

Song and Performance



*I know not how thou singest, my master!
I ever listen in silent amazement.
The light of thy music illumines the world.
The life breath of thy music
runs from sky to sky.
The holy stream of thy music breaks through
all stony obstacles and rushes on.
My heart longs to join in thy song,
but vainly struggles for a voice.
I would speak, but speech breaks not into song,
and I cry out baffled.
Ah, thou hast made my heart captive
in the endless meshes of thy music, my master!*

Rabindranath Tagore, Gitanjali

To both the insider and outsider, India has long been a land of beguiling melody and song. More than one listener, caught in its allure and appeal, has echoed the words of the thirteenth-century West Asian musician, Amir Khusrau, who said, “Indian music, the fire that burns heart and soul . . . charms not only men, but the animals are transfixed also.” It is not only (to some) “the curious and exotic tonalities”—there is something in the soulful comprehensiveness of the ancient airs that suggests an approach to music as a whole which is on the one hand romantic and fanciful, and realistic, imaginative, and confident on the other. The long path of this music is well trodden.

COMPOSITION AND IMPROVISATION

What is a song? Succinctly, several lines of melody tied together by a few lines of text. There have been millions of songs in India’s history,

and she continues to pour them out in every style, from religious chanting to classical solos, to film songs and pop dance tunes—slow and fast, devotional and heroic, happy and sad. The classification of the songs into melodic types has yielded the concept of *rāga*, one of the great legacies of the music of the world. The central feature of a *rāg* performance involves taking a fixed composition, such as a song, and elaborating it with ornamentation, expansions, and improvised additions.

However, the idea of improvisation is elusive and somewhat deceptive in Hindustani classical music. Those who relate to the word “improvisation” in its jazz sense of reworking melodic patterns over a chordal harmony do not instantly grasp the compositional restrictions and elaborations suggested to the musician who plays or sings a *rāg*. For the latter musician, it is largely a question of selecting a few notes and phrases, and then placing these melodic phrases into a balance suggested by the traditions of the *rāg* and the school (*gharānā*) of its performer.

The methods of achieving these balances are absorbed through the hours spent with a teacher, who leads the student through hundreds of models of the *rāg* in both composition and on-the-spot expansion. Repeating a phrase back according to the teacher’s approval is the only way the tradition manifests its “correctness.” A young performer is likely to render a *rāg* with very strict accord to what he was taught—almost like a rote repetition of a composition in the sense of strictly playing a Mozart sonata or Chopin etude. Those who have studied a bit longer will start to take liberties with the timing, ornamentation, and even the ordering of the phrases. A mature musician will do this with a freedom and control that suggests complete spontaneity, inventing new patterns as he represents old ones. But all performers start from a similar point of departure: “This is the way my teacher showed me how to do it.”

A fixed composition in a *rāg*, whether a song (usually in Hindi) or an instrumental melody, is called a *bandish*. A musician who can sing or play a number of these is highly respected. One musician recently praised the late Jnan Ghosh of Calcutta, saying, “You know, Jnan-da (pronounced “gyan-da”: -da is a suffix denoting an elder brother) knew so many—sooo many—compositions from this *gharānā*, that *gharānā*, in vocal music and *tablā*, and he taught them to so many students—oof!—you will not see his like ever again.” Often when musicians lament the passing of one of the older generation, they describe it, apart from the personal endearments, as a loss in terms of the many compositions that the person knew.

The fixed compositions carry the maps of the *rāgs*—the balances of the notes, the moods, the typical phrases, the proper way to begin and end—in short, the lore of the *rāgs*. Some of this lore has been fairly recently written in modern books devoted to *rāga*, but the essential factor in bearing the tradition along from one generation to the next is the sound of these compositions, functioning as models for rendering the *rāg*.



*A composition is like a snapshot, you see. Like you go to your friend's house and see an album of the family pictures. From one picture of this cousin you get some idea of how he looks. But then you see many pictures of him and you start to get a real idea of that person. Like that you learn the picture of the *rāg*.*

*But still you won't know it until you practice and play it. Even now I am still learning about the *rāgs* every time I play.*

Ali Akbar Khan



Certain vocal schools, such as the Gwalior *gharānā*, are known for their compositions, and the singers are likely to present them with some degree of pride in their performances, with meticulous attention to their detail of wording and phrasing. Artists from other schools might focus instead on the ornamentation or display imagination creating permutations of a composition. These elaborations of an original composition will still be considered rendering the “fixed” composition, but to nonaccustomed ears it might sound rather free. Still others will use the composition only as a quick springboard to the *rāg*'s more abstract elaborations, preferring to emphasize mood, technique, or other aspects of the *rāg*'s structure.

CD track 24 is a *bandish* in the afternoon *rāg*, *Gaur Sārang*, the first line of which is written in Figure 5.1. Like most compositions, it is in two parts, called *asthāī* (or *sthāyī*) and *antarā*. Some compositions may have more sections, or occasionally only one section. The *asthāī* will normally show the structure of the *rāg* in its home register, whereas the *antarā* (at the 54" mark) will continue to the higher *sa* and above.

In CD track 24 Asha Bhosle sings a medium-tempo *khyāl* composition, *Bolo re papiha*, by Allauddin Khan (Figure 5.1). The words tell

The asthai begins

G | ³R S — PMDP | ⁺m — G m | ²G R mG Pm | ⁰G — —
 bo- lo re pa- pi- ha

The antara begins

⁰— PP Š Š | ³ŠN R Š — | ⁺P N ŠN R | ²ŠNDP MP m G
 hi-ra mo-ti- yā- na ki hā- ra di- lā- ū

FIGURE 5.1 *Khyāl* in *Rāg* Gaur Sārang.

of a lonely lover who says to the cuckoo, “Take this message to my beloved . . . tell him to bring me necklaces and pearls . . .” We hear the *sarangī* (bowed lute) shadowing the voice, along with a *sarod* and a cello in the background. The *tablā* plays, *sitārkhāni tāl*, a lilting variation of the sixteen-beat *tintāl*.

WHAT IS A RĀGA?

The concept of *rāg* is very elusive. The reason for this is that some *rāgs* are very broad in their possibilities for melodic elasticity and expansion, while others are quite narrow and restrictive: simply stated, there are big *rāgs* and small and everything in between. It is the fixed compositions in any *rāg* which can bring out the most individual features of a *rāg*'s personality, and we again are reminded of the old Sanskrit phrase, *ranjāyati iti rāga*: “that which tinges the mind with color is a *rāga*.” Some of the abstract qualities of *rāg* structure are enumerated in Figure 5.2.

1. A *rāga* must have at least five notes, and cannot omit **sa**.
2. Some form of **ma** or **pa** must be present as well.
3. Two forms of the same note adjacent to each other are rarely encountered.
4. A *rāga* uses a certain selection of tones: ones that are omitted are termed “forbidden” and cannot be used without destroying the *rāg*.

FIGURE 5.2 *General qualities common to all rāgas.*

(continued)

5. There is an ascending and descending format.

For *rāg Gaur Sārang* (CD track 24), the ascent may be given as

Ṇ S G R m G P M D P Ś N R̄ Ś

and the descent as

Ś N D P M P m R G R m G R S

6. Many *rāgs* have strong tonal centers, called *vādi* and *samvādi*. For *Gaur Sārang*, for example, these are **G** and **D** respectively. Typically, these two notes are a fourth or a fifth apart. The *vādi-samvādi* do not substitute for the importance of the tonal center **sa** in a *rāg*, and do not always function the same way for each *rāg*.
7. Certain moods are typically associated with each *rāg* (see Chapter 2), and often a time of day or season of the year. *Gaur Sārang* is an afternoon *rāg* with the moods of peace and pathos.
8. Prescribed melodic movements that often recur, like catch phrases, identifying the *rāg*. In *Gaur Sārang* one such phrase is **G R m G**.
9. There can be precise use of timbres and tonal shading, heightened by the use of microtonal pitches that vary from one *rāg* to another, lending particular character to the *rāg*. (Considering these variations, one cannot use blanket phrases such as “perfect tuning” or “Indian tuning” to refer to pitch placement.)

FIGURE 5.2 *Continued*

RĀGA IN PERFORMANCE

When a musician performs a *rāg* in *tāl*, he or she bases the performance around a fixed composition (*bandish*), and then adds sections to it. After singing or playing the complete *bandish* a few times, it may be shortened into a refrain, perhaps only the first line of the composition, or even only a few beats leading up to the downbeat of the *tāl*. This foreshortened phrase usually shows a main feature of the *rāg* and is called the *mukhṛā* (“face”). The words *bolo re papihā* are the *mukhṛā* of the song in *Gaur Sārang* in CD track 24. The *mukhṛā* reappears frequently during a performance, often returning again and again.

The sections that a performer will then add will be determined both by the performance genre and the tradition that the performer represents, as well as the circumstances of the occasion. Because they will be composed on the spot, they will never be reproduced in performance

the same way each time. These usually proceed from slow tempos to fast, and are a meditation on the melodic design of the *rāg*. This slow beginning and acceleration to a rapid conclusion is characteristic of Hindustani *rāg* development in general, and is known as the *badhāt* (pronounced “bar-HOT,” which means “growth”). The maintenance of the picture, feeling, and design of the slow and steady growth of the *rāg* is a highly prized and satisfying aspect of the performance of mature musicians, one which suggests the growth of a plant from seed to full flowering.

If the prevailing image of the *rāg* in performance were of organic growth and blooming, then the many varieties of flowers would be the *rāgs* themselves. Musicians say that the number of *rāgs* number about 75,000 according to all the mathematical possibilities of note combinations and ordering. In any era, it seems that 500 or so *rāgs* are in circulation, but one musician might know half that many. A good musician may master the performance of only several dozen *rāgs* in his lifetime, although he might recognize many more by their sound. Even then, it is rare for a musician to actually state that he “knows” a *rāg*, since each rendering brings new perspectives. It is told that one master played *rāg Iman Kalyān* on fifty consecutive nights for his royal patron, and each time he brought some new composition, and some new perspective on how this *rāg* might be developed.

THE ON-THE-SPOT DEVELOPMENT OF THE COMPOSITION

The added sections, which comprise the development of the *rāg* in performance, are different in various schools, as well as for instruments and voice. They all share some common factors, although the terminology and techniques may vary quite a bit. The following discussion focuses on the options offered by a performance genre called *khyāl*—the expansive *baṛā* (big) *khyāl*, and the faster *chhotā* (little) *khyāl*.

Barā Khyāl. Often, the development of the *rāg* focuses on the syllable. A performer will begin by extending the notes and phrases of the *rāg* in a slow and deliberate manner. These sections are called *vistārs* (“expansions”). In a song, the performer may simply sing “ah,” or extend and repeat the vowel sounds of the text. If the text were *e pyārī piyā sanga* (“O, with my dearest beloved . . .”) as it is in the performance described next for instance, then the long vowel sounds, ā and ī, would

be extended, with the inevitable result that the meaning of the text would be relegated to a minor position.

On CD tracks 25–29, the young vocalist Rashid Khan sings a *barā khyāl* in the evening *rāg Bāgeshri*, a *rāga* with flat third and seventh degrees that emphasize the fourth degree (**ma**). Therefore the droning *tānpūra* is tuned to **ma** with the usual **sa**. In this presentation of the *rāg*, the introductory *ālāp* (not heard here) is very short, only a minute or two. The composition (we hear) then begins with the *mukhrā*, *pyārī piyā sanga*, which lasts 21 seconds. This *mukhrā*, in its simplest version (it is later highly ornamented), is shown in Figure 5.3.

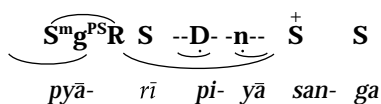


FIGURE 5.3 *Mukhrā in the Barā Khyāl in Bāgeshri*

But the fixed part of this composition continues on one minute longer until the *mukhrā* reappears and comes to the downbeat at 1:32. This takes only one cycle of this very slow twelve-beat *tāl* called *ektāl*. The performers are dividing each beat into slow 1/4-beat micropulses of approximately two seconds each, so each “beat” is around six seconds long! The words are used loosely, almost like the vocable syllables of the *dhrupad* compositions, to help with the phrasing.

Vistār. In the evening *rāg Bāgeshri*, the fourth degree of the scale, the note **ma**, is very important. The next section on CD track 26 follows immediately, but we are actually eight minutes later in the composition, and Rashid-ji sings the *vistār* (“expansion”) of this important note, **ma**. Shadowed by the reed harmonium he freezes time in landing on and extending this tone. As he brings the world to a halt holding out the note without vibrato, he shows a total concentration on the pitch. There follows a few more *vistārs* of **ma**, and then he returns to a highly ornamented *mukhrā*, signaling the end of this *vistār*.

Ten minutes later into this performance (CD track 27) he approaches the high **sa** with several vocal flourishes. When he intones **sa**, there is a feeling of climactic arrival: all motion again suddenly stops, and the artist’s concentration on intoning the note with the syllable *rī* absorbs his (and our) entire concentration. It is an important point in the exposition of the *rāg*, and a good placement of this final *vistār*—the notes have now all been presented, and the next phase of the *rāg*’s *badhāt* will commence. He returns to the *mukhrā*.



FIGURE 5.4 Khyāl artist Rashid Khan sings at the Ali Akbar College. On his lap he strums a swaramandala, a zither that is tuned to the notes of the rāga. The large male tanpura in the background provides a drone. (Photo courtesy of vocalist Tamarind Free Jones.)

This has been *svār-vistār*, or “note-expansion,” where the artist is concentrating on presenting the single tones of the *rāg*. An artist is likely to combine this concentration on the single tones with an elaboration on the context of the note in the *rāg*. He does this with ornaments and combinations of the note with phrases he has previously introduced.

Tān. Further on in his rendition, Rashid further develops the *rāg* with some melodic runs called *tāns* (usually in a faster tempo). These can be of numerous types, including *sārgām tāns* (using the names of the notes), *boltāns* (using the words of the song), or simply *ākār tāns* (using an open-voiced “ah” sound).

In CD track 28, another jump in the performance brings us to the *sārgām tāns*. Heard here is a *tān* (fast passage), taken at a slightly faster tempo, which uses the names of the notes. Rashid-ji shakes each tone slightly with the ornament known as *gamak* (compare it with the *dhru-pad gamaks* of CD track 11). A knowledgeable audience will delight in such a display of imagination and virtuosity. He returns to the *mukhrā* with a great flourish to high *sa*, ending the *tān*.

At the conclusion of both the slow and fast *khyāl* compositions may come the fast runs with “ah” sounds (*ākār tāns*). There are many types of *tāns*, each with a specific melodic or rhythmic quality, described as “jumping,” “inverted,” “full sweep,” “*alankār*” (melodic sequences), “*gamak*,” and other similar descriptive terms.

The second movement of a *khyāl* performance, on CD track 29, is in a medium to fast tempo, and is called the *chhotā khyāl* (“small *khyāl*”). These compositions are often in *tintāl* or sometimes in medium *ektāl* (and other *tāls*), and can be subject to the same style of development as the *barā khyāl*—*vistārs* and *tāns*—depending on the training and the mood of the performer. This particular *chhotā khyāl* itself begins with a flourish (*tān*). He sings the first line (the new *mukhrā*) five times while *tablā* accompanist, Gopal Bandopadhyaya, plays a dazzling short solo.

At the 0:25 mark, Rashid-ji sings the second line of the composition, also fixed. After singing the song through two times, he begins the final section of the performance, with brilliant fast *tāns*, beginning at 0:57, returning to the new *mukhrā*, *piharama garama lāge*. At 1:19 he sings a *sārgām* *tan*, and at 1:40 a longer *vistār* of high *sa*, which uses the text of the second section of the song, the *antarā*. He then returns to the first line of the song at 2:15, and later concludes the performance with several minutes of fast *tāns* (not heard here).

Khyāl and Instrumental Styles. The shape and mood of the *chhotā khyāl* have influenced instrumental music to varying degrees, and CD track 30 presents a *khyāl* composed and played by the famous *sitarist*, Vilayat Khan, who calls his style *gāyākī ang*, “singing style.” This excerpt from a private house concert begins with the Vilayat Khan singing (along with a second unknown vocalist) the *chhotā khyāl*, *sakhi*





Rashid Khan sings Rag Bāgeshri		
CD track 25	<i>Mukhrā</i> beginning <i>barā khyāl</i>	
0:13	Downbeat (<i>sam</i>) of slow <i>ektāl</i> , entry of <i>tablā</i>	
0:21	End of <i>mukhrā</i>	
1:32	Second cycle downbeat, end of fixed composition	
CD track 26	Jump ahead in performance to beginning of <i>ma vistār</i>	
0:54	<i>Mukhrā</i> (ornamented) ending this <i>vistar</i> of <i>ma</i>	
CD track 27	Jump ahead in performance to high <i>sa vistār</i>	
1:04	<i>Mukhrā</i> ending <i>sa vistār</i>	
CD track 28	Jump ahead to <i>sārgām tār</i>	
0:46	<i>Mukhrā</i> ending <i>sārgām tār</i>	
CD track 29	Jump ahead to beginning of <i>chhotā khyāl</i> in medium <i>tintāl</i>	
0:25	Second line of <i>chhotā khyāl</i>	
0:51	End of fixed composition (<i>bandish</i> of <i>chhotā khyāl</i>)	
0:57	Beginning of <i>tāns</i> (<i>ākār</i> , “ah” <i>tār</i>)	
1:19	<i>Sārgām tār</i>	
1:23	<i>Chhotā khyāl bandish</i> (both lines)	
1:40	<i>Antarā</i> in <i>vistār</i> style (high <i>sa</i>)	

FIGURE 5.5 *Listening Guide: Rāg Bāgeshri.*

mori rhuma jhuma ghara āyī (“my beloved enters swinging and swaying”) in medium *tintāl*. They sing the two-lined composition, and then Khansahib plays the *sitār*, accompanied by *tablist* Zakir Hussain, whose lilting accompaniment gives this performance rare life. At 1:06, the second section of the composition, the *antarā*, begins with the words *āyī nāchī* (“she came dancing . . .”). It includes part of a famous dance composition (*kita taka tun tun na*), and ends with a *sārgām tār*.

SONG TEXTS IN CLASSICAL STYLES

The texts of many *dhrupads*, *khyāls*, and *bhājans* were composed by the poets of the Bhakti Movement, a devotional tide that swept over North India from the south in the fifteenth century and enjoyed a great flowering for the next two hundred years (see Chapter 2). Sharing some ideals with the Protestant Reformation in Europe, the Bhakti Movement favored vernacular languages and an individual’s relationship to God

as being more important than the formal language (Sanskrit) or the strict regulations of organized religion. Later, in the late seventeenth century, another style of poetry became popular, the *rīti*, or mannerist, school. This often used stock images and settings (hence “mannerist”) celebrating female beauty, unrequited love, and domestic life in the large collective families. Love songs abound in this style, in which the lover is often alone, waiting for the arrival of the lover who is away. The text of *rāg Gaur Sārāṅ* (CD track 24) is of this type, as is the *rhuma jhuma* song of Vilayat Khan (CD track 30).

An important parallel of the otherwise predominantly Hindu Bhakti Movement was the rise in popularity of the Islamic Sufi sects in India. Sufism is a mystic branch of Islam, but individual schools of the Sufi orders follow the teachings of particular teachers, who, while embracing traditional Islam, emphasize a personalized approach, devotional immediacy, and toleration for many styles of worship. Their fervent devotional emphasis on love placed the Sufis in alignment with the Hindu’s expression of *bhakti* (devotion). Moreover, since many Hindu musicians needed to convert to Islam in order to secure positions at the Muslim courts (where they often took the name “Khan”), the latitude, openness, and kinship of the Sufis with the Hindu Bhaktis made the changeover more attractive. A favorite type of song of the Sufis is the *qawwālī*, which enjoyed a great surge in international popularity in the late twentieth century and continues today with singing of the Sabri Brothers and late Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan.

OTHER SONG GENRES

The film song (*filmi gīt*, refer to CD track 1) and the *ghazal* are the most popular song genres of North India. Along with the *bhajan* (CD track 13), the *ghazal* (CD track 31) has greatly influenced the film song. Coming to full flower in classical literature in Delhi in the eighteenth century, the *ghazal* is an Urdu-language poetic form fashioned in rhymed couplets, usually telling a story of unrequited love and longing. Ambiguity in the classical *ghazal* usually revolves around addressing the beloved: is it a woman or a metaphor for God? The images are often stock: the night, the stars, intoxication, wine, a tavern as a temple, among others. The film *ghazal* and its modern pop-song derivatives use some of these images, but most of the time the beloved is a woman or man. Many *ghazals* are clearly devotional, many are simply love songs, and many are both.

The Gramophone Company of India (now a subsidiary of EMI) began recording light-classical music in India in the first years of the twentieth century, and by 1910 there were more than 4000 titles in circulation. A genre that received much attention during this time was the *ghazal*.

Ghazal, Fana kais bana kaisī, ghazal in Rāg Bhairavi

sung by Jankibai, CD track 42

translated by Peter Manuel

0:00	A	<i>What are life and death when one is aware of Him?</i>
0:13	A	Repeat
0:22	A	<i>We enter into that house and descend to this house.</i>
0:31	B	<i>What is the relationship between Mohammad and Joseph?</i>
0:40	B'	Repeat
0:52	C	<i>Joseph was a suitor of Zuleikha while Mohammad was beloved of God</i>
1:00	A	Repeat
1:09	D	<i>Christ dwells in the seventh heaven</i>
1:17	D	Repeat
1:26	E	<i>But the Prophet is in the highest heaven.</i>
1:33	E	Repeat
1:44	D	<i>When I have surrendered, then it is only me alone</i>
1:52	D	Repeat
1:59	B	<i>At times I am created, at times I am my own god.</i>

FIGURE 5.6 *Listening Guide.*

The early *ghazal* recordings featured mostly women from a class of entertainers called *baijis*, who have some parallel with the geishas of Japan.



These highly accomplished ladies were great favorites of the royalty, landlords, and merchants; some even had amorous liaisons with them. They were extremely knowledgeable in music, dance, literature, shairi (the recitation of Urdu and Persian couplets), and many other arts, blessed with good looks and attractive personalities, beautiful manners and speech, and also an advanced sexual knowledge of the Kāma Sutra. The rich and the aristocracy would send their adoles-


cent sons to these courtesans in order to receive an all-round education!

Ravi Shankar, Ragamala



As an artistic community, they now retain only a shadow of their former glory, for they were the bearers not only of a rich music and dance legacy, but also of a learned and refined culture that functioned as an arm of court life. Ladies of this society had *-bai* added as a suffix to their name, such as Jankibai, who sings the *ghazal* on CD track 31. On this very early recording—1908—Jankibai sings a *ghazal* in the *rāg Bhairavi*. The rhythm is one of the many varieties of eight-beat *tāls* called *kaharwā*. The text is devotional, and is derived from stories in the *Koran*. Often the lines of each couplet are repeated. There are only four fundamental lines of melody (A, B, C, and D below, with B nearly the same as E), but each is repeated with a great deal of ornamentation, so a casual listening might neither reveal the simplicity of the song nor the intricate artistry of Jankibai.

CONCLUSION



From the Vedic chant to Lata Mangeshkar to Jagjit Singh (see CD track 42), India is steeped in song of every variety. In the lighter genres, the idea of *rāg* and its various types of regulated, stylized, and improvisatory performance formats are usually left behind—although there is a lingering suggestion of the melodic color of *rāg* in occasional songs. In the classical styles, the song is used as a springboard for the development of the *rāga*, and the artist's ability to compose *vistārs* and *tāns* on the spot becomes the main concentration of the performance (often leaving the song and its meaning far behind). The range of texts runs the gamut from the verbal syllable to devotional poetry, from linguistically-meaningless rhythmic sounds to very explicit images from classical and modern poetic sources. The great range of styles and genres makes Indian song a feast for the ear, and one that attracts and involves musicians on many levels, from devotional singers to virtuoso concert artists to popular superstars. One thing is sure, to be involved in Indian music on any level, is to sing; and further, to be absorbed in a gamut of explorational possibilities between fixed composition and improvisation.

The next chapter explores some of the same ideas from the perspective of instrumental music.