

The Kirtan Standards Committee (KSC) was established by the GBC to formulate clear standards and guidelines for kirtan within ISKCON based on the statements of Srila Prabhupada, and to present their findings for approval by the GBC body. The below are the first of such approved standards and guidelines.

Musical Instruments to be used for Kirtan and Bhajan in Temple Worship and Public Presentations in ISKCON

In our analysis of Srila Prabhupada's various instructions concerning instrument use during kirtan, we have ascertained that his instructions fall into three categories:

- Instrument use during kirtans in the temple for daily worship at deity aratis, tulasi puja, and guru puja
- Instrument use during kirtans in the temple at times other than regular daily aratis
- Instrument use outside the temple for harinam and public presentations

Herein we will reference various statements from Srila Prabhupada in each category and draw appropriate conclusions.

Instrument use During Kirtans in the Temple for Daily Worship at Deity Aratis, Tulasi Puja, and Guru Puja.

SP Letter to Hayagriva, 17 March, 1968:

Whenever I go to the class, I remember you, how joyfully you were chanting in the temple and whistling the bugle so nicely. Whenever I see the cornet lying idle because nobody can play on this particular instrument, I remember Hayagriva Brahmachari immediately.

Letter to: Aniruddha -- Los Angeles 14 November, 1968:

Throughout arati there is bell ringing, cymbals, mrdanga, gong, harmonium, etc.

The committee considered the above two quotes and others of that time frame but discounted their relevance to establishing present-day ISKCON standards, since Srila Prabhupada, in later years, gave specific instructions to the contrary, such as the following:

Letter exchange, 1975:

Rupanuga Das wrote on 30 January: The question of proper instruments for temple kirtans, particularly aratiks, has been raised. Is it that the proper instruments for temple aratiks and kirtans are only the kartals and mrdanga? Or can harmonium, tambora and tambourine also be used?

Srila Prabhupada replied on 2 February: Regarding instruments for temple kirtans, kartals and mrdanga are sufficient. There is no need of other instruments.

SP Letter to Bahudak, January 11, 1976:

The harmonium may be played during bhajan if there is someone who can play melodiously. But it is not for kirtan and aratik.

Conversation in Bombay, December 26, 1976:

Indian man: He has got one son and daughter. His family is in Bombay. One son is expired earlier. And he has got good talent of teaching Hindi, music, and tape recording. He's such work. And she knows cooking, very good cooking.

Prabhupada: Yes, if she gives cooking direction.

Indian man: She is also quite expert in cooking. (Hindi) He plays very good harmonium.

Indian man (2): All musical instruments.

Prabhupada: No, we don't want to introduce harmonium.

Indian man: No, I know. That is what he's teaching at the moment. He's doing it out of force.

Prabhupada: The other musical instrument*, if he plays his attention will be diverted in musical instrument, not to chanting. "We have to see melody, whether it is going on nicely." But that is not good. Our concentration should be hearing "Hare Krsna". That is... That is bhakti. Caitanya Mahaprabhu, simply this karatala, khol, that's all. In those days... Of course, there was no harmonium, but many stringed instruments were there. Sitar, esaraja, but these things were not used. Sometimes we do use to attract, but it is not required. (Hindi)

*The "other musical instrument" Prabhupada is referring to is most likely the harmonium, as it was the topic of the conversation. Or else Prabhupada is referring to any melodious musical instrument in general.

SP Letter to Dr. Wolf, January 29, 1976:

In India the system is that people go to see the Jagannatha Deity. The Deity is not very beautiful from the artistic point of view, but still people attend by the thousands. That sentiment is required. Similarly with our kirtan we are only using drums and kartals, but people come to the point of ecstasy. It is not the ornamentation, it is the ecstasy. This ecstasy is awakened by sravanam kirtanam by devotees.

Srila Prabhupada Nectar, "Who is Challenging My Authority?":

Palika-devi dasi also recalls that Prabhupada did not like harmoniums played during the kirtana. His comment was that it would "drag" the kirtana. Prabhupada used to say that his Guru Maharaja, Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura, banged the karatalas together and would only have karatalas and mrdanga played for kirtana.

HH Bhakti Charu Swami:

The instruments that Srila Prabhupada instructed for accompanying kirtana were karatal, mrdanga and jhajas (whompers). He didn't approve of harmonium for kirtana. For bhajana it is all right.

Translation of Gaura-arati song by Srila Bhaktivinoda Thakura:

Conchshells, bells, and karatalas resound, and the mrdangas play very sweetly. This kirtana music is supremely sweet and relishable to hear.

Interview with Revatinandana dasa, Memories of Srila Prabhupada DVD. Vol. 1

He [Srila Prabhupada] remarked that melodic instruments, including the harmonium, are not meant for kirtana, and he explained why. He said that the ear will automatically follow musical strains, and then our attention will be diverted from the mantra.

Thus, the Kirtan Standards Committee has concluded that only kartals and mrdanga should be played in the temple for daily worship at deity aratiks, tulasi puja, and guru puja. Whompers, gongs, and similar brass instruments may also be played, as they were often used during aratiks in Prabhupada's presence. No melodious instruments should be allowed, however, including harmonium, as Prabhupada was very clear on that point. It is permissible, however, to play harmonium during the Nrsimha-stuti, as it takes place after the arati when everyone is sitting down.

Instrument Use During Kirtans in the Temple at Times Other than Regular Daily Aratiks

This category includes:

1. Temple bhajans
2. Temple sit-down/stand-up kirtans, including 12- and 24-hour kirtans
3. Large temple festivals for the congregation and general public

SP letter to Jadurani, 26 May 1969:

Regarding your question about kirtana, practically we are not concerned with the instruments. They are used sometimes to make it sweeter, but if we divert our attention for using the instruments more, that is not good. We can accept everything for Krishna's service, but not taking the risk of diverting attention to any other thing which will hinder our Krishna Consciousness. That should be our motto, or principle.

Discussions between Srila Prabhupada and Shyamasundara dasa on Charles Darwin, undated:

You can sing also very nicely, sing also, like songs, with tamboura. It is very nice. (sings:) Cintamani-prakara-sadmasu kalpa, like that, it is very nice.

In every temple there should be, one man should play on tamboura and chant. It requires nice pronunciation, and with the sound of tamboura it will be (indistinct).

Room Conversation in London, August 15, 1971:

Prabhupada: Electric guitar, if it is, they chant Hare Krsna only, nothing else, then it is all right. But as far as possible, simply mrdanga and kartal. But if GBC thinks that it attracts more people so they give contribution, that is a different thing. Otherwise there is no need.

SP letter to Bahudak, 10 November 75:

Regarding the instruments, stringed instruments are Vedic, but the real Vedic instrument is mrdanga and karatala. Anyway, you have to do according to the time and circumstances if you use these other instruments. So you have got my approval and you can go on.

From Vaiyasaki Das' *Radha Damodara Vilasa*, June 1970:

Los Angeles is a hub of activity these days as many temple presidents arrive from around the movement. Kirtanananda Swami has come from New Vrindavana and also shows his skill at playing the organ before the Wednesday evening class in the sanctuary. Prabhupada is pleased to see the devotees dovetailing their propensities in the service of Krsna and wants to have more programs with organ playing.

Hari Sauri Das:

The Vrindavana 24hrs kirtan was often a sit-down bhajan-style affair, although only the maha-mantra was sung. When I was in charge of it in 1975 devotees that knew how to play harmonium did so. Saccidananda das, a Bengali brahmachari with a very sweet voice always played the harmonium, and he was specifically requested by Srila Prabhupada to participate in the 24 hr. kirtan every afternoon.

Because Srila Prabhupada gave specific instructions about not using harmonium and other musical instruments during aratis, as cited in the first section of this proposal, the KSC has concluded that Prabhupada's allowances and recommendations in this present section refer to instruments for kirtans and bhajans in the temple at times when aratis are not being performed. Thus, at these other times, harmonium and tamboura may be added along with mrdanga and kartals. And although Prabhupada favored these aforementioned four instruments over others, at times he also gave allowance for additional non-traditional musical instruments to be used for attracting the public. Because programs for the public are not only held outside the temple but inside as well, the use of these additional non-traditional instruments can also be accepted within the temple. In addition, under the umbrella of our "public", we are including the phenomena, not existing during Prabhupada's time, of large and diverse congregations of devotees and friends of all ages, spanning several generations, and encompassing a broad range of commitment. It is important to note in the above quotes that Prabhupada was extremely conservative and cautionary regarding adding additional instruments to the four that he specifically advocated. If they are to be used, therefore, the temple president and local authorities should ensure that:

1. The additional instruments do not become the dominant sound in the bhajan/kirtan but support it, never being louder, more noticeable, or more prominent than the basic and traditional ones, or than the chanting of the holy name.

2. The musician does not play a solo without any chanting, or if he does so, they are just a few measures long.
3. If the musician is playing a wind instrument, it is better that he or she not play it continuously, but rather alternate playing and chanting, so as to receive due benefit from the holy name and not overemphasizing the sound of the instrument.

Instrument Use Outside the Temple For Harinam and Public Presentations

Note: In addition to the quotes that follow, all the quotes in the previous section are also relevant to this section.

SP letter to Hamsaduta, January 22, 1968:

Another proposal is that I want to form a sankirtana party in which two members will play mrdanga, eight will play the cymbals, two will play on tamboura, and one on harmonium. Besides that there will be the leader of the party. This party will be so trained that exhibitions of our chanting and dancing along with distribution of prasadam will be performed on a stage and for this performance we will sell tickets to the public. It will be known as a spiritual movement.

Room conversation, Mayapur, February 24, 1974:

Pancadravida: Do we use like a marching band in the Ratha-yātrā? If we used a marching band, a lot of people come, like a parade, like they use in the parades with trumpets and drums and all these things.

Prabhupada: I think you can introduce in Africa also. (laughter)

Brahmananda: We want to introduce in Mombasa. We've already been discussing it.

SP letter to Harikesa, Vrndavan, October 28, 1976

The chanting is very effective. Along with tamera and mrdanga played very rhythmically, let them chant. Perform this musical demonstration and sell books as far as possible, and feasting.

Bhakti Vikasa Swami, "Kirtana":

In the early days of ISKCON, Srila Prabhupada allowed all kinds of instruments in kirtana. In the first temple at 26 2nd Avenue, guests even played on the innards of an old upright piano. There was no mrdanga, so Srila Prabhupada played a bongo drum.... At the Honolulu temple, Srila Prabhupada also participated in kirtanas where the devotees played electric guitars and bass guitars. Even later on, Srila Prabhupada allowed the use of tamboura and other instruments-not in the regular temple kirtanas, but in preaching programs, festivals, etc., as an attraction for the public.

Kurma das, "The Great Transcendental Adventure" - June 29th, 1974:

Suddenly the stirring sounds of bagpipes filled the air. On Prabhupada's advice, Madhudvisa had hired a Scottish marching band to lead the parade. The Mitcham Bagpipe Band, fully bedecked with their pipes, tartan forage caps, full kilts, sporrans, and long socks set off along the road, playing a popular Hare Krishna tune from sheet music. "Scottish band, Prabhupada," Madhudvisa announced. Srila Prabhupāda nodded, showing his approval with a broad smile.

Note: This bagpipe band was not playing along with the regular kirtana of the devotees.

Dravinaksa Dasa, Memories of Srila Prabhupada, DVD #47:

Another time in that same room there was a discussion about kirtan, the Radha Damodar kirtans that we were having on campus or on the street where we set up. Prabhupada was saying we just should use khol and karatals. At that time we had many instruments. We had harmonium, we had esraj-which was like a violin-we had ektara, and we had an instrument that had strings and you play it with little hammers. So there was a discussion where Prabhupada was saying just to use khols and karatals. And Adi-kesava said that people were attracted to the party because of the instruments, and Prabhupada didn't seem to take that very seriously. And then Adi-kesava said, "But Visnujana said..." and Prabhupada cut him off and said, "Who is Visnujana? I am your spiritual master." And also in that meeting Prabhupada

said that there shouldn't be any harmonium during the aratis. And previously you hear lot of tapes of Bharadvaj and others playing harmonium. So that was stopped during aratis. And it didn't seem like Prabhupada just wanted some expert musicians. He wanted devotees. So that was stopped, and that time the Radha Damodar party just went back to mrdanga and karatals on the public kirtans, for a while, and eventually we had a couple of instruments here and there, I had heard with Prabhupada's permission; I don't know for sure.

Bhurijana dasa, "My Glorious Master":

Bhurijana: "Prabhupada, we have been holding kirtanas using guitars. Is that all right?"

Prabhupada: "Kirtana means khol (mrdanga) and karatala. That's all."

Bhurijana: "But it is so difficult to preach in Hong Kong. And the Chinese people like kirtanas better when they are soft and with guitars. They don't like loud kirtanas with many instruments."

Prabhupada acceded to my pushing and gave us permission to also use guitars in our kirtanas along with the standard khol and karatala. Our spiritual master may sometimes agree to our requests because we present them forcefully, but that doesn't necessarily mean it is Krishna's desire. We should be careful that our own enthusiastic vision does not cover our ability to recognize our guru's actual desires.

The Kirtan Standards Committee has concluded that Srila Prabhupada gave the same basic instructions for outside kirtans as he did for non-arati temple kirtans and bhajans. Thus, for attracting the public, harmonium, tamboura, plus other non traditional instruments may be added. And as has been mentioned in the previous section, because Prabhupada was extremely conservative and cautionary regarding adding additional instruments to those he specifically advocated (mrdanga, kartals, harmonium, tamboura), if such instruments are used outside the temple, it should again be understood that the temple president and local authorities should ensure that:

1. The additional instruments do not become the dominant sound in the bhajan/kirtan but should support it, never being louder, more noticeable, or more prominent than the basic and traditional ones, or than the chanting of the holy name.
2. The musician does not play a solo without any chanting, or if he does so, they are just a few measures long.
3. If the musician is playing a wind instrument, it is better that he or she not play it continuously, but rather alternate playing and chanting, so as to receive due benefit from the holy name and not overemphasize the sound of the instrument.