

Introduction

As a child, I was brought up with the belief that the best way to connect with one's culture was by participating in the arts. I decided to start learning Carnatic music lessons in order to relate to my South Indian heritage. This South Indian musical style is primarily taught as an oral tradition, where people learn songs by listening and repeating (Garland Encyclopedia, 868). While I was taking face to face lessons, I was also taking a course on musical cultures and I decided to write my final paper on Carnatic music. I asked my music teacher if she knew of anyone in the local area, of Albany, New York, whom I could interview for my project. She mentioned that a Carnatic teacher, Vidya Subramanian, used to give lessons in Albany, New York before she returned to her home in India. My teacher told me that Vidya was still able to give lessons to her students in the United States through skype. I was intrigued by this new type of teaching and decided to contact Vidya. After interviews with her and her students, taking lessons from her, and observing audio lessons on skype, I found that Skype affected the pedagogical, or teaching, practices of Carnatic music in negative and positive ways. It appeared that audio skype lessons were better suited for advanced students than for beginner students, because the advanced students had enough experience to practice Carnatic techniques without the assistance of visual aid. At the same time, beginner students who found ways to expose themselves to face to face lessons, or live performances, were able to still benefit from audio skype lessons. Perhaps the format of skype, in spite of so many setting changes, is best suited for teaching Carnatic lessons because the heart of this pedagogical

practice lies in the fact that it is an oral tradition communicated through sound and not primarily through visual text.

Data and Methods

Before interviewing the participants of this study, I decided to become more familiar with the skype environment. After contacting Vidya, I acquired a skype account. I wanted to take audio skype lessons and observe a few lessons, one hour at a time, before I asked the musicians any questions about their experiences. I was able to contact the musicians through email and receive their consent forms to participate in the study. After having one failed recording with the Garage Band program on my computer, I chose to record everything with an external mp3 digital recorder. While observing or participating I would take notes in a notepad on the side of my computer. In order to not create distracting noise while observing skype lesson, I had to place my skype webpage on “mute”; that way I could hear the singers, but they could not hear the rustling of my note pages (figure 1).

While taking lessons and observing lessons, I read literature that discussed how teachers incorporated the Internet into their lesson plans. The internet has allowed people to easily access music from all around the world (Duckworth, 157). People can become more engaged in learning about a new artform by listening to the music that is available to the general public online (Campbell, 92). Aware of the new medias that exist, teachers are now exposing their students to a wider range of musical examples to learn from. For example, Youtube.com has an abundant amount of video recordings of musical performances and musical demonstrations (Biamonte, 31). Teachers have also turned to podcasting, posting lessons online, to provide more instruction on musical practices for

the public. A person could subscribe to the podcast and have access to a set of informational sessions on their computer (Richardson, 112). For example, I found that Vidya had established a podcast, and that students could learn about Carnatic music by subscribing online for free (Subramanian). After a few weeks of book research, I started to formulate questions for my interviewees. The majority of my questions focused on learning about the new ways teachers were helping students learn about Carnatic music through face to face lessons and online lessons.

I interviewed eight skype lesson participants, including Vidya. Four of the participants were not only students but teachers as well. I had to consider the factor that we all lived in different time zones. Vidya was located in India, and three of her fellow teachers lived in the United Kingdom. The four other students were located in Germany, New Zealand, Texas, and Troy, New York. Aside from a few scheduling conflicts, I was able to contact and interview all the participants on skype.

Another limiting factor that may have affected my methodology is the fact that I did not know any South Indian dialects, such as Tamil. I was able to communicate with all of the participants in English. However, while observing lessons I was not able to understand some of the comments, or vocabulary terms, given in Tamil or sanskrit. I was able to play parts of the recordings for my mother, who is fluent in Tamil, and she translated the phrases for me.

My mother also helped me by paying for my skype lessons. She would send a check of xxx for each lesson to Vidya's bank account; and we would email Vidya a record of the payment. I learned two new songs from the three lessons I had with Vidya.

Once again, translation issues did not become a problem because she emailed me the lyrics for the two songs with the meanings in English.

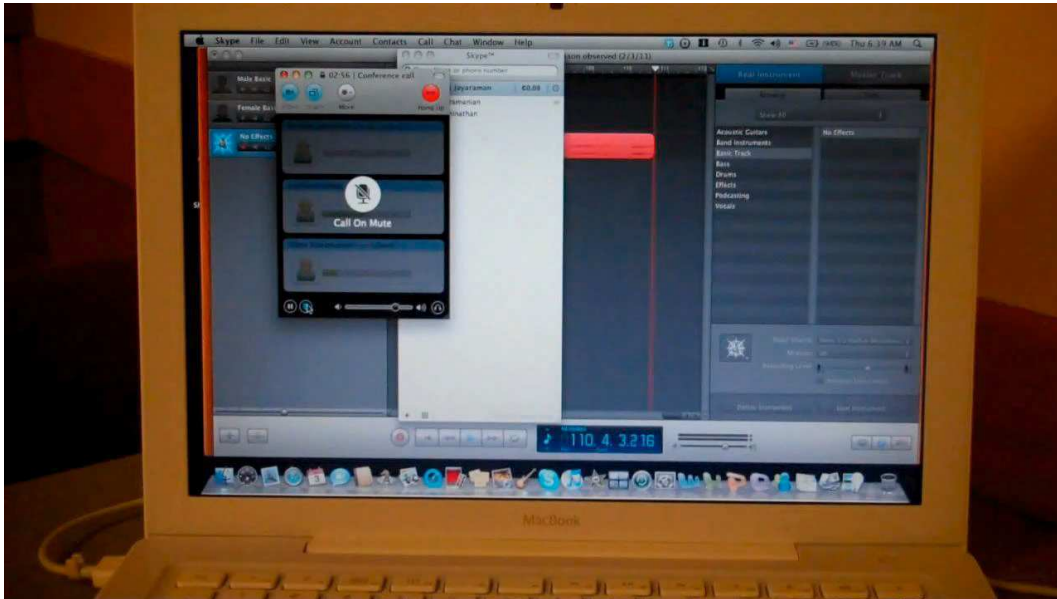


Figure 1. This is a photographic caption of what the skype page looks like. The call is on “mute”, there is a “Garage Band” recording device in the background of my computer. The word “host” appears next to the teacher’s name.

Discussion: What Has Been Modified?

I found that some of the methods for teaching Carnatic lessons changed when using skype sessions. All of the participants I interviewed spoke of how the most difficult technique to teach, or learn, was talam, or rhythm maintenance, during audio lessons (Allen and Viswanathan, 34). The rhythm for Carnatic music is kept by tapping one’s fingers on their lap in a specific pattern (Interview with Sweta, 2/21/2011). In a typical face to face lesson, the teacher and student would sit on the floor, cross-legged, while keeping the beat with their fingers (Beck, 135). When using skype, teachers and students had to clap loudly in order to hear the beat.

Even if the student did keep the talam on their lap, the teacher would not be able to make sure if they were doing it correctly. Since the vocalists found that it was a little difficult to sit on the floor while using their computer, they chose to sit on a chair instead. If the skype video camera was used, both musicians could see each other's faces clearly, but the quality of the sound would suffer (Interview with Soumya, 2/23/2011). There was a time lag, which lead to an echoing sound on skype. As a result, the musicians could not sing together because the echo would overwhelm them. Singing one at a time, the students using skype could not have the experience of singing along with their teacher (Soumya, 2/23/2011). When asked if he preferred skype lessons or face to face lessons, one younger student replied, "I do prefer face to face lessons sometimes though, because your teacher can immediately react or catch the mistakes in the talam. I am having face to face lessons now, and my teacher can also correct my posture." (Anuthum, 2/25/2011).

The teachers had to adjust the time and atmosphere of the skype lesson in order to help their students stay confident in their approach to the music. One teacher decided to shorten the lessons for her younger students from an hour, the typical length, to a half-hour (Sweta, 2/21/2011). This way, the student would be able to manage their energy in a smaller time frame while taking weekly lessons. The teachers also used visual aids, such as the skype video chat, when they needed to teach concepts to a beginner or to a person who plays a hand held instrument. One veena player, whom I interviewed, said that she had to use a stool for her computer so that her teacher could see how she was positioning her fingers. The veena player also had the experience of teaching beginner students face to face. Reflecting on her own experiences, she felt that children especially needed direct contact or they would lose their concentration (Interview with Meena, 2/26/2011).

The other teachers felt the same way, and as result tried to encourage the parents to coordinate group lessons with the younger students. As a teacher, Vidya would ask a parent to act as a teaching assistant and gather a small group, of two or three children, around the computer. The parent had to monitor the children's behavior and make sure they were all practicing the same talam with their hands. The parent also had to make sure the children did not sing out of turn or become restless (Interview with Vidya, 3/4/2011). Vidya could also see that by being in a group, the children were more motivated to learn because they were sharing the same new experience. I could hear this kind of interaction when I was observing one of Vidya's lessons. She was skype calling two sisters, who were learning Carnatic music in the United States. I could hear the two sisters checking each other's tempo, adjusting their note pages and asking each other if they were ready to continue on during the lesson (Observed Lesson-1, 2/3/2011).

Not all of the beginner Carnatic students were children, however. One of the students I interviewed, was an adult who had started to listen to this music only recently. After attending one of Vidya's concerts she was inspired to learn more about the music. She listened to Vidya's podcasts on Carnatic music theory. She liked the balance of listening to musical samples and hearing the teacher compare Carnatic music to western styled music (Interview with Akosua, 2/16/2011). As a westerner, who took lessons in African drumming and classical guitar, she liked the new style of learning as much as the new musical style. She liked having skype lessons because she could create a new learning environment for herself. She would use a pair of headphones, with a microphone built in, while taking vocal lessons. This new approach made her feel more focused on

what she was hearing and less distracted by the external world (Interview with Akosua, 2/16/2011).

Another approach to managing her music lessons was to have more than one teacher. The same western music student, that I interviewed, was taking lessons on theory with Vidya, and lessons on musical practice with another teacher who was located in Texas (Interview with Akosua, 2/16/2011). In fact, Vidya spoke of how more students, advanced as well as beginner, were starting to seek out teachers to learn specific aspects of the music. In that sense, skype has made music learning accessible to the point where students can seek out teachers who can help them improve their singing on different levels. A student, who is having trouble learning a certain set of songs from a particular raagam, or musical tone, could find a teacher on the Internet who possesses such skills (Interview with Vidya, 3/4/2011).

Another student noticed a trend where more teachers were being sought by students on a global level; and that the teachers who lived locally connected with more students through skype than in person (Anuthum, 2/25/2011). I interviewed a few teachers who were located in the United Kingdom, and they liked that distance did not keep them from reaching out to students. One teacher spoke of how her own skype teacher lived in the United Kingdom, but they could not find time to drive to each other's house. With skype, they did not need to factor in the time it took to travel (Interview with Raji, 2/18/2011).

When preparing their students for recitals, the teachers would find ways of being involved, even if they could not be physically present during the recital. Teachers would email the lyrics of the songs with meanings attached to them, in English, for their

students. The teachers would also email mp3 versions of the songs to the students and answer students questions through email. Students, in return, would video record their recitals and send a copy to their teachers (Interview with Soumya, 2/23/2011). Over time, the skype teachers would eventually see how their students were posturing themselves while playing the music.

It was important for both teachers and students to establish that they could keep in touch with each other outside of skype. Sometimes the skype calls would drop due to too much sonic interference. One teacher had to resume some of her lessons over the phone to overcome the breaks during the skype call (Interview with Sweta, 2/21/2011). All of the interviewees agree though, that they would rather have breaks within the lesson, than have breaks from learning the music itself. With skype, students do not have to worry about losing their teachers, who are constantly traveling. One teacher spoke of how she was able to give lessons through skype while spending time in India (Interview with Soumya, 2/23/2011).

Discussion: What Has Remained the Same?

One aspect of learning that has remained the same is the teacher's strict set of rules for students to follow when taking lessons. In spite of being located half way across the world, the teachers and the students have tried to recreate the Carnatic lesson atmosphere "to get things going" (Interview with Meena, 2/26/2011). When I was interviewing one of the teachers, she spoke of how her skype teacher cared about dressing properly for a music class. This teacher could see through the video camera that her student had come dressed in jeans for the lesson. Normally, students are encouraged to wear sweatpants and comfortable clothes whether they are singing or playing an

instrument. The teacher said that she would drop the skype call if her student continued to dress improperly for lesson (Interview with Meena, 2/26/2011). Students are still expected to practice their music as if they still had regular face to face lessons. One teacher explained that if she detected that her students understood the concepts but did not practice their music, she would discontinue the lessons with them, because they were not making a full effort to learn the music (Interview with Sweta, 2/21/2011).

Another example of how the teacher and student relationship has not changed is how teachers set up the skype appointments with their students. Aware that they she and her students live in different time zones, one teacher will email the student the times she is available for lessons during the student's time zone (Interview with Soumya, 2/23/2011). When observing and taking lessons through Skype, Vidya would always initiate the call with her students as well as myself. On the skype screen the word "host" appeared next to her name because she had made the skype call to the other participants. As a student, I was reminded of how teachers host their students for face to face lessons. If there is a teacher living near by, the student would traditionally be invited into their home to learn the music.

While taking lessons and observing lessons, I also found that there were other sounds, other than the music, that could transport me to the space the teacher inhabited. While taking a lesson with Vidya, I could hear a car horn from her skype call. The little car sounds reminded me of the atmosphere in India, a place that is known for having heavy traffic (Lesson-3, 2/25/2011). Also, while observing a lesson, I could hear Vidya's child's voices in the background (Observed Lesson-2, 2/10/2011). This reminded me of how our teachers work full time whether they are raising a family, are having a career, or

both. Many adult students and teachers support the concept of skype lessons because they all understand how busy they have become in their personal and professional lives.

Another mutual understanding, between teacher and student, that has remained unchanged, is the importance of practicing one's listening skills. Teachers will encourage their students to attend live concerts or find examples of Carnatic singing on Youtube.com (Interview with Vidya, 3/4/2011). The process of training one's ear to recognize different raagas is just as important as the act of learning how to sing the raagas (Subramanian). In that sense, Carnatic music can still not be self-taught. Even after having access to so many audible recordings, the musicians still need to listen and respond to the musical tones conveyed by their teacher or by other fellow students during a session. Even after having access to a set of song lyrics, mp3 recordings of the song and a shruti box (to maintain pitch), I still could not learn my songs on my own. I was only able to truly learn the songs during my skype calls because I needed to train my ear to catch the technique of oscillating the notes (Lesson 2, 2/11/2011). This is a technique that can be better understood through audible examples than through written explanation.

The ability to relate to others allows teachers and students to communicate their strengths and struggles when learning the music. Overall, it seemed that the teachers and students could still understand one another's point of view, even if they could not always read each other's facial expressions. The adult teachers remembered how restless they felt as children and could understand how their younger students could become restless as well. Students could see how the teachers were enjoying their progress, and as a result found the process of learning enjoyable as well. The students also felt that once they had learned enough of the musical practice, they would like to become teachers (Interview

with Akhila, 2/20/2011). Many of the students believe that the practice of teaching will remind them and help them relearn concepts because they will have to find ways to communicate their knowledge to their future students (Interview with Vidya, 3/4/2011).

The very steps of teaching a song to a student have not been affected by skype. When learning a song, all the teachers would sing the scale, followed by the notes, and then the lyrics (Interview with Akhila, 2/20/2011). The students will repeat what they hear, and if they are having trouble with a phrase, the teacher will slow down. The tradition of teaching Carnatic music through oral, as well as aural, techniques has remained unchanged and skype is perhaps more accessible for vocal artists for this reason. Other traditional arts that place emphasis on visual examples, such as dance, could not be taught through skype because the students would need to use the video camera more than the audio function of their computer and internet connection.

Conclusion

Although skype has altered the pedagogical practices of Carnatic teachers, the actual components of a Carnatic musical piece can still be taught in a skype lesson, whether the student is advanced or just beginning. The tala, or rhythm is not always easy to capture for beginner students in particular, but they are able to grasp this technique overtime. Overall Carnatic musicians can use skype, because their art is passed down orally through listening and repetition. In this study, I have found that teachers and students have had to rearrange their physical position when engaging in an online lesson. However, skype has the ability to capture sounds, and sometimes images, from the musicians' environments, which allows them to feel as if they are physically close to one another. If I had to take this study in a new direction, I would start to look at whether or

how skype has affected the actual musical pieces and not just the teaching and learning of this South Indian art.

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