
Forms and Styles of Hindustani Vocal Music

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Abstract

Indian Classical Music has been divided into two sub-genres, Hindustani Shastriya Sangeet popular in northern part of India and Carnatic Music, practiced in the southern part of India. Most forms of music has at least three main elements - melody, rhythm and harmony. Because of its contemplative, spiritual nature, Hindustani (north Indian) classical music is a solitary pursuit that focuses mainly on melodic development. In performance, rhythm also plays an important role, giving texture, sensuality and a sense of purpose to melody. Instruments like tabla, pakhavaj etc. are used to provide rhythm. While, instruments like tanpura are accompanied to provide harmony.

In Hindustani classical music, once one has learnt the basic notes, he/she is introduced to ragas (which are like musical themes), and then is encouraged to start improvising and making his own melodies. The main thing Hindustani classical music does is to explore the melodic and emotional potential of different sets of notes. About five hundred ragas are known (including historical ragas) today. While in carnatic music, there are 72 melakartas in which most compositions are based.

Since not everyone can master the rigorous training essential to appreciate hindustani classical music, many forms were given rise to which were semi-classical and light in nature. These styles are less rigid so that anyone can practice and compose songs. Later, light music was adopted in movies. Many singers composed in this style. Due to the influence of films and television, these compositions came in the limelight of the masses and gained popularity. Folk music on the other hand is diverse because of India's vast cultural diversity. Though it is weakened due to the arrival of movies and the western pop culture, saints and poets have large musical libraries and traditions to their name.

In this article, we explore these forms of Hindustani Vocal Music in detail.

I. Classical Style

The classical forms of hindustani music are the oldest forms of music in north India. Since they have been passed on for countless generations, the compositions conform to the raag they belong to. There are very few or no deviations from the original raag. Usually to master them, years of practice is required.

A. Dhrupad and Dhamar

The word Dhrupad is derived from 'dhruva' (the fixed pole star) and 'pada' (meaning poetry). Dhrupad (or Dhrupad) is a form of devotional music that traces its origin to the

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ancient text of Sam Veda. It is a major tradition of Indian culture. It has survived until today in its original form. It was adapted for court performance during the reign of Raja Maan Singh Tomar of Gwalior state, who propagated this style extensively in North India.

This style is spiritual by nature. This style was used to sing the 'stuties' of many deities. Its main aim is not to entertain, but to stimulate feelings of peace and contemplation within the listener. In fact, prior to the reign of Akbar, it was performed almost exclusively in temples. During Akbar's reign, stalwarts like Swami Haridas and Tansen performed it in his court.

Dhrupad music has two major parts, Alap and Dhrupad. Alap is sung without words, Dhrupad (the fixed composition part) is sung with the accompaniment of Pakhawaj. The alap begins very slowly and the tempo gradually increases. The alap comprises the major part of the performance and uncovers the personality of the raga. The singer uses certain syllables (Nom, Tom, Ri, Na, Ta) that have a very peaceful and meditative effect. These syllables are taken from a Mantra and denote various Hindu gods. The artist concludes the alap after exploring the three octaves and is joined by the Pakhawaj as the Dhrupad starts.

In this style, improvisations are not allowed (as conveyed by 'dhruva'). However, Laykaries are carried out. Typically, this style is considered suitable for male singers, preferably performed by two 'Kalvants'.

The recital is concluded with a Dhamar. A dhamar is a composition in praise of Lord Krishna. This is sung in the dhamar taal and usually describe the love pranks of Radha-Krishna.

The suitable taals are Chaartaal (14 mastras), Shooltaal (10 mastras), Brahmataal (18 mastras) etc. Dhrupad compositions were originally written in Sanskrit, but later, most were written in Brij bhasha.

B. Khayal Gayaki

The word 'Khayal' in the Persian language literally means imagination. The Khayal gayaki originated as a popular form of music in the 18th century AD and was ultimate in the blending of Hindu and Persian cultures. It was popularized by Nyaamat Khan and his nephew Firoz Khan, in the Mughal court of Muhammad Shah 'Rangiley'.

Khayal is dependent to a large extent on the imagination of the performer and the improvisations he is able to incorporate. Khayal is less rigid when compared to Dhrupad and Dhamar. The most important features of a Khayal are 'Tans' or the running glides over notes and 'Bol-tans' which distinguishes it from Dhrupad.

The Khayal texts range from praise of kings or seasons, description of seasons to the pranks of Lord Krishna, divine love and sorrow of separation. The compositions contain a play of words. Many poetic devices such as rhyme, alliteration etc. are used.

There are two forms of Khayal style:

1. Bada-Khayal (or Vilambit Khayal): A slow composition in taals like Ektaal, Jhoomra, Tilwada etc.
2. Chhota-Khayal (or Drut Khayal): A fast composition in Teentaal, Drut Ektaal, Jhaptaal etc.

Like Dhrupad, Khayal is also composed in Brij bhasha. Essentially, the tanpura and tabla accompany Khayal performances. Other ensembles include the sarangi, harmonium, violin and swarmandal.

Khayal gayaki established its presence in most parts of Northern India. There are six main Gharanas (schools) in Khayal: Delhi, Patiala, Agra, Gwalior, Kirana and Atrauli-Jaipur. In fact, even today Khayal gayaki is a representative style of Hindustani system.

C. Tarana and Thillana

Tarana is a type of composition in Hindustani classical vocal music in which certain words and syllables (e.g. odani, todani, tadeem and yalali) based on Persian and Arabic phonemes are rendered at a medium or fast pace. It was invented by Amir Khusro.

The structure consists of a main melody, usually short, repeated many times, with variation and elaboration at the performer's discretion. There is a second, contrasting melody, usually with higher notes, which is introduced once before returning to the main melody. The tarana may include a Persian couplet, and may use syllables from sitar or tabla such as "dar-dar" or "dir-dir"; singers might recite full compositions (e.g. tihais, gats, tukdas) within the body of the tarana. Thillana is the carnatic counterpart of tarana. But, unlike tarana, it does not include persian verses.

II. Semi-Classical Style

The semi-classical forms were invented so that anyone with enough practice could compose music of their own. As compared to the classical forms, these are less rigorous and give more freedom to the singer. Some of the major ones are described in this section.

A. Thumri

Thumri is a semi-classical vocal form said to have begun with the court of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah in Lucknow. It was sung by the courtesans. The term 'thumri' is derived from the Hindi verb thumakna which means "to walk with dancing steps so as to make the ankle-bells tinkle". The form is, thus, connected with dance, dramatic gestures, mild eroticism, evocative love poetry and folk songs of Uttar Pradesh.

As in khayal, thumri too has two parts, the sthai and the antara. It favours taals such as Deepchandi, Roopak, Adhataal, and Punjabi. These taals are characterized by a special lilt, nearly absent in the taals used in khayal. Thumri compositions are mostly in ragas such as Desh, Kafi, Khamaj, Bhairavi, Pilu and Pahadi etc. A common feature of these and other such raags is the free movement they allow the artist, since they do not depend for their identity on rigidly formulated tonal sequences, irrespective of the compositions involved. In fact, one may say that they have a built-in provision for mixing raags or for moving out of the raga actually presented in order to add colour to the proceedings.

The compositions are usually set to kehrawa taal of 8 beats, addha tal of 16 beats, deepchandi of 14 beats or jat of 16 beats and in dadra tal of 6 beats.

Unlike the khayal, which pays meticulous attention to unfolding a raga, thumri restricts itself to expressing the colours of shringar rasa by combining melody and words. Thus, a khayal

singer is capable of encompassing and expressing a wide range of complex emotions.

B. Dadra

Dadra has a close resemblance to Thumri. It is mostly performed in Agra and in Bundelkhand region. Originally, it was accompanied by dadra taal (from where the term for the genre was borrowed), but later dadra compositions were often found in other light taals such as keherwa.

As compared to Thumri, Dadra has more than one antara. Singers usually sing a Dadra composition after a Thumri.

C. Chaiti

Chaiti is a semi-classical song sung in the Hindu calendar month of Chait, ie. during the summers. The songs typically have the name of Lord Rama.

Chaiti evokes the aura of romanticism and the mood of love. The most common theme of a Chaiti is the depiction of scene where a girl asks her husband for a new bridal dress. In many Chaiti songs newly married young bride expresses her shyness at meeting her beloved.

It is traditionally sung in the villages and towns of Uttar Pradesh: around Banaras, Mirzapur, Mathura, Allahabad and the Bhojpur regions of Bihar.

D. Tappa

‘Tappa’ means ‘to jump’ in Persian. Tappa originated from the folk songs of the camel riders of Punjab. This style of music was refined and introduced to the imperial court of the Mughal Emperor Muhammad Shah. Later on, it was continued by Mian Ghulam Nabi Shori (a.k.a Shori Mian), a court singer of Asaf-Ud-Dowlah, Nawab of Awadh.

Tappa is a folklore of love and passion written in Punjabi. Its beauty lies in the quick intricate display of various combinations of notes. Its compositions are very short and are based on shringar ras. It has a fast, subtle and knotty construction. Its tunes are melodious, sweet and depict the emotional outbursts of a lover.

Even though it originated in Punjab, Varanasi and Gwalior are its strongholds.

E. Bhajan

The origin of India’s Bhajan genre can be traced back many years to the hymns found in the “Sama Veda,” which is the third Veda in the Hindu religious scriptures. Bhajan songs are essentially religious praise songs that were written between the 14th and 17th centuries. Even though these songs date back many centuries, they still play a major role in India’s society today.

Bhajan music doesn’t have a fixed form. Instead, Bhajan music consists of a wide range of musical styles like musical chant, classical devotional songs, high quality poetic music, and more recently low quality poetic music known as the dhun. This varying range of musical styles is due to the fact that anyone who wants to do so can compose and perform a Bhajan piece. Although Bhajans don’t have a fixed form, they do share many similarities among them. They all have a fixed theme of religion, and they all have secondary themes about

different aspects of that religion.

The most common instruments that are found in Bhajan's are: the Kartal, Harmonium, Manjira, Dafli, Sitar, Dholak, Tabla, Surpeti, and the Tanpura. The main function of the Tanpura, Surpeti etc. in Bhajan music is to provide the drone. The Harmonium often plays the melody, while the Tabla keeps the beat.

F. Hori

Hori is sung during the festival of Holi capturing its joyous and playful spirit.

Shringar rasa dominates in the Hori compositions. Though most of the songs are upbeat in nature, there are few based on viraha evoking the pathos of two separated lovers. In Mathura-Vrindavan, every hori revolves around Radha-Krishna and is called Raas. In Awadh region, one would find many compositions on Ram and his brothers playing Holi in the stype.

G. Chaturang

'Chaturang' literally means 'four colours'. It is a very appealing style of singing that compactly combines sections from four diverse classical forms - khayal, tarana, sargam and tirwat, all in the same raga.

The bandish is crisp and has a well-structured sthayi. The antara is rendered at first in madhya or drut laya. This is followed by a rapid tarana, which in turn gives way to sargam and the performance is rounded off with an enchanting tirwat, or the melodic use of pakhawaj and tabla bols.

Like tarana, chaturang relies on the use of meaningless sounds to develop ragas. Yet, as signified by its name, it brings together a spectrum of four 'colours' into one band. Each stands separately, but the whole coalesces to give a 'rainbow' effect.

III. Semi-Classical Style

A light musical composition may or may not display the elements of the raag it is based on. It is more flexible than the semi-classical form and is not bounded by any rules. For eg. it can also be tunes hummed and passed through the word of mouth for generations. Two of the famous light music styles are Ghazal and Qawwali.

A. Ghazal

The word ghazal is an Arabic word that literally means a "discourse". It originated in Iran in the 10th century AD and became the most popular form of poetry in Iran.

Although ghazals are poems, around the 20th century, ghazal was finally adopted as music. The development of the recording and film industries created a mass media that was well suited to the musical ghazal. They also created an environment where it was convenient to treat the ghazal as though it were a mere geet.

This style usually has a recurring rhyme and theme of love, whether it was about heart aches,

lost love, forbidden love, or even unacquainted love. The first couplet of the ghazal is the most important one; this is called the “malta” (Academy of American Poets). This is so important because it is an introduction to the ghazal and basically allows people to have an idea of what to expect.

The main instruments used for ghazal music today are familiar instruments such as clarinets, flutes, and guitars and also some foreign instruments that many may or may have not heard before are those such as mandolins, Japanese drum, accordion, and ukulele. The original ghazal instruments included the Indian sitar, tabla and harmonium, instruments that we have grown familiar in the World Cultures chapter readings.

B. Qawwali

The word Qawwali is derived from the Urdu word Qual which means ‘utterance (of the prophet)’. Qawwali is a form of Sufi devotional music in South Asia. It is popular in the Punjab and Sindh regions of Pakistan, in many parts of North India including Hyderabad and Delhi, and many parts of Bangladesh. It is part of a musical tradition that stretches back for more than 700 years.

Delhi's Sufi saint Amir Khusro Dehlavi of the Chisti order of Sufis is credited with fusing the Persian, Arabic, Turkish, and Indian musical traditions in the late 13th century in India to create Qawwali.

Originally performed mainly at Sufi shrines or dargahs throughout South Asia, it has also gained mainstream popularity through films. The songs which constitute the qawwali repertoire are primarily in Urdu and Punjabi.

A group of qawwali musicians typically consists of eight or nine men including a lead singer, one or two side singers, one or two harmoniums, and percussion. There is also a chorus of four or five men who repeat key verses, and who aid percussion by hand-clapping. The performers sit cross-legged on the ground in two rows - the lead singer, side singers and harmonium players in the front row, and the chorus and percussionists in the back row.

IV. Folk Music

India is a land of cultural diversities. Every region in India has its own form of folk music. Folk music is very different from the other forms. Folk music is learnt since childhood as children grow up on these songs. Most of the songs are sung in small village functions like weddings, births, etc. Let us explore a few of them.

A. Kajari

The word Kajri is possibly a derivative of Kajal - meaning Kohl or Black. In a country of sizzling hot summers - the black monsoon clouds bring with them relief and great joy - with a need to sing out loud. This is the moment for the Kajri to be sung. Mirzapur is considered the real home of the Kajari.

It is often sung during the rainy season and is used to describe the longing of a maiden for her

lover as the black monsoon cloud come hanging in the summer skies.

There are two forms of Kajri singing in UP - one within which it is sung on a performance platform and the other when it is sung by women on monsoon evenings, while dancing in a semi-circle - known as the 'Dhunmuniya Kajri'.

B. Rabindra Sangeet

Rabindra Sangeet are songs written and composed by Rabindranath Tagore. They are influenced by the thumri style of Hindustani music. They ran the entire gamut of human emotion, ranging from his early dirge-like Brahmo devotional hymns to quasi-erotic compositions.

Some songs mimicked a given raga's melody and rhythm faithfully; others newly blended elements of different *ragas*. It is said that his songs are the outcome of five centuries of Bengali literary churning and communal yearning.

The songs cover topics from humanism, psychology, romance, yearning, nostalgia, modernism etc. They are usually composed in the styles of tappa, baul, kirtan. They are set to a variety of taals, like dadra, ektaal, rupak, dhamar, teentaal, jhaptaal, etc.

Tagore also wrote a book called Gitabitan ("Garden of songs"), forming a collection of all 2,233 songs written by him. It forms an important part of extant historical materials pertaining to Bengali musical expression.

C. Bhangra

The roots of modern bhangra music date back to the early 1980s, when several Punjabi bands started experimenting with Western styles as well as traditional Punjabi music. Bhangra music was said to rise in Britain in the 1970s by Punjabi immigrants who took their native folk music and began experimenting by altering it using instruments from their host country.

The present musical style is derived from the traditional musical accompaniment to the folk dance of Punjab. It is a form of dance-oriented folk music which is not only famous in the north western parts of India, but has become a pop sensation in the United Kingdom and North America.

D. Baul

Baul is a religious sect of Bengal. The songs they sing are named as Baulgaan. The origin of Bauls is not known exactly, but the word "Baul" has appeared in Bengali texts as old as the 15th century. Baul music celebrates celestial love, but does this in very earthy terms, as in declarations of love by the Baul for his bosh-tomi or lifemate.

The lyrics of a baulgaan carry influences of the Hindu bhakti movements and the suphi, a form of Sufi song exemplified by the songs of Kabir. The lyrics intertwine a deep sense of mysticism - a longing for oneness with the divine. It represents a long heritage of preaching mysticism through songs in Bengal. The Bauls frequently use an instrument called a dotara, which is a multi stringed instrument made of wood used for accompaniment.