

## **An Introduction to INDIAN CLASSICAL MUSIC (part one)**

*For the Western listener, approaching Indian classical music is like learning a new language. The familiar rules of harmony, counterpoint and musical form are not apparent. The instruments are exotic and strange. In this piece we have space only to give a brief introduction to the Hindustani (North Indian) and Karnatak (South Indian) classical traditions both of which reach back thousands of years. There exist on the sub-continent also a rich variety of local folk musics, the burgeoning film music and dance music (bhangra) industries plus the devotional Hindu songs or bhajans and the Sufi tradition of Qawwali music which will have to await future articles.*

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It is said that God Him/Herself is musical sound, Nadabrahma, the sound which pervades the whole universe. The origins of Indian music are therefore considered divine. It is said that the musician has to cultivate an attitude of self-abandonment in order to fuse with the Supreme Reality, Brahma. And in that way Indian classical music can lead the listener to experiences of transcendence, or to meditative or dreamlike states.

This divine music manifests in the world through a long tradition, an unbroken chain of masters and pupils. There are no scores or pieces for the pupil to learn as in the Western classical tradition, but there are principles and structures to be grasped. And on the basis of these principles and structures, the music grows through improvisation in the spirit of the moment, the energy of the time and the awareness of the audience.

The main principle is the raga. This informs the melodic structure of the music, for all Indian instrumental music lives in honour of and in imitation of song. But a raga is not a melody, nor is it a musical form like a symphony, nor is it a scale like C major. It is more than picking notes from a set of possibilities, it is the tuning of the instrument to a particular emotional quality, an exploration of the possibilities and the development of a musical character and identity. This quality is often identified with a particular time of day or a particular season of the year. There are ragas of the early morning, the afternoon, the evening and the night. Each has its own personality, male or female.

Raga Pilu, for example, is a late afternoon raga, played before sunset. It is described as "a woman who doesn't know what she wants. She is satisfied, but longing for something else. Sometimes gay, sometimes sad, ever changing."

Raga Hindola, on the other hand, is a spring raga described as "spring bursting with life, like a war dance".

The performance of a raga begins with a slow introduction, called the alap. It is an exploratory, meandering start to a journey, the soloist (voice, sitar, flute etc) develops the raga note by note, feeling out the emotional relationships between the notes. He is supported by a drone instrument, either a tamboura, a fretless stringed instrument or else a harmonium to set an unchanging, universal backdrop, As it progresses, melodic shapes and patterns start to form. Then as the music gathers more movement, the tabla (twin drums) will enter, following the rhythm set by the soloist..

The rhythm isn't counted in beats to a bar but rather it is described as a particular cycle or tala, a sixteen or a ten beat cycle or others more complex, but always returning to a start note, the beginning of the cycle. The soloist and the tabla play together and bounce ideas off each other, developing the raga into a dialogue. The music accelerates and the performers are exchanging tit-for tat phrases (known as jugalbandi) challenging each other to displays of virtuosity, pushing the music to an exciting climactic finish.

All this is done without key changes and the harmonic structures familiar to western listeners. The drone is the ground out of which the raga grows and the tala is the cyclical rhythmic pattern it moves through. The subtlety of expression lies in the nuances of the melody and the spontaneity of the relationship between the players.

In the South Indian or Karnatak tradition the ensemble is the same except that the percussion will be more developed. Instead of the tabla, there is a "rhythm section" consisting of the mridangam - a double headed drum - plus a small hand drum, a clay pot called the ghatam and the morchang - the Indian variant of the jew's harp. This gives the music a spicier quality (a bit like south Indian food). Often there are duets of voice and violin where the violin echoes, supports and doubles the voice by turns. Many of the pieces of Karnatak music are composed and the composer will be credited.

Recordings are an excellent way to learn the language of Indian classical music. The limitations in length of LP and cassette, however meant that ragas had to be somewhat abbreviated to fit onto a twenty five minute side and the quality of cassettes recorded in India was often lacking. Now with the time available on Compact Discs, ragas can develop more expansively and, as digital recording technology is becoming more common in India as well as in the west, we look forward to some excellent releases in the future.

But without doubt, Indian classical music is best experienced live. You have to be there to really appreciate the quality of the music in the moment and the relationship between the performers and with the audience. You will find that a little study and attention will be more than rewarded by an experience that can be utterly spellbinding.

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