Music and Dance of North India

Some Terms & Concepts:

1. Nada Brahma
2. Raga
3. Rasa
4. Tala
5. Musical instruments - characteristics & techniques
6. Three musical styles
7. Three sections - form of music
8. Three elements in classical dance
9. Kathak dance

History:

The Moghul line of emperors, originally from Mongolia, ruled most of India and surrounding regions for over two hundred years starting in the 16th century. Hindustani music, the North Indian tradition, has been traced back over 400 years to a musician named Miyan Tansen (1506-1595) in the Moghul court of the Emperor Akbar, a great patron of the arts. Tansen was considered a great singer. A contemporary wrote “There has not been such a musician in the past thousand years; neither will there be another”. The Hindustani music tradition today encompasses North India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, part of Sri Lanka, and to some extent Nepal and Afghanistan.

During the 15th century the influence of a Persian ruler introduced Persian romanticism into North Indian music, marking the beginning of its diverging from the Karnatak (also Carnatic) music tradition of South India. Around 1600 Locanakavi wrote “Raga Tarangini”, a treatise describing the principles of ragas and scales, helping to establish this distinct North Indian music style. (Understand that the subcontinent of India would not be recognized as one entity until the 19th century. The terms North and South India are used for a contemporary perspective.)

Although the Moghul emperors were all Muslims, Akbar married Hindu princesses, thereby changing the lineage of all future emperors. But by the early 18th century the Emperor Aurangzeb (1658-1707) had rejected Hinduism and destroyed hundreds of temples. As a Muslim he discouraged music in his court. An exodus of musicians to patrons at lesser provincial courts began. Because these musicians were essentially professional entertainers, they held a low social status. The Moghul court lost power with the beginning of British rule in 1765.

Prior to India’s independence from the British Commonwealth in 1947, the nucleus of musical study and performance remained in the courts of the upper class (not rulers at this time) who would serve as patrons. The British colonists
found Indian music incomprehensible and the Indians thought little of European music. The result was that Indian music continued to developed unaffected by British presence.

Today the classical music of India is much more accessible to all. Around 1935 the government established academies which have since compiled archives of music and dance, libraries for reference, and offer seminars and performances as well as awards and fellowships in the arts.

Music:

_Nada Brahma_, Brahma being the creator deity, is a term meaning “the creator manifested as cosmic sound”. In ancient days Indian musicians had the responsibility to convert cosmic sound preserved in the ragas into audible music, thereby conveying the presence of the divine through music.

Classical art music of India has similarities to our European-rooted tradition:

1. It appeals to and is patronized by a small, educated segment of the population.
2. It is founded on a long-standing theoretical system.
3. It has a formal system of study.
4. It is disseminated through public concerts.

There are also significant differences:

1. Pieces may be entirely composed or mix pre-composition with improvised material.
2. There are different kinds of improvisation that occur at specific points in a piece
3. A performer’s skill is measured by the ability to improvise in free rhythm.

Improvisation is largely reproducing what has been passed down from a teacher and worked out beforehand. In reality, both composed and improvised passages vary from performance to performance.

**Timbre:** (voice and instruments)

Indian melodic instruments are designed to imitate aspects of the human voice, which is regarded as the basis of the musical arts. Plucked, bowed or blown melody instruments emulate the pitch range, volume and timbre of Indian classical singing. The traditional setting of classical music has been in an intimate setting with a relatively small audience from the upper class. Singers did not sing loudly, used subtle pitch changes and ornamentations, grace notes, and an individualistic vocal timbre which emphasized the emotion of the sung text.
The modern day use of concert halls is accommodated through the use of microphones, thus allowing the intimate style of singing and playing to remain.

**Instruments:**

The *sitar* is a lute with frets. It has a wide bridge which adds a buzzing element to the sound of the vibrating strings. The sitar has no sound hole. Instead it has a gourd resonator at its base, a resonant hollow wooden neck, and sometimes a second gourd near the top of the neck, which is mostly for decoration. Along the neck are twenty metal frets which are adjustable to facilitate tuning the pitches of different ragas.

Most sitars have four melody strings. These can be pulled (stretched) to achieve different notes in the range of a fifth from one fret position. There are also three strings called jhala strings which are strummed rhythmically, not plucked for melody notes. Lastly there are 9-13 sympathetic strings below the played strings which vibrate as a result of the plucked notes. Occasionally these strings might be strummed with the little finger.

Named after its Persian ancestor, the sitar evolved into its present design around 1895.

The *sarod* is also a lute-type instrument with drone strings that sympathetically vibrate. Carved from a single piece of teak wood, it has a fretless metal fingerboard, and a stretched goatskin head beneath its bridge. It is named Sarod-Dhayak-Vina in Sanskrit and was known as the sarood in the early 16th century, meaning "melody" in the Persian language. The sarod evolved from the Hindustani rabab and the Afghani folk rabab.

The modern instrument was established around 1900 and has twenty five strings, including four melody strings, two rhythm strings tuned to the tonic note at the top octave, four drone strings tuned a 5th away, and 15 sympathetic strings which are tuned to the notes of the raga. It is played with a plectrum called a java, made from a coconut shell.

The *tanpura* (also called tambura when small sized) is a lute, having no sympathetic strings or frets. The 4-6 strings are tuned to the two most important notes and are gently plucked in sequence to provide the drone for supporting the melody. This pattern might be I, V (upper), V (upper), V (lower). The tanpura has a wooden neck and a gourd body. A piece of quill or silk might be placed between the strings and the bridge to provide desirable buzzing and overtones.

All of the stringed instruments mentioned above are tuned to the pitches of the particular raga (more on raga below) to be played, not a standard pitch for each string, like in Western instrument tuning. The violin, used primarily in south India,
is tuned to pitches and intervals that are different from the Western standard tuning.

The tabla are a pair of drums. The high one is called the dahina and consists of a tapered wooden cylinder. It is tuned precisely to the keynote of the raga. The low one is called the bayan and is made of copper and shaped like a kettle drum. Its indefinite bass pitch can be made to imitate speech modulations by applying pressure with the heel of the hand (compares to African talking drum).

For tabla playing, syllables that correspond to various strokes are learned and recited first, then played on the drum. Each mnemonic (called a “bol”) indicates both rhythmic duration and tone color of the stroke.

Other instruments: santur – hammered dulcimer/zither; sarangi – bowed lute; harmonium – reed organ with pumped bellows; shahnai – a Muslim wind instrument with double reed; bansri – flute; jaltarang – set of bowls tuned by adding water; pakhavaj – double headed drum.

Melody:

Sangit is a term whose original meaning encompassed instrumental music, singing, drama and dance. The classical music of India is properly called “raga sangit”, meaning music which conforms to the conventions of the Indian ragas. The Sanskrit word raga means “passion” or “feeling”. Musically speaking, a raga is the material from which a melody comes. It is not simply a scale; it has a specified order of pitches with an ascending pattern (aroha) and a descending pattern (avaroha). It also has two particular scale degrees which are emphasized, known as vadi and samvadi. There is no fail-safe rule by which vadi can be identified. Vadi is the pitch of greatest melodic importance, where melodic lines usually end. But it is rarely the actual tonic note of the “scale”. Samvadi is the secondary tonal center, a perfect fourth or fifth away from vadi (like tonic and dominant in Western music).

There is a typical time of day and season of the year designated for the performance of each raga. There is also a sentiment or character that musicians agree upon, some non-musical idea with which each raga is connected. This is known as a rasa.

There are 9 ancient rasas (200 AD or older) representing sentiments or moods:

1. Sringara (love)
2. Hasya (amusement)
3. Karuna (compassion)
4. Raudra (anger)
5. Vira (heroics)
6. Bhayanaka (fear)
7. Vibhatsa (disgust)
8. Adbhuta (awe)
9. Santa (peace)

Originally these pertained to dance and drama. Today there are no ragas representing anger, fear or disgust in music. Rasas are described using terms like devotion, peace, romance, tenderness, valor, playfulness, and compassion, which are represented in ragas. This music is considered to have the ability to convey thoughts, feelings, moods, and images. Indians value the relationship of their music to nature, to religious and philosophical beliefs, and to temporal elements: the stages of life, seasons of the year, or times of day. The goal of Indian music is to create a climate of feeling which acts on the listener.

Theoretically there are thousands of ragas. In practice, North Indian music has approximately 200 ragas.

For 300-400 years the structure of the scale used in North India has been the same as our major scale. A flat 2nd, 3rd, 6th, 7th &/or sharp 4th are possible alterations. Pitches 1 and 5 are never altered. A Raga can contain both an altered pitch and the “normal” one, they just don’t come next to each other. Altering a pitch can be accomplished by playing a microtone, a pitch in between the notes on a piano. Ancient treatises on Indian music divided the octave into 22 intervals called srutis (microtones). The term “sruti” (also “shruti”) is used to indicate that a particular pitch of a raga should be sung or played a little higher or lower.

Ornamentation of the melody, by sliding between pitches or approaching from a pitch a microtone away, is important for adding interest since no harmony is used in Indian music.

Sargam is a solfege system that is over 2500 years old. The name comes from the first four syllables of the scale - sa re ga ma pa dha ni sa. The syllables can be compared to the European system which is about 300 years old (do re mi fa sol la ti do).

Rhythm:

Tala is a repeating cycle of beats called matras that is divided into shorter sections called vibhags (also avarta). For example: a 16-beat tala can be divided 4+4+4+4, or a 14-beat tala can be divided 5+2+3+4, or a 10-beat tala divided 2+3+3+2. Talas were derived from poetry and song words. The use of cycles in music is representative of the cycles of life and the universe, including birth, death and rebirth, and creation, dissolution and recreation.

The tala can be kept by clapping on beat one and tapping one’s fingers for the remaining three counts in a section, starting with the pinky. The middle beat (9 of
16) is indicated with a wave (the opposite of a clap). The musicians always complete the cycle by returning to sam. A singer will usually keep tala for the ensemble during a performance. This is especially important because of complex improvisations.

Teka – a beat
Sam (sum) - the first beat of a tala cycle
Khali – the midpoint of a tala cycle (means “empty”)
Edippu - where the song begins, not necessarily on beat 1

Approximately 30 talas are in use today. The most common tala in North India is teental (also tintal), a 16-beat cycle divided into 4’s.

Style and Form:

There are three primary styles (genres) of music in North India:

1. **Dhrupad** – for singing; the oldest genre; reflective and subdued in nature.

2. **Thumri** – a “semi-classical” genre for singers and instrumentalists; free, romantic, sensual; developed in the 19th century; used in Kathak dancing.

3. **Khyal** – vocal or instrumental; most popular today; requires technical virtuosity; usually includes an exchange between soloist and tabla player (called Sawal-Jawab).

All three styles will usually include three sections in the form of a piece:

1. **Alap** – the opening section where the raga is sung or played (explored) without a regular pulse. The tabla player is silent.

2. **Jor** – a section with pulsed improvisation. The tabla player enters and the tala cycle begins. There is less pre-composed material and more improvisation. The tempo and rhythmic density increase.

3. **Jhala** – A section exhibiting a second type of pulsed improvisation, with a sudden increase in strumming of non-melody strings producing rhythmic patterns.

(In contradiction to other sources, Ravi Shankar states that the tabla enter after the Jor section, at the beginning of the gat. A gat is a “skeletal melody”, a fixed composition, which is the same length as the tala. The gat is the basis for the improvisation to follow. There might be more than one gat played, e.g., one slow and one fast. Then the Jhala section follows the gat.)
Harmony:

Harmony, in the sense of hearing pitches blending to form chords, is not a part of Indian classical music. However, a drone is sounded on an accompanying instrument which helps to establish the main notes of the raga (compare to bagpipes). This drone emphasizes the primary note (sa) of the raga being played, and a secondary note (ma or pa).

Classical Dance:

Classical dance forms, though derived from folk dances, are more stylized and typically involve highly trained professionals performing for an audience. Hindu and Muslim cultures traditionally not only separate men and women in dance, but prohibit women from dancing in the presence of men. Men commonly play female roles in dance dramas. Cross-dressers can add a comic element to dance performance through their flamboyance.

There are three basic elements in Indian classical dance:

1. Nritta – pure dance - abstract movements of limbs of the body to music
2. Natya – drama – acting out stories from the great epics
3. Nritya – mime - conveying mood and sentiment through facial expressions, hand gestures, sung poetry, costume, jewelry, etc.

Kathak is the primary classical dance style of North India. Originating in the temples, it evolved into a pantomime to accompany storytellers in the courts of Hindu and Muslim rulers. Movements can mime events from the life of the divine Krishna, including love-play which is seen as a metaphor for the uniting of the human soul with its supreme source. Gestures can express devotion.

Today Kathak still has a place in religious festivals, but it is the government and the elite in society who provide patronage for Kathak.

A Kathak performance today consists of three main sections: the invocation, the pure dance recital, and at least one expressive dance. During the invocation the dancer invokes the Hindu gods through hand gestures and facial expressions, or a variation of this would involve a salutation if in a Muslim setting. The pure dance that follows involves great technical virtuosity, stressing footwork and turns. Sets of 100 small bells are worn on the ankles. A rhythmic exchange with the drummer is often included in the pure dance section. The closing expressive dance is typically about Krishna themes and involves storytelling gestures, sweeping turns, and natural facial expressions depicting emotions.
Questions for Discussion:

A British teenager, whose parents were born in North India, wants to learn to play the music her late grandfather played on the sarod. What is involved? How might she proceed? What will she need to learn?