

ISSUES IN RADIO MUSIC BROADCASTING IN THE SRI LANKAN CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

The interference of mass media plays a key role in changing people's listening behavior and thinking patterns in numerous ways. Due to technological factors, a majority of Sri Lankans are exposed to "light songs" which are music tracks to last only for three to five minutes. From earlier to present times, almost all recording and reproducing technologies in the island have been used basically for this purpose. Various types of government and private FM channels, TV channels, and social media propagate these forms of songs in the contemporary music scene for different purposes. Because of the commercial benefits and good demand for songs, mobile network companies also promote artists to record songs according to the contemporary taste of the younger generation. This study discusses how Sri Lankan music was stuck to a monocentric stream of light songs due to the fact that the listeners in Sri Lanka are constantly being exposed to "light songs" through radio broadcasting and radio politics.

Keywords

Sri Lanka, Light songs, Radio broadcasting, Mass media

Introduction

Radio broadcasting technology was first introduced to Sri Lanka in 1924. As a result, of the free economic policy which had been introduced to the country in 1977 under the newly elected government, Sri Lankan culture was subjected to unprecedented changes and influences. In contrast to other mediums of music, gramophone discs, EP LP discs, Cassette tapes, and CDs, radio broadcasting thoroughly embraced the masses since it has the power to address the masses.

Consequently, the listening habits of people began to change in a dramatic manner. The arrival of the gramophone as a listening machine in the early period did not affect the daily lives of people as it had impacted only the musical culture of some upper classes, especially because it was an expensive and elite item that represented high social status at that time. This situation could be seen not only in Sri Lanka but also in India and some other countries (Joshi, 1988: 147). Thus, radio broadcasting the music of the gramophone indirectly influenced the lifestyles of many rural villagers. With the influx of job seekers going back and forth from the Middle East to Sri Lanka, the radio cum cassette recorder soon became a popular listening equipment in Sri Lanka. This may be one of the main reasons why Sri

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Lankan musical culture at this time was subjected to unprecedented transformations. The radio and cassette players critically affected and influenced the folk music traditions and other music styles of the country. Instead of the traditional practice of singing different types of folk songs during various stages of agricultural activities such as plowing, transplanting, weeding, protecting the crop against wild animals in watch huts, harvesting, and manual threshing, farmers began to listen to radios and cassette players while performing such work. This new practice became further established since the television advertisements, which promoted popular brands of radios, used the visuals of farmers listening to radios while engaging in their agricultural practices. The practice of adopting such technologies seriously affected the future of music practicing, especially, the Sri Lankan folk music tradition leading to the breakdown of the fabric of the whole system of music and the taste of music in the Sri Lankan community. When compared to the listening practices and habits of those who are used to high art music traditions (South, North Indian, and some Western classical music), it is clear that the majority of the Sri Lankans were compelled to listen to and appreciate light music such as songs from earlier times in mediums such as gramophone, films, dramas, or radio broadcasting.

The introduction of radio cassettes is not the only such technological influence that affected Sri Lankan music during that time. With the introduction of North Indian dramatic groups, headed by Baliwala also brought a host of songs based on North Indian classical music, and that was resulted to increase the popularity to songs. Since this transformation, not only the people who desired art but also the general public got used to think that a song would be the climax of music. In the same way, the majority of people also began to think that the song itself is "music".

The "song mentality" was properly utilized when producing films, dramas, and other art forms. There were twelve to fourteen songs that were embedded in early Sinhala films based on South Indian stories and music. This trend highly affected the popularity of the films screened at that time. Accordingly, advertisements were produced with attractive songs strategically in weekly papers by film producers to bring the audience to film halls. The following are examples of such paper advertisements for the film *See Devi* (09th March 1951):

1. "Sinhala songs based on popular Hindustani melodies", or
2. "Popular songs based on Hindi tunes could be listened to in this film" (Ariyaratne, 2006:14-15)

The popularity of film songs gradually increased and they became the dominant form of music in Sri Lanka. In the early times, as mentioned in Peter Manuel's article "Popular Music in India: 1901-86", film music was also widely spread by the radio, and recordings were overloaded at tea stalls, homes, and restaurants, not only in India but also in Sri Lankan villages as well (Manuel, 1993: 170). On the other hand, the Commercial and the External Services of the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) have been playing a leading role as the sole broadcaster of Indian film music throughout Asia, thus making Indian film music popular in Sri Lanka (Wallis and Malm, 1984: 37).

The literary aspect and the meanings of the majority of the early film songs were poor. Most of them consisted of vulgar idiomatic phrases, while the bulk of them illustrated over-romanticized love. However, in a few lyrics, the gramophone played an important and vital role in propagating and motivating people for patriotism from 1935 to 1945.

It is clear that other Eastern (especially India) and Western countries have moved on to certain measures to record and propagate both folk and art music traditions, in addition, to recording popular

songs. This practice was highly appreciated by some Sri Lankan listeners and, at the same time, this practice influenced them to cultivate a better music-listening culture in the country to some extent. In addition, it has been reported that some early musicians had also used those materials to learn North Indian music as per their choice (Perera, 1999: 44). There was also a practice of recording art music programs to be broadcast by the radio as a method of conservation within the premises of the radio station. Unfortunately, these productions were limited only to the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC). Some gramophone musicians occasionally recorded some North Indian ragas, but the majority limited their productions to traditional folk and light music.

Even though the SLBC had given high priority to propagate North Indian music in Sri Lanka, it also made the field somewhat confusing due to the practice of performing an elegiac music composition on the funerals of the leading political figures. This practice was initiated at the funeral of the late Sri Lankan Prime Minister Mr. S.W.R.D. Bandaranayake and such music was played by the late musician Edwin Samaradiwakara on that occasion. The result was that North Indian music was degraded by the public, at least to a certain extent as a funeral or public music that propagates political views.

In the same way, other classical music genres have been utilized for several advertising purposes in electronic media all over the world which has highly affected their previous aesthetic quality.

Fixing a reasonable price for songs may also be considered as a matter influential in securing popularity among artists to promote light music genres in the early Sri Lankan music industry. Recruiting famous contemporary and popular musicians as well as singers under agreements to compose only for their own recording labels in the gramophone era revealed the above-mentioned fact and the popularity of songs began to gradually increase. It is interesting to mention here that on certain occasions some artists tried to release their own EP records to bring their music to the audience (Ariyaratne, 1997: 102).

It is thought-provoking to note that the song traditions that had been blended with other art forms, such as drama or films have been utilized for listening purposes by music-appreciating audiences as light songs that used low-cost recording and playback mechanisms.

The establishment of Radio Ceylon resulted in a critical reshaping of the song culture to a certain extent. However, it still depended on gramophone song records in its line, and some programs were totally based on imitated Hindustani melodies. Lampson's administrative report comments on the quality of such programs as follows:

"...the standard of both light and classical music program has left much to be desired. This was mainly due to the lack of trained artists and the common and undesirable habit of slavishly copying Hindustani film music" (Karunanayake, 1990: 290).

Some Historical Facts

A group of musicians who learned classical music in India and a team of officials involved in the SLBC had been assigned a significant role in remodeling the quality and the music of the song tradition after the 1950s. Among them, W.D Amaradewa, Edwin Samaradiwakara, Ananda Samarakoon, and Sunil Santa may be considered pioneers of the said musical renaissance (Karunanayake, 1990: 290). They attempted to try out a new song tradition with meaningful lyrics in collaboration with some well-known poets in this era such as Sri Chandraratna Manwasingha, Mahagama Sekera, Madavala S. Rathnayake, and Wimal Abhayasundara. Together they invented musical compositions according to the lyrical meaning by using music elements from North Indian and other indigenous musical traditions they

could find. The term “light song” was especially used to distinguish between radio and other song categories. This effort was greatly appreciated by the elite and some educated people at that time began to patronize the national radio. However, the broadcasting of other art music traditions in the initial period was remarkably low. A new program titled “Dwithiya Sangrahaya” a secondary program, was designed specially to encourage North Indian classical music (Karunanayake, 1990: 290). Some other programs; namely, Sangeet Sabha, Sangeet Manjari, and Rasa Dhara were also launched on behalf of art music fans and admirers. Not only vocal music programs but also some other instrumental music programs were equally broadcasted by eminent musicians together with their students. This context was greatly influential in cultivating a variety of aesthetic behavioral patterns among the Sri Lankan audience.

In the meantime, the SLBC was offering radio grades to light song artists such as “Sarala Gee Shreni” which could be assumed as an attempt to establish professional standards of Sri Lankan music. Srikrishna Narayan Ratanjankar arrived from India to audit and grade radio artists in 1952. He explained in his noteworthy speech, which he gave concerning the ways in which it could be possible to construct “Sinhalese music”, the use of typical Sri Lankan folk melodies which had hitherto been neglected in rural villages in the country due to the growth of Indian music. A pertinent section of this speech is as follows:

“The real Sinhalese music having a traditional background is lying neglected in the interior, in the villages of Ceylon. The vannams, the sivpadas, the kavis, the viridus, slokas are quite an interesting stock of musical compositions which contain the germs of a great system of music which can be built upon them. Indian music of today has grown to its present standard out of simple folk songs as are now heard in Ceylon. These folk songs of Ceylon, as they are, of course, in a very primitive form. I do recommend them to notice the modern musicians and musicologists of Ceylon” (Karunanayake: 1990: 292).

In the same way, imitating and applying the musical elements of one of the most famous musical traditions of Calcutta in India known as “Rabindra Sangeet” by the great poet Ravindranath Tagore was imitated and practiced by some Sri Lankan patriotic musicians such as Ananda Samarakoon, Swarnaguptha Amarasingha, W.B. Makulolowa, C. de. S. Kulathilake, and Lionel Ranwala. This also resulted in establishing the said situation in the country. The dream of a “national musical tradition” in the country was gradually established; however, ultimately the practice ended because of the creative light song tradition. On the other hand, due to the lack of a cultivated art music tradition in the country, the situation became even worse and resulted in the spread of poor-quality² songs in Sri Lanka. Because of the great demand and the popularity of light music, especially the song culture, the majority of the musicians who had specialized in North Indian classical music both vocal and instrumental entered the field of light music. In the meantime, a few others struggled to cultivate Indian classical music in Sri Lanka. They held private tuition classes for students to learn music and managed to introduce North Indian Art Music to the school curriculum in addition to perform cultural shows.

In contrast to art music, another music style known as “Sinhala pop music” (the term “baila” was used to refer to this tradition) began to emerge together with “group songs” during the 1960s. This was distributed among the urbanized young generation at that time. Wally Bastiansz, M.S. Fernando, Anton Rodrigo, Anton Jones, and Nihal Nelson are some of the then contemporary artists in this regard.

2. Aesthetically, lyrically, and musically poor.

The Commercial Service of the SLBC³ promoted such artists and gave them 15 minutes per week for their programs. These programs were rather different from the ones that were broadcast in the National Service since they often promoted popular music programs of pop artists with fast rhythms. Subsequently, some of these programs were banned by the authority because of radio politics.

Issues of internal politics and the prevailing dominance of North Indian music also paved the way for banning these music practices of so-called popular music. The vast majority of people who had been trained and educated in North Indian music tended to relentlessly criticize and ignore widely distributed commercial music. They sometimes refused to consider this music under the category of “music”. Undoubtedly, this trend directly impacted the growth and diversity of Sri Lankan music. Due to the dominance of North Indian music, those in high positions at the SLBC unofficially took responsibility for this new trend. As a result, those music productions and locally produced music were not given proper recognition at the SLBC. Radio authorities tended to consider these ways of doing music to be poisoning the people’s aesthetic sensibilities, which would ‘kill’ the spirit of music, and they did so by bringing in ethical principles into their arguments. The following extract is taken from an earlier research publication titled “Big Sounds from Small People”:

“...They're not only against pop, they're even against our own traditional music ... that crowd is in charge of Radio Ceylon [the SLBC's former name] ... To that crowd, pop is poison. I recorded a song called 'Dilhani' in 1969. It was the first genuine Sinhalese pop song. When I went to the Director of music of the Sinhalese Service he said: 'Do you want me to play that poison? ... so, when it became a success, I met him again and asked: 'How do you like the success of my poison?' He had nothing to say, of course” (Wallis and Malm, 1984:255).

This may also show the necessity of a better definition regarding “success”.

Some Control Practices

The SLBC policy, during the period in question, also affected some other ways of music production. In practice, the lyrics and music notations had to be submitted to a committee (Sensor Board) to be considered for approval before broadcasting. Only the approved ones were allowed to be broadcast. However, some music compositions subsided due to the policy of the SLBC. Some songs were seized by the Corporation without giving a significant reason. The song “Mage rathtaran Helena” by Rohana Beddage was banned accordingly (Beddage,1992: 71-75). However, some pop musicians had the opportunity of broadcasting their songs via National Radio especially because of the sponsorship of the then Director General of Broadcasting Nevil Jayaweera and the Director of Commercial Service Livee Wijemanna as well as the English announcer Vijaya Korea from 1967 to 1970.

As a solution, group song artists and other popular artists attempted to launch their own EP albums and cassettes to propagate their music genres among masses thereby resulting in a profitable business in the context of the Sri Lankan music market. The late musician R. A. Chandrasena used Extended Play discs (EP) mediums in order to bring his music to the general public under the names of R.C.A. and later under the name of “Sri Math”, after 1973. Later, the EP and LP (Long Play) mediums were used as models to launch personal song albums of individual artists/singers and other local traditions of folk

3. Established in 1950.

songs and traditional drums.

Depending on the usage of music, musical elements, and lyrics, there were two types of artists. The first category was known as “classical artists” or “sambhawya gayakayin” and was highly appreciated and admired whereas the others were known as “pop artists” or “baila gayakayin” who were often always disregarded by the ‘elite groups’⁵ on the grounds that their music could not be admired as a good practice. In general, their use of language, dress code, and style of performance was fairly different from the so-called classical artists. There was a bad practice emerging, in that the pop artists were not appreciated even when they performed meaningful songs due to prevailing stereotypes. This is visible in present-day Sri Lanka as well. The main reason behind this is that the majority of listeners in Sri Lanka has not been willing to “ideologically transcend” the limits of the classical light music genre. However, the quality and creativity, and the types of prevailing genres are highly dependent on the members of a particular community.

When compared to the services provided by All India Radio to cultivate and broadcast art music and other music (Mathur, 1970: 97-103), it is clear that except for the earlier periods of Radio Ceylon, the era of the SLBC had not taken sufficient measures to develop local high-class music during the period from 1990 to-date. Where the light programs are concerned, only one hour of air time was allocated to classical music programs every Saturday from 10.00 to 11.00 pm on the Swadeshiya Sevaya (or National service of SLBC), whereas other services such as Tamil and English, broadcasted a variety of art music programs and other programs during the rest of the week.

The introduction and distribution of cassettes in 1977 drastically changed not only the quality of music productions and behavioral patterns of listening and aesthetics of the general public but also the themes and rhythm styles of songs. This trend laid the foundation to propagate these songs further and resulted in a pathway for everyone to enter the field of music rather easily. Based on the direct business-oriented way of production, there were a number of manufacturers who entered the field of music. Some of them decided on the themes of songs and the style of music without taking the quality of execution into consideration when they were producing cassettes. However, it was also possible for the singers and artists to select the themes and styles freely, resulting in a situation with reasonable independence for whom? at the SLBC (Karunanayake, 1990: 315). Nonetheless, some cassette manufacturers such as Singlanka, Tharanga, and Torana produced a variety of first-rate cassettes of the above-mentioned musicians who ethically were and still are in the classical category, meaning they have a complex framework of ethics that they have followed. Such producers always promoted and stood up for these artists whereas some manufacturers produced pop songs just as a straightforward business.

Ultimately, aesthetic features of songs explained through ethical considerations began to wane. Further, the phenomenon of a “song” became a commodity rather than an artistic creation. Some popular “cassette artists” have even released more than 100 cassettes within a short period (within two to three years). In addition to that, by means of the new recording techniques available, some popular albums of famous singers, especially H.R. Jothipala, and Milton Perera have been reproduced and released with harsh and unfitted instrumentations by some popular bands, without changing the

original voice of the artist. In the meantime, as an alternative method, some albums of pioneer artists were re-launched with new instrumentations by those first-grade cassette producers to cultivate a proper music impression suiting the taste of the younger generation and as a challenge to the fake music propagated by money-oriented companies.

If a recorded song or a musical composition is considered a "text" in a modern literary context, the reader (the listener or the audience) tends to construct its "textual meaning" according to the given clues or signals in different contexts as mentioned in Holub:

"There is no regulative context between text and reader to establish intent; this context must be constructed by the reader from textual clues or signals" (Holub, 1984: 92).

As a result, of these practices, the appreciation of music could be differentiated as per their choices depending on the music and the musical elements that were employed in such compositions. The so-called practice of issuing the same song containing different instrumentations has resulted in serious divisions among the listeners or audiences. Some of them prefer to listen to the original version with acoustic instruments whereas others prefer re-arranged versions with electronic instruments.

Benjamin argues in his article "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", that the aura of aesthetic quality tends to be lost (Benjamin, 1992 [1936]: 211-244) as a result of 'reproduction'. Modern recording and reproduction technologies have affected not only music but also other artifacts such as photographs and films. Much evidence could be provided to prove this argument within the music contexts in Sri Lanka. Such practices have highly affected the musical depth⁶ of some compositions, together with the permanent mixing up of fame and quality, light music and light living patterns, tradition and old, modern and good, and many other items with assumed traditional contextual meanings.

However, musically inexperienced young people used technological "tricks" and have again changed the nature of producing music in the recent past. These cassettes are used by drivers and conductors of the public transport systems in accordance with their choice and taste and the assumed need they want to satisfy in the people they transport. This can be largely seen in rural areas of the country. It has also affected the line-of thinking of children and younger people, who are made to believe in fame, popularity, and money sources. Because of the bad practice of propagating harsh rhythm, or vulgar murmurings, passengers with refined taste are getting used to embracing new technologies such as walkman cassettes players, I-pods, MP3, and even mobile phones capable of playing back music as a way of escaping these so-called music items so as to listen to the music of their own choices. Those people are easy to identify by their arrogance, their different way of smiling and their inactivity to change other people's behavior towards too much noise and too much hunger for loudness in drivers. Developing computer-based mass recording productions and home-based small-scale recording productions have also resulted in the creation of some other music genres such as "hip hop", and other modern genres and styles of music which were widely distributed among the generation since the 1990s. This can be seen as one of the dominant forms in the music charts in almost all private

5. The richness, complexity, and multi-layered nature of a musical composition, performance, or piece.

media channels, which is just a ranking of sold items emphasizing beats or rhythms other than the melody. This is a salient feature of these songs.

Even though there is a stream meant for the study of aesthetic subjects in the Sri Lankan formal education, the priority has been given to studying 'abhyasa ganas' (singing practice) and students usually prepare only for music examinations. The teaching methodology of North Indian classical music appears to be not helpful to cultivate and strengthen the aesthetic features and moods of students according to the ragas used. As a result, students do not pay much attention to this music either for their further studies or for developing their needs for aesthetic pleasure.

Further, secondary education has basically focused on teaching applied musical traditions. These conditions critically affect the increased demand for light music in the country. This is one reason why the contemporary reality programs such as "Superstars shows" are being telecasted on more than three or four television channels every weekend, thus promoting the song culture further.

Since there is a good demand and popularity for the genre of light songs, other kinds of musical compositions are not given a proper place in the field of music in Sri Lanka. However, there are a number of international award-winning and internationally recognized music compositions of late musician Premasiri Kemadasa, and contemporary musicians like Lalanath de Silva, Dilup Gabadamudalige, Harsha Makalanda, have their songs mostly limited to cassettes and CD media. Although they organized live performances to bring those compositions to Sri Lankan music audiences in person, due to the high entrance charges only those who belong to the social upper class are able to access them. It is interesting to notice that there was a practice of forming four types of small groups (music clubs) to listen, propagate, educate, and initiate a dialog of music and they were formed by eminent musicians in different places in the country. Such music clubs are the P4 Club, the Musical Hour Club, the Music Conservation Club, and the Ceylon Music Society (Basnayake, 2002: 11).

Depending on the prevailing situation, many artists have attempted to record songs for light song albums, commercials, film songs, and tele-dramas. Indeed, there needs to be a critical discourse focusing on how to change this practice to a more socially oriented consumption of music.

Conclusion

Although Sri Lankan music is nourished by various musical cultures, it is clear from the facts analyzed above that the Sri Lankan fan's enjoyment has been limited by being locked in the commercial music production of light songs. Consequently, not giving a proper place to other music seems to be a major mistake. It is also notable that Sri Lankan musicians were captured by literati due to their reliance on the song itself. According to these facts, it appears that the enjoyment of each other is also shaped according to the local sameness and similar wishes created throughout history.

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