

Appreciating Hindustani Music
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Lecture 31
A Typical Khayal Concert

A typical Khayal presentation of a raga is 2 or 3 tiered; that is, a Khayal presentation typically uses 2 or 3 compositions in different layas - different tempos. The Khayal presentation of a raga will start with a Vilambit Khayal and then it will proceed to a Drut Laya composition. That is, it will start with a slow khayal and then... it will also include a rendition of a drut or a fast tempo composition and there will be vistaar around both, the taal may be the same hm and very often it is the same.

So, a rendition of a raga might first begin with a composition in Vilambit Teentaal and after that it will be followed by a composition in Drut Teentaal. So, different compositions in different layas offer different possibilities for vistaar or improvisation and the ramping up of the laya is conducive to creating and building up of interest and tension.

So, as I said, typically a khayal composition, a khayal rendition will include 2 compositions, but sometimes it may also include three. So, the Vilambit may be followed by a Madhyalaya Bandish and then a drut composition which may even be a Tarana.

A leisurely presentation of a raga in Khayal can take a minimum of 45 minutes. It can go on for up to an hour and more. So, what happens, how does a khayal presentation unfold? It begins, a khayal presentation begins with a short, very leisurely introductory aalap without taal: that is its anibaddha. This aalap should establish the raga clearly and unambiguously and evocatively.

And then the Vilambit composition is rendered; usually the sthayi is rendered first once or twice and then the singer will embark upon the vistaar with whatever he or she prefers - aalap, bol aalap, bol laya, etcetera. Taans usually do not enter right in the beginning. Taans are rendered towards the end of the vistaar; and there is a step by step development or badhat or there is vistar beginning in the lower ranges and progressing towards the tarasa. The taar sadja, that is the high Sa and singing it or attaining that is a landmark, a point of great drama and once that happens then the antara's mukhada is sung. Typically the full antara is not sung at the time. The antara's mukhada alone is sung and then more badhat, more vistar in the higher ranges is performed after which the antara is rendered fully and then you return to the sthayi.

In many schools, at this point, the laya is increased after which we have bol laya, bol baant, bol taan and also taans. So, then the Vilambit Khayal is rounded off. And after, which the drut bandish is rendered, typically at this stage, you would not you know embark upon leisurely aalap; more bol baant and taan kind of vistaar will be performed around the drut bandish. And the laya may be increased again and the presentation is brought to a close after some climactic fast taans and typically there is also the rendition of the mukhada three times.

And this is called the thihai and the thihai when it is rendered like this typically indicates that the presentation or that particular composition has been wound up. The thihai is an important rhythmic device that is used in other ways and in other places too.

The expectation is that the last - so, what is it the thihai? Thihai is any pattern that is repeated thrice. It could be a rhythmic pattern, it could be the text of a song, it could be the mukhada, it could be anything, it has to be rendered thrice. And the expectation is that the last repetition must achieve some kind of resolution usually by landing on the sam. So, that is thihai which is very often encountered in khayal and very very often encountered in instrumental performances.

They revel in thihais. Now in a typical concert of say 2 hours, today it is 2 hours or even less, a few decades ago it was like 3 hours with a break in between or 4 hours, but these days an hour and a half or 2 is a typical length for a full khayal concert. So, in such a concert you may hear 2 or 3 ragas.

The first raga is presented in 2 or 3 tiers using 2 or 3 compositions and can easily be run for 45 minutes or 1 hour, typically 40-45 minutes. The second and the third raga presentations are shorter, often using Madhyalaya compositions or compositions set to jhaptaal or roopak taal because these avartanas are shorter and there is a variation of pace when we introduce these taals.

The choice of ragas is also done with a view to offering some variety in terms of the notes and the nature of the raga; that is you may have ragas drawn from different thaats or of different prakritis and all these are planned with a view to retaining interest. And often a Khayal concert ends with a lighter piece either a thumri kind of composition or a bhajan. Many Khayal singers do not render, do not perform thumri because that calls for a completely different sensibility and different training. So, very often a Khayal concert will end with a lighter piece in the form of a bhajan.

Now, I want to talk here about the Raga Bhairavi, traditionally Raga Bhairavi - actually it is Ragini Bhairavi, but nobody says Ragini these days. So, Bhairavi is rendered at the end of a concert. Bhairavi actually is one of the most widely used ragas in many genres of Indian music including film and religious music.

Now, if in a concert, a classical concert, the singer or the instrumentalist starts Raag Bhairavi it signals the end of the concert, that is the concert will end after that piece. So, there is no performance after Raag Bhairavi. So, Bhairavi signals the end of the concert.

Raag Bhairavi is regarded as Saarvakaalika; that is it can be performed at any time. The raga time association is relaxed in the context of, in the case of Bhairavi. Bhairavi is a mangala raga, a raga on which to end a performance and it can be performed at any time. There is a link to performances of Raag Bhairavi in the description box that I would encourage you to listen to.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ZEPLjN-6yl>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fdJaFSGYA9o>

Accompaniment or Sangat is an important aspect of Khayal. Besides the all important tanpura, there is a melodic accompaniment which is the harmonium or the sarangi or the violin and we have the tabla of course.

As we have already discussed the tabla is the keeper of the taal; that is the theka, the basic strokes of the tala, this is what the tabla player plays for most part and he never strays very far from the theka.

Because that is the reference for the tala cycle for all performers and the audience, but you will also notice that there is a constant variation in the theka, it is not a monotonous set of strokes that is played over and over, but one that remains you know fundamentally the same and identifiable, but is constantly embellished and constantly played around with.

The tabla player will play with the theka, but always responding to the singer, to what the raga exposition... needs. So, as there is a build up towards the mukhada, as the singer fills the aavartan and makes her way or starts building up towards the mukhada. You will see that the tabla player also often improvises along with a singer in anticipation and both of them will land on the sam. We will look in some detail at the harmonium too later.

Here I want to talk about another instrument called Swaramandal. Because many prominent Khayal vocalists use this while performing. They themselves typically play it. Now this is a harp like instrument and it is a box mounted with about 32 strings, 32 strings which are tuned to the notes of the raga whichever raga is being performed. The notes of those ragas are what this instrument is tuned to in aroha and avaroha.

So, with every change in raga the swaramandal has to be retuned [Music]. Now, while the when the swaramandal is used it has an effect of a shimmering cascade of swaras of the raga and it can be seen as offering a richer listening experience. Prominent Khayal singers like Bade Ghulam Ali Khan and Smt. Kishori Amonkar have used it.

Now, let us listen to a very short exposition of raga Miyan Ki Todi - it is about 15 minutes long. It is very short because Miyan Ki Todi is one of the very major ragas of Hindustani music and it can be performed easily for 45 minutes to 1 hour, but for the purposes of this course this is an abbreviated exposition. This is a 2 tiered presentation - the Vilambit is in Jhumra of 14 beats, it is a traditional composition and is followed by a tarana in Drut Ektaal. Observe the tabla accompaniment and the harmonium accompaniment; the harmonium accompanist plays a supporting role and follows the singer closely and you will see you will notice that the accompanist, whether it is a tabla or the harmonium player - they would be constantly looking and following very closely what the singer is doing.

[Music].