

FORM AND FUNCTION: ECONOMICS AND THE MUSICAL ARTS

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One of the ways in economics to determine the worth of anything is price. And to most people who love the arts, that strikes them as a particularly vulgar method. It goes against the notion that art has innate value, that art should be for art's sake.

This is why the word “priceless” is so often used to describe works of art (though those pieces tend to be in museums), that considering their sale cheapens the notion of their universality in appeal, their timelessness in artistic achievement.

So yes, for aesthetes prices are anathema. But for artists, it may not be their motivation but it is definitely their bread and butter.

For years I have, as a thought experiment, wondered what is the most moving form of art. And I have concluded on the basis of personal preferences, that it is music. There is something in the marriage of music, voice and lyrics that pushes both memories and powerful emotions to the surface. In its brevity it does what longer training to appreciate paintings, or the time required to invest in watching film achieves. In that sense, it is also the most democratic, everyone can get access to music.

But music has been undergoing a significant transition, one felt most direly by both Generation X and older Millennials. Maybe attitudes and tastes are shifting — as they usually do when a new generation drives cultural consumption. Baby Boomers know this; they saw ghazal, qawwali, filmi songs and disco fade into the background, as less nuanced music took hold as both Millennials and Generation X embraced pop and rock in its less nascent form.

For music as it currently stands, at least internationally, changing technology and economics is driving art as much as changing tastes and a new generation is. Spotify, introduced in Pakistan just two years ago is a service I love. And yet the convenience and endless choice it has provided me has distorted incentives so much that it has influenced the course of how music is created.

First the good — Spotify increases your consumption of music, it expands your musical horizons if you let it choose the next song in a playlist and it addressed the significant issue of piracy by providing a usable payment model. And the choices are endless.

But, there is always a but, the way Spotify monetises — which is to count a listen if the user hears at least 30 seconds of it before skipping to something else — has incentivised some creators to restructure their songs away from the traditional verse, bridge, chorus structure to bring the hook and the chorus first. Catchy wins out over nuance. I haven't seen this in Pakistan yet — with a few exceptions — but the increasing popularity of hip hop and rap in our shores could change that.

The internet did some radical things for music, maybe before it did it for information, journalism and other forms of content. It made music free through piracy, creating a generation of listeners unaccustomed to paying for songs. And with monoliths of distribution labels the response to technological change was threatening legal action — but given the sheer number of users that was never going to work.

Music, now, with streaming services being more convenient than piracy, are no longer free, but they may as well be. The cost of music is less than it has ever been, one no longer has to build a personal library and while this has led to musicians being paid, they are paid a pittance.

Musicians no longer make money from the distribution of their music as much as they do from their performances. For a Pakistani artist to make an estimated USD 500 they would need to get a million listens on Spotify. That's not a lot of money, but it's definitely more than nothing they received from decentralised piracy.

In Pakistan this poses unique problems. In the 90s and early 2000s claiming royalties was difficult, and musicians and bands were incentivised to sell albums outright. It was a legitimate one-off income stream that was supplemented by performances and sponsorships. But albums now the world over are somewhat passé as singles rule the roost.

For music to flourish, artists will need increasing access to public space for performances in Pakistan. This remains an issue, some legitimate as security during rough times, some illegitimate as the law of permissions making it cumbersome.

We are lucky though that corporates in this country have all rather unimaginatively chosen to piggyback on music shows to associate their products with. These shows have grown in stature and ambition over the years by providing opportunities and some semblance of movement in the music industry. Some of the shows now – including Coke Studio in its latest iteration – are showcasing younger and fresher talent rather than just repackaging the old with better production values.

For the longest time, especially during the heyday of the insurgency in the country when all public space contracted, only established artists could truly survive. We had the internet, but suffered from the paradox of choice. Since everything was available it was too much effort to listen to new music and curate our tastes with new materials and only Coke Studio to bring out something new.

This is now at least changing as entry barriers have become virtually non-existent. But it is easier than ever to join the industry and harder than ever to become successful in it. Previously, the constraints in the industry were gatekeepers from labels, channels, the costs of music production and tastemakers. Today the restraints come from the fact there are no constraints, everyone can potentially listen to your song, but getting sufficient numbers to do so is increasingly difficult.

So it is odd now that the economics of creative industries in this cutting edge age of technology comes from the oldest form of music's practice, the live performance. If Pakistan is to become the cultural powerhouse it wants to be, or at least at one point wanted to by emulating Turkey, we need state intervention to make performance possible. Only then will the world sing our tune.

The magic sauce of "Pasoori" is a once in a lifetime event, not always replicable.

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