

Sai Bhajan Network - Article

::: Issue II - May 2005 :::

By: Pandit Ravi Shankar

'Appreciating Indian Classical Music'

Indian classical music is principally based on melody and rhythm, not on harmony, counterpoint, chords, modulation and the other basics of Western classical music.

The system of Indian music known as Raga Sangeet can be traced back nearly two thousand years to its origin in the Vedic hymns of the Hindu temples, the fundamental source of all Indian music. Thus, as in Western music, the roots of Indian classical music are religious. To us, music can be a spiritual discipline on the path to self-realization, for we follow the traditional teaching that sound is God - Nada Brahma: By this process individual consciousness can be elevated to a realm of awareness where the revelation of the true meaning of the universe - its eternal and unchanging essence - can be joyfully experienced. Our ragas are the vehicles by which this essence can be perceived.

The ancient Vedic scriptures teach that there are two types of sound. One is a vibration of ether, the upper or purer air near the celestial realm. This sound is called Anahata Nad or unstruck sound. Sought after by great enlightened yogis, it can only be heard by them. The sound of the universe is the vibration thought by some to be like the music of the spheres that the Greek Pythagoras described in the 6th century B.C. The other sound Ahata Nad or struck sound, is the vibration of air in the lower atmosphere closer to the earth. It is any sound that we hear in nature or man-made sounds, musical and non-musical.

The tradition of Indian classical music is an oral one. It is taught directly by the guru to the disciple, rather than by the notation method used in the West. The very heart of Indian music is the raga: the melodic form upon which the musician improvises. This framework is established by tradition and inspired by the creative spirits of master musicians.

Ragas are extremely difficult to explain in a few words. Though Indian music is modal in character, ragas should not be mistaken as modes that one hears in the music of the Middle and Far Eastern countries, nor be understood to be a scale, melody per se, a composition, or a key. A raga is a scientific, precise, subtle and aesthetic melodic form with its own peculiar ascending and descending movement

consisting of either a full seven note octave, or a series of six or five notes (or a combination of any of these) in a rising or falling structure called the Arohana and Avarohana. It is the subtle difference in the order of notes, an omission of a dissonant note, an emphasis on a particular note, the slide from one note to another, and the use of microtones together with other subtleties that demarcate one raga from the other.

There is a saying in Sanskrit - "Ranjayathi Iti Ragah" - which means, "That which colors the mind is a raga." For a raga to truly color the mind of the listener, its effect must be created not only through the notes and the embellishments, but also by the presentation of the specific emotion or mood characteristic of each raga. Thus through rich melodies in our music, every human emotion, every subtle feeling in man and nature can be musically expressed and experienced.

The performing arts in India - music, dance, drama, and poetry - are based on the concept of Nava Rasa, or the "nine sentiments." Literally, Rasa means "juice" or "extract" but here in this context, we take it to mean "emotion" or "sentiment." The acknowledged order of these sentiments is as follows: Shringara (romantic and delightful): Hasya (humorous): Karuna (pathetic): Raudra (anger): Veera (heroic): Bhayanaka (fearful): Vibhatsa (disgustful): Adbhuta (amazement): Shanta (peaceful).

Each raga is principally dominated by one of these nine Rasas, although the performer can also bring out other emotions in a less prominent way. The more closely the notes of a raga conform to the expression of one single idea or emotion, the more overwhelming the effect of the raga.

In addition to being associated with a particular mood, each raga is also closely connected to a particular time of day or a season of the year. The cycle of day and night, as well as the cycle of the seasons, is analogous to the cycle of life itself. Each part of the day - such as the time before dawn, noon, late afternoon, early evening, late night - is associated with a definite sentiment. The explanation of the time associated with each raga may be found in the nature of the notes that comprise it, or in historical anecdotes concerning the raga.

Although there are 72 "melas" or parent scales upon which ragas are based, Indian music scholars have estimated that, with all their permutations and combinations, there exist over 6,000 ragas! But a raga is not merely a matter of the ascending - descending structure. It must have its "chalan" - or certain note patterns characteristic of the raga; its principle important note (vadi); the second important note (samavadi); and its main feature known as "jan" (life) or "mukhda" (face), the cluster of a few notes by which a raga is immediately recognized.

In terms of aesthetics, a raga is the projection of the artist's inner spirit, a manifestation of his most profound sentiments and sensibilities brought forth through tones and melodies. The musician must breathe life into each raga as he unfolds and

expands it. As much as 90 percent of Indian music may be improvised and because so very much depends on understanding the spirit and nuances of the art, the relationship between the artist and his guru is the keystone of this ancient tradition. From the beginning, the aspiring musician requires special and individual attention to bring him to the moment of artistic mastery. The unique aura of a raga (one might say its "soul") is its spiritual quality and manner of expression, and this cannot be learned from any book.

It is only after many long and extensive years of "sadhana" (dedicated practice and discipline) under the guidance of one's guru and his blessings, that the artist is empowered to put "prana" (the breath of life) into a raga. This is accomplished by employing the secrets imparted by one's teacher such as the use of "shrutis" (microtones other than the 12 semitones in an octave, Indian music using smaller intervals than Western music: 22 within an octave): "gamakas" (special varieties of glissando which connect one note to the other), and "andolan" (a sway - but not a vibrato). The result is that each note pulsates with life and the raga becomes vibrant and incandescent.

Next to be considered are the "talas" or "rhythmic cycles" of a raga. There is unique intricacy and rhythmic sophistication in Indian music. There are talas ranging from a 3 beat cycle to 108 beats within a cycle! The most popular talas are those which have 5,6,7,8,10,12,14, and 16 beats to a cycle. There are also other cycles such as 9,11,13,15,17, and 19 beats, etc., which are only played by outstanding musicians on rare occasions.

The division in a tala, and the stress on the first beat (called sum), are the most important rhythmic factors. While there are talas having the same number of beats, they differ because the division and accents are not the same. For example, there is a tala known as "Dhamar" which has 14 beats in the cycle divided 5+5+4: another tala, "Ada Chautal" has the same number of beats, but is divided 2+4+4+4: still another tala, "Chanchar" is divided 3+4+3+4.

In vocal music, a drummer will accompany a singer either in slow, medium, or fast tempo at the start of a song in whatever tala the singer chooses. He will do the same when he accompanies an instrumentalist in the gat section of a composition. Like ragas, talas also have their own characteristics. Some of the older traditional talas, such as "Chautal" (12 beats) and "Dhamar" (14 beats) are played on a two-faced drum known as pakhawaj. This accompaniment is used in the old traditional "Dhrupad-Dhamar" form of singing and in instrumental performances on the veena, rabab, surbahar, etc. Today, most vocal and instrumental music is based on the contemporary form called "khyal" and is accompanied by the Tabla, a two-piece drum.

The improvisatory nature of Indian classical music requires the artist to take into consideration the setting, time allowed for his recital, his mood and the feeling

he discerns in the audience before playing. Since Indian music is religious in origin, one finds the spiritual quality in most of the musician's performances.

The traditional recital begins with the alap section - the stately and serene exploration of the chosen raga. After this slow, introspective, heartfelt, sometimes sad beginning, the musician moves on to the jor. In this part, rhythm enters and is developed. Innumerable variations on the raga's basic theme are elaborated. There is no drum accompaniment in either the alap or the jor.

The alap and the jor evolve into the gat, the fixed composition of the raga. Here the drums enter with the wonderful rhythmic structure of the gat and its time cycle, the tala. This section is based on the "Khyal" form. From this moment on, the gat (which can be anything between 4 and 16 bars of fixed composition) becomes the vehicle for the musician to return to after his improvisation. While the artist has complete freedom to improvise, he may do so only as long as he does not leave the format of the raga and tala. This freedom within the bounds of artistic discipline comes only after many years of training and sadhana. This is why one cannot rightfully compare the improvisation in Indian music with the improvisation of jazz.

The step-by-step acceleration of the rhythm in the gat finally culminates in the jhala portion as it becomes more and more playful and exciting. Sawal jabab, the dazzling and rapid dialogue between sitar and Tabla, has the power to enthrall even the most uninitiated listener with its thrilling interplay.

Indian music is much more appreciated and respected today in the west. Many composers and musicians have been influenced by our music. The openness, willingness to learn, and sincere enthusiasm of western audiences are a continuing source of inspiration and delight.
