

Below the main strings of the *sitar*, and passing beneath the curved metal frets, are a large number of "sympathetic" strings that vibrate involuntarily when the main strings are played



ALAP

The opening section of a *raga* performance in which the performer "explores" the *raga*.

JOR

A regularizing of the beat in the opening section of *raga* performance in Indian classical music.

JHALA

Refers to a set of drone strings on Indian chordophones. Also, a reference to the climactic end of the *alap* section of *raga* performance in India.

TABLA

A pair of drums found in Hindustani music from India.

The first portion of a *raga* is called the **alap** and could be described as a period of exploration of the *raga* and its characteristics. The principal melodic player begins with the lower pitches, approaching them in a leisurely and experimental manner; there is no regular beat because the melody is played in free rhythm. Consequently, the drum, which is primarily responsible for the rhythmic element of a *raga* performance, is not heard during this opening section.

An *alap* can last for a mere minute or so, or be extended to an hour or more, depending on the taste of the performer and the interest of the audience. As the *alap* progresses, the player explores more pitches and melodic units, moving from the lower range of the instrument—representing relaxation or repose—into the higher ranges, which increases tension. Gradually the rhythms become somewhat steadier, though they never become totally metered; the term **jor** refers to this tenuous regularizing of beat. As the tempo and excitement increase (along with the tension), the player begins a regular alternation between melodic pitches and a set of drone strings called the **jhala**. Just as the playing reaches a feverish level of excitement, the "drive" suddenly slows as the player quickly descends through the scale back to the point of relaxation and the *alap* concludes.

At this point a pair of drums enters. These consist of a small cylindrical wooden drum with a single head called *tabla* and a larger, rounded metal drum with single head known as *baya*; together, the pair is also called **tabla**. Most players strike the smaller drum with the right hand and the larger with the left. The *tabla* (i.e., the smaller of the pair) is tuned to the *raga*'s fundamental pitch by tightening or loosening leather straps attached to the face; their tension is controlled by moving cylindrically shaped pieces of wood wedged between



Tabla refers to both the pair of Hindustani drums and to the cylindrical drum (below) in particular, while the kettle drum (above) is called *baya*

TALA

Cyclic rhythmic framework that organizes a *raga* performance in India.

BOLS

Mnemonic syllables corresponding to drum strokes in Indian drumming traditions.

THEKA

(pronounced *teh-kah*) The entire pattern or set of words (*bols*) for a given *tala* in classical Indian music.

GAT

The skeletal melody used as a basis for improvisation in a *raga* performance of classical Indian instrumental music.

Schematic of the North Indian *tala* in a sixteen-beat cycle called *tintal*.

the straps and the body of the drum. Each drum stroke has a name, and drummers memorize the stroke names as part of the learning process. Indeed, most drummers can *speak* the strokes, in a kind of “verbal drumming”—and many listeners are able to keep track of the cycle of strokes through patterns of handclaps and waves (see below).

The drummer plays a cycle of strokes called the *tala*. A *tala* is considered a closed cycle, because it has a fixed number of beats; these are subdivided into three or four sections. In Hindustani music there are hundreds of possible *talas*, each with its own name and specific number of beats, theoretically ranging from 3 to 128. In practice far fewer are used, and *talas* using seven to sixteen beats predominate. Of these, the best known and most often encountered is *tintal*, a *tala* having sixteen beats divided into four groupings of four pulses each. While *talas* are played beginning on beat 1, they do not end on the last beat, that is, 16, but rather end on beat 1 of what would have been the next cycle. The audience can hear where they are in the cycle by listening for the deep tones of the *baya* drum; in *tintal*, the *baya* either drops out or is played quietly during the third group (beats 9–12), allowing listeners to anticipate the restatement of beat 1.

Each drum stroke—whether played on a single drum or on a combination of drums—has a name, such as *dha*. Totally there are more than a dozen named strokes, some involving one drum, some both, some closed, that is, dampened (the fingers stay on the head, deadening the tone), some open (the fingers spring away allowing the head to vibrate). Drum stroke names are called *bols*. The entire pattern or set of words for a given *tala* is called the *theka*. The most basic *theka* for *tintal* is: *dha, dhin, dhin, dha/ dha, dhin, dhin, dha/ dha, tin, tin, ta/ ta, dhin, dhin, dha*. *Talas* can be recited in syllables as well. Skilled drummers play patterns that go far beyond this basic set, including a great many elaborate “compositions,” each based on the *tala*’s cycle of beats.

During the *tabla*’s performance, disciples and audience members may “keep the *tala*” in a pattern involving claps, counts, and waves. As mentioned, *tintal* has four sections with four beats each. For sections 1, 2, and 4, you clap on beat 1 and silently count beats 2, 3, and 4. In section 3, you turn one hand over, giving a mini-wave (instead of clap) and then silently count the remaining three beats. When silently counting, you can either touch your right hand to the left or touch your thumb to three successive fingers.

When the drum enters, it often starts in the middle of the *tala* cycle (beats 9–16), but exceptions occur frequently. In our example, the *gat* begins on beat 1 and the drum enters on beat 11. The *sitar* or *sarod*, now relaxed and calm, plays a short composition—a kind of tune—called the *gat* (in vocal music this is called *chiz*). The *gat* is the skeletal melody around which the player will improvise. When improvising, the player may fragment the *gat*, restate

a) DHA DHIN DHIN DHA DHA DHIN DHIN DHA

X 2

DHA TIN TIN TA TA DHIN DHIN DHA

o 3

it in whole, or depart from it entirely. Some longer *raga* performances have more than one *gat*, perhaps a slow *gat* (*vilambit*) first that is longer in duration, a medium *gat* (*madhya*), then a fast *gat* (*drut*) that takes the shortest time to complete. The rhythmic density of the slow *gat* is the lowest, whereas the fast *gat* has the highest rhythmic density, contributing to the increasing tension of the music. The name of the *raga* remains the same regardless of the *gat* chosen, and although the *gat* is a composition, it does not usually have a “title” and the identity of its composer is regarded as insignificant.

The length of the *gat* matches the length of the *tala*; therefore, the use of *tintal* requires a 16-beat *gat*. In a sense, anything can happen during the overall *gat* section, which can last anywhere from a few minutes to an hour. As with the *alap*, the length of the *gat* depends on the audience’s reaction, the performers’ skill level and ability to cooperate or challenge each other in positive ways, and the context of the performance.

The instruments of India are numerous, and quite a few of them can be used as the lead melodic instrument in *ragas*. In the West, the instrument that has become most famous is the *sitar*, which for Westerners is virtually synonymous with Indian music. The *sitar* is a long-necked plucked lute, with a body made from a gourd and with seventeen arched metal frets running up the neck. Over these frets four main melodic strings and three *jhala* (rhythm/drone) strings and beneath them pass around twelve sympathetic strings. *Ragas* can also be performed on many other stringed instruments, such as the *sarod*, the *santur* (hammered zither), or the *sarangi* (bowed lute), as well as on non-stringed instruments such as the *bansri* (flute) and several reed instruments, such as the *shehnai*. Among the most curious of instruments used in *ragas* is the *jal tarang*, a semicircular series of small china bowls each filled/tuned with different levels of water and struck with a small beater. *Ragas* are also sung. Vocal *ragas* are structured according to one of two formal patterns, both of which differ from patterns used in instrumental *ragas*. These patterns, called *Dhrupad* and *Khyal*, both require great endurance on the part of performers. Full appreciation of vocal *ragas* naturally requires knowledge of Indic languages, which is perhaps why instrumental performers tend to be more internationally recognized.

Now that we have run through some of the basic principles and characteristics of the *raga*, we will return to our musical example. It is *Raga ahir bhairav*, a type of *raga* appropriately performed at daybreak. The ascending and descending scale used in this performance consists of the pitches C♭, D♭, E, F, G, A, B♭, c—though in the ascending form the G is often avoided. The *tala* used is a fast *tintal* (16 beats).

Cultural Considerations. If you were to attend a *raga* performance, you would probably be amazed at the musicians’ dexterity, creativity, and stage presence, and at the way that their music can involve an audience. These are some of the aspects that have long made Indian *raga* attractive to Western audiences and to a number of Western popular performers, such as George Harrison and John McLaughlin.

While a *raga* performance may be relatively easy to follow on an aural and visual level, there is, however, much more involved than mere sound and sight. Important extra-musical cultural and philosophical matters come into play as well, encompassing the *raga*’s relationship to, and effect on, both the individual listeners and broadly on the smooth working of the universe.

The extra-musical aspects of *raga*, which may seem merely curious to outsiders, are essential to Indians. Each *raga* has an articulated mood, called *rasa*, which creates in

RASA

A mood or sentiment associated with artistic activity, such as *raga* performance, in India.

LISTENING GUIDE



CD 1.5 (4'38")

Chapter 5: Site 1

India: Hindustani (Instrumental) *Raga*

Instruments: *Sarod* (fretless plucked lute), *tambura* (plucked lute), *tabla* (pair of hand drums)

TIME LISTENING FOCUS

The duration of the initial *alap* section—the exploratory opening section of the overall form—is much shorter than normal in this performance, due to the recording's time limitations. Note the use of free rhythm and the absence of drum during the *alap* section.

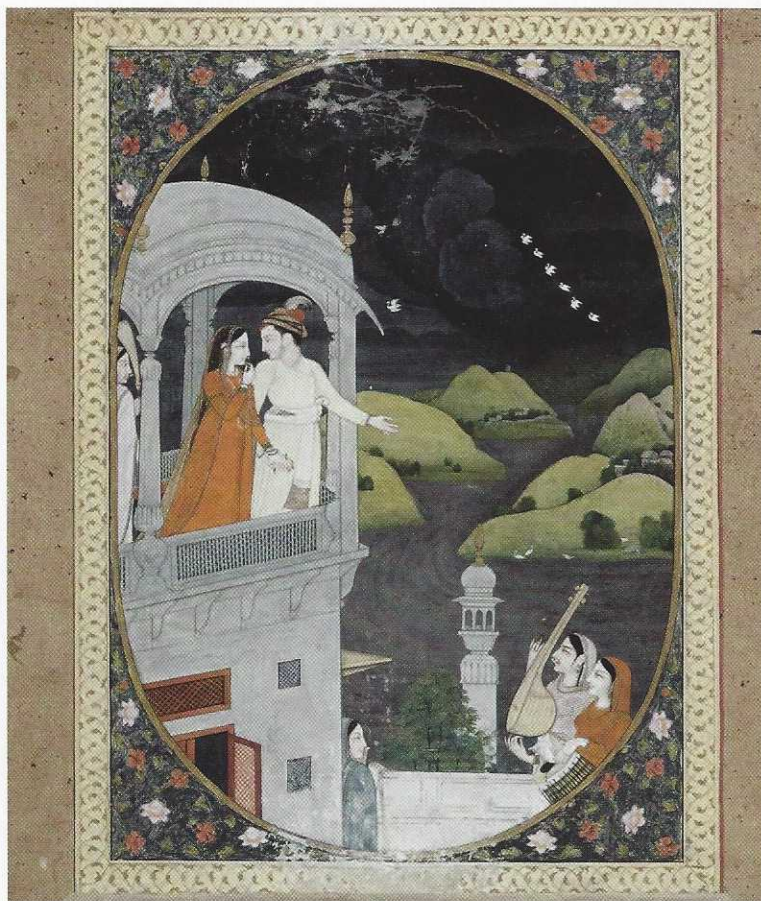
- 0'00"** *Tambura* enters. Plays four pulses before melody begins on *sarod*. Listen for the characteristic "twang" of the *tambura* drone at 0'04", 0'14", 0'18", 0'25", 0'35", etc.
- 0'03"** *Sarod* enters. Note that the melodic pitches that are emphasized begin in the lower range of the instrument and gradually work toward the upper range. Listen for the "sliding" between distant intervals (rather than "bending"), which is characteristic of a fretless chordophone.
- Also listen for the gradual increase in rhythmic density of the melodic content. These two aspects (range and rhythmic density) encourage an increasing feeling of tension in the music, though the shortened *alap* encourages the performer to build the tension continuously into the composed section of the performance.
- 2'10"** The *gat*, or composed section of the overall form, begins. Note the transition into a rhythmic meter and the appearance of the drum (*tabla*). Listen for the characteristic "boing" timbre of the lower-pitched drum (*baya*).
- 2'13"** Listen for the "melodic hook," repeated again at 2'17" just before the *tabla* enters. This short four-note motif appears many times throughout the *gat* and often signals the end of the *tala* cycle, such as at 2'34" and 2'58".
- 2'18"** *Tabla* enters. The *tala* is a sixteen-beat cycle. Listen for the "one" pulse on the third strike of the drum. (Begin the "Ethno-Challenge" here.)
- 4'19"** Final use of the "melodic hook" to signal the end of the piece. The performers likely made prior visual contact to signal the approaching ending.
- 4'23"** *Tabla* stops.
- 4'27"** *Sarod* stops. The *tambura* (drone) closes the performance.

Source: "Raga Ahir bhairav," played by Buddhadev DasGupta, *sarod*. From *The Raga Guide: A Survey of 74 Hindustani Ragas*, Nimbus NI 5536/9 (4 CDs and 196-page book), 1999. Used by permission.

ETHNO-CHALLENGE (CD 1.5): "Keep the *tal*" (sixteen beats) during the *gat* section of the performance (clap on beats 1 and 5; wave on beat 9; clap on beat 13). Listen especially for how your "1" pulse corresponds to the melodic hook throughout the performance. Anticipate the final pulse of the performance and stop counting.

performer and listener alike a state of mind, such as love, heroism, or anger. The *rasa* can become so pervasive that listeners begin to conceive of the *rasa* as a person. Personified *ragas* are frequently depicted in miniature paintings called *ragamala*, often showing humans performing music. Some *ragas* are believed to have magical powers. A *raga* performed correctly can heal, influence personality, and even bring the divine into both performer and listener. *Raga Dipak* is said to create fire when performed well, and the *Mallari ragas* can create rain. *Kedar ragas* will cure diseases and melt stones. Indian jailers, always ready to earn some extra money, were said to have taught *Raga Kedar* to prisoners who hoped to melt the stones of the prison and escape.

Each *raga* is to be performed at a proper time of day, and consequently there are *ragas* appropriate for specific times, from before dawn to after sunset. For Indians this is important because they believe there is a reciprocal relationship between the sound of music and a smoothly functioning universe. Walter Kaufmann, who researched *ragas* in India prior to World War II, reported that one great musician predicted the coming of that terrible war, which he claimed would result from the Western habit of playing music at the wrong times (as when funeral music is played when there is no funeral). He shouted to Kaufmann, "How long will the universe tolerate this abuse of music, music, mind you, a most sacred thing?"



An Indian miniature painting, or *ragamala*, entitled "Krishna and Radha watching rain clouds," from India's Punjab Hills, c.1790 (Cleveland Museum of Art)

As a result of this negligence a great calamity would befall the West, he said—and indeed it did.

During the 1960s, many Westerners turned to the East—India in particular—in search of spiritual enlightenment. Because Indian music is overtly spiritual, it soon became popular with Western audiences. Ravi Shankar, the Hindustani sitar specialist, who has also composed many film scores, toured the United States as early as 1964 and soon became a cultural icon. George Harrison of The Beatles studied sitar with Shankar, and Harrison's use of the sitar in several Beatles' songs, including "Love You Too" from *Revolver* (1966) and "Within You Without You" from *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967), brought about a rising interest in Indian music. Around the same time England's John McLaughlin, leader of both Shakti and the Mahavishnu Orchestra, also invoked Indian sounds and spirituality. These groups, and many others, added Indian drummers and sitarists, making the distinctive dry timbre of the tabla and the twangy sitar familiar to many Westerners. Today the sounds of the tabla and sitar can be easily imitated on synthesizers and have become commonly accepted in mainstream Western popular music.



Ravi Shankar, India's most famous musician, plays the *sitar*, a fretted North Indian lute with sympathetic strings (Jack Vartoogian/ FrontRowPhotos)

Because Indian music is played by soloists, one finds both virtuosos and a “star” system associated with its performance. Ironically, Indian musicians can make more money touring in Europe and North America than in India. Ravi Shankar made a great success for himself doing this, and his daughter, Anoushka Shankar, has followed in his footsteps. A few Americans, such as Ken Zuckerman, have completely mastered Indian instruments and styles and have become professional Indian musicians, touring both here and in India. Even though Indian music no longer holds Western popular culture in its thrall, Indian concerts in the West continue to attract large audiences of both Indian expatriates and Westerners.

Fundamentals of Indian (Hindustani) Classical Music

NEED TO KNOW

Modal System. *Raga* denotes a comprehensive system governing the creation of melody—improvised or composed. Its elements include:

- Tone material (a limited number of pitches presented in both ascending and descending forms)
- Pitch hierarchy (strong and weak pitches that define the tonal center of the mode. The *vadi* is the strongest—and central—pitch followed by the *samvadi*; these are reinforced by the sounds of the drone instrument)
- Solfège (a system of syllables used to articulate pitches, called *sargam* and expressed in ascending order as *sa, re, ga, ma, pa, dha, ni, sa*)
- Magical powers (Indian musicians ascribe magical powers to some individual *ragas*)
- Mood or character (each *raga* has a *rasa* or mood/feeling/personality that can be personified in small paintings called *ragamala*).

Rhythmic/Metric System. *Tala* denotes a comprehensive system governing the organization of the music in time. Its elements include:

- Fixed number of beats organized into a closed cycle
- Grouping of beats into units

- Visible means of “keeping the *tala*” with a clap followed by counts or a wave followed by counts
- Words to represent drum strokes (known as *bols*) used by drummers during learning or in demonstrations of drumming.

Form. Although partly improvised, *raga* performance follows expected patterns. These include:

- *Alap*, the beginning section of melody (vocal or instrumental) accompanied only by the drone instrument
- *Jor*, as the *alap* proceeds, it becomes faster and emphasizes the higher pitches of the *raga*. In the *jor* the music becomes somewhat steady, but not yet in *tala*
- *Jhala*, coming at the end of the *alap*, the music reaches maximum tempo and rhythmic density. It is mostly steady in beat, while the player repeatedly use drone strings (called *jhala* string) in alternation with the melodic pitch
- *Gat*, the section that coincides with the entry of the drum(s). The *gat* is a relatively short composition that becomes the basis for further improvisation. *Gat* refers to instrumental *ragas*; the vocal equivalent is called the *chiz*.