

An Introduction to INDIAN CLASSICAL MUSIC (part two)

The Virtuosi and their instruments:

The heart of Indian classical music is the relationship between the master and the pupil. In the past, the pupil lived in the master's home and performed the functions of a servant whilst receiving tuition in the instrument. The basis of the improvisations had to be learned by ear, there being no written system of notation. Styles have passed in an oral tradition from master to pupil and so on through the ages.

This means of transmission gives the character of the performer far more importance than in western classical music, especially since the performer is in effect the composer. This means that choosing a recording of Indian Classical music is more about finding something by a favourite instrumentalist and choosing a recording of a particular performance. (For an introduction to ragas see the first half of this article)

If you are a newcomer to Indian music, you can find soloists who use instruments from the western tradition. There are ragas played on violin, mandolin or flute. Then there are the more traditional instruments particularly the sitar which has come to be most closely identified in the minds of western listeners with Indian Classical music.

But the most personal expression in any tradition must always be song. Indian vocal technique is more open throated than in western operatic singing with the emphasis on accuracy of intonation rather than vibrato, something that Western ears can learn to appreciate without difficulty. The voice in Indian tradition becomes a vehicle for such a range of emotion and expression bordering sometimes on an ecstasy that the divine "unstruck" sound of Nadabrahma is felt through the music.

Brian Lee

What follows is a guide to some of the more well-known and widely recorded artistes from the Hindustani (North Indian) and Karnatak (South Indian) traditions with a description of the instruments they play.

If you need help getting hold of recordings then send for the Caduceus guide to Indian Classical Music Resources.

HINDUSTANI MUSIC

Hariprasad Chaurasia : Bansuri.

The simple bamboo flute has a special place in Indian mythology as the instrument of the God Krishna. but it was only transformed recently into a vehicle for Indian classical music. Hariprasad Chaurasia's consummate artistry and depth of feeling has distinguished him as the greatest living master of the North Indian flute today.

Bismillah Khan : Shenai.

An oboe-like instrument much used in outdoor celebrations like weddings. It is played using the technique of circular breathing often at a breathtaking speed to show off the virtuosity of the performer.

Shivkumar Sharma : Santoor.

Shivkumar Sharma transformed the little-known Kashmiri folk instrument similar to a Hammer Dulcimer into a full-fledged solo concert instrument in Indian classical music. He is one of the rare instances in which the name of the artist is virtually synonymous with the instrument he plays.

Ravi Shankar : Sitar.

Collaborator with Yehudi Menuhin, sitar teacher of George Harrison, Ravi Shankar has done more than anyone to introduce Indian Classical Music to the Western world. The instrument he plays, has come to exemplify Indian music. It has 7 playable strings and 12 sympathetic strings and the frets are moveable so that different ragas can be played.

Ustad Vilayat Khan : Sitar.

Ustad is an honorific title in the Islamic tradition, given to great teachers. It is the equivalent of Pandit in the Hindu tradition. Ustad Vilayat Khan's inventiveness has added many innovations to modern sitar playing and he has been selling out concerts since he shot to fame in 1944.

Lakshmi Shankar : Vocal

A magnificent voice of emotional depth and power like the voice of the Divine Mother. She was the first Indian singer to have CDs released in Europe and the States. Can be heard singing in the film Gandhi. Her albums include "Live in London" on the Navras label and "Les Heures et les Saisons" on the Ocora label.

Rajan and Sajan Misra : Vocal

Two brothers who come from a musical Benares family. They are both ardent devotees of Saraswati, the Goddess of Music and Science and music to them is an act of devotion and gratitude to the deity. "When we sing, we are as one soul singing, even though we are in two bodies"

Pandit Pran Nath : Vocal

Pandit Pran Nath who died earlier this year in California was the singing teacher of American composers Terry Riley and La Monte Young. His long unavailable album "Midnight Raga" is due for release from the Cortical Foundation. His vocal style is severely simple, ie. not embellished with ornament but the accuracy of his intonation means that his emotional expression is transparent.

Imrat Khan : Surbahar.

A larger version of the sitar with thicker strings and a lower pitch, the surbahar is used to play more serious music. It was invented by Imrat Khan's great-grandfather, Sahibdad Khan. Imrat Khan is the most well known performer on this instrument as well as performing on the sitar.

Alla Rakha : Tabla

Zakir Hussein : Tabla

This father and son are the most well known of contemporary tabla players. The instrument consists of two drums which are played with the fingers rather than the open hand giving it range of tonal qualities and making it an expressive instrument in its own right.

Ustad Ali Akbar Khan : Sarod

The sarod is hand carved from a single block of wood and the finger board is smooth and fretless. The 25 metal strings, four of which are used for the melody, are played with a plectrum. One of the most demanding Indian Classical instruments to play Ali Akbar Khan now runs a centre for Indian Music in California.

Pandit Ram Narayan : Sarangi.

The sarangi is a fretless bowed string instrument carved from wood with three melody strings plus a drone string and 30-40 sympathetic strings. It is capable of a wide variety of timbres comparable in subtlety some say to the human voice. Originally only used to accompany vocalists, it is now used more as a solo instrument.

KARNATAK MUSIC

Dr. L Subramaniam: Violin.

South Indian music soon made the western violin its own and Subramaniam is its finest exponent and a legendary performer both in India and abroad having made over 100 recordings including the 4 CD set "Anthology of South Indian Classical Music" on the Ocora label of Radio France

U. Srinivas : Mandolin.

The first Indian musician to play the mandolin, his inventiveness and technical virtuosity are stunning although he is still in his late twenties. He shows that Indian music is a living tradition that can continue to respond to outside influences and develop in new directions..

Dr N Ramani : Flute

A magical and entrancing performer whose album of Ragas on the Nimbus label is a splendid example of a South Indian ensemble of flute, violin, mridangam (double headed drum) and ghatam (clay pot).

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