



Hindustani Classical Music

Resources Performing Arts Hindustani Classical Music

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Throughout the ages, man has sought to express the stirrings of his soul, the search for something beyond the mundane through the medium of the arts.

The evolution of poetry, painting and other visual arts has been preserved on stone, leaves and paper but music being auditory, no such evidence exists. As such it is not possible to listen today to the music of the ancient times.

In spite of such a variety of cultural interactions, our music has remained essentially melodic. In melody, one note follows the other, making for a continued unity of effect, whereas in harmony musical sounds are superimposed on one another. Our classical music has retained its melodic quality.

2. Music of India

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Today we recognise two systems of classical music: the Hindustani and the Carnatic. Carnatic music is confined to Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Kerala. The classical music of the rest of the country goes under the name, Hindustani Classical Music. Of course, there are some areas in Karnataka and Andhra where the Hindustani Classical system is also practiced. Karnataka has given us in the recent past some very distinguished musicians of the Hindustani style.

It is generally believed that the music of India was more or less uniform before the 13th century. Later it bifurcated into the two musical systems.

The present Indian music has grown from ancient times. Almost every tribe or people have lent their own share in this growth. What therefore, we now call a *raga* might have started as a tribal or folk tune.

3. Theatre Forms of India

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It is usual to begin the history of Indian music with the melodic patterns of vedic chanting. The oldest music, which possessed a grammar was the *vedic*. Of course, the *Rig-Veda* is said to be the oldest: nearly 5000 years old. The psalms of the *Rig-Veda* were called the *richas*. The *Yajur Veda* was also a religious chant. But actual music in Northern or Southern India, of those bygone days could not have only been of this kind. There were non-Aryan people with their own art. For instance, Santhal music from the Eastern region of India may have been passed down from them. While the differences are obvious, there is no doubt that such music of the people contributed to the formation of what we now call Hindustani Classical Music.

Natya Shastra of *Bharata* is another important landmark in the history of Indian music. It is supposed to have been written sometime between the 2nd century B.C. and the 2nd century A.D. Some scholars are even doubtful whether it is the work of one author and the work might well have been a compendium - at least, the version which is available to us. The Natya Shastra is a comprehensive work mainly dealing with dramaturgy. But a few chapters of this deal with music. Therein we get information on scales, melodic forms, tala and musical instruments. The then contemporary music recognized two standard scales. These were called *gramas*. The word *grama* is itself perhaps derivable from the idea of group or sect: a village, for instance. This probably led to a set of *svaras* or notes being called *grama*. This could roughly be translated as scales. There were then two *gramas* prevalent. One was called the *Shadja grama*, the other one was the *Madhyama grama*. The difference between the two was only in one note, the *panchama*. To speak more accurately, we say that the *panchama* in *madhyama grama* was one *sruti* lower than the *panchama* in *shadja grama*.

The *sruti* thus is the unit of measure or small difference between the various consecutive pitches within a grama or a scale. For all practical purposes they are said to be twenty two. This is only as far as practical enumeration is concerned. Just as we would say that there are seven notes in an octave or *saptak* - from Sa to upper Sa. But in reality the number of *srutis* employed in Indian music is infinite.

Getting back to *gramas* in Bharata's time, there were two, with seven notes each. Bharata also mentions two other notes: these were the *antara gandhara* and *kakali nishada*.



Now, from each *grama* subsidiary scales are derived. These are called *moorccchanas*. The notes are played or sung in a descending manner. There are seven basic notes in a scale, hence there can be seven *moorccchanas*. There were two *gramas* and each had seven standard notes and two auxiliary ones, as was mentioned. Since each note could give a *moorccchana*, numerous such subsidiary scales could be obtained. It is possible to show that there could be sixty-four *moorccchanas* derivable from two *gramas*. The process gave different tonal orders within which could be grouped or from which could be evolved, all known classical melodies of those days. This condition remained for many centuries. In approximately the 13th century A.D. Sarangadeva - whose forefathers hailed from Kashmir - settled in South India and wrote his monumental *Sangeeta Ratankara*. He also described technical terms such as *gramas* and *moorccchanas*. The standard scales were still the same. But whereas Bharata mentions two auxiliary *svaras*, the number and definition of these were very different in medieval times.



The whole scheme, what is often called the modal music, seems so strange to us now. But there is no doubting the fact that it was a very highly advanced and a scientific one.

From about the 11th century, music from Central and West Asia began to influence our music tradition. Gradually this influence took a deeper root and many changes took place. Of these, an important one is the disappearance of *gramas* and *moorccchanas*.

Sometime around about the 15th century, this process of change became manifest, the **grama** system became obsolete. The concept of **mela** or **thata** takes its place. In this there is only one standard scale. All known notes are referred to a common note **Sa**.

By about the 18th century even the standard or **shuddha svara** in Hindustani music becomes different. The following is the current one, accepted from the 18th century.

Sa re ga ma pa dha ni

This is the mela aaroh of the modern raga Bilaval. Besides these seven shuddha notes or svaras there are five variants, making in all twelve notes to a saptak.

Sa re re ga ga ma ma pa dha dha ni ni

There are, of course, finer variations: these are the **shrutis**, It is better, therefore, to call these 12 tonal regions rather than notes.



All known **ragas** are grouped within this twelve tone scale. Indeed, it was a Carnatic musicologist - Venkatmukhi of the 17th century, who gave a system of 72 melas formed out of these twelve tones. Later on, in the 20th century, Pt. Bhatkhande, chose 10 out of the 72 to classify Hindustani **ragas**.

So far we have been speaking of scales: the **grama**, **moorcchana** and **mela**. These are obviously concepts developed after melodies were born. No folk singer thinks of a **grama** or a **mela**. The tribal and folk songs existed and still exist without a conscious grammar. It is the musicologist who later classifies melodies or **ragas** into scales.

We shall now turn our attention to the melodic structures. Again it is to the Vedas that we must turn for the first codified melody. In the **Natya Shastra** of Bharata are found descriptions of melodic forms called **jati**. How they were sung or played, we have no idea; but some salient points can be called from **Natya Shastra** and later commentaries. Every one of these **jatis** could be put in some moorcchana or the other. They were distinguished by characteristics like the **graha** (starting note) **nyasa** (note on which a phrase stops), the range of notes - from low pitch to high - and so on. Many scholars are of the opinion that the concept of **raga** which is so basic to our music, was born and developed out of **jati**. The major work dealing with the **raga** is the Brihaddesi of Matanga. The work is dated around the 6th century, A.D. By this time, the idea of the **raga** as a melodic scheme had become clear and well defined. Matanga was from the southern areas of India, to be specific he was from Carnatic. This shows that up to this era, at least, the grammar of Indian music was more or less one throughout the country. Secondly, what he deals with is **desi** music. That is why he had titled the work Brihaddesi.

A characteristic contribution of India to musical rhythm is the **tala**. **Tala** is a cyclic arrangement of time units. The basic units of time division are **laghu**, **guru**, and **pluta**. These are actually derived from poetic prosody. **Laghu** comprises one syllable, **guru** two, and **pluta** three. There are also larger units. Bharata's Natya Shastra gives details of construction of **tala** out of various time units, how they should be played and so on. Later authors developed a scheme of 108 **talas**. Besides some ancient **talas** new ones, as for example, Firdost, seem to have entered Hindustani music. The most important aspect of playing the **tala** in the Hindustani system has been the development of the ideas of theka. This technique is characteristic of Hindustani music. A theka is the definition of a tala by the stroke of a tabla. Each stroke on the drum has a name called a bol or syllable. For instance, dha, ta, ghe. etc.

In any language one can have an epic, a sonnet, a lyric, a short story and so on. Similarly, given a **raga** and a **tala**, various musical forms have been created. Right from ancient times, musical forms can be divided into two broad categories. These were the **anibaddha** and the **nibaddha sangeeta**. The first may be called the open or free form and the second as the closed or bound form.

Anibaddha sangeeta is one which is not restricted by meaningful words and **tala**. It is a free improvisation. The finest form is the **alap**.

Of the **nibaddha** variety, there are many. The earliest about which some knowledge is available is the **prabandha giti**. Indeed, **prabandha** is often used as a generic term to indicate any **nibaddha** song or musical composition. We have little evidence of these closed forms, except that they were set to definite **ragas** and **talas**. Of all known **prabandhas** those of **Jayadeva** are the best known. This poet lived in Bengal in the 12th century and composed his **Gita Govinda**, a Sanskrit work with songs and verses. The songs are **ashtapadis**: that is, each song has eight couplets. Today, the songs have spread throughout the country and each region has its own style. As a matter of fact, singers have taken the liberty of giving the **prabandhas** their own tunes. In the face of this, it is impossible to determine the original tunes of the **ashtapadis**.



The popularity of Jayadeva's Gita Govinda is due to many reasons. The first, naturally is the intrinsic poetic beauty of the work almost unequalled. It also lent itself to dance and any conceivable style of music. Again, it was in Sanskrit, thus transcending many linguistic barriers. Besides all this, the greatest significant force sustaining it is **bhakti**. Bhakti or adoration is as old as man. It really is a state of mind beseeching the Lord.

While the Godhead takes on many forms to the **bhakta**, as Shiva or as Parabrahma - the Bhagavata, as the story of the ten **avatars** of Sri Vishnu, has captured the Indian mind. Round this were woven songs and hymns, preachings and psalms of these two travelled in waves to North India to give us singer saints like Jayadeva, Chaitanya, Sankaradeva, Kabir, Tulsi, Meera, Tukaram, Eknath, Narsi and Nanak. This bhakti movement engulfed all religions and classes including the sufis. It has given us numerous devotional forms such as **asbhanges**, **kirtans**, **bhajans**, **baul songs**.

The next great formal aspect in **Nibaddha** Sangeet is met within the Dhrupad. It is believed to have been a further elaboration of the **prabandha** structure. While it might have had an impetus for popularity even by the 14th century, it finds a blossoming period from 15th century onwards to about the 18th century. During these centuries we meet the most respected and renowned singers and patrons of this form. There was Man Singh Tomar, the Maharaja of Gwalior. It was he who was mainly responsible for the enormous vogue of dhrupad. There were Baiju, Bakshu and others. Swami Haridasa a hermit of Brindavan was not only a **dhrupadiya**, but one of the most central figures in the Bhakti cult in the Northern areas of India. By tradition he was the guru of Tansen, one of the best known dhrupad singers and one of the nine jewels of Emperor Akbar's court.

In structure dhrupad has two parts, the **anibaddha** section and the sanchari **dhrupad** proper. The first is free alap. The dhrupad proper is a song in four parts: the **asthayee**, the **antara**, the **Sanchari** and the **abhoga**.

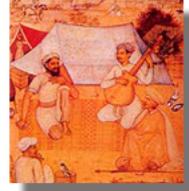
The essential quality of the dhrupadic approach is its sombre atmosphere and emphasis on rhythm.

There were four schools or **vani**s of singing the dhrupad. The Gauhar vani developed the **raga** or unadorned melodic figures. The Dagarvani emphasized melodic curves and graces. The Khandar vani specialised in quick ornamentation of the notes. Nauhar **vani** was known for its

broad musical leaps and jumps. These *vanis* are now indistinguishable.

The *dhrupad* is even now highly respected and can be heard on the concert platform but more often in temples of North India. The *dhrupad* has somewhat receded to the background and is not so popular with the masses. The *Been* and *Pakhawaj* which were closely associated with the *dhrupad* also do not find much patronage these days.

Today the pride of place in classical Hindustani Music is occupied by the *Khyal*. We are really not sure about the beginning of the *Khyal*. The word is alien and means 'imagination'. And as you will find when you hear it is more lyrical than the *dhrupad*. But whether the musical form itself is foreign, is a matter of doubt. Some scholars are of the opinion that in fact, it has its roots in the ancient Indian *roopaka alaps*. It is also said that Amir Khusrou of the 13th century gave it an impetus. Sultan Mohammed Sharkhi of the 15th century is credited with encouraging this form. However, it attained its maturity at the hands of Niyamat Khan Sadarang and Adarang of the 18th century.



As sung today, the *khyal* has two varieties: the slow or *vilambit* *khyal* and the fast or *drut* *khyal*. In form both are similar, they have two sections - the *asthayee* and the *antara*. The *vilambit* is sung in slow tempo and the *drut* at a faster speed. In technique, the exposition is less grave than the *dhrupad*. There are more delicate *gamkas* and ornamentations.

Both types of *khyals* have two sections. The *asthayee* and the *antara*. The *asthayee* mostly confines itself to the low and middle octaves. The *antara* generally moves in the middle and upper octaves. Together *asthayee* and *antara* make one song, a composition, or *bandish*, 'cheez' as it is called. As a total work it reveals the essence of the raga in which it is set.

Comparable to the *vanis* of the *dhrupads*, we have *gharanas*, in the *khyal*. These are schools of singing founded or developed by various individuals or patrons such as kings or noblemen.

The oldest of these is the Gwalior *gharana*. The father of this school was one Nathan Peerbaksh, who settled down in Gwalior, and hence the name. He had two grandsons Haddu Khan and Hassu Khan who lived in the 19th century and were regarded as great masters of this style. The qualities of this *gharana* are an open voice clear enunciation of words, a comprehensive attention to *raga, svara* and *tala*. Some of the prominent musicians of this *gharana* are Krishna Rao Shankar Pandit, Raja Bhaiya Poonchwale etc.

The Agra *Gharana* is said to have been founded by one Khuda Baksh of Agra. He had studied with Nathan Peerbaksh of Gwalior, but developed his own style. Here again the voice is open and clear, a speciality of this *gharana* is its *bol taan*: that is, a fast or medium *layakari* passage using the *bols* or words of the song. The song itself is rendered in medium tempo. Of the most well known musicians of this *gharana* in recent times are Vilayat Hussain Khan and Fayyaz Khan.

The Jaipur Atroli *gharana* is said to take off directly from *dhrupad*. It is associated with Alladiya Khan of the 19th-20th century. The *khyal* is always in medium speed. The words are pronounced clearly and in an open and clear voice. The distinguishing characters are the passages which are primarily based on *alankars* - that is, repetitive melodic motifs - and an almost metronomic insistence of *tala* division. Some of the prominent musicians of recent times are Mallikarjun Mansur, Kishori Amonkar etc.



Finally we come to the Rampur Saheswan *gharana*. Since the earlier singers came from Rampur in Uttar Pradesh, this school has come to be called so. The slow and fast *Khayals* usually are followed by a *Tarana*. The style is very lyrical and full of finer tonal embroidery. Nisar Hussain Khan, Rashid Khan are the two prominent musicians of recent times belonging to this *gharana*.

Thumri and *Tappa* are popular types heard in concerts. The *thumri* is very lyrical in its structure and presentation. These forms are termed as 'semi' or 'light' classical. *Thumri* is a love song and hence the textual beauty is very important. This is closely coordinated with the musical rendition. And keeping in mind its mood a *thumri* is usually set to *ragas* like *Khamaj*, *Kaphi*, *Bhairavi* and so on and the musical grammar is not strictly adhered to. There are two styles of *thumri* singing: the *Poorab* or *Banaras* which is fairly slow and staid and the *Punjab* style which is more mercurial. *Rasoolan Devi*, *Siddheshwari Devi* are prominent musicians of this style.

The *Tappa* consists of the song uttered in fast note patterns. It is a difficult composition and needs much practice. Both the *Thumri* and *Tappa* require special training as do the *Dhrupad* and *Khyal* forms of singing. *Ragas* in which *Tappa* compositions are set remain same as in *Thumri* style. Pt. L.K. Pandit, Malini Rajurkar are names who specialize this form of singing.