

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

Lecture 47
Instrumental Music - a Brief Overview

Hindustani music today includes a strong presence of a variety of instruments in solo performances, that is we have the sitar, sarod, bansuri or flute, santoor. All of these are quite prominent on the scene. Now, a variety of musical instruments are discussed in music texts through the centuries. You can also see them in sculptures paintings and descriptions are found in literary works too.

The Natyasastra offers a very interesting and quite viable classification of instruments based on the principle of how sound is produced. And nearly 2 millennia later Sachs and Hornbostel - they came up with a system that is now globally followed, which follows the same idea, the same principle of classification. So, what are the various ways in which musical instruments make sound? That is all sound is vibration.

So, we could have music that is made by a vibrating string, this class of instruments is called tata vadya, in the Natyasastra. And these include both plucked string instruments and bowed string instruments. So, you have Sitar, Sarod which are plucked. the guitar also is a plucked instrument. Whereas, violin, Sarangi these are bowed, there are other instruments like the bin, surbahar, surshringar these are very rarely performed today.

The second class of instruments is sushira vadya where we have a vibrating column of air. So, we have the flute; obviously, the shehnai, even the harmonium which we have seen earlier. The third class of instruments is called Avanaddha, membranophones under the Sachs Hornbostel system, the sushira vadya are called aerophones, and string instruments or the tata vadya are called chordophones.

So, this third class, third category of instruments is called avanaddha or membranophone, where a membrane is pulled tight over something and that is the vibrating substance and that is how a music is made. So, tabla, pakhawaj etcetera will fall under this category.

Then you have a solid surface, which is the vibrating substance and these are called Ghana vadya, obvious examples are the cymbals in the tala. So, now, broadly, in terms of their roles, we can speak of two kinds of instruments melodic and percussive. Melodic instruments are those on which ragas are performed, while percussive instruments for our purposes are really two, tabla and pakhawaj which serve as percussive accompaniment. And this lesson is about melodic instruments.

Now, instrumental music is regarded as a separate genre in Hindustani music, because it has its own repertoire and also method of presentation. In Carnatic music in contrast we do not have a separate repertoire of compositions or even a presentational model for instrumental music.

So, instrumental music has its own standing so to say, but nevertheless it does draw from the vocal genres, vocal styles of Dhrupad and Khayal and it also draws from vocal music in other ways and this is acknowledged in the distinction between what is called tantkari and the gayaki ang.

Now, gayaki ang - and this has been explained earlier - this is modelled on vocal styles, on the way of the voice, trying to bring, to express on the instrument, to bring the expression of the human voice on an instrument, to bring out those nuances. Whereas, tantkari is playing the instrument in such a way that it exploits the possibilities of that instrument. Each instrument has its possibilities. It has its limitations, but there are unique possibilities of each instrument and tantkari really exploits those. Instrumental music in Hindustani music is a heady mix of these two approaches to music making and there are famous rivalries over the superiority of the one or the other approach, that is the gayaki and the tantkari.

So, though an instrumental music has its own story, has its own repertoire or way of presenting ragas, it does draw from Dhrupad and Khayal. It also borrows repertoire especially from Khayal and in the manner of presenting raga, it draws from Khayal and Dhrupad.

So, to give an explanation using the schema, here we have A stands for alaap, there is an extensive alaap. We have B standing for Bandish, C for bol laya or layakari, it is only using rhythmic only performing rhythmic patterns or creating rhythmic patterns using the text of the composition. And we have D which is other elements of improvisation such as bol alaap, taan, bol taan, sargam etcetera.

Now, when you have Dhrupad - in Dhrupad it progresses like this. First you have a very extensive alaap and you have already seen the kind of alaap that they perform in Dhrupad. From that after that it progresses to the Bandish, the Dhrupad or the Dhamar or whatever it is and then after that you have bol laya or layakari (Refer Time: 08:00) that is using the text of the composition, they perform rhythmic variations and rhythmic play.

Now, Khayal starts with a very short alaap ok, which I have not indicated here because it is not really an extensive alaap. It starts off with a very short introductory alaap and then launches into the Bandish, after which really the extensive alaap follows. It is incorporated into the avarthanas as we have seen it.

And the other elements of improvisation including bol laya are also all performed after the Bandish. And how are they brought together? As I said there is considerable freedom and considerable liberty that the performer exercises in how he wants to bring these elements together.

Now, instrumental music ah it draws from both these structures, in that its first begins with the extensive alaap in the Dhrupad model. So, you have the alaap, jor, jhala as it is called - the rhythmic pulsating kind of alaap, that is also performed in the instrumental music alaap. So, the alaap of instrumental music is really the alaap of Dhrupad and then it progresses into the Bandish - what is called Gat, after which within the avarthan the other elements of improvisation including some alaap - these are brought together. Instrumental music as I said draws from both the presentational style of Dhrupad and Khayal.

But the overall idiom of the music that we hear in instruments like the sitar, sarod, bansuri, shehnai etcetera - this is predominantly the Khayal ang or the Khayal voice. Ornaments used, the phrases are constructed and then built upon - these are all derived from the Khayal ang. But we can hear the Dhrupad ang and instruments that are now almost extinct like the surbahar or sursringar which are the base counterparts of the sitar and sarod respectively.

The Bin or the Rudra Bin is a full-fledged Dhrupad ang instrument. In fact, it belongs to the Dhrupad tradition. Celebrated Dhrupad musicians like Zia Mohiuddin Dagar, Ustad Asad Ali Khan, they have been brilliant performers of this instrument in the last century. And today Bahauddin Dagar of the Dagar family carries on the legacy of Bin playing.

Let us listen to a short clip of Ustad Asad Ali Khan, playing Bheemplasi. I thank Carsten Wicke for permission to use this clip, he is himself a musician and plays the Rudra Bin [Music]. Please see the links below in the description box for more music of the Rudra Bin. The music of the Bin has a depth and gravitas that is not found easily elsewhere.

So, the Bin and the flute, the bansuri are perhaps the most ancient among today's instruments heard in classical music. Some instruments that we hear in classical music today found their way from other spaces, instruments such as the Santoor, they are folk instruments in origin.

Santoor is a Kashmiri folk instrument and it found a place for itself in Hindustani music because of the artistry and the sheer brilliance of Pandit Shivkumar Sharma, who single handedly brought prestige and acceptance to this instrument in the world of classical music. Let us watch a clip of santoor performance.

[Music]. Similarly, the bansuri or flute too, which is an ancient instrument, but it was one musician who propelled it into the classical music arena and that was Pandit Pannalal Ghosh. In the flute, typically before Pandit Ghosh, the flute was a foot long instrument high pitched and that was not appropriate for creating the serious music of Hindustani music. So, Pandit Ghosh created a long flute with a large diameter to be able to produce the mellow and dignified sound of Hindustani music, thereby bringing depth and seriousness to the music. I am going to play a short clip from a house concert. This will also give you an idea of patronage of music at various levels. Of course, we have classical music concerts in big auditoria in all kinds of venues, but a closed chamber setting is still the best way to experience Indian classical music.

The big auditoria with stages that are isolated, take away the element of interaction with the audience which is important for this music, because this music unfolds through creating tension and resolving it in every avartan. And when the musician knows that the audience is with her and that the audience is getting what she is doing that makes for inspiration and for inspired music [Music].

The shehnai too has an interesting story. Primarily a Mangala Vadya, that is an instrument that is played on auspicious occasions such as marriages, Ustad Bismillah Khan worked to give it a place in classical music, his sheer artistry and command gave a new visibility to the shehnai outside wedding halls. [Music] A unique feature of instrumental music in India, is that most musicians customise their instruments; these are not standardized; all instruments are hand crafted.

Now, we will take a look at the sarod and the sitar. We have guest lecturers taking us through some aspects of these instruments. The sarod and sitar are both string instruments, they are plucked string instruments. As I have said, the other kind of string instruments are bowed - violin, Sarangi etcetera.

But both sitar and sarod are plucked string instruments and as you listen to our guest lecturers, you will appreciate that though both are plucked string instruments, one of them the sitar is fretted - there are frets - while the sarod is unfretted. So, they present different challenges to produce raag sangeet.

How ornaments are played, how the continuity of the music is maintained all this is navigated in different ways. Dr. Supriya Shah who is also at the Banaras Hindu University talks about the sitar. Dr. Shah refers to two kinds of sitar, as customised and used by two great musicians of the 20th century, Pandit Ravi Shankar and Ustad Vilayat Khan.

Now, these instruments - it is the same sitar - but they differ in size, the number of strings even the way the strings are tuned. And after Dr. Shah's lecture demonstration, let us also listen to Pandit Suresh Vyas as he talks about the sarod.