

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

**Lecture 38**  
**The Harmonium as Accompaniment for Khayal**

Hello friends. Namaskar. I am Vyasmurti Katti, I am going to talk to you in brief about Harmonium as an instrument and the sangat with harmonium in the context of Hindustani Classical Music or Hindustani Raag Sangeet. I am a harmonium player myself and I must say that I am very fortunate to be able to do the sangat of many stalwart vocalists of our country.

Though it seems to be an easy instrument to start with, going a little deeper into it especially in the context of Hindustani Raag Sangeet one requires a special training and a consistent rigorous Riyaz; Riyaz is practice. A lot of effort goes into learning and mastering the art of sangat too. What is sangat? Sangat is accompaniment; accompaniment with a vocalist. Sangat is a very special unique subject and a very unique art.

Hindustani Classical Music is an impromptu art form.

It has a framework of the raag, the compositions thereof and the style of presentation, but a master vocalist challenges himself to create new things within that framework sometimes even takes a creative liberty to widen the framework also. So, if creativity in real time is so special, then to understand that creativity and efficiently follow it immediately on the harmonium is also very special, it is an art in itself.

It would be interesting to note that the sangatkaar - the accompanist - is reproducing which has already been produced, but these two things are reaching the audience together in real time and producing a great effect. The harmonium sangatkaar therefore, forms a very unique position on the concert stage, he can lift a performance with his sheer abilities of accompaniment.

Let us now quickly have a look at the history of harmonium very briefly. It is said that the foot-operated reed organ was invented by Alexander Debain in the 1840s in France. A reed is a metal structure which has a vibratable tongue riveted to the base. The wind passing through the reed makes the tongue vibrate to produce a sound.

The bellows were the foot operated, the keyboard was operated by both hands unlike this harmonium where we operate the bellow with the left hand and the keyboard with the right hand.

In the subsequent decades the organ went through many improvements in Germany and France, it came to India through missionaries and the organ found its place in churches initially. The organ became very popular due to the sweet tone. Subsequently due to the efforts of Shri Dwarkanath Ghosh of Dwarkin and company, the foot-operated organ got converted to a hand operated harmonium and it is called as baja or just a peti. Today the harmonium is an irreplaceable part of any concert; it is being used across the genres including Hindustani Raag Sangeet, Ghazals, semi classical, light music, Bhajans, Kawali, film music etcetera.

The contributions of stalwarts like Bhaiyya Ganpatrao and Govindrao Tembe and others need to be appreciated for popularising harmonium in those days. Now, let us understand the construction of the harmonium quickly.

The harmonium is a Sushir Vadya - a wind instrument. The wind is pushed in through the bellows and is made to pass through the vents created by the pressing of the key. While passing through the vent the wind makes the corresponding reed vibrate and thus the sound is produced. Very simple principle of sound production is it not, but it produces a very rich sound.

The bellow structure and its mechanism, the keys and its mechanism, the reeds, the reed board, the sound compartment and the wooden box are the important parts of the harmonium. Let us see: here these are the bellows. So, when I operate the bellow the air is pushed in. So, and this is the keyboard and when I press the key there is a key structure here. This gets lifted up and below this structure are two vents. And the air passes through those two vents and thereby producing the sound through the reeds. here the reeds get vibrated and it produces the sound. This is a reed board, this is a sound compartment. So, I operate the bellows, press a key [Music]. Today one is able to select a specific type of harmonium according to his need. Transportability plays an important role today. You can unfold the harmonium for the concert and then fold it back to look like a suitcase and carry it very easily. The traditional vertical type of harmonium is also available, the harmonium which you just saw, the harmonium which is in front of me is a vertical type of harmonium; more the octaves bulkier is the harmonium.

So, the harmonium can be made to order if we know exactly how many octaves we actually need. Then there can be many types of harmoniums depending on the number of reed sets it could be a single reed - actually nobody uses a single reed harmonium anymore, but it is possible to have one, a single reed, double reed or a triple reed based on the need.

And then there are various combinations of these reeds possible. In case of double reed harmonium it could be a male male type of combination or a bass male kind of a combination. In case of triple reed bass male female could be a combination or bass male male could be a combination. So, when I say double reed or triple reed - as you saw just now - the harmonium will have that many sets of reeds on the reed board.

And then quality or make of the reed. So, we used to have reeds made in Europe, earlier Germany or Paris. So, the reed qualities like Monarch or Jubilate are made in Germany. The reeds like Kasriel or BBD are made in France, but unfortunately none of these are available now, but these were some of the finest reeds available. They have been recirculating and if you are fortunate you can get hold of one such reed set.

And of course, there are old Indian reeds like System Paris etcetera and today Palitana in Gujarat - they have a factory of reproduction. So, we get most of our reeds for the present requirements from those factories. Even Punjab I think produces reeds. And there is another type of harmonium which is a scale changer. As we discussed earlier the organ came to India and was played in churches; later it crept into the folk music and theatre music scenario especially in Marathi, Kannada and Bengali folk and theatre music.

It will be interesting to know that even today the sangeet natak use organ for their performances. After the innovation from being a foot operated organ into a hand operated harmonium it reached more areas or genres including Hindustani Classical Music or Raag Sangeet. The recorded music of the early decades in the 20th century have a Harmonium as the sangat instrument [Music].

Its journey began from a single reed harmonium to a double reed instrument for better resonant sound and then from a sweet sounding male male double reed harmonium to a

more robust bass male kind of a harmonium to cater to the male voices also. Single reed [Music]. Double reed [Music]. This was a double reed male male. Now hear the sound of double reed bass male [Music].

Let us now turn to the advantages of having harmonium for accompaniment. Harmonium has a steady sound which supports the vocalist. If a sangatkaar possesses a good well-tuned harmonium, it is a boon for the vocalist and the concert as a whole. Harmonium does not change its tuning during the concert. The reeds maintain the tuning irrespective of the weather condition during a concert as against any string instrument. It is possible to opt for different tonal quality of the harmonium depending on the texture of the vocal sound. For example, male male or a bass male or a male male in lower octave etcetera. Harmonium has a very sweet, rounded and resonant sound. The harmonium can play high speed taans with clarity and crispness. And as I said earlier the learning of this instrument harmonium is easier to start with. Harmonium can be played as a solo instrument apart from being an accompanying instrument.

As you know the harmonium, being a keyboard instrument, there could not be a continuous progression of frequencies between two keys. However, this drawback could be overcome by understanding the timing of the meend and playing the keys in such a way that you give the same feel of the meend.

Friends let us now focus on the requirements to be a good sangatkar. The diagram here represents the process of sangat, a few sub processes are also involved.

Let us understand them. The vocalist sings, the tabla plays and the harmonium sangatkar listens to it and decodes the music. He is experiencing the music here and at the same time visualizing the keyboard and the finger movements. Finger movement takes place almost simultaneously. The same music is delivered on the harmonium, he listens to it and if he finds something lacking, he tries to correct it during the next such available chance.

The processes of listening, decoding, visualizing, fingering and the corrective action thereafter are involved here. Better the skill in each of these processes the better the sangat. There are occasions when the sangatkaar is needed to fill the spaces depending on what the vocalist is expecting whether it is a breathing space or a thinking space, the sangatkaar is supposed to fill that space with meaningful matter or silence respectively. Having a well tuned harmonium with a good rounded tone adds to the quality of the listening experience. It would be ideal if the sangatkar knows the ragas, the compositions and the typical development of the raga by the vocalist. The knowledge of gayaki with respect to his gharana adds to the quality of accompaniment. A sangatkar is normally a good solo player too. He can create the ragas in his own way as he is trained in that, but while doing the sangat he has to be aware that he is doing the sangat and not playing the solo and so has to be much restrained. Patience plays a good role here.

Now, what are the challenges? It can be said that mastering all the requirements to be a good sangatkar is very challenging, it takes a certain long time too. I am going to discuss a few connected aspects which may not have been discussed earlier. The challenges could be divided as on the stage challenges and off the stage challenges. The understanding of the musical likes and dislikes with respect to the sangat of the vocalist and taking care accordingly to me is the greatest challenge. The concert goes very smoothly once this understanding happens.

Sometimes it so happens that the sangatkar may have to play on different scales. The ability to maintain the continuity in playing notes using bellowing technique and key pressing techniques is also very challenging. Ability to tune the harmonium in a given scale as per the requirement is very challenging too. As a sangatkar one might associate with many

vocalists; each vocalist has his or her own pitch. The naturally tuned harmonium for every such pitch is a must for the better experience.

So, to possess so many harmoniums, tuning them and maintaining them is a huge challenge and it is a huge challenge financially too. By now you must have understood the importance of the role of the harmonium as an accompanying instrument. With a little sadness I must admit that the harmonium sangatkars have hardly received the due recognition or accolades for their skills, hard work and the value they bring to the concert scenario.

Now, we will talk about training in harmonium. So, I can divide this training into four broad portions; one is training in the techniques of harmonium playing - the tantra, the training in raag sangeet which is vidya and then training in sangat and training in tuning aspect. So, let us discuss one by one briefly. The first one - training in the techniques of harmonium playing. It is important to achieve the muscle memory of playing the harmonium, when you hear some music or think of a beautiful song or phrase you must be able to reproduce it on the harmonium efficiently.

It is about playing certain exercises again and again, the guru guides you with these exercises. The exercises are about scales, alankars, paltas, ragas, laya etcetera. These have to be performed on a regular basis these exercises improve the swar gyan, laya gyan and the fingering techniques. [Music] [Music]. Training in raag sangeet: as the core of our music is raag one has to take a systematic taleem in the raag, the compositions and the development of these compositions. Listening to good music apart from playing what is being taught is very important.

The training, the riyaz accompanied by listening to quality music regularly improves the raga gyan training in sangat. A student of music aspiring to become a good sangatkar needs to accompany vocalists on a regular basis. This process makes him aware of musical needs of the vocalists and makes him a better sangatkar also. This is a good exercise to test and execute his swar gyan, laya gyan, raag gyan and muscle memory.

Coming to the tuning aspect slowly and steadily a harmonium sangatkar starts to give performances, he would possess a good number of harmoniums at this stage he should be able to tune his own harmoniums, it is a very important and subtle skill, it adds quality to music performances. Broadly there are two types of tuning the scale: the equi tempered tuning and just tuning or natural tuning. For Hindustani Classical Music or Raag Sangeet we use natural tuning. [Music] [Music].

With this I come to the end of this Lecdem, I thank NPTEL for this opportunity and finally, I wish you all the very best and really wish that some of you will really take up harmonium as a subject of learning. And this particular session will really act as an inspiration to you. Thank you very much and I will end this session with my brief solo recital.

Thank you very much and namaste. [Music] [Music] [Music] [Music] [Music] [Music] [Music] [Music] [Music] [Music].