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Distant melodies

Many teachers of Indian classical music are giving online lessons to students in all corners of the world. **Abimanyu Nagarajan** tunes in to the trend



Mariette Galea Ebejer lives in the small town of Xghajra in the island nation of Malta. She works as a senior clerk at the foreign office in Valletta, the capital of Malta, and in her spare time plays the sitar.

“In 2006, Ustad Parvez came to Malta to give a sitar recital,” recalls Ebejer. “I went to see it, and I’ll never forget the experience. Around the same time, I found a sitar in a music shop in Malta. It was lying on the floor like nobody wanted it. So I bought it.”

But much as she wanted to learn how to play the sitar, there was no one in Malta who could teach her. Undaunted, Ebejer turned to the Internet for an answer. She found that there were many music teachers who were offering to train students online through video conferencing. Soon Ebejer found a guru in Pt Sanjoy Bandopadhyay, a well-known sitar player based in Calcutta, who began teaching her to play the instrument.

Online music lessons have, in fact, been catching on in recent times. Says Bandopadhyay, “I started using the Internet to teach as early as 2001. Back then, we didn’t have the bandwidth to use video conferencing and relied on sending files back and forth. But now, thanks to software like Skype, we can hold live training sessions, almost as if the teacher and the student were in the same room.”



It’s not just Bandopadhyay. Many other teachers of Indian classical music, both Hindustani and Carnatic, have been taking their lessons online to reach out to students they would never have had access to under normal circumstances. “I’ve got students from all over the world,” says Vidya Subramanian, a Carnatic musician based in Chennai, who has been giving online lessons for the past six years. “I have students in Africa, the US, the UK and Australia.”

Guru Arun Debnath, a Delhi-based vocalist and music teacher, also teaches online with his wife, Sanghamitra Acharya. Says Acharya, who along with Debnath, helps run The Music Foundation India, “A lot of our students are studying music at various universities, and want to add to their knowledge. There are also those who have studied with us, but have moved to other places and would like to continue their lessons. However, the trend hasn’t really caught on in India as it has abroad.”

Bandopadhyay says that the lack of quality teachers in the West, coupled with an increasing interest in Indian classical music, has led to online lessons becoming a major teaching method.



Indeed, the practice has so many takers now that many music teachers, who once taught online only as part time exercise, have now opted to do it full time. For example, Subramanian, who is a chartered accountant with an MBA degree, has switched careers to focus solely on online teaching. She has even developed an extensive online network where aspiring music students can get in touch with the right teachers.

“Usually, I give a few free lessons to gauge the student, and then put him or her in touch with someone who would make a good teacher. We also have regular teacher training sessions.”

Rajesh Puranik is another classical music buff who has started his own online music training network from Massachusetts in the US. Puranik got the idea when he wasn’t able to find himself a tabla teacher there. He realised that there were many people like him in the US and other countries who wanted to find a teacher, but could not.

“That’s when I thought about creating a site which would bring classical music teachers together. It’s like a shopping mall for online music teachers,” says Puranik, who now has a network of 60 teachers, most of whom are based in India.



The lessons don't come cheap, though. On an average, Subramanian charges Rs 300 to Rs 700 per session for students in India, and \$15 to \$30 per session for those who live abroad. And on an average, a teacher may earn as little as \$50 for a short course taken by a single student to as much as \$500 for a longer course.

"There are a lot of factors that go into deciding the fees, though," clarifies Subramanian. "For example, we wouldn't want to turn away talented students just because they can't pay the usual rate. Other factors include the standard of the student, whether it's a one-on-one session, the standard of the teacher, and so on."

But while the idea of learning Indian music online is attractive, Acharya cautions that it may not be for everyone. "We usually prefer to teach students who know their basics — the *swaras* and *talas* and all that. A higher level of concentration is required when you are learning on the Internet as you are not face-to-face with your teacher. You need instruments for your voice to give the proper pitch. Beginners will face the problem of not knowing which is the correct scale or pitch."

But can online teaching ever be a substitute for the real thing? Naturally, purists don't think so. But even they admit that it's a good way to reach out to students who do not have access to teachers of Indian classical music and yet have an avid interest in the art form. Says Balamani, a Mumbai-based Carnatic music teacher who is in her 70s, "My own daughter gives lessons online. I think online lessons are a great tool to help reach people who have the interest, but lack guidance."

Of course, online music lessons are not without their problems. "For students who live abroad, we have to account for the time difference," says Bandopadhyay. "Usually, though, they adjust to us. Also, most of these foreign students live in places where it's hard to find someone who knows Indian music, and so they lack the cultural ambience you get here in India."

Still, online music lessons have become a godsend for people like Ebejer. Today, three years after she started learning with Bandopadhyay, she dreams of becoming a professional sitar artiste. Whether that happens or not, Ebejer is thankful that at least the Internet allowed her to learn to play the instrument she had fallen in love with.

A thousand other online disciples like Ebejer would agree.

