

Appreciating Hindustani Music
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Lecture 48

Sitar - the Instrument, Technique and Presentation.

Namaskar, I am Dr. Supriya Shah, sitar player of Maihar gharana, Assistant Professor in the Department of Instrumental Music, Faculty of Performing Arts, Banaras Hindu University. Today, I am going to present a lecture demonstration on the sitar, which is arguably the most popular Indian classical musical instrument worldwide.

I shall first tell you briefly about the evolution of the sitar from ancient times to its present form. There are three hypotheses regarding the origin of the sitar; the first hypothesis which was proposed by Karam Imam and Captain Willard - the invention of the sitar has been credited to Amir Khusrau who was a poet in the court of Alauddin Khilji.

This is however, disputed because Amir Khusrau himself never mentioned this instrument in any of his works. According to a text Madan-ul-Mausiqi written by Mohammad Karam Imam in 1854, Niamat Khan Sadarang had a younger brother who was very skilled in the art of sitar playing. His nephew Feroze Khan Adarang was also a skilled instrument player and was a big name in the field of music. He was also believed to have played several compositions dexterously on the sitar.

Although the name of the younger brother of Niamat Khan is not mentioned in the text, some scholars believe that his name was Khusrau Khan and he in fact, was the inventor of sitar and not Amir Khusrau. This hypothesis is also not credible because nowhere in the text is it mentioned that Khusrau Khan was the inventor of the sitar.

The most credible hypothesis regarding the origin of the sitar is the one that regards the Tri-Tantri veena mentioned in Bharat's Natya Shastra as the precursor to modern day sitar. When the Muslims came to India, they began to call the Tri-Tantri veena by the Persian name Sehtar, Seh meaning 3 in Persian and tar meaning string. This sehtar over a period of time became sitar. The Tri-Tantri veena was also known as the jantra in common parlance. The Ain-i-Akbari describes the jantra as a stringed instrument with a gourd resonator and movable frets, much like the present day sitar. The jantra was also used as a synonym for sitar for a long time. Around the 14th and the 15th centuries, the jantra was used by the Krishna Bhakth poets as an accompanying instrument to vocal music.

By the 18th century the Senia gharana Ustads, who were descendants of Tansen adopted this instrument, they then sitar to teach the intricacies of the bin or the Rudra veena to the students who were outside the circle of kinship. This led to further improvements and modifications in the sitar, which became more or less standardized by the 1940s and 50s. I shall now tell you a little about the construction of the sitar. The sitar, as you can see, has two main parts, the fingerboard or the dand and the resonator or the tumba.

The tumba is carved out of a hollow gourd, it is covered by a wooden plate which is known as the tabli, the fingerboard or the dand is carved out of hollow tun wood and sometimes hollow teakwood. The frets as you can see are tied to the fingerboard with the help of a nylon thread. You can see two bridges here, a bigger one on which the main strings of the

sitar rest. And a smaller one just ahead of the main bridge which is also called the ghudhach.

This one the smaller one is for the sympathetic strings or the taraf strings, which provide resonance to the instrument. And they are tuned to the respective notes of a particular raga. A sitar usually has 6 to 7 main strings and 11 to 13 sympathetic strings. The main strings as you can see are tied on one end to a metallic piece called langot at the base of the tumba, this metallic piece here.

And they move over the ghudhach and on the other end they are wound around the wooden pegs in the peg box, which is at the top of the sitar, on the other end of the fingerboard. These wooden pegs can be turned to tune the strings. Some of the main strings also have some beads or mankas, they could be round or oval in shape or even in the shape beautifully carved in the shape of a duck or a bird. These are provided for fine tuning of the strings.

The sympathetic strings are also similarly tied to a hook on the langot on one end and they pass through holes drilled in the fingerboard to be wound around the smaller pegs, on the side of the fingerboard. The part where the fingerboard and the resonator or the tumba are joined is called the gulu [Music]. The gulu, the tabli and the hollowed out gourd or tumba are the most important parts of the sitar, as they are the resonating, they make the resonating chamber of the sitar.

Coming back to the ghudhach, the surface of the ghudhach is very important and it is filed from time to time in order to keep it smooth, because the tonality and the timber of the sitar are also determined by the smoothness of the ghudhach. This work is known as jawari and it requires a very skilled technician.

As regards the structure of the sitar we find that two models are in vogue these days, one is the Pandit Ravi Shankar model and the other is the Ustad Vilayat Khan model, these two models of sitar differ from each other in certain aspects.

I will talk about the Ravi Shankar model first, because that is the sitar I also play. In this model there are 7 main strings out of which 2 are chikari strings the other 5 main strings have 2 thick strings, which are known as the laraj [Music] and the [Music] kharaj strings. The laraj and the kharaj strings have been added in this model in order to execute the alapchari of the dhrupad ang which is a specialty of the Maihar gharana.

The laraj string is tuned to Ati Mandra Pa or Pancham and the kharaj is tuned to Ati Ati Mandra Shadaj. The second string is [Music] tuned to Mandra Sa and the main string or the baaj ka taar is tuned to Mandra Madhyam. One of the chikaris, [Music] the smaller chikari [Music] is tuned to taar Sa [Music], the longer chikari to Madhya Sa [Music] and there is a steel string which is tuned to either Mandra Pa or Mandra Madhyam depending on which note is more prominent in which raag.

Other than this the Ravi Shankar style of the sitar is slightly wider, bigger and heavier in size compared to the Ustad Vilayat Khan style of the sitar, and that is because it accommodates the laraj and kharaj strings also. As you can see there is a lot of ornamentation also done on the tabli and very intricate inlay work and all these factors contribute to the tonality of this instrument.

The Vilayat Khani sitar is smaller in size because it has 6 main strings and 11 sympathetic strings as against the 13 strings in the Ravi Shankar sitar. The tabli in the Vilayat Khani sitar is slightly thicker compared to the Ravi Shankar style of sitar. The curvature of the frets, the thickness of the tabli, the strings and also the bridge and how the jawari is done on the bridge all these factors provide a unique quality to the tone and the timber of each type of sitar.

And they have been made specially to execute the special style of playing, whether it is the Ravi Shankar style of playing or Ustad Vilayat Khan's style of playing. The sitar is played sitting in the Ardha-Gomukhasan and it is played with the help of a metallic plectrum or the mizrab, which is worn on the right index finger. I am wearing it here as you can see [Music]. The individual notes in a sitar are produced by pressing the string on the fret, on the requisite fret and striking the string with the mizrab [Music] like this [Music].

Another thing that I would like to tell you about the frets of the sitar is that there are about 19 to 21 frets in a sitar, these frets are movable. So, if there is a raag which uses the Komal swaras Re, Ga, Dha or Ni the frets of those notes can be moved and adjusted in order to produce the Komal swaras.

I will show you how. I will move the fret of the Rishabh upwards in order to make it [Music] Komal Rishabh. And similarly, the fret of Dhaivat can be moved upwards, closer to the fret of Pancham so that Komal Dhaivat can be played on it. Similarly, the taar Saptak Rishabh fret can be moved upwards to play the taar Saptak Komal Rishabh.

The Gandhar, Shuddha Gandhar fret in the taar Saptak can also be moved upwards to play Komal Gandhar in the taar Saptak and the Madhyam, the Shuddha Madhyam fret can be moved downwards in order to play the Tivra Madhyam [Music]. The sound can be produced on the sitar, with inwards [Music] and outwards movements [Music] of the mizrab.

The inward [Music] movement is called Da [Music] and the outward movement is called [Music] Ra. So, these are the two main strokes or the bols of sitar and various combinations and tempos of these two main bols produce different kinds of bol patterns, which are used in sitar playing [Music].

So, this way I have played Komal Rishabh. When I move the fret back to its original position, I get Shuddha Re [Music]. Similarly, if I want to play the scale of Kalyan, [Music] I have a fret for Tivra Madhyam as well as Shuddha Madhyam here. So, I do not need to move the frets in the Madhya Saptak; however, in the taar Saptak I can move the fret downwards and play Tivra Madhyam [Music].

I will now talk about... talk a little about the ornamentations, the techniques which are used in sitar playing. We have a variety of techniques which beautify the sitar playing and which help us to execute the various nuances of a raag.

So, I will tell you a little about the techniques. We have the Krintan, we have the zamzama, khatka, murki, meend, gamak and so on. These are the various ornamental techniques which we use in the course of playing [Music]. I will tell you one by one every technique, [Music] this is the Krintan [Music]. So, a Krintan is of different kinds, [Music] 2 swaras, [Music] 3 swaras, [Music] 4 swaras, [Music] [Music].

Very similar to this, but still different is the zamzama technique [Music]. Apart from this, we have the khatka [Music], the ghasit [Music], the murki [Music] and then we have the meend which is one of the most important techniques. Because it helps us get closer to gayaki to execute elements of gayaki on sitar, because it helps us to move away from staccato notes and play continuous flowing notes.

So, here we can pull different notes from one fret, by pulling the string [Music]. So, how we sing you know whatever sounds we in the course of singing or when there is a vocal rendition - the continuity of the swaras can be achieved on the sitar with the help of the meend. Apart from this [Music], there is another technique which is called the gamak, which is an oscillation of the notes by pulling the string [Music]. Shaking the note, making round movements with the note, [Music] this is the gamak.

So, a combination of all of these techniques is applied when a raag is played. I shall now demonstrate a few exercises which can be played during riyaz (practice) and they can help improve the clarity of the stroke and also enhance the speed. So, the first exercise is to do the Murchana Alankar, it can first be played on the main string or the baaj ka taar starting from Pa in the Mandra Saptak [Music] [Music]. So, this can go on and later it can be started from the jodi which is the Mandra Sa [Music].

So, one has to be careful that the Dha and the Ra have equal emphasis. And one can even practise these exercises only with Dha to start with and only with Ra, so that the volume of both the Dha and the Ra strokes becomes equal and uniform [Music]. So, here I played it with Dha first and then only with Ra and then I can continue with Dha and Ra the alternate strokes.

Then like I said these two main bols can be used in different permutations and combinations and different tempos to make different bol patterns of the right hand. And for this also there are specific exercises - dha dira dira dira dha dira dha ra dha ra dira dira dha ra dha ra dha [Music] and so on on every note.

So, here I have taken three notes. I can even play it on a single note, but usually when it is taught to the beginners it is taught using 3 notes. Apart from this, there are other exercises for meend and gamak. For example, for a single swar meend [Music]. So, the student has to find the place of the note which is being pulled on the fret and that may be very tricky in the beginning [Music].

Once the staccato sound is clear and in tune then the meend can be attempted in this manner [Music]. This is a single swar meend which I demonstrated. Similarly, the number of swaras being pulled on a single fret can gradually be increased as more and more advanced training happens.

Then there are exercises for gamak as well [Music] [Music]. So, these are the exercises. They can be played with Tivra Ma also, usually in the beginning they are played with Tivra Ma, here I played with Shuddha Ma [Music]. This is the Tivra Ma [Music] and the reason why it is taught like this is because the distance between Sa Ni Sa Pa Ma Pa is similar and therefore, it is easier for the student to pick these up.

[Music] and this way once the gamak is practised well it can be played on different notes as well [Music]. So, this is how training is done and this is how riyaz is supposed to be done. I shall now talk a little about the format in which a sitar recital usually takes place. The sequence followed is the alaap which is a slow elaboration of the raag, it is not accompanied by any percussion instrument and it is non rhythmic.

And the alaap is then followed by a jor and a jhala which have a rhythm, but again there is no percussion accompaniment there. Thereafter Vilambit Gat or Masitkhani Gat which is a slow tempo composition is played usually set to Teental. And then a fast composition is played which is called the Drut Gat or the Razakhani Gat.

And finally, it is concluded with the jhala which is the last portion of a performance and it employs different combinations, different attractive combinations of the chikari [Music] string, I will just demonstrate this for you here [Music]. So, as you can see I used different permutation combinations of the chikari here. And the performance usually ends with this. Sometimes the thumri ang compositions are also played or a dhun as usually played, a semi classical dhun is also played as a second and the concluding part of a sitar recital.

As regards the compositions I told you about the Masitkhani and the Razakhani Gats, but sometimes the Khayal ang compositions especially in Madhya or Dhruv laya may also be played. And then there are also Gatkari - compositions like the Masitkhani and Razakhani

which predominantly use the mizrab bols, and the arrangement of the bols is such that the the bol patterns are in keeping with the divisions of the taal.

So, this is how the instrumental compositions or the gatkari ang is played on sitar, that is how it is executed. I will play a small piece in raag Hamsadhvani, where I will play a very short Alaap and jor just to give you an idea. And I will also play a Chota Khayal, a Bandish, a very famous Bandish in raag Hamsadhvani, laagi lagan pati sakhi sangh. Thereafter I shall play an instrumental composition which was composed by my Guruji, Late Pandit Uma Shankar Mishra ji. So, raag Hamsadhvani [Music].

[Music] I hope that you had some useful takeaways from this lecture [Music] and I hope that we will help to enhance your knowledge and understanding of the sitar [Music]

Thank you, Namaskar [Music].