning (figure 5) is that one harmonium will sound well-tuned only for the melodies that take its main key as the tonic of the harmonium. Therefore, any other key on the keyboard can neither be taken as the tonic nor as transposing melodies. This was the main reason that Vinay Mishra had to keep a number of harmoniums which is more than 12.

The techniques like oscillation and glissandi are still not well attempted that the harmonium artists justify not doing so. But the harmonium has faced no less demand on the classical music stage.

The natural tuning system of Vinay Mishra strongly supports the Hindustani intonation but less attention has been given to Vikrit tones can be a minus credit to the tuning system which in comparison with the 22-shruti-harmonium tuning system implemented by Vidyadar Oke sounds like a more advanced system of tuning perfectly supportive to Indian intonation (Oke & Singh, 2020).

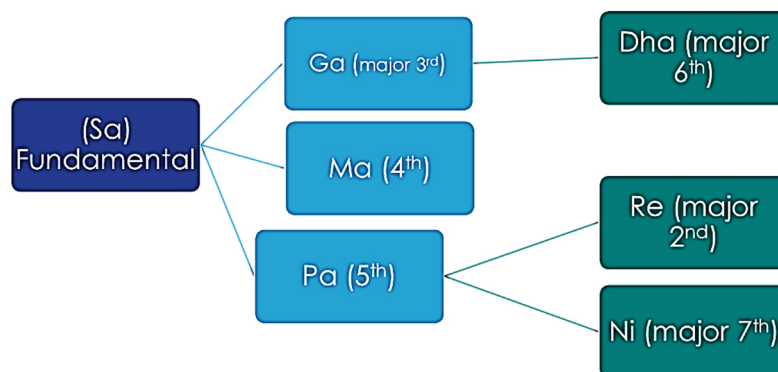


Figure 5: Overview of tonal relationships.

The seven tones of the major scale show that closer relations through the harmonics of the fundamental tone in contrast to the other five (vikrit swar) in a chromatic scale can be the reason for Vinay Mishra to pay less attention of positioning the vikrit swar.

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APPENDIX – PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE MUSICIAN



An intimate concert with Pandit Ashis Senguptaji on tabla, Torvi, Vinay Mishra on harmonium and Torvi's disciple Shiddartha Belmannu was held at the Auburn Lakes Clubhouse in The Woodlands. Photo by courtesy of Jawahar Malhotra.³



Profile picture of the young Vinay Mishra playing on harmonium and singing. (Photo open access).

³ Sources can be compared to <http://www.indoamerican-news.com/over-the-hills-and-valleys-of-vocal-music-with-a-maestro/>, last accessed 24 November, 2021.