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Cultural Centre of India

Indian Culture Comes to You: Music of India



Classroom photo by Rich Sofranko

STUDY GUIDE

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Artists on Tour

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Music has always been regarded as the most philosophical of all art forms, perhaps due to its exciting and invigorating blend of art as well as science. Indian music occupies a prominent position with its religious traditions and faiths. Music is intertwined in Indian life and culture from birth to death; songs, dances and musical instruments are used for every occasion.

The roots for almost every kind of Indian music can be traced to the Indian classical music and can be classified into Carnatic and Hindustani systems. Indian classical music is complex and rich with direct emotional appeal. Carnatic music is lyrical oriented, while Hindustani music emphasizes musical structure and the possibilities in it. Indian musicians essentially regard their music as a means of spiritual exploration, path of realization, in addition to deriving aesthetic enjoyment.

Indian music is rich in variety and diversity. While the science of the music stresses conformity, discipline and acoustic accuracy, the beauty of Indian classical music is the immense freedom that it allows the performer – the freedom to improvise.

Following topics will be discussed during the workshop:

- Basic concepts of Indian music: sruti (key or pitch), raga (melody), laya (rhythm), and sahitya (compositions).
- Forms of Music: Carnatic, Hindustani, Light Music, Devotional, Folk, Ghazals, IndiPop, Quawwali, Patriotic, and Film Music (in different languages)
- Musical Instruments

During the workshop:

- Children will listen to music clips
- Sing seven basic notation variations: sa ri ga ma pa da ni
- Learn and sing age appropriate songs

INTRODUCTION

Music has always been regarded as the most philosophical of all the art forms in India, perhaps due to its exciting and invigorating blend of art as well as science. Indian classical music was referred to as shastriya sangeetham which means 'scientific music'. However, while the science of the music stresses conformity, discipline and acoustic accuracy, the beauty of Indian classical music is the immense freedom that it allows the performer – the freedom to improvise.

The historical roots of this tradition can be found in Bharata's "Natya Shastra" (Science of Dancing), circa fourth century BC, a treatise that presents a rich, all-encompassing cultural fabric of dance, music and drama. Since then, the literature on Indian classical music has evolved richly and dramatically.



Indian music refines one's soul, discipline one's body, make one aware of the infinite within one, and unite one's breath with that of space and one's vibrations with that of the cosmos.

THE ROLE OF MUSIC IN INDIAN SOCIETY

European and American ideas regarding “classical” and “folk” music do not apply to Indian music. Traditional and modern, codified (marga) and regional (deshi) styles mingle in every performance. Religion is much more an integral part of daily life in India than in Europe and America.

On the other hand, music also relates to various social customs without being “religious music” in the Western sense of the word. There exists an old tradition of classical music for art’s sake. For most Indians, music is, of course, a means of distraction from daily worries, a form of entertainment among others. Although the mass media (cinema, radio, television) have changed popular tastes and introduced many foreign and modern elements, it still can be said that Carnatic music always remains unmistakably South Indian in character and temperament.

The idea of an individual and permanent musical “work” is still not very important in India. Perhaps it does not relate to prevailing philosophies about the nature of the universe and man’s role in the scheme of evolution. More important, therefore, than the reproduction of a finished work is the understanding of stylistic principles underlying traditional music.

The musical structure consists of Swara (the seven musical notes)—Sa, Ri, Ga, Ma, Pa, Da and Ni in an octave; each of which has a distinct character. Raga (melody) is a musical scale having a definite combination of musical notes (swaras) – in the ascending (Arohana) and descending (Avarohana) order. A melody (Raga) can be sung or played without lyrics or rhythm and each melody (Raga) has a mood. There are melodies (Ragas) which display the emotions of happiness, sorrow, anger, etc., and also those that symbolize sunrise, dusk or night. The sound of certain notes within a melody (Raga) evoke particular feelings or moods.

There are two main streams of Indian classical music: Hindustani music, the music of North India; and Carnatic music, the music of the South.

Indian classical music is melodic in nature. It does not allow the four-part vertical harmony of Western classical music. It does, however, allow linear or horizontal harmony, in the form of unison harmony (singing in unison or playing different instruments), octave harmony (playing the same melodic music in two different octaves), tonal or background harmony (an ensemble that includes instruments with varying tonal characteristics), and also drone harmony (provided by the drone instrument).

The beauty of Indian classical music lies in the smooth and wave-like passage from one note to another. The music, which is melody-based, is filled with poly-rhythms and delicate nuances and is embellished with unimposed grace notes, and note ornamentations (collectively known as gamakas-s).



CARNATIC MUSIC STYLE

Carnatic music is considered one of the oldest systems of music in the world and it developed in Southern India. Purandara Dasa is known as the Father of Carnatic Music. An important element of Carnatic music is its devotional content. The base of the lyrics of the traditional composition is devotional or philosophical. Three saint composers of the 19th century—Tyagaraja, Muthuswami Dikshitar and Shyama Shastri—have composed thousands of songs popular with musicians and audiences. The Carnatic form owes its evolution to such scholars who defined the system and gave it a clear format.

The basis of Carnatic music is the system of ragas and rhythmic cycles (talas). There are seven rhythmic cycles and 72 fundamental melodies (Ragas). All other melodies (Ragas) are considered to have developed from these. The scheme developed to identify these scales, known as the 72 Melakarta melodies (Ragas).

The seven musical notes (swaras)—

Shadjam (Sa),

Rishabam (Ri),

Gandharam (Ga),

Madhyamam (Ma),

Panchamam (Pa),

Dhaivatham (Da) and

Nishadam (Ni)—

are associated with the sounds produced by certain animals and the names of the musical notes (swaras) are related to the names of these animals.

The basic concepts of Carnatic music are:

sruti (key or pitch),

raga (melody),

laya (rhythm), and

sahitya (compositions).

The basic concepts:

The adage “sruti mata laya pita” refers to key or pitch (sruti) as the mother and rhythm (laya) as the father of Carnatic music; they are integral to the music.

There is no absolute rule for selecting the base key or pitch (sruti) in a concert. It is selected by the main artiste, and remains constant for the whole duration of the concert. The selection of the base key or pitch (sruti) depends on the range of the artiste’s voice (in a vocal concert) or on the range of the instrument (in an instrumental concert). The accompanying artistes tune to this base key or pitch (sruti),

in order to perform in unisonal harmony. The drone instrument (tampura) is also tuned to the base key or pitch (sruti) which creates a meditative mood through its resonating and reverberating drone.

The melody (Raga) is the central concept in Indian classical music. The notes of a melody (Raga) are transposed relative to the base or pitch (sruti) that is chosen for the concert. The semantics that describe a melody (Raga) are highly intricate; even the slightest hint of a wrong note, or even a quarter note, may invoke the theme of a different melody (Raga) altogether.

Rhythm (laya) is an important facet of Carnatic music. The generic concept of rhythm (laya) may be expressed in terms of the organization of beats according to predefined rules (tala) and speed. Apart from the melody (Raga), the composer of a song also specifies its organization of beats according to predefined rules (tala) and its speed.

A composition in Carnatic music is a piece of measured music set in a particular melody (raga) and organization of beats according to predefined rules (tala). Most compositions are generally made up of three distinctly identifiable sections: pallavi, anupallavi and charanam. Each section of a composition leads the performer into structured sequences of progressively complex melodic and rhythmic variations, while providing ample scope for improvisation. The pallavi is repeated at the end of each of the other sections and is generally ornamented by a completion theme (or teermanam), performed by the percussionist. Each of the sections can begin at any point in the organization of beats according to predefined rules (tala cycle) on or off the beat. A section can be sung any number of times with pre-set or sometimes, extempore variations of lines of prose.

THE VIOLIN

In Carnatic music tradition, the singer sits cross-legged on the podium. A violinist, who sits beside the singer, normally provides constant accompaniment throughout a concert. The violin is placed firmly between foot and chest of the performer. This enables rapid hand movements that are necessary for the innumerable slides, oscillations, grace notes and other types of note ornamentations that are so intrinsic to (and typical of) Carnatic music. Although identical to the Western violin and imported into Indian classical music (possibly in the late 18th century), the adaptation of this instrument to the culture is so complete and total that most Indians would naturally assume that the instrument is indigenous!



THE VEENA

The Veena is one of the most ancient string instruments of India. Its origin can be traced back to the ancient yash, a stringed instrument, similar to the Grecian harp.

The Veena is 1.5m long and is made from jackwood. It has a large, round body with a thick, wide neck, the end of which is carved into the head of a dragon. A small resonator is attached to the underside of the neck.

Melody is produced on four metal strings, which run above the frets and are stretched over a wide bridge that sits on the body of the Veena. Three other strings run alongside the neck of the instrument. These are used for maintaining time and for playing the drone. The performer, who sits cross-legged on the stage, rests the small resonator on the left lap. The fingers of the left hand are used to press, pull and glide on the frets, while the fingers of the right hand are used to pluck and twang the strings.

The Veena is a complete instrument and provides the basic components: key or pitch (sruti), rhythm (laya) and composition (sahitya). Its main attraction is the mellow tonal quality which is capable of evoking a meditative atmosphere.



THE MRDANGAM

The mrdangam is used to provide rhythmic accompaniment. The name mrdangam originated from the Sanskrit phrase mrit-anga meaning 'clay body'. It is a two-headed, barrel-shaped drum. The left head provides the bass and has two layers of hide. The top layer is cut in a perfect circle with a large diameter, to expose the inner layer. White paste (made out of semolina) is continuously applied during the concert to maintain the tonal quality of the left head. The mrdangam has a remarkably crisp, well-defined sound. It is played with dexterous movements of the whole hand, wrists and fingers.

The different forms of improvisation add different facets to Carnatic music and, thereby, provide variety. The ability to improvise varies from performer to performer. Moreover, each of these forms of improvisation evokes different moods. Again, the ability to evoke, characterize and exploit these different moods vary from performer to performer and form an integral part of the exhaustive and demanding training that is required. All of the above make Carnatic music a highly refined, demanding, complex and, most importantly, an exciting art form.



HINDUSTANI MUSIC STYLE

The Hindustani form of Indian classical music developed in Northern India. Hindustani music is based on the melody (Raga). It is the medium of expression of emotion and in nature it lies between a scale and a tune. A scale is just a set of notes, which can be used flexibly whereas a tune is rigid in terms of spontaneous creation of melody. A melody is made up of a specific selection of tones. In a scale all notes are equal whereas a melody (raga) has notes of greater and lesser significance. A melody (raga) has well defined characteristic phrases that are used in its performance. Each melody (raga) is also associated to a particular mood, and to a particular time of day or season of the year. A melody (raga) must contain a minimum of five notes from the basic seven known as sa, re, ga, ma pa, dha, and ni. Apart from sa and pa which are constant, the other notes may be in major or minor tone, and could lead to various combinations. Ten basic scales are recognized, and other ragas are considered to have evolved from these. Depending on the notes included in it, each melody (raga) acquires a distinct character. The form of the melody (raga) is also determined by the particular pattern of ascent and descent of the notes. The three most important genres of Hindustani vocal music are: dhrupad, khayaal, and thumree.

Dhrupad is the oldest and perhaps the grandest form of Hindustani vocal music. It is said to have descended from an older form called the prabandha and adapted for court performance during the reign of Raja Man Singh Tomar of Gwalior. It requires rigorous training to perfect this genre and hence has been in decline since the 18th century.

Khayal is the most prominent genre of Hindustani (vocal) music. Its origins are a mystery. Some people trace its origins to "Sadarang" Nyaamat Khan, a musician in the Mughal court of Muhammad Shah "Rangila". A khayaal is also composed in a particular melody (raga), the organization of beats according to predefined rules (taal) and has a text, which is very brief. The khayaal texts range from praise of kings or seasons, description of seasons to the pranks of Krishna (incarnation of God Vishnu), divine love, sorrow of separation, etc. The texts contain rhyme, alliteration, and play on words.

Thumree originated from Lucknow and Benares in the 19th century. This genre is considered to be "light classical" music. Thumrees are composed in lighter melodies (ragas) and have simpler organization of beats (taalas). It also is composed in melody (raga) and organization of beats (taal) and the text. The text of a Thumree is usually romantic. Unlike a khayaal, the text is pronounced very clearly during the performance and the emotions expressed in the text are brought out musically.

INDIAN INSTRUMENTS

Instrumental music has universal appeal, the richness and soothing tones can be appreciated without language and regional barriers. The history of Indian musical instruments can be gathered from various sources such as literature (folk, general) and visual representations (paintings, sculptures, models). Most of the Indian musical instruments still remain in use.

Almost every Indian God is associated with a musical instrument. There are many musical instruments to be found among the sculptures existing in various temples, cave temples and Buddhist pillars (stupas) in all parts of India. The therapeutic use of musical instruments had been understood from early days.

The instruments are mostly made using wood, leather, skin, and clay. The making of the musical instruments requires great skill and practice in the manufacturing process, combined with some basic knowledge of music and acoustical principles.

The Indian musical instruments are classified into four major categories:

- String instruments (Tata vadya),
- Wind instruments (Sushira vadya),
- Membrane covered (Avanaddha vadya) and
- Solid percussion instruments (Ghana vadya).

1. **Tata vadya–String instruments** (Chordophones)

This is further classified based on the mode of playing:

- by friction with a bow like the violin, sarangi, dilruba, esraj, etc.
- by plucking the string like the veena, rudra veena, gotuvadyam, sitar, sarod, guitar, mandolin, harp, (tambura, ektar -drone instruments) etc.
- by striking with a hammer or a pair of sticks like gettuvadyam, swaramandala

2. **Sushira vadya–Wind instruments**

This section comprises hollow instruments where wind is the producer of sound. These can be further classified by mode of playing:

- those where wind is supplied by some mechanical means, commonly bellows—e.g. organ, harmonium
- those where the wind is supplied by the breath of the performer, which can be further classified as mouth blown and nose blown

3. **Avanaddha vadya–Membrane covered** (Membranophonous)

This section comprises percussion instruments. These can be further classified by mode of playing:

- those played by hand—e.g. mridangam
- those played using sticks
- those played partly by hand and partly by stick—e.g. tavil
- self struck—e.g. damaru
- those where one side is struck and the other side stroked—e.g. perumal madu drum

4. Ghana vadya—Solid percussion instruments

This covers instruments made out of metal, wood, stone or clay but those that are solid like the ghatam, kartal, gongs, cymbals, etc.

BANSURI: The Bansuri is a deceptively simple bamboo flute. The Indian-style flute uses no keys, tone control being a matter of breath control and careful fingering on the six or seven holes in the flute.



DHOLAK: The Dholak is a small barrel-shaped drum, used mostly for folk music. It is sometimes heard in percussion ensembles, or accompanying Qawwali concerts.

HARMONIUM: An instrument introduced by the British, the harmonium is like a small pump organ. It is used as an accompaniment for a vocalist.



TABLA: Tabla is the most common percussion instrument in Hindustani music, and almost any concert will include a tabla player. The instrument consists of two drums, one played with the right hand, one played with the left. The right hand drum is tuned to the drone, and thus provides an extra reinforcement of the fundamental pitch.

TANPURA: The Tanpura is the most common source of a drone in Indian classical music concerts. It is a long-necked lute without frets. It usually has four to six strings, which are strummed continuously throughout the performance.



SANTOOR: Another instrument which until recently was used mainly for folk music, the Santoor is the Indian version of the hammered dulcimer. The classical version has 84 strings. It is traditionally associated with the province of Rajasthan.



SARANGI: The sarangi is the principal bowed instrument in modern Hindustani music. A typical sarangi has three main playing strings, and from 35-40 sympathetic strings.

SAROD: One of the two main plucked string instruments in Hindustani music, the sarod is a fretless instrument with generally 25 strings. Of these 25, 15 are sympathetic strings, and six more are tuned to various drones, leaving four main playing strings. It is played with a plectrum made out of a piece of coconut shell.



SHEHNAI: The Shehnai is a double-reed wind instrument (like an oboe). Traditionally it was used mostly for outdoor celebrations, and for temple music.

SITAR: The sitar is probably the best-known of the instruments of India. It is a long-necked plucked lute, typically with about 18 strings (11 sympathetic, 3 - 5 drone strings, and 2 - 4 playing strings).



ACTIVITIES

ACTIVITY 1



Practice the following rhythmic cycles (talas)

The tala system of Carnatic music is unique in the world of music. The time measures used in Southern Indian music are innumerable and varied, and they occupy an important position in Carnatic music. Talas organize rhythm in music. All aspects of percussion are bound by a constantly repeated cycle of beat called tala. The talas are not just recurrent time cycles, they rather have their individual structure and influence on music. Just as a raga extols the mood (bhavam) of the song, so does the tala, which reveals the mood of the song.

Each and every tala has a structure that is governed by the rules pertaining to it. For example, if we take the most common tala (Adi Talam), we can describe the process of the tala thus:

One beat of the palm of the hand on the thigh,
followed by counting three fingers,
then beating the palm and turning it over,
then beating the palm and turning it over

1. **Adi Talam** (8 beat cycle)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
clap	small	ring	middle	clap	wave	clap	wave
	finger	finger	finger				

If we count a number each for every beat, finger count or turn of the palm – the number comes to eight. So the tala has eight units.

The first part of the tala which consists of the beating of the palm and counting is called Laghu. Here the number of units is four (Chatusram) and the laghu is Chatusra laghu. The next process of beat and turning the palm is called Drtham. It is done twice, so the tala has two drthams.

2. **Eka Talam - | -one laghu** (4 beat cycle)

1	2	3	4
clap	small	ring	middle
	finger	finger	finger

ACTIVITY 2

Practice singing the following seven notes:

Simple Notes (Sarali Varisai)

This exercise is practiced to develop a good sense of key or pitch (sruti) and rhythm (laya). Different combinations of the musical notes (swaras) are practiced in a minimum of three different speeds, while keeping the speed of talam constant. In the first speed, one swara is sung for one beat (one unit of talam).

For example:

Sa ri ga ma | pa dha ni sa

Sa ni da pa | ma ga ri sa

In the second speed, two swaras are sung for one unit of a talam.

For example:

Sari gama padha nisa | Sani dapa maga risa

Sari gama padha nisa | Sani dapa maga risa

In the third speed four swaras are sung for one unit of a talam.

For example:

Sarigama padhanisa Sanidhapa magarisa | Sarigama padhanisa Sanidhapa magarisa

Sarigama padhanisa Sanidhapa magarisa | Sarigama padhanisa Sanidhapa magarisa

Increasing speed means doubling the swaras from the previous speed. Likewise, various combinations are practiced.

Double Notes (Jantai Varisai)

The next exercise consists of repeating the same swara twice with stress on the second swara. Here also, different combinations in three speeds are practiced.

For example:

sasa riri gaga mama | papa dhadha nini sasa

sasa nini dhadha papa | mama gaga riri sasa

ACTIVITY 3

Research famous musicians of India.

ACTIVITY 4

All the movies produced in India are musicals. Can you name any of the famous musicals produced in Hollywood? If not, try to find out what some are.

REFERENCES



Following websites have good information about Indian music:

<http://www.musicindiaonline.com/>

<http://www.ravishankar.org/>

<http://www.sruti.org/>

<http://www.culturopedia.com/default.htm>

BOOKS

The Life of Music in North India: The Organization of an Artistic Tradition by Daniel M. Neuman

Raga Mala: The Autobiography of Ravi Shankar by Ravi Shankar, et al

The Music of India by H. A. Popley

Acoustical Perspective on Raga—Rasa Theory by Suvarnalata Rao

The Rags of North Indian Music: Their Structure and Evolution by Nazir Ali Jairazbhoy