CHAPTER SUPPLEMENT

The Music of India

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

The art music of Western Europe and America forms only a small, although important, portion of the world's music. Every culture has its own indigenous music, and the study of music of non-Western cultures is known as ethnomusicology. In some cultures of the world, the traditions of music are much older than those of Western art music. One of the greatest distinctions between Western and non-Western music is in the area of musical notation. Many of the world's great musical traditions are transmitted from generation to generation through aural means only; they are not preserved in a notated form like the music of Western Europe since the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, for many of these non-Western systems of music, there is a body of theoretical understanding that explains and codifies the styles and performance practices of each tradition.

We will take a brief look at one of these non-Western musical traditions, namely the music of India. Indian classical music is complex and has a broad theoretical basis. It came to the attention of popular and classical musicians alike in the 1960s and has influenced a number of composers of Western art music since then.

The history of Indian classical music stretches back almost two thousand years. Some of the first ideas and definitions of the components of the Indian style were developed as early as A.D. 400. The first writings on the theory of Indian music date from the thirteenth century.

The music of India comes from two distinct geographic areas, northern India and southern India. The music of northern India is often call Hindustani music and that of southern India is called Karnatic music. Although there are many differences between the two styles, as well as different terminology used for similar concepts, this discussion will treat Indian music as a whole and not draw many distinctions between the two areas. Music of this region is based on two broad concepts, one melodic, the other rhythmic. We will deal first with the melodic aspects.

In Indian music, the octave is contains seven fundamental notes, just as in Western music. And just as in the solfège system, these notes are assigned syllables. The scale itself, called a *sargam*, is represented by the following syllables:

sa *re* *ga* *ma* *pa* *dha* *ni* *sa*

These pitches are comparable to the notes of a major scale sung with a moveable-do system of solfège. One of the major differences between Western and Indian music lies in the use of *srutis*, or microtonal intervals that are added to the scale. The combination of fundamental notes and *srutis* creates an octave that is divided into 22 separate and distinct pitches. Each of the *srutis* is associated with one of the main notes of the scale listed above. Each has a name and is a raised inflection of the fundamental note.

There is no standard agreement on the exact values of the intervals created by the *srutis*, but they could be compared to chromatic inflections of the major scales used in Western music. The *srutis* are used as notes of ornamentation in the improvisatory performances of Indian classical music. A student of Indian music must be trained to hear the *srutis*, and to discriminate between these microtonal inflections of

the main notes of the scale. For example, in Western music the distance between *do* and *re* is divided only into two distinct intervals, with the note in between them called C♯ or D♭. In Indian music, the distance between the first two notes of the *sargam* is divided into four equal parts and musicians must learn to distinguish the three musical sounds that can occur between *sa* and *re*.

Melodic material in Indian music is based on on several modes of the main scale known as *thaats* or *melakartas*. The modes do not rearrange the notes of the original scale, but determine exactly how many of them are used, and which inflection of the *srutis* are included. In southern Indian music, there are considered to be 72 melakartas; in northern Indian music there are ten basic thaats. Instruments such as the sitar that are used in the performance of Indian music must be tuned to a particular mode in order to perform melodies that are based on that specific mode.

The actual melodies of Indian music are known as *ragas*. The *ragas* are based on a particular mode and generally have the following characteristics:

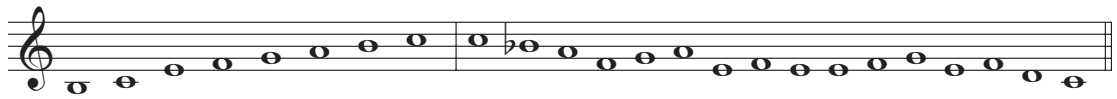
1. In general, the *ragas* are very short, but are lengthened in performance through repetition and variation
2. *Ragas* use the notes of a particular mode and place those sounds in a particular order of as cending and descending pitches
3. A *raga* is not dependent upon rhythm for its identity; a change of time does not change the nature of a *raga*
4. All *ragas* bear names that identify them; there are many hundreds of *ragas* in existence
5. Certain *ragas* are associated with seasons of the year and hours of the day during which they are considered to be most effective when performed

Within every *raga*, one note is designated as the *vadi*. This note remains prominent through the repetitions of the *raga* and is accentuated. This same note should begin and end all of variations of the *raga*.

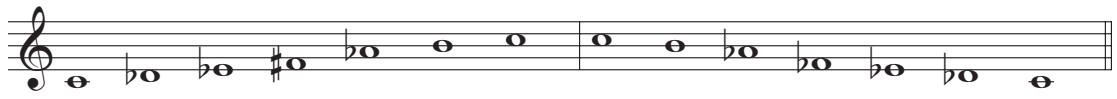
Three *ragas* and their names are shown in Figure 1, using Western style notation. Notice that in each *raga*, the first half of the melody uses primarily ascending motion and the second half uses primarily descending motion.

Figure 1. Three Indian *ragas*

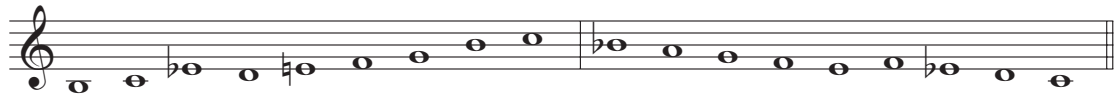
Khamaj



Todi



Pilu



The *tala* is the rhythmic aspect of Indian music. There are hundreds of *talas* ranging in length from 3 to 108 beats, but in practice only about 30 to 40 of them are regularly used. Like the *ragas*, the *talas* also have names. The most important characteristic of a *tala* is that it is cyclic or repetitive in nature.

The beat in Indian music is called the *matra*. The beat represents a subjective length of time, based upon the tempo of the *tala*. Groups of *matras*, called *angas*, are arranged into sections that are equivalent to measures in Western music. Usually a *tala* consists of three or more *angas*.

One of the biggest differences between the measures of Western music and the *angas* of Indian music is that the first beat of each *anga* is not always a primary accent. Therefore, two different *talas* each containing fourteen matras can create entirely different rhythmic patterns based on the placement of accented and unaccented beats.

The various types of stressed and unstressed beats are given names. The *sum* is the strongest stress and is the most important beat in a *tala*. It is always the first beat of the *tala*. Because a *tala* always cycles to end not on the last beat of the final measure, but on a repeat of the first beat, the *sum* also is always the final beat of the *tala* as well. In a sense, it is a point of culmination in the rhythmic structure.

Other stressed beats within the *tala* are called *talis*; these are equivalent to secondary accents in Western meters. Finally, there are empty or "vacant" beats called *khalis*. The khali is the first beat of an *anga* (or measure) which is omitted. In performance, these are often shown by a wave of the hand without any audible sound. The *khali* assumes a greater importance in Indian music than a rest does in Western notation, because it signal s the impending return of the *sum*.

There is also a sophisticated system of rhythmic solfège that is used to learn and perform the *talas*, espeically in Northern Indian music. The *talas* are known by these sets of syllables, which are called *thekas*. Figure 46.2 shows one *tala*, named *Jhaptal*, which consists of a pattern of ten beats. The *theka* associated with *Jhaptal* is included, as are the indications of which beats form the *sum*, *talis*, and *khali*.

Figure 2. *Jhaptal tala*, with syllables of the theka and stresses assigned to the beats

counts:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
theka	dhi	na	dhi	dhi	na	ti	na	dhi	dhi	na
	sum		*tali*			*khali*		*tali*		

The *raga* is performed on some type of melodic instrument or instruments, often stringed. The most well known of the Indian stringed instruments is the sitar, which is a long-necked fretted instrument, usually with seventeen strings. The *tala* is played on percussion instruments, such as the tabla, a pair of curved drums, one of which is usually wooden, and the other of which is usually made of copper.

The typical performance of Indian music is made up of three distinct sections, which govern the interplay of the *raga* and the *tala*. The first section is the *alap*, or exposition, in which the *raga* is first presented by the melodic instruments alone, in a slow and rhythmically free style. The middle sections, known as the *jorh* and the *jhala*, introduce an element of rhythm into the *raga*, however, this is done without the use of the percussion instruments. It is in these middle sections that the complex variations of the *raga* begin to appear. The final section, called the *gath*, is where the percussion instruments join the improvisation. The tempo may move from slow to medium to fast within this final movement.

To Western ears, Indian music may seem to be tedious, because it lacks the element of harmony with which our ears are so familiar. Also, because the music is based on limited melodic and harmonic resources, usually a single *raga* and *tala*, there is an element of repetitiveness that can be difficult for

Westerners. However, this very aspect of the music is considered an essential and desirable element of the style, since Indian music strives for unity and seeks to avoid heterogeneity.

In general, Indian music is not notated, nor is there a universal tradition of musical notation associated with it. There have been some attempts to develop a system of notation for Indian music over the past several centuries, but none has been widely adopted.