All about Indian Classical Music

The Raga Sangeet system of Indian music has a history of some 2000 years. The roots of Indian classical music are religious and lay in the Vedic hymns of the Hindu temples. According to the traditional teaching, sound is God - Nada Brahma. Through music, human consciousness can be elevated to a degree which allows one to understand the eternal essence of the universe.

The Hindustani or North Indian style of music developed after the subcontinent was invaded by the Moguls from the 13th century onwards. In the Mogul empire, cultures derived from Persia and elsewhere merged with local traditions. The indigenous music of India, with its intricate systems of ragas and talas, continued uninterrupted and has become the Carnatic or South Indian style, dominant in the areas never conquered by the Moguls.

Originally, all Indian music was sung in Sanskrit. But after the two systems divided, Hindustani music was centered around Hindi and its dialect Brajabhasha, whereas the Carnatic system was mainly influenced by Telegu as well as by Kannadese and Tamil.

India's performing arts - music, dance, drama, and poetry - are based on the concept of Nava Rasa (the nine sentiments). The acknowledged order of these sentiments is as follows: Shringara (romantic and erotic), Hasya (humorous), Karuna (pathetic), Raudra (anger), Veera (heroic), Bhayanaka (fearful), Vibhatsa (disgustful), Adhuta (amazement), and Shanta (peaceful).

Indian classical music is based on ragas (melody) and talas (rhythm), but not on harmony, counterpoint, modulation, chords, dynamics and other structural elements of Western (classical) music. Furthermore, the tradition of Indian classical music is an oral one. The guru teaches it directly to his disciples. There is no sheet music, no written tradition as in Western music.

A raga is a scientific, precise, subtle and aesthetic melodic form with its own peculiar ascending and descending movement consisting of either a full seven note octave, or a series of six or five notes (or a combination of any of these) in a rising or falling structure called the Arohana and Avarohana. It is the subtle difference in the order of notes, an omission of a dissonant note, an emphasis on a particular note, the slide from one note to another, and the use of microtones together with other subtleties, that demarcate one raga from the other. A raga is the projection of the artist's inner spirit, a manifestation of his most profound sentiments and sensibilities brought forth through tones and melodies, and the spiritual quality and manner of expression cannot be learned from any book. Ragas are based on 72 melas or parent scales. With all their permutations and combinations, one estimates that there are over 6,000 ragas.

The talas or rhythmic cycles of a raga are another essential element of Indian classical music. Talas range from cycles of 3 beats to cycles of up to 108 beats. The most popular talas use cycles of 5 to 16 beats. The most important rhythmic factors are the stress on the first beat (sum) and the division in a tala. Talas with the same number of beats may differ from each other in that they use other divisions and accents. For instance, the tala Dhamar has 14 beats, divided into 5+5+4 beats, whereas the tala Chanchar is divided into 3+4+3+4+4 beats. The most common North Indian cycle, teental, consists of 16 beats in four groups of four beats.
In vocal music, a drummer will accompany a singer either in slow, medium, or fast tempo at the start of a song in whatever tala the singer chooses. Today, most vocal and instrumental music is based on the contemporary form called *khyal*, which is accompanied by the *tabla*, a two-piece drum. It consists of the right-hand, wooden-bodied tabla and the left-hand, metal-bodied bass-drum *bayan*.

The traditional recital of Indian classical music begins with the *alap* section, the stately and serene exploration, the gradual and meditative unfolding of the structure, theme and rasa of a chosen raga. It is considered the highest form in Indian music. This slow, introspective and heartfelt beginning is followed by the *jor*, which adds rhythm to the music and develops the raga's basic theme in innumerable variations. Neither the *alap* nor the *jor* are accompanied by the drums. They evolve into the *gat*, the fixed composition of the raga. The drums enter the rhythmic structure of the gat and its time cycle, the tala. This section is based on the *Khyal* form. The gat accelerates step-by-step and culminates in the *jhala* portion, which is playful and exciting.