UNIT 1 INTRODUCTION TO PERFORMING ARTS

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1.1 INTRODUCTION

Human society has always accepted and encouraged performances. Now you will ask – what is a performance? How do you define it for the purpose of study? This is a very valid question. It is one thing to totally enjoy a performance that is taking place right in front of your eyes. Just shut your eyes and try to remember or visualise having watched something that you have thoroughly enjoyed, appreciated and perhaps envied? This is where the element of “aesthetic” and “being appreciated” comes into your reckoning. Let us start by something which almost all we Indians love – cricket – a magical world. Who has not thrilled to Sachin Tendulkar’s superb batting? Or Anil Kumble’s bowling? In a way, they are entertainers entertaining people. Why does a man want to play cricket in front of other people who come to watch him play? And why do you go and sit in a stadium undergoing a good deal of physical inconvenience to watch a match? The answers to these two questions are very simple. Every human being likes to show off and earn praise. Also every human being wishes to sit back and take pleasure in other people excelling and putting in effort. A cricketer makes tremendous efforts to be where he is – the hours of practice, concentration, sacrifices made and he will continue to do so till he continues to play; but he certainly wants appreciation and praise. In this context all great players are superb artists practicing their craft. This, in a way, is art, a sort of performing art; something that is performance based. But it is SPORT. All sports are performance based.

Similarly, observation can be made regarding a PERFORMING ART – it is very natural it depend on performance when someone performs the others enjoy. But there is a great difference between an ART and a SPORT. There is no aim of winning in an art but in sport to win is all that matters. In simple words, a sport is competitive, an art is not. In sport, there is a challenge between or amongst human beings. In an art the challenge is with yourself, no other being is involved.
in this challenge. Sport does not create any mood excepting generating excitement and thrill, of course if your favourite loses you are sad for sometime. But an art, since there no win and no loss, affects you very deeply – somewhere within your deepself from where it evokes some extraordinary response within your soul – something that you cannot experience in this world, it is otherworldly. This is a PERFORMING ART.

Once again let us categorise within this concept of PERFORMING ART. There are certain arts which are performed by the entire community for any occasion that needs to be celebrated – it is a group art which does not have to appeal to the deepest corners of the human soul. The purpose is connected with an event – good or bad. There are the folk arts which do not require much of pre-organised and systematic training. A child observes the elders performance and joins in at the right moment and becomes a performer.

But the other category is something that concerns the students of this course. It is the category of CLASSICAL PERFORMING ARTS. The study and performance of these arts is a life time challenge and dedicated involvement. It is these arts that touch and evoke some unknown response from the depths of your soul – as a performer and as also as a viewer. The practice and performance of these arts create a rare bliss in your soul – Aananda – an other worldy joy that cannot be described. Aananda is the only aim to be pursued. This practice is a saadhanaa, supreme yoga.

It is this class or category of PERFORMING ARTS that are being discussed and analysed hereafter.

Performing arts can be classified as: DRAMA, DANCE and MUSIC. Classical as against folk.

Objectives

After studying this unit you should be able to:

- distinguish between a performance at the superficial level and a performance at the otherworldly level;
- understand the non-competitive nature of the study of a classical performing art; and
- appreciate the absolute necessity for the classical performing arts in a society.

1.2 WHAT IS A PERFORMING ART?

Let us start by defining what is a Performing Art. In very simple terms it is an act which needs to be presented by a physical performance from a living entity. Here the word living entity is very specially used because even animals and birds can and do present such acts. It is an art which exists or comes into being when it is actually being performed – intentionally or impulsively. It also has a specific form and has an emotional or psychological impulse which promotes it.

Coming from the general term of living beings to the specific world of human beings this living performance is witnessed either in dance, music or theatre of any genre. Music is made when someone sings or plays on an instrument. In our tradition the form of a musical piece can be written down in terms of notations or, as it is now possible due to technological advancement, a piece of music can
be rendered on tape or a disc. But you can term it music only when it is heard. The written notation or a score, or the recordings are meant to just remind us and reproduce it. There is no thrill of witnessing the art being created, it is just the same again and again – in short it has passed on in time and gone into the past – it has, in a way, become history.

Similarly a dance, of any type can be filmed or video taped. Once again, as in the case of music, it will appear the same when the recording is projected repeatedly. Once you are acquainted with the sequences of the dance piece, the element of novelty just vanishes and the viewer would loose interest. It is a different matter when an aspiring student or performer watches such recording or listens to the musical one to learn something to, improve his / her technique. But then here it is a mode of learning, it is not appreciation of an art form.

Similarly, the film or a television recording is the combination of many co-ordinated arts and artifices; one can see a film again and again or a video recording. It will be the same every time. Yet the excitement of seeing something live and unfolding in front on the stage would be missing as when one watches the actual staging of a play.

1.3 EXPERIENCING LIVE MUSIC AND RECORDED MUSIC

Let us be a little more specific. Let us consider some actual facts. Imagine a situation where you had gone to a music concert by some great singer like Pandit Bhimsen Joshi or Dr. Balamurali Krishnan, or a sitar recital by Pandit Ravi Shankar. After the performance you come away with your ears buzzing with the strains of their exquisite and immortal music. Days or even years later you still savour the taste of that music. But these great musicians are not performing in front of you. Yet you remember their music. One can say that the Sound of Music has lived for only the few seconds or minutes for each facet, each phrase and then it vanishes. What remains is the memory of the wonder, the amazement, the delight that it created in you. You remember the intensity of the artist and his total involvement with his music. You remember the thrill that you experienced at watching and listening to the music being created. The eyes of the musician shut in total concentration and involvement in the music, the turn of the head, even the superbly controlled breathing and the eventual smile of joy and satisfaction at the music that he had wished to create and was successful in creating. And you smiled with him. But all these are images from the past-to be brought out from the closet of the stored memories, enjoyed and returned to be stored safely. But if you go once again to a concert by the same musician, and even if is the same raaga or song that he is delineating you will be amazed at the deviations or changes that he is bringing in. You will tell yourself: “but this is not the same as he had presented last time”. This is where a live performance is different from a fixed recording. For no human being can perform identically same every time. We adjust to the situation and rising to the needs of the occasion change our actions and reactions. Thus, the musician in question would have changed his approach depending on various factors. He may quicken the speed of his rendition if the time at his disposal is shorter and he has to wind up the recital rather quickly. He would also react and respond to the echoing reaction that he is evoking from his audience. If the audience response is very good and he is lauded for every beautiful interpretation he gives to his selected piece of music he will feel
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highly encouraged and he would give even more from his musical knowledge to further enrich his rendition. As against this there can be a situation where the audience just does not respond positively and is very cool and detached. Such a situation will, very naturally, affect the musician who may not be able to give his best; conversely he may use every trick of his trade to attract the attention and appreciation of his audience. All this is possible when the musician himself performs live. These changes are not possible when recorded music is played. Live music passes into memory immediately after it is made, but not so the recorded music which is right there to be played again and again as and when desired. Recorded music also is not always done at a stretch; musical pieces can be recorded bit by bit and the musician has the facility to re-record if he is not satisfied with his performance. A recording can even be continued after some days. In recorded music the accompanying music can be adjusted to go along with the musician. Recorded music eventually is the product of the technicians involved and their expertise. But it hardly ever gives the thrill of watching a live performance where the musicians and his audience literally become one pulsating to the same heartbeats.

1.4 EXPERIENCING LIVE DANCE PERFORMANCE AND RECORDED ONE

Let us turn to dance. This is even a more challenging art. A musician sits and give his performance – he does not have to significantly move his body, does not have to worry about his appearance or costumes. He does not require a large space to move and even if the lighting or the condition of the stage are not very good he can manage – but a dancer cannot.

To watch a dancer is a great experience. Indian dance is a miracle of both movement and stillness, of music and silence. Watching a dance performance it becomes very evident that the dancer takes you right inside her deepest being and conscience – it seems as if she is taking you in her confidence. Yet as soon as she finishes one item or an episode it passes into memory. In a live performance of dance the spectator experience the intuitive recognition of quality of the truth of the art and of its performance. He takes in his experience through his mind, his senses – enjoying it not through the external appearances, rather he sees into it. He perceives dance; does not see it. In dance there is only truth – the entire truth. It exists at the instant and moment of its execution and the dancer is focused on this point. The moment to moment images that is being created is stored in memory. In each of these innumerable images the dancer’s face, her hands, her eyes – in fact her entire body moves in complete harmony to present one integrated whole. And the myriad facial expressions on an Indian dancer’s face, interpreting at one moment love, at the next petulance and anger and in the very next anguish and despondency – all these in complete synchronisation of her entire body and in harmony with meaning and cadence of music creates a miracle – a miracle in which the spectator has participated, has grabbed the essence of it and has stored it in the priceless closet of his memory. A little bit of mistake on the dancer’s part breaks this magical experience and returns the spectator to the lower strata of earthiness where a human being is viewed, judged and criticised. The minute movement of raising or lowering of the brows at the wrong moment would ruin the entire performance; the ordinary spectator, even if he is not a cognizant would immediately perceive and understand the discordant note and the magic is broken. Same thing would happen if the dancer’s feet adorned with the
ghungharoos (bells) go out of synchronization with the rhythm being chalked out by the drummer – something that an ordinary spectator can perceive and probably laugh at.

This sort of a situation does not arise when the dance is filmed or video taped. The miracle of live synchronisation just does not figure here. The recording can be done bit by bit. A recorded dance is, to a great extent, the technical editor’s creation. Today’s technical advancement permits an editor to correct a good many flaws and mistakes in a dance performance. The costumes would always look well groomed, the make-up always fresh. There can be many takes and on the editing table the best would be chosen. The ultimate result would be a very correct and good performance but the thrill of watching the miracle unfold before your eyes is absent. You see the recording again and again and the same dance appears before your eyes. You do not see the dancer’s tremendous efforts and your heart and her heart just do not throb, in a synchronised manner, to the same rhythm.

1.5 EXPERIENCING A LIVE DRAMA STAGING AND A FILM

Same would be the case with theatre or drama. Who has not experienced thrill at an intense story being told through enactment by different actors doing different characters or roles. The actors’ voices throb with the emotion of the dialogues woven into the overall story to be told. The costumes is not as elaborate as in dance but is definitely selected to suit the personality of the character being enacted. Music may not play a very decisive role in the contemporary presentation of plays which is now popular and there are no dance like movements. But that which is absent in dance – the spoken words – is the life and breath of this art. In a play the most exciting and attention catching part is the dialogue delivery. It may vary from era to era and area to area and character to character but never fails to thrill the audience. The emotion laden voices of the actors create another world in front of the audiences eyes. Here also the stance of the body, the movements of the body which are actually well rehearsed and planned, add deep dimensions to the enactment by the actor who cannot take a step in the wrong direction. Just as dance and music have their rhythmic element, drama has its own when the perfect timing has to be maintained for the movements on the stage and the delivery of dialogues. An additional concern is that the actors have to interact with each other in a convincing manner. Each actor also has the weighty task of memorizing his/her dialogues – any lapse and the audience is bound to perceive it immediately eventually leading the staging to failure. But perfectly memorised dialogues and movements properly synchronised, the total involvement of the actors in the play with perfect identification with the character being presented is once again a highly elevating experience. Just as a great musician with his rendition, a great dancer with her performance, an actor also rises to greatness.

Yet no two performances by the same actor will be identical. An actor is a living entity pulsating with life and he is bound to react to the minutest impulse that he receives from his audience. He also has the opportunity and liberty of delineating different shades of the main emotion thus creating subtle differences in the impact of his performances on different days. It is a thrilling experience to witness a group of actors performing live on the stage to surpass each other.
1.6 THE MEDIUM OF FILMS

But samc is not the case with a film. Both drama and film have a lot in common with each other. Both have the same elements and components and both have inherent movement in the form of the storyline. One can say that it has a forward main movement in the unfolding of the story. It has collateral, horizontal movements which come and feed the central storyline. Today, the film has completely invaded our society and our psyche. It has become the major mode of entertainment which cuts across the different levels of society. The twin idiom to film is the television. At the present juncture both have a great similarity and serve the same purpose. Yet the two do have different treatment once in a while.

A film once shot will be the same after 50 years – excepting that over the decades technological progress would improve the quality of the film which can be updated. But the performances remain the same. We thrill at the superb artistry of Dilip Kumar or Sivaji Ganeshan but they are on celluloid, they are not in front of you in flesh and blood and you will never have the fascinating experience of watching them actually enacting scenes. Their task is the easier than the actors in dramas. If a particular scene is not satisfactory it can be shot again. And the best one will be inserted in the final print of the film. But their performance in drama remains static in time. It is not flexible and once shot it is even forgotten by the actor. It does not have to be stored image in the closet of memory. In fact the miracle of a live performance is totally lacking in a film.

1.7 THE MEDIUM OF TELEVISION

Television is slightly different in cases where it telecasts live performances of any of these three arts which gives the same thrilling experience. But when the programmes are shot bit by bit, edited and telecast it is identical to the film.

1.8 CONCLUSION

To conclude, watching, listening, being involved, mentally participating, sharing in the tension, being immersed in the excitement, getting activated by any of the Performing Arts is an experience; one in which you can sit back in tranquillity and enjoy the same presentation again and again but without being a part of it. The experience of enjoying and participating in a performing art is at the level of high seriousness. Great performances reflect the total identification of the artist with the idiom so as to become his/her second nature – it becomes a part of the performer’s intellectual, emotional and in India, spiritual being. This is true of all classical arts.

But there are some arts which do not conform to the classical norms. These are the entire body of folk arts – folk dancing, folk music and folk theatre. They are bright, joyous, colourful spontaneous but without the sophistication of the classical arts. These are performed during day-to-day activities or on special social occasions like weddings, births, deaths, naming ceremony of newborns, for sowing and reaping of crops and many more. There are the ritual dances and performances which are offered to propitiate and pacify the spirits. There are dances which form an integral part of the temple worship.

All these are living, throbbing performing arts – an integral part of the total human life.
1.9 SELF ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1) Fill in the blank space in the following statements using the words given below:
   a) There are three performing arts ......................................, ......................................, ......................................
   b) A performing art is to be presented by a ......................................
   c) Indian dance is a miracle of both ...................................... and ......................................
   d) It is a thrill to experience ...................................... and ...................................... to the music being created.
   e) The emotion laden voice of the actors create ...................................... in front of the audience’s eyes.
      (watching, drama, silence, music, another world, dance, listening, movement, living entity)

2) Write in 5 to 6 lines why a live performance is more thrilling than a recorded one.

3) Write briefly on the distinction between classical and folk art.

1.10 ANSWERS

1) a) drama, dance, music
   b) living entity
   c) movement silence
   d) watching, listening
   e) another world

2) A live performance brings you face to face with the artist who is performing. You can see the tremendous effort and concentration that go into the performance. It is not the same when you listen or watch a recorded performance. In a recorded performance there is effort but the mistakes or flaws are corrected technically and you have a perfect performances since the artist is given many chances and then technology steps in.

3) The experience of enjoyment of a classical art at the level of high seriousness. Classical performances reflect the total identification of the artist with the art so that it becomes the performer’s intellectual, emotional and spiritual being. Whereas the folk arts are bright, joyous, colourful spontaneous. They are presented on everyday or special activities of the society. Unlike the classical arts, the folk arts do not require a long and strenuous period of learning. They come naturally to the people of particular communities.