



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

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HINDUSTANI CLASSICAL MUSIC : AN OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

The broad outline of this exhaustive research on the origin, growth and development of Hindustani Classical Vocal Music is with the aim and intention of projecting to the world how this classical form has transformed itself with time and stayed relevant in spite of the rapid popularity attained by the newer musical genres like pop, jazz, hard rock and the like. Over the centuries, there have been hardly any changes in Hindustani Classical Musical gharanas or styles of singing and playing music. However, over time, newer musical instruments have been introduced and numerous other folk and classical styles have been fused together to create even greater musical harmony. The research also conclusively analyses the reasons for the popularity and success of classical forms of music after independence, in spite of the western onslaught, and credits it to the concerted efforts of the government wings as well as the deep-rooted traditions of Indians. Despite being modernised rapidly, we have not completely forgotten our culture and heritage. Lastly, my research also pays tribute to the great influencers of the modernist revival of classical Hindustani Vocal Music.

Hindustani music, one of the two principal types of South Asian classical music, is found mainly in the northern three-fourths of the subcontinent, where Indo-Aryan languages are spoken. Carnatic music, which is the other principal type, is found in southern India where the Dravidian languages are spoken. The central concept of both Hindustani and Carnatic Classical music is that of a melodic mode or *raga*, sung to a rhythmic cycle or *tala*. The tradition dates back to the ancient *Sama Veda* (*sāma* = ritual chant), which deals with the norms for the chanting of *srutis* or hymns such as in the Rig Veda. These principles were further refined in the *Natyashastra*, written by Bharata (second—third century C.E.) and the *Dattilam* (probably third—fourth century C.E.).

The two systems diverged gradually, beginning in the thirteenth century, when the Islamic conquest of northern parts of the subcontinent introduced the highly influential Arab and Persian musical practices—particularly, the influence of Sufi composers like Amir Khusro—and later on, by the influence of the artists in the courts of the Mughal Emperors. Noted composers such as Tan Sen flourished, along with religious groups like the Vaishnavites. After the sixteenth century, the singing styles diversified into different *gharanas* patronised in different princely courts. Around the year 1900, Pandit Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande consolidated the musical structures of Hindustani Classical music and classified them into a number of *thaats*. Strangely, the influence Islamic musical traditions played virtually no role in the development of Carnatic music.

The Hindustani tradition was born of a cultural synthesis of several musical streams: the Vedic-chanting tradition dating back to approximately one millennia B.C.E.; the equally ancient Persian tradition of *Musiqi-e assil*; as also folk traditions prevalent in the region. Terms like North Indian Classical Music or *Sh striya Sangeet* are also occasionally used to refer to Hindustani Classical Music.

Indian music is rooted in to the Vedas. It derives its essence, not so much from its structure and rules, as from the quest and goal—God. Believed to have originated from the *Samaveda*, initially only three *Swaras* of Hindustani classical music had evolved. The numbers rose from three to five and then to seven. Out of the seven *swaras*, five were further subdivided into *Komal* and *Tivra* variations. The spectrum, which finally evolved, covered a gamut of twelve *swaras*. This scale of twelve *swaras*, recognised by Indian Music, also forms the basis of all styles and forms of music all over the world. The *matras* of *Samaveda* were recited and were known as *Samgan*, which had three types of *swaras* or tones—*Anudatta* (low-

pitch), *Udatya* (high-pitch) and *Swarita* (in-between low and high pitches).

The roots of Hindustani Music are also traced to the emergence of *Dhrupad* and *Dhamar*. It further developed into Vocal and Instrumental Streams. There was further emergence of *Khayal* from *Dhrupad* as a result of influence of the Mughal era. Love, humour, pathos, anger, heroism, terror, disgust, wonder and serenity are the *nava rasas* or nine basic emotions which are fundamental to all Indian aesthetics, be it Hindustani or Carnatic.

Indian classical music has seven basic notes or *swaras*, with five interspersed half-notes, resulting in a 12-note scale. Unlike the 12-note scale in Western music, the base frequency of the scale is not fixed, and inter-tonal gaps (temper) may also vary; however with the gradual replacement of the *sarangi* by the harmonium, an equal-tempered scale has come to be used increasingly. The performance is set to a melodic pattern (*raga* or *raga*) characterised in part by specific ascent (*Arohana*) and descent (*Avarohana*) sequences, which may not be identical. Other characteristics include *Vadi* and *Samvadi* notes and a unique note phrase called *Pakad*. Additionally, each *raga* has a natural register (*Ambit*) and glissando (*Meend*) rules, as well as features that are specific to different styles and compositions within its particular structure. Performances are usually marked by considerable improvisations yet, keeping within the ambit of these norms.

Hindustani musical performance is based on a composition that is set to a meter and from which extemporised variations are generated. These compositions are transmitted directly from the teacher (*guru*) to the student (*sishya*); though notation systems exist, they are intended mostly as mnemonic devices. Most Hindustani Classical musicians are associated with a *gharana*—a musical lineage or group descended through apprenticeship from a particular composer or musician. Traditionally distinguished performers are awarded titles of respect—Hindus are usually referred to as 'Pandit' and Muslims as 'Ustad'. Going back to the times of Sufi music, Hindustani Classical music has embodied a tradition of religious neutrality—it is common for Muslim Ustads to sing Hindu *bhajans* and vice versa.

A typical Hindustani performance, which may last well over an hour, begins with a long, non-metrical improvisation (*alapa* or *alap*) by the singer or melodic soloist, followed by *jor* or improvisation without a metrical cycle but with a perceptible pulse, and eventually, by the similar but faster *jhala*. This is

followed by the composed piece, which is performed with improvised variations—most typically Khayal—a poetic form in vocal music—and *gat*—a short, rhythmically distinctive theme—in instrumental music. Here, the soloist is accompanied by the percussionist on a *tabla*, and the improvisations often involve various kinds of virtuosic rhythmic competition and cooperation.

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