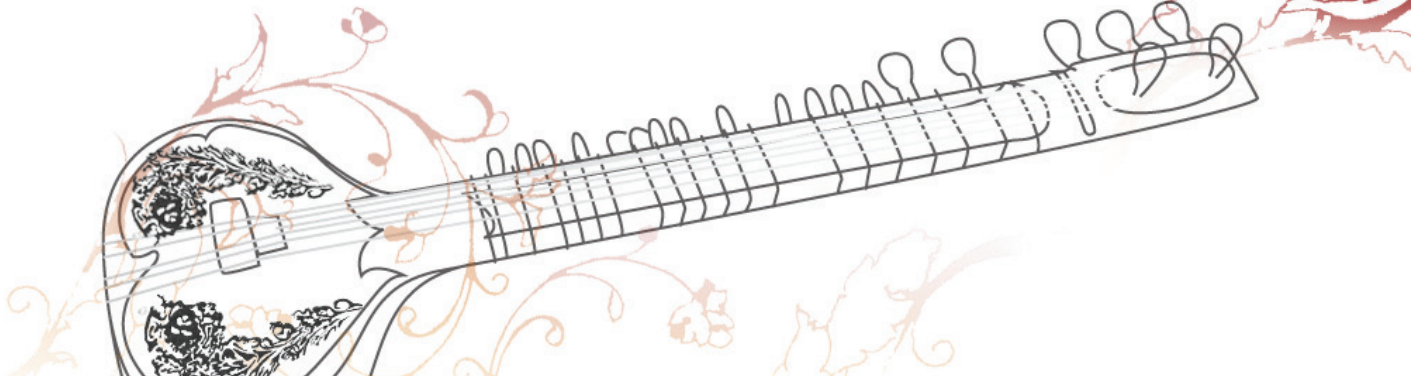


KARTIK SESHADRI *Tradition on the Cutting Edge*

INDIAN CLASSICAL MUSIC



Indian classical music known as **Raga Sangeeth**, is an improvised art form based on the concepts of **Raga** and **Tala**. The historical origins of this spiritual musical tradition date back to the sacred Hindu scriptures known as **Veda(s)**, which were the early precursors to the system of music that developed gradually. **Raga(s)** are the tonal idiom for improvisation and these precise melodic forms while essentially modal in structure, acquire their distinct musical identities from a complex range of factors: the Indian tonal system of perceiving the octave as 22 microtonal divisions (**Sruti**); the subtle nuances, inflections, and ornamentations associated with each **Raga**; and the particular emphasis of certain notes (**Vadi, Samavadi**) within the specific ascending and descending (**Arohana and Avarohana**) movement of each **Raga**. While all **Raga(s)** are specific to the time of the day (morning, evening or night) some **Raga(s)** are performed only during certain seasons, festivals or special occasions. The melodic and rhythmic aspect of our tradition is completely consistent with our aesthetic and philosophical idea that each **Raga** expresses a single dominant mood (**Rasa**). The nine **Rasa(s)** associated with our music are: **Shringara** (sensual or erotic), **Hasya** (humorous), **Karuna** (pathos), **Rudra** (anger), **Veera** (heroic), **Bhayanaka** (fearful), **Vibhatsa** (disgust), **Adbhuta** (wonderment) and **Shanta** (tranquility).

The second aspect of improvisation in Indian classical music pertains to the concept of rhythm known as **Tala**. A **Tala** is conceptualized in cycles of beats ranging anywhere from a three beat cycle to a 108 beat cycle. There are other complex cycles in fractional beats such as $4\frac{1}{2}$, $6\frac{1}{2}$, $11\frac{1}{2}$ to mention a few, that make for complicated improvisations. An accomplished musician of Indian classical music has to develop complete mastery and facility over both **Raga** and **Tala** to acquire the total freedom of improvisation within the complex constraints that **Raga** and **Tala** impose on the performer. Indian classical music is predominantly steeped in melody and rhythm as opposed to the ideas of contrast manifested in harmony, counterpoint and modulation which shape traditions such as European art music or Jazz. The challenge of our music lies in the musician's ability to shape and develop an entire musical edifice of a **Raga** and to express its fullest depth and excitement. This is acquired through many years of **Talim** (training) with a master musician (**Guru**).

A typical performance of instrumental Indian classical music begins with **Alap, Jor** and **Jhala** rendered on the solo instrument such as **Sitar, Sarod**, etc. While the **Alap** is a slow, spiritual, non-metric rendition of the **Raga**, the following sections **Jor** and **Jhala** are somewhat free and bound to a more defined pulse. The **Gat (theme)** follows the previous sections and it is in this section that the concept of **Tala** is introduced and the accompanying percussion instrument (such as **Tabla** or **Pakhawaj**) joins the main instrument.

Sitar: the **Sitar** is one of the most popular stringed instruments of northern and eastern India and has gained much attention in the West during the last few decades. The instrument usually consists of 20 strings of which seven strings constitute as the main playing strings. There are 13 sympathetic strings that respond in sympathy to the main strings. The instrument also has a track of twenty metal frets that are movable and can be tuned to the specific tonality of each raga. The main facet of the instrument is that the strings can be pulled or stretched over the metal frets to obtain gliding and melismatic effects much in keeping with the ideal of Indian music to emulate the human voice.

Tabla: The **Tabla** is a two piece drum referred to as **Tabla** for the right-handed drum and **Bayan** for the left-handed drum. The **Tabla** (right-hand) is a pitch specific drum tuned to the main tonic note of the performer. The **Bayan** is a bass drum which can produce a variety of sounds by exerting pressure on the skin of the instrument. The instrument is tuned with a metal hammer.

Tambura: This background instrument also referred to as **Tanpura** is used to lend a drone or continuo effect for the performer and listener alike. The instrument usually consists of 4 to 5 strings and is tuned to the main notes of the **Raga**.