India

The Music of India

Candidates should be taught to identify the sounds of the *tānpurā*/*tambourā*, instruments from the North Indian Hinudstani tradition (*sitar*, *sarod*, *sarangi*, *bansuri* and *tablā*) and the South Indian Karnatak tradition (*venu*, *veena*, *violin*, *mridangam* and *ghatam*). Where instruments have a very similar sound (e.g. *bansuri*/*venu*) candidates will not be expected to differentiate between them aurally (but should understand the context they each belong to). They should understand the terms *sargam*, *rāg*/*rāga* and *tāl*/*tāla* but will not be expected to identify any specific scale/mode or time cycle. They should understand and be able to identify the structural sections of a typical *rāg* (e.g. *ālāp – jor – gat – jhālā*). The extract used in the examination will be identified as coming from either the Hindustani or the Karnatak tradition; candidates will not be expected to differentiate this for themselves. Candidates will not be assessed on spelling, providing the meaning of their answers is clear.

1. Background

India is a huge country with diverse languages and sub-cultures; its musical tradition is thus also very varied, having folk and classical types. Folk music of India includes a variety of song forms and dances that are closely linked to social contexts such as work, weddings, festive occasions and rituals. The classical music tradition is one that was formerly patronized by the court and the upper classes but is today performed in towns and cities throughout the country. By the sixteenth century, two main systems of classical music had developed–Hindustānī in the northern part of the country and Karnatak in the south, both share some general characteristics but each also diversifying in many ways.

In India, music and religion are also closely related. The oldest and dominant religion in India is Hinduism, but Islam, Christianity, Jainism, Sikhism, Buddhism and various syncretic folk religions are also found. No matter what faith and whether folk or classical traditions, musicians in India think of music's origin as a divine manifestation and a gift from God; music is respected as *Nād Brahmā* – 'sound as god'.

In the twentieth century, Hindi film song has become the most prevalent of pop music in India. Virtually all Bollywood movies have song and dance. Themes of love and romance dominate in Hindi film songs, and the music is a syncretic mix of the East and West with global musical styles and electronic instruments accompanying melodies using Indian scales and modes.

2. Instruments

Drone instruments

The sound of a drone in the background of any ensemble performance is an intrinsic aspect of Indian classical music. It is central to the texture of the music. The drone instrument is a four-string lute known as the *tānpurā* or *tambourā*. It has a long, unfretted neck and the strings are tuned to the tonic and dominant of the *rāg*. In performance, the *tānpurā* player sits behind the soloist and strums the strings in a free manner. The sound of the drone has two important functions: firstly, it helps to create ambience and mood to the music and secondly, the sounding of the tonic (*sa*) string helps the instrumentalist to stay in tune. In more recent times, a small electronic *sruti box* is also commonly used in place of a *tānpurā*.

Melody instruments

Since ancient times, song has been an important part of classical music in India. From the sixteenth through to the nineteenth centuries, instrumental traditions have also risen in importance. In Hindustani music the *sitar*, *sarod* and the *sarangi* are the most commonly found solo instruments; transverse bamboo or reed flutes can also be found in North and South India. In the Karnatak tradition, solo instruments include the *veena* and the Karnatak violin.

The *sitar*

In the twentieth century the sitar and its most famous player Ravi Shankar have become a musical icon of Hindustani classical music partly through interests shown by the 1960s pop group The Beatles.[1] Western interests have also aided its rise in position as an image of culture and cultivation among the rising middle-class in India in modern times.

Sitar comes in all sizes. It has a long neck with curved metal frets that are moveable and a main resonator made of gourd. It has a varying number of strings but 17 is usual, with three to four playing strings, three to four drone/rhythm strings (*chikari*) and the rest are sympathetic strings. The playing and drone strings are plucked with a wire finger plectrum known as *mizrab*, while the sympathetic strings are almost never played but they vibrate whenever the corresponding note is sounded.

The *sarod*

Another instrument that has held an esteemed position in Hindustani classical music is the *sarod*. Adapted from the *rabab* of Afghanistan, the sarod has a wooden body covered with goatskin and a broad neck that has a fretless fingerboard covered in a smooth metal sheet upon which the player slides the fingernails of his left hand while the right hand plucks the strings with a plectrum. The modern sarod has four to five main playing strings, four fixed drone strings and approximately 15 sympathetic strings. By the 19th century, it had become one of the most important concert instruments in Hindustani music and is now often accompanied by the tabla and the *tambourā*.[2]

The *sarangi*

A *sarangi* is an unfretted, bowed instrument with three to four main playing strings (one being a drone string) and up to 35 to 40 sympathetic strings. Unlike the sitar and the *sarod*, the *sarangi* is a folk instrument. It also accompanies the voice. Because of such associations, the *sarangi* has been thought of as an instrument of a lower class, with the result being that it now struggles for its existence.[3]

Transverse flutes

The *bansuri* is a transverse flute with six holes made from bamboo, reeds or canes. It is used in the North Indian system. It was previously associated with only folk music but in recent years it has found its way into classical, film music and other genres. As it is keyless, the player must master difficult whole and half-hole fingering techniques to play the microtones and slides.

The South Indian flute used in the Karnatak system is the *venu*. It is made of hollowed-out bamboo and is just under a foot and a half in length. It has a mouth hole and a seven (sometimes eight) finger holes which are burned into the bamboo with a hot metal rod. The instrument has a complex variety of fingering and embouchure techniques.

1 Listen to any track on *Ravi Shankar Music of India* (Box Set 2013).
2 For a video of sarod playing by Ustad Wajahat Khan, see **http://www.wajahatkhan.com/recordings.html**
3 For an example of this instrument, listen to Track 39 in George E Ruckert *Music in North India*. Oxford University Press, 2004.

The *Veena* (or *Vīṇā*)

The *Veena* is a plucked string instrument having an ancient recorded history dating back to approximately 1500 BCE. It is the most prominent classical instrument of South India. It is about four feet in length with a large resonator carved out of jackwood, a tapering hollow neck with 24 bell-metal or brass frets and a tuning box. It has four main playing strings, three subsidiary drone strings. The instrument is held tilted slightly away from the player who sits cross-legged with the small gourd on the left resting on the player's left thigh; the left arm passes beneath the neck to reach the frets. The right hand index and middle fingers pluck the strings while the drone strings are played with the little finger.

The *violin*

The Karnatak violin is essentially the same as that of a Western violin, which was introduced by the British to India in the 19th century. It has since become a popular instrument to vocal accompaniment and as a solo instrument as well. However, there are differences in the Indian violin: firstly, the strings of the instruments are tuned as octave pairs, usually on the tonic and dominant, but the tonic note is not fixed but is variably tuned to accommodate the vocalist or the lead player. Secondly, the Indian violin is held differently from the Western violin. The player sits cross-legged on the floor and props the instrument between the shoulder and the foot so that the scroll of the instrument can be stabilized, leaving the left hand to move all over the fingerboard.

Percussion instruments

Tablā

The *tablā* is the most important drum used in Hindustani classical music. It is actually a paired set, comprising a smaller right-hand drum – the *tablā* and the bigger left hand drum - the *bāyā.* The *tablā* player has the important role of keeping the time cycle (*tālā*) in Hindustani music. It is also capable of playing complicated cross rhythms. Players learn rhythmic patterns by reciting drum syllables known as *bols*.

Mridangam

The *mridangam* is the primary drum used in Karnatak music. It is a double-headed membranophone that accompanies the South Indian vocal *kriti*. In contrast to the crisp sounds of the *tablā*, the *mridangam* has a low, woody tone. It is made out of a hollowed-out piece of jackwood about sixty centimeters long, with the heads covered with animal hide. The right head has a round black spot in its centre for tuning to the tonic pitch of the soloist. But the left head is not tuned. Like the *tablā*, players learn how to drum using a system of mnemonic syllables.

Ghatam

The *ghatam* is another percussion instrument commonly found in South Indian music. It is literally an up-turned claypot which is tuned. Players place the pot on the lap and hit the mouth of the pot using their fingers, thumbs, palms and heels of the hands to produce different timbre.

3. Musical Features

Scale/mode

Like as in Western music, the Indian scale is also heptatonic, having 7 basic pitches. The names of the 7 pitches are identified by these syllables, known as the *sargam*:

Sa ri ga ma pa dha ni sa

Just as notes in a Western scale can be made sharp or flat or natural, pitches in the Indian scale can also be altered, although the exceptions are the notes *sa* (tonic) and *pa* (dominant), which would never be altered as they are thought to be 'pure' (*shudh*). Similar to the concept of the moveable solfege system, the *sa* first

degree is relative and can begin anywhere; usually the vocalist or instrumentalist decides what pitch to start the *sa*. The notes *ri*, *ga*, *dha* and *ni* are flattened (*komal*) and the note *ma* can be sharpened, producing *tivra ma*. In Indian music theory, an octave of 7 tones can be further divided into a total to 22 microtonal steps (*shrutis*).

With these tones, a *rāg* (or *rāga*) can be constructed. The basis of Indian music is the *rāg*. It is a scale having 5 notes or more in ascending and descending format, but it is also more than a scale as a *rāg* comprises recurring motivic melodic movements and strong tonal centres. Moreover, *rāgas* have extra-musical associations such as moods, time of day or season of the year.

Both northern and southern India music use *rāgas* as their melodic basis. Hindustani music, however, favours improvisations based on a *rāg*, while Karnatak musical style has a huge repertoire of precomposed songs or compositions (*kriti*).

Time cycle

The concept of time in Indian music is *tāl* or *tāla*, in which cycles of beats (*mātrās*) are divided into groups of short and long sections (*vibhāgs*). Hand gestures, such as claps, wave of the hand help to mark the division of the cycle but drum syllables, known as *thekas*, are also used to identify metrical patterns. The drum syllables in *thekas*, which are called *bols*, are onomatopoeia words that imitate the sounds of different strokes on the drum.

E.g. 1 Division of the Hindustani 16-beat (4 + 4 + 4 + 4) *tīntāl*

Clap					clap					wave					clap					clap	
1	2	3	4	|	5	6	7	8	|	9	10	11	12	|	13	14	15	16	|	1	etc.

E.g. 2 The *theka* for *tīntāl*

+ (Clap)					2 (clap)					0 (wave)					3 (clap)					+	
1	2	3	4	|	5	6	7	8	|	9	10	11	12	|	13	14	15	16	|	1	etc.
dha	dha	dhin	dha		dha	dhin	dhin	dha		dha	tin	tin	ta		ta	dhin	dhin	dha		dha	

The 16-beat *tīntāl* is the most common *tāla*, having a division of four groups of four beats marked by three claps and a wave (*khāli*, meaning empty beat); the first beat (called the *sam*) is the most important in all metrical cycles. Soloists must have a good knowledge of the structure of the different *tālas* so as to be able to come in on the first beat with the drummer.

E.g. 3 The 8-beat (4 + 2 + 2) *Adi tāla*, in Karnatak music

Clap					clap	wave	clap	wave			
1	2	3	4	|	5	6	7	8	|	1	etc.

In both Hindustani and Karnatak music systems, a fairly large number of *tālas* exist, but today, usually only a handful of these are used.

Laya is the term referring to the speed or tempo in which the *tāla*, is set, with *vilambit* being slow, *madhya* medium and *drut* fast.

4. Formal structure

In Indian classical music performance, two aspects are always present: composition and improvisation. The central feature of a rag performance is a fixed composition, called *bandish* in a sung form or *gat* in an instrumental performance in the Hindustani system and the *kriti* in the South Indian tradition. But before the composition is played, the performance begins with a slow, freely improvised and unmetred section known as the *ālāp*. This section is accompanied only by the tamboura drone instrument, the purpose of which is to allow the soloist to define and explore the notes of the *rāg*. As the playing becomes more rhythmic and a pulse is felt (although there is still no fixed metre), the *jor* section is introduced.

At the entry of the drum introducing the *tāla* metrical cycle, the fixed composition (*bandish* or *gat*) begins. At this point, the soloist elaborates the composition with ornamentations, melodic expansions and improvisation. The *tablā* or *mridangam* player keeps the time cycle going but will, now and again, also improvise virtuosic rhythmic patterns as a display of their skills. As the performance progresses, the playing speeds up, climaxing with the repeated striking of the drone (chikari) strings in between other pitches. This *jhālā* section concludes the performance. At times in the *ālāp* section, the *jhālā* may also be heard after the jor; when played in this section, rhythmic density and the interplay between melody and high-pitched drone strings becomes the centre of attention although this is still unmetred.

5. Context

Transmission of music

The peak of art music in India culminated with the reign of the Mughal emperor Akbar the Great (1556–1605), under whose patronage music and its artists flourished. However, with the demise of the old feudal system and courts and a new order in society, the life of court musicians began to change radically. With the loss of courtly patronage, musicians found that they had to strive for their own livelihood in the new economic environment.

Indian classical music is transmitted via the *guru-shishya* (teacher-disciple) system. In the old days, a pupil learned from only one *guru* and the relationship of a teacher-disciple was one of utter commitment on both sides: the pupil lived with the *guru* and took on the chores of the teacher's household, and equally the *guru* devoted much time on teaching and nurturing the pupil. Transmission was through oral and aural repetition and practice. The *guru's* repertoire and style were highly guarded treasures within the teaching lineage. It was under these contexts that the *gharana* (*ghar* meaning 'house') guild system was established.

By the end of the 19th century, the *gharana* system was highly established and many powerful *gharanas* had links to aristocratic patronage of the old days or were known by a founding *guru* or specific places.

In modern times, *gharanas* still exist but the old traditions of guru-shishya system is no longer as strong.

Performance contexts

Music is an important part of life in India; many forms of music from religious songs and chants to Hindi film song can be heard in temples, shops, households and on public transport. In the past, classical music was heard only in courts and temples, but from the 20th century, classical music was heard in many places, especially urban centers and cities such as Mumbai, Delhi, Varanasi and Kolkata. With the decline of the court by the end of the 19th century, the rising urban middle class became the patron of classical music.

Up to the middle of the 20th century, semi-private performances in people's houses (especially the teachers' houses) were still fairly common. These performances tended to be quite informal, with the audience sitting on the floor in close range to the performers. Performances could go on all night, with performers taking time to explore the *rāga* and introduce lengthy improvisations to an audience who were knowledgeable. With social change throughout India in modern times, however, performances of classical

music began to take place in auditoriums and concert halls, on television and radio. These brought new changes to classical performances: larger venues led to sound amplification, performers now perform on stage, concerts are shortened as performances start and end at fixed times, and modern audiences may not be as attuned as before.