

**Appreciating Hindustani Music**  
**Dr.Lakshmi Sreeram**  
**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**  
**Indian Institute of Technology, Madras**

**Lecture 37**  
**Melodic Accompaniment in Khayal**

A typical ensemble of a Khayal performance includes, besides the tabla of course, melodic accompaniment and we will look at this in this video. Melodic accompaniment in Indian classical music serves the function of supporting the lead performer. It is not to offer a contrast like in Western classical music or other music. Chords for instance played on the guitar offer a contrast to the voice and the song and the music gains vertical dimensions through accompaniment in Western music.

But that is not the case in Indian classical music. In fact, the word for accompaniment in Hindustani music is *sangat* or *saath*, both of which have the meaning of going along with, together with. In Khayal, the ideal melodic accompaniment is seen as following the vocalist like an unobtrusive shadow, sounding like the voice and playing exactly what the vocalist renders. This can be challenging of course, but it is possible because of shared traditions of performance, *raga*, *tala* etcetera.

There is still bound to be a time lag which it is the skill of the accompanist to minimise. The lead performer, the vocalist in Khayal leads in every way and the accompanists have to literally follow the lead performer. So, there is a certain, if one may say, hierarchy here. This is evident even in the seating arrangement on the stage, the vocalist will be at the centre and the accompanists sit on her sides looking at her all the time, not facing the audience like the vocalist would be.

The vocalist will face the audience full on, the accompanists will sit sideways; so, that they have a full view of the lead performer. They look at the lead performer all the time, all their senses are cued in, the hearing, seeing, feeling. It is a unique challenge and being a good accompanist involves many skills besides good musicianship. Now, standard melodic accompaniment in Khayal is offered by *sarangi* or *harmonium* and more rarely by the violin. But the most common melodic accompaniment these days is the *harmonium* which is a wind instrument and it works on the principle of a keyboard - the keyboard is pressed and then the sounds, the music is produced. Now, the keys or the pitches on any keyboard are fixed. So, this should be a puzzle to anyone because when we have harped so much on micro tonality and the continuity in the ornament, the ornamentation of the music and how fundamental these are to *ragas* into Hindustani music, how can the *harmonium* which in principle cannot produce either micro tonality and definitely not continuity, how can the *harmonium* have such a strong presence? There are no easy answers to this.

The *harmonium* is an instrument of European origin and it displaced the traditional *sarangi* as accompanying instrument.

The *sarangi* itself is probably not a very ancient instrument, it is a bowed string instrument with a strong presence in folk music of the North and North Western regions of the country. The *sarangi* has a rich plaintive sound, it is very capable of producing vocal nuances.

The sarangi has three main playing strings made of gut and about 35 metallic sympathetic strings which are divided into four sets and these are called taraf strings. So, you can imagine that tuning the sarangi is quite a task. Tuning the tarafs - the sympathetic strings - is an important problem of the instrument and there is some element of personal preference in the tuning method adopted.

In fact, it has been said that he who can tune the sarangi correctly is already half a sarangi player. I guess it can be said of almost any instrument. You learn to tune an instrument properly, you are probably a very good musician yourself.

The multi-layered tonal texture of the sarangi and the fact that micro tonality and continuity of the music can be maintained on the sarangi, make it eminently suited to accompany Khayal. But in fact, the sarangi is an endangered instrument today. The sarangi needs some retuning with every raga; that is you cannot have one tuning for all ragas.

So, if you have a concert every time one-piece ends and the next raga is taken up for presentation, the sarangi would have to be retuned to some extent. And, this definitely makes it less efficient than the harmonium which does not require any tuning, it is just keyboard. In fact, even in terms of maintenance it's much easier than the sarangi, the sarangi would need to be tuned several times within the same performance with the change in ragas.

So, and in the context of today's concerts held in auditoriums with time constraints all around, not to speak of the absence of the relaxed mindset of an earlier era; all this makes the sarangi a bit of an anachronism. And, this is certainly one of the reasons it has been gradually pushed out of the performance scene. Please visit the link below to listen to a Khayal concert with the accompaniment of the sarangi. Such performances are all too rare these days, it's very rare to have a Khayal concert with sarangi accompaniment.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8HCPZoiKKKQ>

The sarangi and sarangi players were closely linked with the tawaif culture, the courtesan salon culture. But, the sarangi masters were both teachers of the courtesans as well as accompanists during the performances of the tawaifs. Now, this community was disenfranchised, it was erased as part of social reform during the early or mid-20th century and with the fall of the tawaif, the sarangi players also faced stigma.

So, these are two easily identifiable reasons why the sarangi has been replaced by the harmonium. One is the convenience aspect and the other is the socio-cultural associations of sarangi with a community that was regarded as socially and morally corrupt. The steady decline and very sparse presence of the sarangi in the performance seen in Hindustani music today is surely one of the tragic casualties of modernization and reform of Hindustani music and its practice.

The harmonium, despite its limitations of not being able to produce ornaments or maintain continuity of the music or you know easily produce microtonal nuancing, the harmonium has steadily gained ground. It did have some initial setbacks and challenges. In fact, the harmonium was at one time banned from the All India Radio as being unsuited to Hindustani music. There is a link to an interesting paper on this in the ah description box, do read it if you are interested. But, other factors worked out in its favour and today the harmonium is the default accompaniment of Khayal.

<https://read.dukeupress.edu/public-culture/article-abstract/31/1/117/137315/Radio-Citizenship-and-the-Sound-Standards-of-a?redirectedFrom=fulltext>

Vyasmurti Katti is a leading harmonium player of the country and has accompanied several Khayal vocalists and he is a very good harmonium soloist himself. And, in the next video he will talk about the harmonium, he will talk about its history, its construction, how you play it as well as aspects of sangat or accompaniment.