

This is no more than a very brief outline of a fascinating musical genre. The 'further reading' section at the end of this sheet provides a number of sources of more detailed information.

Background

North Indian Classical Music, also known as Hindustani music, is one of the musical styles that have inspired the *Mantra* project. Hindustani music is just one of many different types of Indian music. Its roots can be traced back thousands of years and, although it has evolved over time, the musical style may well be close to that experienced by Portuguese settlers in Goa.

Although forms of notation of this musical style do exist, Hindustani musicians do not usually perform from 'written-down' music. Musicians learn their art aurally and their performances involve a large element of improvisation. This does not mean, however, that musicians can perform anything they like. They improvise within the 'rules' or principles that govern the music's style.

In a performance of Hindustani music there are three distinct 'ingredients': melody, drone and rhythm.

Melody

The melodic ingredient of Hindustani music is known as the '*rag*'. The *rag* forms the basis of the melodic improvisation in performance. The term '*rag*' comes from a Sanskrit word '*raga*', meaning 'emotion' or 'colour'. The performance of a '*rag*' was intended to communicate a particular emotion or mood. There are a number of different elements that make up a

rag and the performer creates a unique piece of music by basing his/her improvisation upon them. Three of the most significant elements are the mode, or '*that*', the '*jat*' (number of pitches used), and the ascending and descending structure of the *rag* (*arohana* and *avarohana*).

Mode

In Hindustani music, there are usually seven different pitches (*swar*) in each octave. Each pitch has a long name and an abbreviated name. These are listed below:

long name	Shadj	Rishabh	Gandhara	Madhyam	Pancham	Dhaivat	Nishad
short name	Sa	Re	Ga	Ma	Pa	Dha	Ni

The interval between each pitch and the tonic (Sa) is not always the same; it varies according to the music's mode or *that*. For example, one octave of the *that*, *Bilawal*, portrayed in Western musical notation, has the following arrangement of intervals:

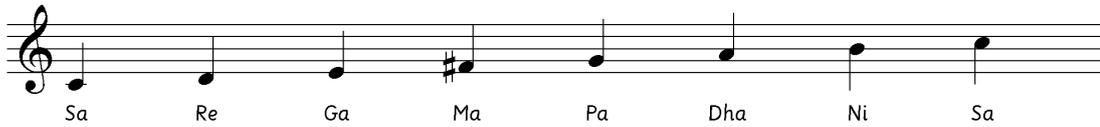


Khammaj, however, has a different arrangement:



Although the seventh degree of the mode is still called 'Ni', in *Khammaj* it is a minor seventh from 'Sa', whereas in *Bilawal*, the interval between 'Sa' and 'Ni' is a major seventh.

Kalyan is different again:



Here the fourth degree of the mode (Ma) is an augmented fourth from 'Sa'.

Each *that* is characterised by the varying intervals between 'Sa' and the other six pitches. The only pitch whose interval never changes is 'Pa'. This is always a perfect fifth from 'Sa'. There are

approximately 20 different *that*s used in Hindustani music. Each *rag* is based on the pitch relationships of one of these.

The number of pitches used (*jati*)

Rags do not always use all the notes of their mode or *that*. A *rag* can use five, six or all seven of the pitches of the mode. A five-pitch *jati* is called *audhav*, a six-pitch *jati* is a *shadav jati* and a seven-pitch *jati* is a *sampurna jati*. Some *rags* use a different number of notes on the way up from the number used on the way down. One which has five

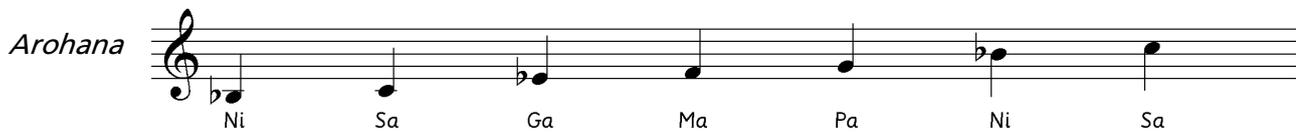
pitches on the way up and seven on the way down, for example, is known as an *audhav-sampurna rag*. This does not mean, however, that the *rag's* performer limits him- or herself to only seven specific notes. The performer will use the notes of the *rag* at several different octaves.

Ascending and descending structure

Each *rag* has a characteristic ascent and descent. For some *rags*, the notes simply ascend and descend in pitch order (rather like a scale). Other *rags*, however, incorporate melodic 'twists and turns'. Although the general direction of the ascending melody is upwards, the *rag* may ascend for a few notes, and then drop to a lower pitch before ascending again, not necessarily by step. A similar thing can occur in the descent; the *rag* may 'spiral' downwards, rather

than simply descend in order of pitches. This concept is known as the *arohana* (ascending structure) and *avarohana* (descending structure) of the *rag*.

Below is an example of the *arohana* and *avarohana* of *Rag Bhimpalasi*. This has five ascending notes (Sa Ga Ma Pa Ni) and seven descending notes (Ni Dha Pa Ma Ga Re Sa).



A *rag* can be performed by a singer or by an instrumentalist, such as a sitar player. The musician improvises melodic figures based on the *arohana* and the *avarohana*. S/he may also incorporate melodic

fragments that are associated with the *rag* that is being performed. These are known as the *pakad* or *swarup*. They contribute to the *rag's* specific character.

Drone

The drone is the harmonic ‘foundation’ of Hindustani music and is sounded throughout the performance of a *rag*. The simplest drones consist of just one note: Sa. Usually, however, the drone is made up of two notes. The first is always Sa; the second is often Pa (making the drone a perfect fifth), but some *rags* call for different second drone notes. Some *rags* include drones of three or more notes, but this is

quite rare. Traditionally, drones are played on a stringed instrument called a Tanpura. Many Hindustani melody instruments also have a way of playing a drone. The Sitar, for example has a number of strings used specifically for producing the drone, players sound the drone strings as well as performing the notes of the *rag* on the instrument’s other strings.

Rhythm

Rhythm in Hindustani music is cyclic, meaning that it is based on sequences which are played repeatedly. A rhythmic cycle is called a ‘*tal*’. Hindustani music uses approximately 360 *tals*, although some are performed much less frequently than others. Every *tal* comprises a number of different ‘components’ and concepts. These are best explained through the example of a specific *tal*: *Tintal*.

Each *tal* has a set number of beats or *matras*. This is known as the *tal’s avartan*. *Tintal*, for example, has an *avartan* of 16 *matras*. Not all the *matras* carry equal emphasis; some are stronger than others. The first beat, or *matra*, is always the strongest. This is known as the *sam*. Another important *matra* of the *tal* is the *khali*, this usually occurs around the midpoint of the *tal*. Other important *matras* are called *tali*. In *Tintal*, the *khali* falls on beat 9, and beats 5 and 13 are *tali*. This divides the *tal* into sections (or *vibhags*), as can be seen from the table below:

The strong and weak beats of *Tintal*:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
sam				tali				khali				tali			

As can be seen from the table above, *Tintal* is divided into four sections, each of four *matras*. *Tintal* is a symmetrical *tal*, in which each section contains an equal number of beats. This is not always the case. *Jhaptal* (a 10-*matra tal*), for example, also has four

vibhags, but these are of varying lengths. The strong beats fall on 1, 3, 6 and 8, meaning that the first and third *vibhags* have two beats and the second and fourth have three.

The strong and weak beats of *Jhaptal*:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
sam		tali			khali		tali		

The *tal* is usually played on an instrument known as the Tabla. This instrument comprises a pair of drums (called the Tabla and the Bayan). The Tabla player strikes the drums with his or her hands. By striking different areas of the drums with different parts of the hands and fingers, the player can produce a very

wide range of different sounds and pitches. Sometimes a sound is created by striking just one drum; sometimes a sound is created by striking both drums together. Each different sound is represented by a spoken syllable (or *bol*).

When learning a *tal*, the Tabla player learns the pattern of *bols* associated with that *tal*.

This arrangement of syllables is known as the *theka*. The *theka* of *Tintal* contains four different bols (*dha*, *dhin*, *tin*, and *na*) in the following pattern:

The *theka* of *Tintal*

sam				tali				khali				tali			
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
dha	dhin	dhin	dha	dha	dhin	dhin	dha	dha	tin	tin	na	na	dhin	dhin	dha

Each *tal*, then, can be categorised by its *avartan* (number of beats), the structure of its *vibhags* and its *theka*. As we have seen, *Tintal* has:

- An *avartan* of 16 *matras* (or beats)
- A *vibhag* structure of 4 – 4 – 4 – 4.
- A *theka* of dha, dhin, dhin, dha, dha, dhin, dhin, dha, dha, tin tin, na, na dhin dhin dha

Some other *tals* have the same *avartan* and *vibhag* structure as *Tintal*, but their *thekas* are different.

The Tabla player performs the *theka* repeatedly, often getting faster and faster. At a certain point in the performance, the Tabla player may break away from playing the *theka* and improvise his/her own patterns of sounds. This does not mean, however, that the *tal* is abandoned. Instead it is marked by the other performers and sometimes also by the

audience. The Tabla player must ensure that, for however many cycles of the *tal*/s/he improvises, his/her improvisation ends on the *sam* (the first beat of the *tal*). If members of the audience have kept track of the *tal* during the improvisation, they may applaud or cheer when this occurs.

Performing Hindustani music

There are many ways to perform Hindustani music. Instrumental and vocal performances each have a number of different characteristics and styles. Below is a description of one style of instrumental performance:

- The performance involves three performers: the drone (played on the Tanpura), the *rag* (played on the Sitar) and the *tal* (played on the Tabla).
- The performance also has three sections: the *Alap*, the *Jor* and the *Jhala*.
- The *Alap* section is rather like an introduction. After the drone begins, the sitar player slowly explores the ascending and descending notes of the *rag*, perhaps at different octaves.
- Although the music is still quite relaxed, in the *Jor* section, the sitar player introduces an identifiable pulse to his/her improvisation of the *rag*.
- In the *Jhala*, the Tampura and the Sitar are joined by the Tabla. The section begins slowly but gradually gains pace. The Tabla and Sitar players take it in turn to improvise, sometimes imitating each other’s improvised patterns. The music gets faster and faster, and more and more exciting before concluding, often to great applause.

Further reading

<http://www.chandrakantha.com/> this website contains a very thorough introduction to Indian music, together with many audio and video examples.