

LISTENING TO INDIAN CLASSICAL MUSIC*

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Abstract

For the Western listener, some suggestions for beginning to listen to and appreciate the classical music of India.

1 Introduction

Many Western¹ listeners find themselves drawn to the classical music of India but aren't sure how to listen to it. The two traditions developed independently for thousands of years, and the music of one tradition can seem mystifying to someone raised in the other tradition. Below are some suggestions to help the beginning Western listener begin to make sense of Indian music.

North Indian and South Indian classical music are two distinct traditions, but they share many similarities. Both will be discussed here in very general terms. Indian pop music and folk music will not be discussed. If you want more specific, technical information about tuning and ragas, please see Indian Classical Music: Tuning and Ragas².

2 History and Geography

There are two distinct traditions in Indian Music. The South Indian, or **Carnatic**, and the North Indian, or **Hindustani**. The Carnatic is the more ancient and purely Indian tradition. The Hindustani tradition has been more influenced through the years by other peoples and musical traditions, particularly by the Moghul (or Mughal) invasion and empire.

Besides bringing musical influences from other cultures, the Mughal empire encouraged the appreciation of music as an upper-class, court activity, in much the same way that European classical music was mainly supported by the court aristocracy through the Baroque and Classical periods. Hindustani music therefore shares Western "classical" music's tendency towards long, complex performances tailored for knowledgeable audiences. In the case of Indian classical music, this means very long, improvised performances on a single raga (Section 3.2: Melody and Mood: The Raga). In the south, music remained more commonly associated with everyday religious and secular activities. Even formal performances tend to feature shorter improvisations alongside (relatively) short composed pieces.

Thanks mainly to international superstars like Ravi Shankar, Westerners are more likely to encounter music from the Hindustani tradition. In general, terms below are from the Hindustani tradition, since that is the one that Westerners are most likely to encounter.

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¹"What Kind of Music is That?" <<http://cnx.org/content/m11421/latest/>>

²"Indian Classical Music: Tuning and Ragas" <<http://cnx.org/content/m12459/latest/>>

3 Basic Elements

The raga (Section 3.2: Melody and Mood: The Raga) and the tala (Section 3.4: Rhythm: The Tala) are the basic building blocks of any classical Indian piece of music. These mainly affect the melody (*raga*) and rhythm (*tala*). But the approach to other basic elements of music - form, tuning, harmony, texture, timbre, and improvisation versus composition - are also quite different from Western music. Here is a short, basic comparison of each element of the two musics.

3.1 Improvisation

Unlike most Western classical music³, most Indian classical music is improvisational. The musician chooses a raga (Section 3.2: Melody and Mood: The Raga) and a tala (Section 3.1: Improvisation). These provide a basis for the musician to improvise a solo. This is a little similar to the way the chord progression⁴ and the background provided by the the rhythm section of a jazz band give the jazz soloist the basis to improvise a solo. Of course, both the basis and the rules for improvising are different from jazz, so the results also sound very different.

3.2 Melody and Mood: The Raga

The melodies⁵ and harmonies⁶ in Western music are based on major⁷ and minor⁸ scales. Major-key melodies and harmonies are different from minor-key melodies and harmonies, but the same melody and chord progression⁹ can be easily transposed¹⁰ from one major key to a different major key, or from one minor key to a different minor key. Of course, some Western music is modal¹¹, and some uses pentatonic, blues, twelve-tone, or other scales¹², but the vast majority of familiar pieces can be classified as major or minor.

The melodies of Indian music are based on **ragas** (in southern India, **ragam**). Like a scale, the *raga* is a list of the notes that are used in a particular piece of music. But there are many more *ragas* than there are scales - hundreds - and the various *ragas* are much more different from each other than the various scales are. The number of notes used, the intervals¹³ between the notes, and even the tuning (Section 3.3: Harmony and Tuning), can be different from one *raga* to the next. Because of these differences, the rules for constructing melodies are also different in different *ragas*, and so the melodies found in various *ragas* will not be the same. A melody cannot be transposed from one *raga* to another; they are simply too different.

You may have noticed that major-key music tends to have different moods than minor-key music. (See Major Keys and Scales¹⁴ for more about this.) *Ragas* are also associated with particular moods. The idea that different modes produce different moods is one that was also common in ancient and medieval Europe. Many *ragas* are also associated with a specific season and/or time of day. These associations often began with traditions of playing certain *ragas* for particular festivals or religious rites, but the associations with moods are also tied into the associations with particular times. (Think of the difference between your typical mood on a summer evening as opposed to an autumn morning.) It is often considered inappropriate to play a *raga* at the wrong time (similar to a Westerner's reaction at hearing Christmas music in July, lullabies at breakfast, or sad songs at a wedding), and creating the *raga*'s proper mood is one of the Indian musician's most important tasks.

³"What Kind of Music is That?" <<http://cnx.org/content/m11421/latest/>>

⁴"Harmony": Chords <<http://cnx.org/content/m11654/latest/#10b>>

⁵"Melody" <<http://cnx.org/content/m11647/latest/>>

⁶"Harmony" <<http://cnx.org/content/m11654/latest/>>

⁷"Major Keys and Scales" <<http://cnx.org/content/m10851/latest/>>

⁸"Minor Keys and Scales" <<http://cnx.org/content/m10856/latest/>>

⁹"Harmony": Chords <<http://cnx.org/content/m11654/latest/#10b>>

¹⁰"Transposition: Changing Keys" <<http://cnx.org/content/m10668/latest/>>

¹¹"Modes and Ragas: More Than just a Scale" <<http://cnx.org/content/m11633/latest/>>

¹²"Scales that are not Major or Minor" <<http://cnx.org/content/m11636/latest/>>

¹³"Interval" <<http://cnx.org/content/m10867/latest/>>

¹⁴"Major Keys and Scales" <<http://cnx.org/content/m10851/latest/>>

If you don't mind getting a little technical, there is more information on *raga* at Indian Classical Music: Tuning and Ragas¹⁵.

3.3 Harmony and Tuning

Much of the interest in Western music lies in its complex, ever-changing harmony¹⁶. Indian music takes a different approach. Melodic scales and rhythms are much, much more various and complex than they are in Western music. Harmony, on the other hand, is usually kept simple, in the form of an unchanging drone¹⁷ of a pure¹⁸perfect fifth¹⁹ or perfect fourth²⁰. (See below (p. 3) for more about the drone instrument.)

In order to fit better with the pure interval of the drone, the tuning system used is not equal temperament²¹; instead a just intonation²² system, based on the pure fifth, is used. The tuning of the other notes (the ones not played by the drone) can vary to suit the particular *raga*. For more technical information on tuning, please see Tuning Systems²³ and Indian Classical Music: Tuning and Ragas²⁴.

3.4 Rhythm: The Tala

Western music tends to use only a few popular meters²⁵ for almost all of its music, and these meters are usually felt as repetitions of two, three, or four beats. The rhythms of Indian music, rather than being organized into short measures²⁶, are organized in long rhythmic cycles called **talas** (in southern Indian **thaalam**). There are more than 100 different *talas*. These rhythmic cycles are quite long and complex; the Carnatic tradition in particular includes some of the most complex and sophisticated rhythmic structures of any music tradition.

In fact, it is common for some sections of a performance (see below (Section 3.6: Form)) to be in free rhythm, with the *tala* not even introduced until the middle of the piece. These free-rhythm performances, which altogether lack a beat-like pulse, are central to a true appreciation of Indian music. Gosvami suggests (1961, p. 162) that "the best way to approach the Indian rhythm is to pay attention to the phrasing and ignore the pulsation", claiming that Indian rhythm is "derived from song", while Western rhythms are derived from "the dance or the march" (p. 169).

3.5 Color and Texture

Indian music is indeed, in many ways, based on the song. While Western audiences are more likely to hear famous Indian instrumentalists, vocal music is actually at the center of the Indian tradition, and vocal techniques are understood to be the basis for good instrumental technique.

The texture²⁷ of Indian music is typically a single melody voice or instrument, supported by drones²⁸ and rhythm percussion. As mentioned above, this texture is not common in Western music, and there are several elements of the timbre²⁹ (color) of the music that also make it sound unfamiliar. One is, of course, the use of Non-western instruments, as described below. But even the tone quality of the voice is different from the typical Western vocalist, who usually strongly relies on vibrato to produce an acceptable tone quality. The

¹⁵"Indian Classical Music: Tuning and Ragas" <<http://cnx.org/content/m12459/latest/>>

¹⁶"Harmony" <<http://cnx.org/content/m11654/latest/>>

¹⁷"Harmony with Drones" <<http://cnx.org/content/m11844/latest/>>

¹⁸"Tuning Systems": Section Pythagorean Intonation <<http://cnx.org/content/m11639/latest/#s11>>

¹⁹"Interval" <<http://cnx.org/content/m10867/latest/#p21a>>

²⁰"Interval" <<http://cnx.org/content/m10867/latest/#p21a>>

²¹"Tuning Systems": Section Equal Temperament <<http://cnx.org/content/m11639/latest/#s22>>

²²"Tuning Systems" <<http://cnx.org/content/m11639/latest/#p12a>>

²³"Tuning Systems" <<http://cnx.org/content/m11639/latest/>>

²⁴"Indian Classical Music: Tuning and Ragas" <<http://cnx.org/content/m12459/latest/>>

²⁵"Meter in Music" <<http://cnx.org/content/m12405/latest/>>

²⁶"Time Signature": Section Beats and Measures <<http://cnx.org/content/m10956/latest/#s1>>

²⁷"The Textures of Music" <<http://cnx.org/content/m11645/latest/>>

²⁸"Harmony with Drones" <<http://cnx.org/content/m11844/latest/>>

²⁹"Timbre: The Color of Music" <<http://cnx.org/content/m11059/latest/>>

Indian vocalist, on the other hand, tends to use a timbre lacking in vibrato. To Western listeners, this tone quality may at first sound flat, nasal, or lifeless. However, to the Indian listener it is a clean, clear sound that does not mask the subtleties of the *ragas* tuning, or overpower or interfere with the production of the intricate ornaments that are also an integral part of each *raga*.

Because instrumental techniques also rely on these subtle tunings and ornaments, Indian instruments also tend to play with little or no vibrato.

The harmony is usually provided by a drone instrument called the **tanpura**. (There are many alternative English spellings for the name of this instrument, including **taanpura** and **tambura**.) This instrument has four very long strings. The strings are plucked one after the other, continuously throughout the music. It takes about 5 seconds for one four-string cycle to be plucked, and although the drone itself is constant, the complex interactions between the harmonics³⁰ of the strings vary during the cycle, creating a shimmering, buzzing effect unlike that of any Western instrument.

In India, vocal soloists are very popular, but Westerners tend to hear instrumental soloists. The melody instrument is often also a stringed instrument: the most well-known is probably the **sitar**, a plucked-lute-family chordophone³¹ that has moveable frets to accommodate changes in tuning from one *raga* to the next. Other popular solo strings include the **surbahar**, which is basically a bass sitar, the **sarod**, a fretless plucked-lute-family instrument, and the **vina**, a zither-family chordophone³² with gourd resonators. On many of these instruments, only some of the strings are for playing the melody. Other strings are drone/rhythm strings and/or strings that are not plucked but only vibrate sympathetically with the other strings. Again, this can produce a buzzing timbre³³ that Westerners find exotic.

There are other, less common solo string instruments. Bamboo flutes (**bansuri** or **venu**) are also popular solo instruments, and some Western instruments, particularly **violin**, are also fairly popular.

The rhythmic accompaniment is usually provided by the **tabla**, a set of two small drums that are played with the hand. The *tabla* is tuned to the *raga* (Section 3.2: Melody and Mood: The Raga) by tapping wedges on the side of the instrument. Because the *tabla* is played with the hand rather than a stick or beater, the rhythms of the accomplished player are subtle and expressive as well as complex. In fact, even on this percussion instrument, an accomplished Indian musician can put the listener in mind of vocal phrasing.

3.6 Form

There are many forms in Indian classical music, including shorter composed songs and hymns. But the form of the fully-explored *raga* (Section 3.2: Melody and Mood: The Raga) has three main sections.

The opening section, the **alap**, is a long, slow, free-rhythm improvisation. In it, the performer reveals the *raga* gradually, note-by-note. Although this section may be hardest to appreciate for listeners accustomed to the relentless rhythms of Western rock and pop, to those who understand Indian music, it is the section in which the musicianship of the great performer is most obvious.

The **chor-alap** section introduces a rhythmic pulse, and the music becomes more animated.

The percussionist joins in on the **jhala** section, as the music becomes faster, more rhythmically complex, and more exciting as it drives to its climax. All of these sections are typically improvised, with close communication, cooperation, and interaction between the soloist and percussionist on the improvisation of the final section.

4 Recognizing Indian Classical Music

For the Western listener, probably the easiest clue that you are listening to Indian classical music is the instrumentation. Listen for the distinctive drone of the tanpura (p. 4), the expressive rhythms of the tabla (p. 4), and the un-Western timbres³⁴ of vocal and instrumental soloists.

³⁰"Harmonic Series" <<http://cnx.org/content/m11118/latest/>>

³¹"Classifying Musical Instruments": Section Chordophones <<http://cnx.org/content/m11896/latest/#s21>>

³²"Classifying Musical Instruments": Section Chordophones <<http://cnx.org/content/m11896/latest/#s21>>

³³"Timbre: The Color of Music" <<http://cnx.org/content/m11059/latest/>>

³⁴"Timbre: The Color of Music" <<http://cnx.org/content/m11059/latest/>>

Listen also for the simple drone-and-rhythm accompaniment (Section 3.3: Harmony and Tuning) and the exotic raga (Section 3.2: Melody and Mood: The Raga)-scale melodies and ornaments.

As a first guess, a long piece with a very leisurely, free-rhythm opening is likely North Indian. A shorter piece with very complex rhythms is more likely to be South Indian.

If the music has an Indian-sounding melody and timbre (for example, a vocalist who relies on ornaments rather than vibrato), but seems to have the simple, driving rhythms, short forms (and sometimes the functional harmony, too) of Western music, you may be listening to Indian pop music, a genre largely developed by and for India's extensive movie industry, which is also very influential in the world-music scene.

5 What to Listen For

A listener educated in Indian classical music will be able to identify the raga (Section 3.2: Melody and Mood: The Raga) and tala (Section 3.1: Improvisation) by listening to the music. This is too much to ask of the beginning Western listener. Listen for the major sections of the music, the slow revelation of the *raga*, for the buildup and release of tension in both the melody and the rhythm, and the rhythmic excitement of the final section.

You may also want to try to get into the mood of the piece; the mood may be hinted at by the performer, program notes, or the specific time of day or season that the raga is associated with. If you are attending a live concert, it is quite likely that the *raga* is appropriate for the season and time of day, so you may want to meditate on "winter evenings" or "a Sunday afternoon in spring" as you listen.

If you have an ear well-trained in Western music, you may want to listen for the scale notes used by the raga (Section 3.2: Melody and Mood: The Raga) and their relationship to the drone notes, and try to figure out the number of beats in the tala (Section 3.1: Improvisation).

You may find it impossible to "tap your foot" to this music, though; don't let that cause frustration. Instead, listen for the ebb and flow and development of the phrases. Although the ornament-heavy melodic style is completely different, if you are accustomed to listening to jazz improvisations, you can listen for the same types of development that you might hear in a good jazz solo. From some performers who often play for Western audiences, that may even include musical "quotations" that you'll recognize!

6 Suggested Listening

- The music of Ravi Shankar, the internationally famous *sitar* player, is easy to find and a good place to start. Percussion fans may prefer recordings featuring famous *tabla* players such as Zakir Hussain.
- If you find the buzzing sound of all those drone and sympathetic strings distracting, try to find some of the vocal-solo music which is so popular in India, or try to find some bamboo-flute-solo music.
- The *Rough Guide* series is a good place to find additional information on Indian music as well as an extensive list of excellent recordings.
- Indian pop or Bollywood musicals can be an accessible "introduction" to the sounds of Indian music, for anyone who is really struggling with the classical.
- There are many recordings of Indian classical music at YouTube. Try sampling some to find a recording with a sound that appeals to you. Listen to the recording multiple times, and also look for other recordings by that same artist, just as you would in more familiar music styles.

7 Bibliography

- Deva, B. Chaitanya. *Music of India: A Scientific Study*. Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers. New Delhi, 1981.
- Gosvami, O. *The Story of Indian Music: Its Growth and Synthesis*. Asia Publishing House. Bombay, 1961.

NOTE: Thanks to everyone who participated in the survey! It was very useful to me, both as a researcher and as an author, to get a better picture of my readers' goals and needs. I hope to begin updating the survey results module³⁵ in April. I will also soon begin making some of the suggested additions, and emailed comments are still welcome as always.

³⁵"A Survey of Users of Connexions Music Modules" <<http://cnx.org/content/m34234/latest/>>