



This article is published under the Creative Commons CC-BY-ND License
(<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/>)

The Necessity of Teaching North Indian Music History at the Undergraduate Music programs: Enhancing Musical Understanding and Pedagogical Foundations

K. A. D. Ranga Perera

Senior Lecturer

Department of North Indian Music

Faculty of Music

Visual & Performing Arts University, Colombo Sri Lanka

Correspondence:- ranga.p@vpa.ac.lk

Submitted: March, 23, 2026 Revised: May, 23, 2026 Accepted: June, 20, 2026

Abstract: This study investigates the necessity of embedding North Indian music history, particularly Hindustani classical traditions, within undergraduate curricula, and evaluates its impact on musicianship, pedagogy, and cultural literacy. Drawing on a qualitative framework, the research combines a systematic literature review with semi structured interviews conducted among educators and students from three Sri Lankan universities. The literature establishes theoretical foundations regarding the dual role of history in preservation and innovation, while interviews provide contextual insights into pedagogical practices, challenges, and student perceptions. Findings reveal that educators consistently emphasize the importance of historical study in enhancing interpretive authenticity, stylistic sensitivity, and pedagogical preparedness. Students, though initially resistant to abstract historical content, reported increased engagement when exposed to interactive strategies such as multimedia resources, storytelling of guru-shishya lineages, and experiential workshops. Comparative analysis across institutions highlights distinct emphases: stylistic authenticity at the University of Kelaniya, sociocultural reflection

1. Introduction

North Indian classical music, widely known as Hindustani music, represents one of the most profound cultural and artistic traditions of South Asia. Rooted in ancient Vedic practices, particularly the melodic chanting of the *Sama Veda*, this tradition evolved over centuries through dynamic interactions with diverse sociocultural influences, including Persian and Central Asian musical elements during the medieval period. The result is a rich and layered soundscape that embodies both spiritual depth and artistic sophistication. Hindustani music is not merely a performance practice; it is a cultural philosophy that integrates aesthetics, pedagogy, and identity. For undergraduate students engaged in music studies, understanding this historical trajectory is indispensable for cultivating holistic musicianship and pedagogical competence.

The teaching of music history at the undergraduate level provides a critical bridge between technical training and contextual knowledge. In many music education systems globally, performance training and historical study are treated as complementary rather than competing

at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura, and pedagogical preparedness at the University of the Visual and Performing Arts. Challenges include reconciling oral traditions with academic frameworks, limited instructional time, and inadequate access to archives and scholarly resources. Despite these constraints, the study affirms that historical knowledge is indispensable for cultivating culturally literate, critically engaged, and pedagogically versatile musicians. It recommends curriculum reforms, resource investment, and collaborative initiatives bridging traditional practitioners and academics to harmonize oral heritage with scholarly discourse. Ultimately, the research underscores that history is not peripheral but a central pillar of holistic musicianship, ensuring both continuity and creative adaptability within the Hindustani tradition.

Keywords: Cultural identity, North Indian music history, Preservation and innovation, Sri Lankan Universities, Undergraduate pedagogy

priorities. A student who can execute a raga with technical precision but lacks knowledge of its gharana lineage, its historical evolution, or its sociocultural significance is, in an important sense, performing incompletely. History does not merely supplement performance — it informs interpretive choices, shapes stylistic sensitivity, and anchors the performer within a living tradition. Exposure to the *guru-shishya parampara* (teacher-disciple tradition), for instance, illuminates not only how music was transmitted across generations but also the ethical and philosophical values embedded in that transmission. Whether and how such historical knowledge shapes students' interpretive practice and cultural identity in formal academic settings, however, remains an open question — particularly in contexts outside India where Hindustani music is taught as a transplanted tradition.

Globally, music education has increasingly emphasized the importance of contextual learning. In Western conservatories and universities, music history is considered a foundational subject that complements performance and theory, and its place in the

curriculum is rarely questioned. Within the South Asian context, however, the integration of Hindustani music history into formal academic curricula has faced persistent challenges. Resistance often arises from the tension between oral traditions and academic frameworks: the guru-shishya model prizes experiential immersion and embodied knowledge, while university structures demand documentation, structured syllabi, and assessable outcomes. These two systems do not easily coexist, and the negotiation between them has shaped — and in some cases constrained — the development of music history as a formal subject. Recent reforms in Indian universities have begun to address this by institutionalizing music history as a critical component of music education, recognizing its role in cultivating cultural literacy, artistic responsiveness, and generational continuity.

In Sri Lanka, the situation carries additional layers of complexity. Hindustani music occupies a unique position in Sri Lankan higher education: it is formally taught within university music departments, yet it exists outside its original cultural and geographical ecosystem. Students learning this tradition in Sri Lanka do not have the same informal cultural exposure that students in India might absorb from their broader environment. The classroom and the lesson, therefore, bear a greater responsibility for transmitting not only technique but also the historical and cultural context that gives the music meaning. Despite this heightened responsibility, the history of Hindustani music remains largely absent from undergraduate curricula in Sri Lankan universities, where the emphasis continues to be placed predominantly on practical performance skills. This absence raises important pedagogical questions about the kind of musicians these programs are producing and whether those musicians are adequately equipped to perform, teach, and sustain this tradition in a culturally responsible manner.

The purpose of this study is to argue for the necessity of teaching North Indian music history at the undergraduate level and to demonstrate how historical knowledge enhances musical understanding, pedagogical skills, and cultural empowerment. By reviewing scholarly literature and analyzing empirical data drawn from educators and students at three Sri Lankan universities, the research identifies best practices and persistent challenges in institutionalizing music history as a curricular subject. The study also foregrounds the dual role of history in preservation and innovation: while safeguarding intangible heritage, historical knowledge simultaneously empowers students to engage creatively and responsibly with contemporary artistic landscapes. The following sections review existing literature on the subject, outline the methodological framework employed, present findings from interviews and analysis, and discuss implications for curriculum development. Ultimately, this study seeks to contribute to ongoing debates in music education by affirming that history is not a peripheral subject but a central pillar of holistic musicianship within the Hindustani tradition.

Objectives

- To examine the necessity of embedding North Indian music history within undergraduate music curricula in Sri Lankan universities and evaluate its role in holistic musicianship.

- To evaluate the impact of historical knowledge on students' interpretive authenticity, stylistic sensitivity, and pedagogical preparedness when performing and teaching Hindustani classical music.
- To investigate the pedagogical strategies — such as multimedia resources, storytelling of guru-shishya lineages, and experiential workshops — that effectively engage undergraduate students with historical content.
- To identify the challenges faced by educators and students in integrating North Indian music history into formal academic curricula, particularly the tension between oral traditions and academic frameworks.

Statement of the Problem

The historical dimensions of Hindustani classical music have not been systematically addressed at the undergraduate level in Sri Lankan universities. Although these institutions offer formal programs in North Indian music, the curriculum tends to privilege practical performance over historical and contextual study. As a result, students are not adequately equipped with the cultural frameworks necessary to interpret and perform the music with authenticity. This gap reflects a broader tension between the indigenous oral tradition of music transmission and the demands of formal academic structures. Compounding this are institutional challenges such as insufficient curriculum time allocated to music history and a lack of accessible scholarly resources in the local context. There is therefore an urgent need to revise undergraduate music curricula in Sri Lanka and to introduce more systematically grounded, research-informed pedagogies that can meaningfully bridge the oral heritage of Hindustani music with contemporary academic expectations.

Literature Review

The teaching of North Indian music history at the undergraduate level has been increasingly recognized as a critical component of holistic music education. Scholarship emphasizes that historical knowledge not only enriches performance practice but also strengthens pedagogical foundations and cultural literacy. This review synthesizes key contributions from recent journal articles, theses, and academic studies, highlighting themes of pedagogy, preservation, innovation, and the challenges of integrating history into formal curricula. Together, these contributions establish a theoretical foundation for understanding why music history occupies an indispensable place in undergraduate music education, and why its absence carries significant consequences for the quality and cultural authenticity of musical training.

Oppenheim (2012) offers a foundational analysis of pedagogy in North Indian classical music, situating the *guru-shishya parampara* within broader educational reforms and examining the tension between oral traditions and academic frameworks. His study notes that while oral transmission emphasizes experiential immersion and personalized mentorship, formal curricula demand structured analysis, documentation, and assessable outcomes. This duality reflects the central challenge of integrating Hindustani music history

into undergraduate programs without undermining its traditional ethos. While Oppenheim's work remains a valuable starting point for understanding this tension, its focus on the North American institutional context means its findings cannot be directly transposed to Sri Lankan settings, where resource constraints, cultural distance from the tradition, and the absence of a surrounding Hindustani musical ecosystem present distinctly different pedagogical challenges.

Recent scholarship has expanded this discussion by examining improvisation and memory-based learning as sites where history and practice converge. Sayers (2025), writing in *Frontiers in Psychology*, explores pedagogical strategies for developing improvisational skills in North Indian classical music, highlighting the cognitive processes — such as schema development and pattern recognition — that underpin oral transmission. Her findings suggest that historical study can meaningfully complement these processes by contextualizing improvisational practices within their lineage and stylistic genealogy. Historical knowledge, in this reading, is not an abstract academic exercise but a practical cognitive tool — one that equips students with the conceptual vocabulary to understand, reproduce, and eventually extend the improvisational conventions of their tradition. This positions history as integral to performance development rather than supplementary to it.

Krishna (2021) investigates the role of Hindustani music education in shaping identity and values in post-1991 India, arguing that music history education fosters cultural belonging and continuity, particularly in contexts where globalization and modernization threaten traditional practices. By situating students within historical narratives — of gharanas, of legendary practitioners, of stylistic evolution — curricula strengthen their sense of identity while equipping them to navigate contemporary artistic landscapes with confidence and critical awareness. In the Sri Lankan context, where students engage with Hindustani music outside its cultural homeland, this question of identity formation through historical study takes on even greater significance. Without the surrounding cultural ecosystem that students in India might absorb informally, the university classroom becomes one of the few structured spaces where historical and cultural context can be deliberately transmitted, making its inclusion in the curriculum not merely beneficial but essential.

A consistent theme across the literature is the dual role of history in safeguarding tradition while simultaneously enabling creative adaptation. Scholars argue that documenting gharanas, ragas, and performance conventions is essential for preservation, while critical engagement with stylistic evolution empowers students to innovate responsibly. Preservation and innovation, in this framework, are not opposing forces but complementary dimensions of cultural continuity. A student who understands the historical trajectory of a raga is better positioned to experiment with it meaningfully — aware of what conventions they are working within, extending, or departing from. This dual emphasis ensures that creative adaptation remains culturally grounded rather than arbitrary, and it is this grounding that distinguishes a historically informed musician from one trained solely in technical execution.

An emerging theme in recent scholarship concerns the role of digital technology in supporting music history education. Access to archival

recordings, digitized manuscripts, and online repositories of performance footage has begun to transform how students engage with historical content, enabling direct encounters with historical performances rather than reliance on textual description alone. Singh and Kaur (2025) note that North Indian universities are increasingly incorporating digital resources into music curricula, with measurable improvements in student engagement and historical understanding. This development carries particular relevance for institutions in Sri Lanka, where physical access to North Indian archives, rare manuscripts, and living practitioners of historical gharanas is structurally limited. Digital tools thus represent not merely a pedagogical enhancement but a practical necessity for music history education in geographically displaced institutional contexts.

Despite consensus on its value, integrating North Indian music history into undergraduate curricula faces significant challenges. Oppenheim (2012) identifies resistance from students who prioritize performance over historical study, perceiving history as abstract or secondary to their immediate artistic development. Institutional inertia and resource limitations further impede curriculum modernization, while Krishna (2021) notes that limited access to archives and scholarly materials constrains effective teaching, particularly in regional and non-Indian institutions. Sayers (2025) adds that pedagogical strategies must address cognitive engagement directly, suggesting that interactive methods — such as multimedia resources, recordings of legendary practitioners, and experiential workshops — can bridge the gap between oral traditions and academic expectations. These strategies align with global best practices in music education, where multi-modal and experiential approaches are increasingly employed to engage diverse learners and make historical content tangible and relevant.

Across the literature, a consensus emerges on the indispensability of North Indian music history education at the undergraduate level, alongside a shared recognition that its effective delivery requires pedagogical innovation and institutional commitment. Emerging directions in the field point toward blended pedagogies that integrate oral traditions with academic frameworks, collaborative workshops involving both traditional practitioners and university scholars, and the sustained use of digital technology to provide access to recordings, archives, and interactive learning tools. Interdisciplinary approaches linking music history with cultural studies, philosophy, and performance science are also gaining traction, reflecting a broader shift in music education toward contextualized, holistic learning that values both tradition and innovation. These directions collectively frame the theoretical landscape within which the present study situates its inquiry into Sri Lankan undergraduate music education.

Materials and Methodology

This study examines the necessity of teaching North Indian music history at the undergraduate level and evaluates its impact on musical understanding, pedagogical development, and cultural literacy. The research is guided by a qualitative orientation, emphasizing depth of understanding, contextual sensitivity, and interpretive analysis rather than statistical generalization. This approach was deemed most appropriate given the study's focus on lived pedagogical experiences, institutional practices, and the

nuanced interplay between oral tradition and academic structure — dimensions that resist reduction to quantifiable measures.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopts a constructivist and ethnomusicological framework. Constructivism posits that learners actively construct knowledge through interaction with cultural, social, and historical contexts (Vygotsky, 1978). Applied to music education, this framework highlights the importance of situating musical practice within its historical lineage, enabling students to build meaning through contextual engagement rather than passive reception of technical instruction. Ethnomusicology further informs the study by emphasizing the cultural embeddedness of music traditions and the necessity of preserving oral transmission while adapting to academic structures (Nettl, 2015). Together, these frameworks provide an analytical lens for examining how historical study mediates between tradition and modern pedagogy, and how students and educators negotiate questions of identity, authenticity, and innovation within formal academic settings.

Research Design

A qualitative case study design was employed, focusing on three Sri Lankan universities with established undergraduate music programs: the University of Kelaniya (Department of Fine Arts), the University of Sri Jayawardenepura (Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences), and the University of the Visual and Performing Arts (UVPA). These institutions were selected because they represent diverse approaches to music education in Sri Lanka, each combining performance training with varying degrees of theoretical and historical study. Their different institutional missions and student profiles made them well suited for comparative analysis. The case study design allowed for in-depth exploration of pedagogical practices, student experiences, and institutional challenges across contrasting educational contexts.

Data Sources

Two principal data sources were utilized. The first was a systematic review of scholarly articles, theses, and institutional curricula focusing on Hindustani music pedagogy and history education, which provided the theoretical grounding and contextual background for the study. The second was primary empirical data collected through semi-structured interviews with educators and students at the three selected universities. These two sources were used in combination, with the literature informing the design of the interview questions and the interview data subsequently interpreted against the theoretical and empirical landscape established by the review.

Participants

A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to ensure representation of diverse perspectives across institutional and role-based contexts. The total sample comprised six educators and fifteen students, distributed equally across the three universities, with two educators and five students drawn from each institution. The educator group comprised lecturers specializing in North Indian classical music, musicology, and music pedagogy, all of whom were actively involved in music history instruction at the time of the study. The

student group comprised undergraduate students in their second and third years of Hindustani music programs, selected on the basis of their enrolment in music history courses and their demonstrated engagement with the subject matter. All participants were selected on the basis of their active involvement with music history curricula and their willingness to reflect critically on their pedagogical experiences, prioritizing depth and relevance of perspective over numerical representativeness, in keeping with the qualitative orientation of the study.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary method of data collection. Interviews were conducted in English or Sinhala depending on participant preference and lasted between 20 and 40 minutes each. This format was chosen because it allowed for systematic coverage of key topics while preserving the flexibility to pursue unanticipated insights as they emerged in conversation. Interview topics addressed the perceived value of music history instruction, the challenges of integrating historical content with performance practice, the effectiveness of various pedagogical strategies, and participants' suggestions for curriculum enhancement. In addition to interviews, document analysis was conducted examining syllabi, course outlines, and institutional policies related to music history education at each university, providing an institutional complement to the individual perspectives gathered through interviews.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were coded thematically using NVivo software. Themes were derived both deductively, based on the constructivist and ethnomusicological theoretical framework, and inductively, emerging organically from participant narratives. Key themes that emerged through this process included the value of historical knowledge for performance practice, pedagogical challenges and student engagement, the tension between preservation and innovation, and institutional constraints and resource limitations. Triangulation was achieved by systematically comparing interview data with findings from the literature review and insights drawn from institutional documents, enhancing the validity and reliability of the interpretive conclusions. The use of multiple data sources ensured that no single perspective dominated the analysis and that findings were grounded in convergent evidence across different modes of inquiry.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant university committees prior to data collection. All participants provided informed consent and were made aware of the voluntary nature of their participation, including their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Confidentiality was maintained throughout by anonymizing participant names and institutional affiliations in all transcripts and reported findings. Interviews were conducted in a manner sensitive to participants' professional and academic contexts, ensuring that responses were given freely and without institutional pressure.

Limitations

The study's primary limitations relate to scope and access. The sample of six educators and fifteen students drawn from three institutions, while sufficient for the purposes of qualitative inquiry, may not fully represent the diversity of music education contexts across Sri Lanka. Resource constraints also limited access to comprehensive archival materials, which would have strengthened the document analysis component. Additionally, student responses were at times shaped by immediate academic pressures, which may have influenced their reflections on the relevance of historical study. These limitations are acknowledged as boundaries on the generalizability of the findings, though they do not diminish the depth and contextual validity of the insights generated within the scope of the study.

Results and Findings

Analysis of interviews conducted with six educators and fifteen students across the three universities revealed a consistent and strongly held recognition of the importance of teaching North Indian music history at the undergraduate level. Educators across all three institutions observed that students who engaged substantively with music history demonstrated markedly greater interpretive authenticity in their performance of ragas. Knowledge of gharana legacies enabled these students to move beyond generic renditions and perform with the stylistic sensitivity that distinguishes informed musicianship from technically competent but contextually hollow execution. Lecturers further noted that historical study cultivated a capacity for critical reflection, enabling students to interrogate the sociocultural forces that shaped the evolution of Hindustani music across different periods. As illustrated in Figure 1, educator ratings of student outcomes were consistently high across all three institutions, though the specific dimensions most valued differed according to institutional emphasis — interpretive authenticity at the University of Kelaniya, critical reflection at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura, and pedagogical preparedness at the University of the Visual and Performing Arts.

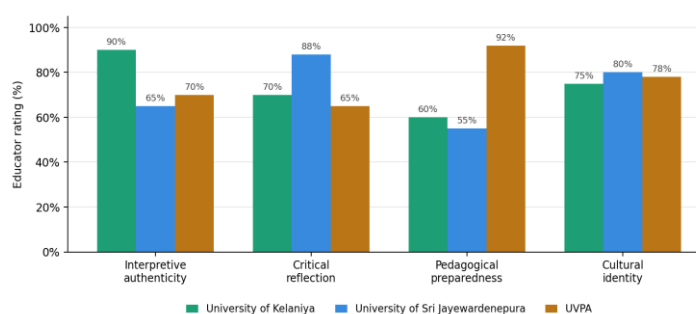


Figure 1. Educator perceptions: value of music history instruction by institution (n = 6 educators)

Students initially expressed considerable reluctance toward history courses, frequently perceiving them as abstract and secondary to performance training. Many participants acknowledged that their primary orientation was toward mastering technical skills and stage performance, and they found it difficult to perceive the immediate relevance of historical content. However, as courses progressed and pedagogical strategies shifted toward more interactive formats, student perceptions changed substantially. Guided exploration of historical narratives — particularly through storytelling of *guru-shishya* lineages — helped students recognize the organic

connection between history and performance practice. Multimedia recordings of legendary practitioners proved especially effective in bridging the gap between theory and lived musical experience. At the University of the Visual and Performing Arts, experiential workshops in which historical concepts were demonstrated through live performance were particularly valued, as they rendered abstract ideas tangible and fostered sustained engagement. As shown in Figure 2, student-reported engagement across four key dimensions increased dramatically following exposure to these interactive methods, with engagement scores rising from an average of approximately 29% before interactive pedagogy to over 78% after its introduction.

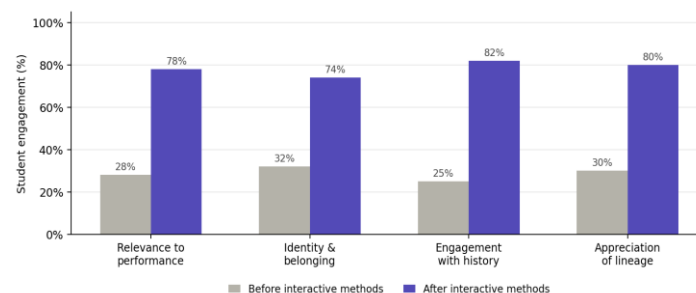


Figure 2. Student engagement shift before and after interactive pedagogy (n = 15 students)

Despite these positive outcomes, several challenges were consistently reported across all three institutions. The most fundamental difficulty was reconciling oral traditions with academic frameworks. The *guru-shishya* model emphasizes experiential immersion, embodied memory, and personalized transmission, while university curricula demand structured analysis, written documentation, and standardized assessment. Students frequently struggled to navigate these dual demands, and educators expressed concern that the tension between these two systems created conceptual confusion that undermined the depth of historical learning. A second persistent challenge was the limited instructional time allocated to history courses, which were routinely overshadowed by the demands of performance training. Educators across all three institutions reported that the reduced time available for historical content prevented adequate coverage and limited students' capacity to appreciate its full significance. Resource constraints compounded these difficulties: institutions reported inadequate access to archival recordings, comprehensive scholarly materials, and documentation of historical performance traditions, all of which are essential to effective music history instruction.

Comparative analysis across the three institutions revealed distinct pedagogical emphases that reflected their respective institutional missions and student profiles, as summarized in Table 1. At the University of Kelaniya, educators placed strong emphasis on stylistic authenticity, encouraging students to study gharana legacies in detail and to bring that knowledge directly into their performance practice. Students at this institution showed particular appreciation for contextualized performance work, recognizing that historical knowledge enriched and refined their interpretive choices. At the University of Sri Jayewardenepura, the emphasis fell on critical reflection and sociocultural analysis. Educators prioritized an understanding of the historical forces — cultural, political, and economic — that shaped the evolution of the tradition, and students demonstrated heightened awareness of how these broader contexts inflected the musical forms they were learning. At the University of the Visual and Performing Arts, the focus was on pedagogical

preparedness. Students there were oriented toward teaching careers and valued history primarily as a foundation for effective instruction — a body of knowledge that would enable them to contextualize technique within broader cultural narratives when teaching their own students in the future.

Table 1. Comparative institutional emphases, key themes, and reported challenges

Institution	Primary emphasis	Key themes reported	Main challenges
University of Kelaniya	Stylistic authenticity	Gharana legacies; interpretive choices; historical lineage	Reconciling oral and academic frameworks; limited archival access
University of Sri Jaywardenepura	Sociocultural reflection	Critical reflection; cultural context; sociopolitical analysis	Insufficient instructional time; student resistance to abstract content
University of the Visual and Performing Arts (UVPA)	Pedagogical preparedness	Teaching competence; experiential workshops; live performance integration	Resource constraints; limited scholarly materials

The findings align strongly with and extend existing scholarship. Oppenheim's (2012) identification of the tension between oral and academic traditions was consistently echoed by educators across Sri Lankan institutions, confirming that this challenge is not unique to the North American context but operates with particular intensity in diasporic settings where the tradition must be formally transmitted rather than culturally absorbed. Krishna's (2021) argument that historical study shapes musical identity was directly corroborated by student narratives, particularly among students who reported that engagement with lineage histories deepened their sense of belonging within the broader South Asian musical continuum. Sayers' (2025) advocacy for interactive and multimedia-based pedagogies was reflected in the measurable shift in student engagement following the introduction of experiential workshops and multimedia resources, reinforcing the finding that method matters as much as content in music history instruction. Taken together, the Sri Lankan case studies both confirm global perspectives and contribute locally grounded insights into the specific institutional conditions under which music history education succeeds or struggles.

The trustworthiness of these findings was ensured through systematic triangulation, cross-verifying data from participant interviews, the scholarly literature, and institutional documents including syllabi and course outlines. Member checking was

conducted by sharing summaries of findings with participants to confirm interpretive accuracy. Thick description was employed throughout the analysis to preserve contextual richness, and reflexivity was maintained by acknowledging the researcher's positionality as both a practitioner and an academic within the tradition under study. These measures collectively enhance the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the findings, ensuring that the conclusions drawn are grounded in robust and convergent evidence rather than in any single participant's perspective.

Discussion

The findings of this study extend existing scholarship in ways that go beyond simple confirmation. While Oppenheim (2012) and Krishna (2021) identified the tension between oral and academic traditions primarily within Indian and North American institutional contexts, this study demonstrates that the same tension operates with heightened intensity in a diasporic setting. In Sri Lanka, Hindustani music exists outside its cultural homeland, which means students cannot absorb historical and contextual knowledge informally through their broader environment. The university classroom becomes, in effect, the sole structured space where that knowledge can be deliberately transmitted. This geographical and cultural displacement does not merely replicate the challenges documented elsewhere — it amplifies them, making the formal inclusion of music history in curricula not a pedagogical preference but an institutional necessity. The Sri Lankan case therefore adds a dimension to the global literature that has not previously been theorized: that the urgency of music history education scales with the cultural distance between the institution and the tradition it teaches.

One of the most analytically significant findings is the dual role of history in preservation and innovation. Educators and students across all three universities recognized that historical study safeguards intangible heritage by documenting gharana legacies, ragas, and performance conventions — ensuring that knowledge which exists primarily in oral form is not lost as generations of practitioners change. At the same time, the findings reveal that historical knowledge functions as an enabling condition for responsible innovation. Students who understood the historical trajectory of their tradition were better positioned to experiment with it meaningfully, because they could locate their creative choices within an established framework rather than departing from it arbitrarily. This aligns with broader ethnomusicological arguments that preservation and innovation are complementary rather than opposing forces, and the Sri Lankan data substantiates this theoretically with empirically grounded evidence from three distinct institutional contexts.

The challenge of reconciling oral traditions with academic frameworks emerged consistently as the most structurally entrenched barrier across all three institutions. Oral transmission prizes experiential immersion, embodied memory, and the intimacy of the guru-shishya relationship, while formal academic structures

demand documentation, standardized assessment, and replicable outcomes. These two epistemologies do not map cleanly onto one another, and students frequently reported confusion when required to navigate both simultaneously. What the findings suggest, however, is that this tension is not irresolvable. When educators introduced interactive and experiential pedagogical strategies — multimedia recordings of legendary practitioners, storytelling of lineage histories, and live performance demonstrations — students who had initially resisted historical content began to engage substantively with it. This aligns directly with Sayers' (2025) advocacy for cognitively engaging, interactive methods in North Indian classical music pedagogy, and it points toward a practical pathway: the tension between oral and academic epistemologies can be meaningfully reduced when teaching methods honor the experiential character of the oral tradition rather than forcing historical content into purely textual formats.

Institutional constraints, however, remain a structural obstacle that pedagogical innovation alone cannot overcome. Across all three universities, limited instructional time devoted to history courses meant that even motivated educators could not cover the subject with adequate depth. The systematic underfunding of archival resources, scholarly materials, and documentation of historical performance traditions compounded this difficulty. These are not incidental resource gaps — they reflect a deeper institutional assumption that performance competence is the primary, if not sole, measure of music education quality. Shifting this assumption will require not only curriculum reform but a reconceptualization of what undergraduate music education is fundamentally for. The findings suggest that institutions producing musicians who are technically accomplished but historically uninformed are, in effect, producing musicians who are professionally incomplete — capable of performing the tradition but not of sustaining, transmitting, or critically evolving it.

The comparative analysis across the three universities reveals that while all institutions affirmed the value of music history, their distinct emphases reflect genuinely different understandings of what historical knowledge is for. The University of Kelaniya's prioritization of stylistic authenticity positions history primarily as a performance resource. The University of Sri Jayewardenepura's focus on sociocultural reflection positions history as a critical and analytical tool. The University of the Visual and Performing Arts' emphasis on pedagogical preparedness positions history as professional infrastructure for future educators. Rather than treating these differences as inconsistencies, they should be understood as evidence that music history serves multiple legitimate functions depending on institutional mission and student need. A productive direction for curriculum development would be to design history courses flexible enough to serve all three functions simultaneously — building stylistic fluency, critical awareness, and pedagogical competence within a single, coherently structured subject.

The implications of these findings for undergraduate music education in Sri Lanka extend beyond institutional policy. They suggest that the field needs a new conceptual framework — one that positions music history not as a supplementary subject that competes with performance for curriculum time, but as the interpretive and cultural foundation upon which all other musical training rests. Investment in digital archives, collaborative partnerships between

universities and traditional practitioners, and interdisciplinary approaches linking music history with cultural studies and performance science are not aspirational add-ons but structural requirements for producing musicians who are genuinely equipped to carry this tradition forward. The evidence from this study affirms that when history is taught well and taught early, it does not diminish performance training — it deepens it.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine whether and how the formal teaching of North Indian music history shapes the musicianship, pedagogical competence, and cultural identity of undergraduate students in Sri Lanka. The evidence gathered across three institutions — the University of Kelaniya, the University of Sri Jayewardenepura, and the University of the Visual and Performing Arts — consistently affirmed that historical knowledge is not a peripheral academic requirement but a formative dimension of musical training. What the findings reveal, more precisely, is that the absence of historical grounding does not merely leave a gap in students' theoretical knowledge — it limits the interpretive depth, stylistic awareness, and professional readiness they bring to performance and teaching alike.

The Sri Lankan context adds a dimension that existing global scholarship has not fully addressed. Unlike students in India who may absorb aspects of the Hindustani tradition informally through cultural proximity, students in Sri Lanka encounter this tradition almost exclusively through formal instruction. This places an unusual and significant burden on the curriculum: it must do the work that the surrounding cultural environment would otherwise perform. In this respect, the case for embedding music history in Sri Lankan undergraduate programs is stronger than the general case made in the international literature — it is not merely enriching but compensatory and essential.

The challenges documented in this study are real and persistent. The tension between oral transmission and academic structure, the shortage of instructional time, and the limited availability of archival and scholarly resources cannot be resolved through individual pedagogical effort alone. They require institutional commitment — reallocation of curriculum time, investment in digital archives and locally relevant teaching materials, and sustained collaboration between university departments and traditional practitioners. These are not aspirational recommendations but necessary conditions for the kind of music education this study has shown to be both possible and valuable.

The path forward requires more than curriculum revision. It calls for a reconceptualisation of what undergraduate music education is fundamentally for — whether its primary goal is the technical production of performers, or the cultivation of culturally grounded, critically thinking artist-educators. The evidence from this study points clearly toward the latter. Future research should expand the scope of this inquiry, drawing on larger and more diverse samples across Sri Lankan and South Asian institutions, and exploring longitudinal outcomes to determine whether early and sustained engagement with music history produces measurably different trajectories in students' performing and teaching careers. Moving

from advocacy to evidence, and from institutional aspiration to verifiable policy outcomes, is the next critical step for this field.

References

Bakhle, J. (2005). *Two men and music: Nationalism in the making of an Indian classical tradition*. Oxford University Press.

Bresler, L., & Stake, R. (2024). Qualitative research methodology in music education. In *Critical essays in music education* (pp. 115–140). Routledge.

Danielou, A. (2013). *The ragas of North India*. Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers.

Deshpande, V. H. (1987). *Indian musical traditions: An aesthetic study of gharanas*. Popular Prakashan.

Kaufmann, W. (1968). *The ragas of North Indian music: Their structure and evolution*. Oxford University Press.

Krishna, A. (2021). *Hindustani classical music and education: 'Tradition', values, and identity in post-1991 India* (Doctoral dissertation, Royal Holloway, University of London). <https://pure.royalholloway.ac.uk/files/43265722/2021KrishnaAphd.pdf>

Manuel, P. (1993). *Thumri in historical and stylistic perspectives*. Motilal Banarsidass Publishers.

Nettl, B. (2015). *The study of ethnomusicology: Thirty-three discussions*. University of Illinois Press.

Neuman, D. M. (1990). *The life of music in North India: The organization of an artistic tradition*. University of Chicago Press.

Oppenheim, M. H. (2012). *Cross-cultural pedagogy in North Indian classical music* (Master's thesis, University of British

Columbia).

<https://open.library.ubc.ca/soa/cIRcle/collections/ubctheses/24/items/1.0073063>

Qureshi, R. B. (1997). Musical sound and contextual input: A performance model for North Indian music. *Ethnomusicology*, 41(3), 465–495. <https://doi.org/10.2307/852623>

Sanyal, R., & Widdess, R. (2004). *Dhrupad: Tradition and performance in Indian music*. Ashgate.

Sayers, E. (2025). Pedagogical strategies for the development of improvisation and composition in North Indian classical music. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 16, Article 1460158. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1460158>

Sharma, R. (2017). *Hindustani music: Concepts and terminology*. Sangeet Natak Academy.

Singh, H., & Kaur, G. (2023). A survey report on the role of North Indian universities in the progression of music education and research. *Swar Sindhu: National Peer-Reviewed Journal of Music*, 11(1), 192–206. <https://swarsindhu.pratibha-spandan.org/wp-content/uploads/v11i01a28.pdf>

Subramanian, L. (2006). *From the Tanjore court to the Madras Music Academy: A social history of music in South India*. Oxford University Press.

Vatsyayan, K. (1997). *Classical Indian dance in literature and the arts*. Motilal Banarsidass Publishers.

Wade, B. C. (2000). *Imaging sound: Ethnomusicological studies of music and image in India*. University of Chicago Press.

Widdess, R., & Brown, J. (2016). *Beni: The classical music of North India*. Cambridge University Press.