

Hindustani Music: Appreciating its grandeur

Dr. Lakshmi Sreeram

Music in India comprises a wide variety: from the colourful and vibrant folk music of various regions, to the ubiquitous film music; from the more recent “Indipop” music with its “Indian Madonnas” and Colonial Cousins, to religious music both sacred and popular and, at the pinnacle of all this and mothering many of these – the classical traditions of Indian music.

Indian Classical Music

Among the great contributions of the Indian culture are its classical traditions of music and the unique musical phenomenon of the raga. When we speak of “classical” music of India, two traditions come to the mind – the Carnatic tradition largely practiced in Southern India and Hindustani music largely practiced in the northern parts of India. Although both traditions share common sources and concepts, history has shaped them so differently that it is not trivial for a listener of one system of music to easily appreciate the other. This article, targeting the Carnatic music listener, is about what to expect in a typical Hindustani concert, concentrating on the vocal genre of *Khayal* music.

Hindustani Music

Hindustani music comprises instrumental music and vocal music; vocal music, in turn, can be *Khayal* or *Dhrupad* – the two classical vocal forms – and the lighter, “semi classical” forms such as *thumri*, *dadra*, *tappa* etc. In both the *Khayal* and *Dhrupad* forms, the main artistic intent is to present a *raga* in a stylized way through systematic exploration of the possibilities in the *raga*. *Dhrupad* is the more ancient form, and has strict norms regarding the progress of the *raga* exploration. Legendary singers like Swami Haridas, Tansen, and Baiju were *Dhrupad* singers. *Khayal*, which evolved later (around the 18th century), permits more freedom with regard to the form of presentation (not of course *raga* structure) and, is today, much more popular than the *Dhrupad*. Unless otherwise mentioned, the expression ‘Hindustani’ music or concert is used, in this article, to mean *Khayal* music or concert.

(The word '*Khayal*' is of Persian origin, and very much part of contemporary Urdu usage. It means a thought or idea and, in the context of Indian music, denotes two things – a type of composition and a form or genre of presenting raga-s using these compositions.)

The Khayal

Khayal is an extremely sophisticated and refined performing art form. It takes years of training and later performance experience to get a grasp of the form and be able to handle it with confidence and ease. Training under a guru is irreplaceable. For one thing, understanding the nuances of ragas cannot be achieved by any bookish summary, however exhaustive. And then, certain aspects of presentation and performance can be easily gained from a guru while the rest must come from actual performance experience.

What then happens in a Hindustani concert? What conceptual armoury will help one understand and appreciate better Hindustani music?

The basic intent of the musicians in a Hindustani concert is to present a raga. The choice of the *raga* to be presented will always depend on the time of the concert and sometimes the season. Each raga is associated with a time bracket (of 3 hours) during the 24 hour cycle when it can be rendered. Some ragas are also associated with seasons and can be performed in that season at any time. Thus, the raga Yaman is associated with the first part of the night while Todi is associated with the second part of the day; Malhar family of ragas are associated with the monsoons and can be presented during that season at any time.

Apart from raga, the other unique feature of Indian music is *Taal*. *Taal* being more than mere rhythm, creates an interest and tension in the presentation. More about *Taal* and its role in *Khayal* presentation will follow a little later.

Elements in a Khayal presentation

In a typical presentation of a raga in the *Khayal* format, the following elements are usually included:

1. the composition-also called *Khayal* or *bandish*
2. *alaap*

3. *bol alaap, sargam*

4. *taan*

The composition (Khayal or Bandish): The composition or *bandish* used in a Khayal presentation is called *khayal* too. This is usually a short piece, in one of the dialects of Hindi (sometimes Punjabi) set in a particular *taal*, expressing earthly love or divine love. Sometimes there are descriptions of nature too. The *bandish*, when compared to a Carnatic *kriti*, is rather brief, but is nevertheless a vital aspect of the presentation. The *raga* is built / explored around the nodal points provided by the refrain of the composition (called the *mukhada*). The *mukhada* has a very significant role in the development of the *raga* and in the aesthetics of the *raga* development as shall be seen later.

Khayals are of two types depending on the *laya* or the pace of their movement. We have the *vilambit* or *bada khayal* which is sung at a very leisurely pace and the *drut* and *Madhya laya* or *chota khayals* which are sung at a faster pace. Corresponding to these are the *masitkhani gat* and *razaakhani gats* of Instrumental music.

Aalaap: For many, *Aalaap* is the core of a *Khayal* presentation – or indeed of any classical rendition of a *raga*, whether *dhrupad* or instrumental. It is through this that the *raga* exploration is mainly achieved. *Aalaap* is improvised singing of notes and groups of notes appropriate to the *raga* using *aakaara* (the sound of “aa”) or *eekara* etc. Plain vowel sounds are used – some musicians occasionally use syllables like *dhe, na, re* etc.

The *aalaap* is sung in a systematic manner-beginning with the lower registers going up to the higher ones. In *Khayal* presentations, *aalaap* is mostly sung after the composition is sung, using its words and most importantly the *mukhada* of the *Khayal* to create a musical edifice. Sometimes the words of the *Khayal* are also used in *aalaap* and this is called *bol alaap*. *Sargam* is singing the notes of the *raga* much like *swara prastara* of Carnatic music.

Taan: *Taan-s* can be the most dazzling part of a *Khayal* presentation. These are improvised patterns of notes rendered at breathtaking speeds. A *Khayal* presentation usually ends with *taan-s*.

Taal (Tala): *Taal* figures in Hindustani music in a way slightly different from the way it figures in Carnatic music. A *Taal* is a cycle of a certain number of beats-

e.g. 16 in teentaal, 12 in ektaal, ten in Jhap taal and so on. Its cyclical nature is of essence to it and thus *taal* is more than mere rhythm or beats. A single cycle of any *taal* is called an *avartan*. The first *matra* of every *taal* is called the *sam* and is the nodal point of the *taal*.

The *sam* has to be repeatedly highlighted as part of the Khayal presentation. Thus, the musician sings the *bandish* and shows the *sam* at the very first *avartan* – this is something that is made musically evident for the weight of the first phrase will fall on the *sam* and the tabla will begin at that point. Even the physical behaviour of the musicians suggests the showing of the *sam*.

A Khayal concert in progress

The first thing that strikes one in a Hindustani concert is the resonant and restful sound of the tanpuras. The attaining and holding of the right sur (pitch) is a core feature of Hindustani music and this is done with constant reference to the tanpura's drone. In a vocal concert the accompanists typically are the tabla player and the harmonium player. Sometimes we have a sarangi or violin player too. Usually two tanpuras are used, sometimes an additional electronic tanpura is also used. The general ambience is quiet, restrained and dignified.

A Khayal concert begins with a major raga appropriate to the time or season. Unlike a Carnatic concert where a few smallish pieces are presented in quick tempo, the beginning here is with a "main" piece. The beginning is very quiet and intense when the vocalist or instrumentalist present some phrases of the raga by using elongated notes. These first few notes are expected to clearly communicate the raga that is going to be rendered. This is followed by the composition or *bandish*. Typically two compositions are used in the presentation of a raga. Once the initial phrases introducing the raga are sung, the vocalist launches into the *bada* Khayal and then begins the process of "*badhat*" or "*vistaar*" (elaboration). It is in this that elements like *aalaap*, *bol alaap*, *sargam*, *taan* etc are introduced. This whole process is punctuated with the showing of the *sam* at the end of every *avartan* (*taal* cycle). Thus the vocalist will render *alaap* (or *taan* or *bol alaap* etc.) for one or more *avartans* and slowly building up a climax, will pick up the *mukhada* (first phrase of the composition which is used as a refrain) and show the *sam* with a flourish. This is a very important aspect of both the Khayal

presentation and its enjoyment. This also is one of the main distinguishing features of Hindustani music from Carnatic music. In Carnatic music, the eduppu or the beginning of the song at the same place on the *tala* cycle is important while in Hindustani music, the beginning phrase of the *bandish* can be moved slightly here and there, what is important is that the *sam* be shown at the same place.

After the *badhat* of the *bada khayal*, the *chota* Khayal is presented and elaborated with the same elements of *alaap* etc. but in a brisker way.

After a main raga is presented this way, other ragas are taken up for less elaborate treatment. Sometimes in longer concerts, there is an interval and the musicians render another raga with great elaboration after the interval.

Bhajans have come to form the conventional ending pieces in a Khayal concert. Of course, the style of bhajan rendition that is found in classical concerts is different from that of the popular bhajan. There is a tradition and convention (not always followed) of ending a concert with the raga Bhairavi (close to the Carnatic Sindhu Bhairavi).

Instrumental Concert

An instrumental concert also includes the same elements-composition (*gat*), *aalaap*, and *taan-s*. But most of the *aalaap* is rendered before the composition is presented and very little after that. This is really the dhrupad pattern. *Jod-jhala* is another element present in instrumental concerts. In this the instrumentalist introduces a rhythmic pattern, slowly building up to reach a crescendo (the *taal* and the *tabla* are not introduced in this). Thus the typical instrumental presentation proceeds in the order of *aalaap*, *jod*, *jhala*, *gat*. There is considerable working of rhythmic patterns and there is a great deal of interaction between the main instrumentalist and the *tabla* player. There is also greater scope for *tabla* improvisation in an instrumental concert than in a vocal concert.

Appreciating Hindustani Music

Hindustani music is a highly evolved and sophisticated system exploring the possibilities of melody. The challenges that a Hindustani musician faces are both of a physical nature and non-physical nature. The physical challenges include

finding, and maintaining the note or pitch, executing phrases, embellishments, *taan-s* etc. But more challenging than these physical challenges are the subtler ones of being able to bring out the raga effectively, maintain the subtleties of the raga and, handle the *taal* with finesse, present a tight and well-knit *badhat* or elaboration. Since it is all improvised, the *badhat* or raga elaboration can easily slip into shoddiness and looseness.

Appreciating the grandeur and sophistication of Hindustani music will be that much fuller if one understands these challenges, and has some understanding of raga and taal subtleties. But even the uninitiated will find much that is beautiful and soothing in Hindustani music.