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## The Virtual Guru and Beyond: the Changing Role of Teacher in North Indian Classical Music

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**The Virtual Guru and Beyond: the Changing Role of  
Teacher in North Indian Classical Music**

A culminating project submitted to the faculty of Dominican  
University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master  
of Arts in Humanities

by  
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San Rafael, California,  
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## ABSTRACT

This project, which encompasses both written and performed aspects, is an exploration of the North Indian classical music tradition as it is taught in twenty-first century California, and a de-exoticization of a musical style that most Americans are unacquainted with. A brief overview of the basic theory, history, and practice of North Indian classical music is followed by a comparison of oral and written musical traditions. A specific composition from the North Indian classical tradition is included as an example of the form and how that form is transmitted. Emerging modes of transmission include multimedia and network technologies; their use, and their limitations, are investigated, along with deeper questions of pedagogical utility.

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## Introduction

This project is concerned with the care and maintenance of knowledge, as well as the transmission of information across distances of time and space. I will show that an art form often viewed through the lens of the “exotic other,” in this case the classical music of North India, is not only accessible and interesting to almost anyone, but also valuable as a tool for understanding and appreciating all kinds of music and art, even those with which we are already familiar. The process of pedagogy continues even as the cultural context changes, and without lowering the level of the conversation, we can all participate in the ongoing cultivation of endangered traditions. In this process, the judicious use of technology can serve ancient art forms.

In the North Indian, or *Hindustani* classical music tradition, knowledge was held within families for many generations. The teacher was not just a conduit or vessel for information but a figure of spiritual power accorded great respect and treated with religious reverence, (Wulff 148) and tutelage often lasted decades, beginning in early childhood. As this tradition is now being taught outside of South Asia, some trappings of this role of the teacher as *Guru* have been cast aside, while others remain. The environment of the modern college and university campus offers a fertile medium for the transmission of knowledge, and will play an increasing role in the preservation of traditional art forms. However, it also presents challenges for

anyone trying to teach these art forms in the setting of modern higher education, and may work best in collaboration with smaller institutions off of the academic grid, especially when dealing with highly specialized cultural knowledge.

### Historical Context

The Indian sub-continent is an area roughly two thirds the size of continental Europe, and possesses a great diversity of climates, languages, and cultures. There exists, to this day, an ethnic and linguistic divide, between peoples of southern India (who speak languages in the Dravidian language family, such as Tamil, Kannada, Malayalam and Telugu), and the Indo-Aryans of the north (speakers of Sanskrit and its descendants: Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, Bengali, Gujarati, Sinhalese, etc.). However, this divide is not particularly a cause for conflict in society (perhaps with the exception of the Sri Lankan conflict between Sinhalese and Tamils), and has given us two great art-music traditions, *Hindustani* (North Indian) and *Carnatic* (South Indian), as well as several other important regional ones.

These traditions share a common ancestor, as well as basic principles: the interplay of melodic systems, called *raag* (or raga), with rhythmic cycles, called *taal*, played against a fixed drone. North and South Indian classical traditions diverge greatly in the specifics of both theory and practice; for instance, the names of *raags* rarely correspond across the traditions, and the



approach to ornamentation and rhythmic composition is quite different between the two styles. *Hindustani* classical music's development at the courts of Muslim kings eventually created a distinct art form, which has some features, such as highly melismatic singing, increasing tempo throughout a performance, and extensive use of improvisation, that show influences of Persian and Central Asian music which was also played at the courts of Sultans, Shahs, and Nawabs, while still maintaining the fundamental grammar that it shares with its South Indian counterpart. (Khan 251)

Throughout the political turmoil of the collapse of the Mughals and the subsequent British Raj, musical lineages have continued in both North (often confined to blood relatives) and South India unbroken to the present day. (Bhakle 6)

The music's longevity itself is one of the attributes implied in the term "classical" in this context. Like the European art music tradition commonly called "Western classical music," Hindustani classical music followed a path from church, to royal court, to concert hall. Both of these traditions find themselves at a disadvantage when trying to compete for audiences and resources in an era of ever shrinking attention spans, and must continually educate their listeners in order to survive as living art forms that are taught, performed, and practiced. Unlike European art music, the musical traditions of South Asia do not use chord progressions or functional harmony. They are engaged instead with the interplay of melody and rhythm, in ways that can

be obscured or lost in a harmonic context. For Hindustani classical musicians, freedom from large ensembles allows for the exploration of microtonality and polyrhythm, and the emphasis on oral tradition in South Asian culture has encouraged the development of music for solo voice or instrument, or small chamber groups, instead of large orchestras and choruses. Conversely, the development of written notation in Europe, as well as the invention of the keyboard, encouraged polyphonic experimentation and the growth of orchestras, choirs, and bands. “Pure melody” here means one voice, perhaps with a drone and percussion, but absent of any chords or counterpoint. In North Indian classical vocal music, occasional accompaniment may be provided by another melodic instrument “shadowing” the melody heterophonically, but this does not really constitute polyphony in the sense of the word as it is used in the European musicological tradition.

Even a cursory exploration of the concept of *raag* could easily consume an entire dissertation, because there is little in European music theory that it can be compared with: a scale or a mode is a mere starting point towards the idea of *raag*, which involves refined and specific use of phrasing, ornamentation, and microtonality. Although one’s movement within a *raag* can be restricted by complicated sets of rules, each *raag* allows for practically endless compositional possibilities. The best way to understand raags is to listen to them, but perhaps the background information given here will help to shed some light on this concept.

There are potentially many thousands of raags, though in practice there are only a few hundred played today. (Khan, private conversation, 2001) Even a thoroughly trained musician in the Hindustani classical tradition may only be able to play a few dozen, even if she or he is familiar with many more. According to Ali Akbar Khan, musicians in the past may have specialized in only a few throughout their lives. (Khan, private conversation, 2001) Each *raag* is suitable for practice or performance at a specific time of day, such as morning or evening, and/or season of the year, such as spring or autumn. Other major defining features of a Raag are: mode (which notes are natural, sharp, or flat), ascending/descending patterns, number of notes used (this may differ in the ascending and descending movements), hierarchy of notes used, and what kinds of ornaments (grace notes, slides, mordents, and vibrato) are used (and on which notes).

### **Modern Legacies**

Ali Akbar Khan (1922 - 2009), who could trace his musical heritage back to Mian Tansen, court musician of the Mughal emperor Akbar, settled in Marin County, California, and taught thousands of students over a 42-year period, the majority of whom were not of South Asian descent. I was lucky enough to be one of those students for sixteen years, and have continued to study, teach, and perform his music and help build the Ali Akbar Khan

Library and Archives since his passing. He came to California in the late 1960's, under the auspices of the American Society for Eastern Art. Many students from the United States were already going to India to study with him, so he decided it was more practical for him to California, at least for part of the year, and he eventually founded his own school, the Ali Akbar College of Music in San Rafael.

Khan chose to teach in a way that used written notation as little as possible, rather than following European pedagogical models, even in the United States, where students are accustomed to printed material. He built his music school as a small, specialized operation, in the North Indian tradition of *gharana*, or lineage. Like all ad hoc institution building, this has required a great deal of interpersonal negotiation, made more complicated by the institution having two sometimes conflicting functions: first, as a repository, or, more accurately, an active perpetuator of an old and somewhat esoteric (even in South Asia) traditional art form (hopefully with its values intact), and, second, as a bridge between cultures. Music ideally transcends the boundaries of human culture and language, so the second function is both a consequence of and catalyst for the first. His father, Allauddin Khan, who also taught the famous sitar player Ravi Shankar, made many important innovations that improved the sound and functionality of the instruments used in Hindustani classical music. He helped to put the art form world stage with other great "classical" art forms, and he sent two of his most

accomplished students (Khan and Shankar) abroad, freeing the music from constraints of the South Asian cultural milieu. (Khan 237)

From my own earliest involvement with this enterprise, I have continually returned to basic questions about the transmission of knowledge. At times when the task has seemed overwhelming, I have found myself looking to history and finding many examples of humans trying to preserve culture in various ways, with far fewer tools and resources than the Ali Akbar Khan Library and Archive has at its disposal, with some successes and many failures. The greatest failure, of course, would be not trying, but it is certainly important to do the best job possible, since what comes after us will be built on what we do.

Khan assented to, but did not originate, the idea of putting his work into an archive; his wife, Mary Johnson Khan, laid most of the building blocks for the library project. Ali Akbar Khan's focus on the orality of the tradition was such that he would often derisively describe musical notation as "toilet paper", asking how the music could live on a page if it did not live in the heart, (personal conversation 2002) yet he recognized that his students could and did overcome the obstacles presented by their own habituation to print culture, and he did allow minimal use of written notation (in class, but never in performance) as "training wheels" on the way to a non-visual internalization of the music. He often creatively used metaphor, such as

“Your playing is all mouth and no kiss” (personal communication, 1994) as well as specific technical suggestions in his teaching.

### **Hindustani Classical Music as Oral Tradition**

Engagement with writing and print in general is somewhat different on the Indian sub-continent than in European derived culture, reflecting a different history and multiple kinds of involvement with language in its spoken forms. As mentioned previously in this thesis, religious texts such as the *Vedas* have an ancient and unbroken history of oral transmission. This process itself is considered sacred, and so the writing down of sacred texts was not encouraged, even after the development of literacy. This has led to some paradoxes in the linguistic history of the region, where the first evidence of written Sanskrit occurs centuries later than that of languages that are its linguistic descendants. (Masica 4) Use of the *Devanagari* text that we now associate with written Sanskrit did not become standardized until the nineteenth century (at the behest of colonial scholars); before that time, Sanskrit was written using the closest local vernacular, if at all.(7) The forging of a sense of “Indian-ness” elevated the status of writing (a reversal of the process that McLuhan describes occurring in Enlightenment Era Europe, where print led to nationalism) and created the need for an “indigenous”

national (or at least regional) script, in contrast to the Arabic-derived script used to write Urdu in modern Pakistan or the Roman alphabet. (151)

The tendency of European colonial and global culture to dismiss oral tradition primitive did nothing to foster intercultural understanding, or even to help the British to rule their largest colony, but was probably not part of a conscious effort to demean India's ancient civilization. Instead, Europeans felt it was their duty to elevate India's "noble" past by giving it a form recognizable to literate culture. As European scholars recognized that music on the subcontinent was sophisticated in ways comparable to their own classical traditions, they felt that it lacked only a notation system in order to be truly "classical". (Bhakle 66) Bhakle cautions us that the idea of a tradition being "classical" (especially in trying to apply it to an oral tradition) is a colonial construct and can be used a tool for exporting a certain brand of "civilization," one that may translate across cultures only with difficulty. Ironically, it was also well suited for building a sense of national identity that could cross India's many linguistic and sectarian boundaries. In this process, musicians both accommodated and confronted the European idea that a classical tradition is necessarily a written one, an idea that has its own complicated history.

The development of notation in the Western European art music tradition lends itself to a mosaic, rather than linear, type of analysis, which has characterized European and American musicology. It constitutes a major

constellation in what Marshall McLuhan called the “Gutenberg Galaxy,” one that has been relatively neglected in both musicology and general studies of orality in the humanities. (Sborgi Lawson 430) The use of musical notation in Europe chronologically parallels the development of written speech, beginning in ancient Greece around the time of Socrates and becoming standardized in medieval monasteries. Neumatic script, the forerunner of modern music notation, with its clear graphic interface of higher pitches expressed by higher position within a set of lines, or staff, was created for recording Gregorian chant. As music in Europe shifted from strictly modal forms to styles with greater harmonic emphasis (itself a consequence of the new visual stress, according to McLuhan), musical notation evolved to include devices such as key signatures and “accidental” pitch markings, eventually accommodating, and indeed encouraging, complex polyphony.

Musical notation, both written and oral, served not only to preserve knowledge, as written speech did, but changed the entire texture of Western European art music. Written notation made composing intricate works for large ensembles much more feasible: if each musician in a modern symphonic ensemble had to learn their part orally and have it entirely memorized in order to perform a Beethoven symphony or Wagner opera, it would take months, if not years, to prepare, and essential parts would be at risk of being lost to history every time a second bassoonist died or became unable to teach. Works of the scale of Beethoven’s ninth symphony would be inconceivable, or



at least of an entirely different character. There are examples in South Asia, such as the *gamelan* traditions of Indonesia, of large ensembles that use orally transmitted material to achieve the kind of complexity of a European symphony or opera, but even they use written notation for pieces not in the main repertoire. (Gold 35)

The development of large ensembles in Europe corresponds with the growth of the modern “audience,” as the decline of the aristocratic patronage system required musicians to fill large halls with members of the aspiring middle classes in order to pay rent. This confluence of events and trends led to a kind of notation centrism that continues to afflict Western European art music to the time of this writing. Ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl encountered this problem in interactions with musicologists as recently as 2005: “...the academic musical establishment has made the lay public feel that without understanding the technicalities of musical construction, without knowledge of notation and theory, one cannot properly comprehend or deal with music.” (Sborgi Lawson 431) Even as the Hindustani musical tradition has adopted limited use of notation in a concession to literacy and the reality that modern students may not have the time, let alone memory, to completely internalize thousands of compositions, as was the practice throughout the music’s history, Western staff notation has not been the first choice of vehicles. Instead, most lineages have chosen a system using the traditional note names, the *sargam*, as being more suitable. The *sargam* is analogous to the

European *solfege* (“Do, Re, Mi, Fa, So” being equivalent to “Sa, Re, Ga, Ma, Pa” in the sargam system) that is still used in western pedagogy. When used for written notation, note names are abbreviated to their first letter, so that a major scale would be written “S R G m P D N”, with letter cases denoting accidentals (if “m” had been written uppercase in the example given, it would have denoted a raised fourth) and rhythmic and phrasing markings added as necessary. Although it lacks the graphic positional correspondence of western notation, writing in this way avoids some of the translation problems (especially concerning key signature, ornamentation and rhythm) that are inherent in using western notation for other traditions. Attempts to notate Indian classical music in staff notation are unwieldy on the page, in much the same way that transcriptions of Charlie Parker saxophone solos into Western staff notation are nearly impossible to read.

This brings us to another aspect of *Hindustani* classical music that makes recording and preserving it very difficult: although the student is expected to memorize vast amounts of material by rote as a basic part of her training, performances are expected to be a seamless combination of memorized and improvised material. This makes the music heard in a concert simultaneously ancient and completely of the present moment, with compositional decisions being made on the stage using structures and forms that have been passed down through many generations. Ali Akbar Khan generally avoided the term improvisation (he thought the term implied too

much freedom, perhaps having heard excesses of “free jazz” of the 1960’s), preferring instead the phrase “composing on the spot”. (personal communication, 1995)

The tendency towards pedagogical specialization in European based traditions of learning is reflected in the way that music is taught, but South Asian culture has not completely assimilated this aspect of literacy, so that all-encompassing (but not general) knowledge is still expected to be part of the teacher’s curriculum there, (Bhakle 99) at least in traditional art forms. Music teachers, like religious scholars and teachers of yoga or other spiritual disciplines, are referred to as *gurus*, and some lineages still celebrate the establishment of the teacher-student bond with a special ceremony in which a cord is tied around the wrist of the teacher and student, signifying a relationship that is believed to last many lifetimes. This type of ritual is a hallmark of oral traditions, but is especially pronounced in the sub-continent, where music itself, even practicing scales and exercises, is considered by many across sectarian and linguistic divides to be a form of spiritual development. (Wulff 155) Music teachers are seen as purveyors of wisdom in a way that academics often studiously avoid, because it would consume valuable class time with “personal” matters, as well as opening their own values up to scrutiny that might be uncomfortable for both teacher and student.

In the context of twenty-first century northern California, the nature of these relationships will inevitably change to suit a cultural climate quite different from mid-twentieth century India. However, the continuation of some kind of intense bond between teacher and student is certainly necessary to the survival of the tradition, even if the student only sees the teacher once a week, rather than the kind twenty four hour immersion possible when teaching was confined to family members. This is where multimedia technology can be especially valuable, allowing students to engage with the tradition even across distances of space and time. Although teaching music lessons using “Skype” and similar tools is far less than ideal, it allows for corrections and teacher-student interaction in a way that “book learning”, or even static audio and video recordings, would never allow. For the long term preservation of precise musical details, multimedia technology offers advantages over even the most sophisticated written forms, especially as regards the compositional process.

Khan often composed new material on the spot when he was teaching, both to accommodate the needs and skill levels of students and to demonstrate how compositional decisions are made. Comprehensive audio (and, later, video) recordings made of his classes allow this process to be shown completely as it was originally presented, with no intermediate interpreter or notation system in between the end-user and the "original" teacher. However, the video Guru cannot correct a student's mistake, so the

maintenance of the oral tradition is still essential to a “complete” transmission of knowledge.

Early in the planning of the Ali Akbar Khan library, it was clear that modern database technology would be a major part of the undertaking. This allows the end-user to look for class and concert material using a great variety of search criteria, from melodic and rhythmic forms to specific song wording (although Khan performed exclusively as an instrumentalist, nearly half of his teaching involves the vocal repertoire, reflecting the historical dominance of the voice in South Asian music). These functions may be used by future students in ways that archive builders may not be able to yet conceive of, but must allow for. Tools like these offer great potential, but raise serious questions for the traditionalist, especially considering the *guru's* role as gate-keeper as well as distributor of knowledge. The traditional *shishya* (student) would never presume to ask the *guru* a question; this would imply lack of trust in the teacher's understanding of what the student needs to know at any particular time, but a searchable database throws open the barn-doors to any and all knowledge contained in the tradition, and future students may not feel bound to honor requests by teachers *not* to learn something that they may not yet be ready to undertake.

Databases also allow for the re-sorting and analysis of information in new ways, as shown by recent surveys of printed material scanned by Google. In the 1950's, historian and philosopher Walter Ong's groundbreaking work

on the sixteenth century educator and humanist Petrus Ramus listed for the first time over one thousand printings of books by Ramus in the fields of grammar, rhetoric, logic, mathematics, physics, optics, ethics, and theology. (Sharratt 172) Subsequent scholars have used tools made available by computer technology to analyze various aspects of the work of Ramus, thanks to the *Centre d'Histoire des Sciences et des Doctrines* in Paris, which has created a computerized catalogue of all things "Ramusian" (173). This raises issues of "instant analysis" offered by database searches and statistical tools: future scholars of Hindustani classical music may be able to find connections and meanings in the music that are not obvious even to the most serious student, who can usually assimilate only part of the vast repertoire within one normal lifetime. At what point does the technology come to control the assimilation of the material, and how might this disrupt the essentially (and necessarily) oral nature of the tradition? These are among the questions that we must constantly ask ourselves in order to utilize these tools, rather than be used by them.

### **An Example for Consideration: *Raag Kafi***

One of the more commonly played (and probably oldest) raags is Kafi, which mostly uses the seven notes of the Dorian mode (the third and seventh

notes of the scale are lowered) with the occasional major third (“Ga” in the Sargam system). Raag Kafi is associated with the spring season, although it can be played throughout the year in the afternoon and evening. There are many songs in this raag whose lyrics are about the spring festival of Holi, which celebrates Krishna and his free and playful spirit. Each raag has a unique hierarchy of the notes it uses, with the top note in “rank” called the *vaadi* note, and the second most important note called the *samvaadi*. In the case of raag Kafi, “Pa” (the fifth note of the scale) is the vaadi note, and Re (second note) is the samvaadi. In practical terms, this means that Pa is a “safe zone” where one can land without disturbing the character of the raag, so that many phrases in Kafi tend to lead toward that note (it does not mean that Pa and Re are played louder than other notes). This is part of what makes Kafi distinct from other raags in the Dorian mode.

Here are some of the key phrases of raag Kafi, written in abbreviated sargam notation (a dash indicates a held note, and a dot above a note indicates a higher octave):

R g S R - m m P -

R n D P m g R - m P -

P D n <sup>.</sup>S - n D P - m g R m P -

One can see here that the notes Pa and Re are used more than others, and Pa tends to be the point of arrival. Unlike in a harmonic system, the dominant does not need to resolve to the tonic in order for the melody to sound

complete. This raag does sometimes melodically imply the subdominant chord in certain phrases:

R m D P -

m D - D n D P -

The focus is always brought back to Pa. The heart of this raag, or *pakar* (literally “catch”), is:

R g S R m m P

If one is playing other raags, even related ones, such as Zila Kafi or Kafi Kanada, one must avoid using these notes in this way, because it would bring the mood of Kafi, instead of whatever one is trying to play.

Raags are expressed in the meterless form, called *alap*, and in compositions set to a *taal* or rhythm cycle, which are called *bandish* in vocal music and *gat* in instrumental music. In both cases they can either be through composed or, more often, serve as points of departure for extended improvisation. In order to be considered complete, a composition (vocal or instrumental) must contain two sections: the *asthai* or *sthayi*, followed by the *antara* (in the older *Dhrupad* forms there are two additional sections, *sanchari* and *abhog*, but those are rarely used in the more modern *Khyal* and instrumental styles). These sections are defined by the range of notes that they use: the *asthai* should avoid going into the upper octave, for this is what defines the octave. By limiting the tonal “real estate” that one is allowed to





Here is an example of a very simple composition in raag Kafi (taught by Ali Akbar Khan in 1988, but it is not clear whether he composed it or learned it from his father), that clearly illustrates the asthai and antara structure. The sixteen beat cycle is shown by the numbers above the notes; “+” denotes the first beat of the cycle, so this composition actually begins on beat twelve. The asthai is played at least twice, followed by the antara, and then the asthai is recapitulated.

**Asthai:**

3            +            2            0            3            +            2            0  
 - R g m P - - - - - R g m - - - - - S R g - - - - - n S R - S -

**Antara:**

3            +                            2            0            3            +            2            0  
 - P D n S - - - - - P D n - - - - - g m D - - - - - R g m P - - -

3            +                            2            0            3            +            2            0  
 - P D n S - - - - - P D n - - - - - g m D - - - - - R g m R - S -

(Published with permission of the Ali Akbar Khan Library and Archive in San Rafael, where a recording of this composition being taught can also be heard)

### **Learning and Preserving Traditional Music in the Future**

One of the main challenges of teaching Indian classical music, especially in a period of economic uncertainty, is that few people are able to devote the time or energy to become competent, let alone master musicians in the Hindustani or any other classical tradition, however, learning music at any level has been shown to be beneficial and is an essential part of music therapy . Indian classical music in particular develops the ability to recognize subtle tonal and rhythmic changes, which enhances one's appreciation of all kinds of music. Learning the benefit of diligent practice through music can foster self-discipline in those of us for whom it is occasionally lacking. Many students of Indian classical music around the world approach their musical practice as a *saadhana*, or spiritual discipline, and so missing a practice session is like missing mass would be for someone who is devoutly religious.

Even the most sincere devotee can find it difficult to maintain good practice habits when technological distractions seem to be beeping and blinking from every corner, demanding immediate interaction. However, technology offers new possibilities for the preservation and transmission of musical knowledge across spans of distance and time that have been impossible up to now. The digital preservation and cataloging of Ali Akbar Khan's music, as previously discussed, is an attempt to break the bonds of time and carry the teaching far beyond the physical life of the teacher, but audio and video classes distributed online are also useful for freeing up

teachers from repeating certain basics and allowing them to concentrate on the more subtle areas for real time classes. The danger here is that teachers get lazy about teaching the fundamentals, assuming “the computer can do that.” Throughout his teaching career, Ali Akbar Khan always insisted on teaching beginners as well as advanced students (although he did eventually delegate teaching the absolute basics), because he felt that it was important that students have the strongest foundation possible.

It is also possible to break the bonds of distance through “webinars” and lessons given through Skype or other video phone services, but it requires a reliable internet connection on both ends, or the learning experience can be severely compromised by garbled sound and dropped calls. Even under the best circumstances, it is usually not possible for teacher and student to truly sing together, so everything must be done by taking turns. This has the incidental benefit of forcing the student to sing with confidence, and avoid the habit of letting the teacher do all of the work, but it is not always satisfying for student or teacher, nonetheless.

Teaching Indian classical music across time zones presents another problem to those trying to teach raags at the time of day for which they are best suited. A twelve hour time difference (the difference between North America and South Asia) can require some flexibility and inventiveness on the part of the teacher, who must either find raags to teach that have a broad enough time span, or teach a raag for the student’s time zone. In conclusion,

the transplantation of the North Indian classical music to North America is a project that is still in its infancy.

The first generation of musicians who brought the music here have passed the baton to students born and trained here, who will face a new set of challenges in trying to maintain the purity of the tradition while helping it to grow. An absolutely essential ingredient to this is an educated audience who can appreciate some of the subtleties of the music. It is hoped that this paper will serve to initiate anyone who is interested into the group of educated audience members, or perhaps even stir enough interest to inspire the reader to take up the study of a traditional art form, before it disappears.

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<http://www.sjsu.edu/faculty/watkins/indus.htm>



mind and heart. However, some basic information about the history and context of the music can enhance one's enjoyment, so here goes.

The Indian subcontinent possesses a great diversity of climates, languages, and cultures. There exists to this day an ethnic and linguistic divide, between the Dravidian peoples of southern India (who speak languages such as Tamil, Kannada, Malayalam, and Telugu) and the Indo-Aryans of the north (speakers of Sanskrit and its descendants: Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, Bengali, Gujarati, Sinhalese, etc.), but is not particularly a cause for conflict in society (with the exception of the Sri Lankan conflict between Sinhalese and Tamils), and has given us two great art music traditions, Hindustani and Karnatic, as well as several other important regional ones.

These two main traditions share a common origin as well as their basic principles: the interplay of melodic systems, called Raag, or Raga, and rhythmic cycle called Taal, played against a fixed drone. North and South Indian classical traditions diverge greatly in the specifics of both theory and practice; for instance, the names of Raags rarely correspond across the traditions, and the approach to ornamentation and rhythmic composition is quite different between the two styles. In performance, a Hindustani classical concert as we shall see shortly, will usually have long renderings of one or two Raags, whereas a Carnatic concert will often have many short, fixed compositions in different Raags. This split coincides with the spread of Muslim rule over northern India, from the 13th to 16th centuries.



The elements of melismatic singing, improvisation and gradual acceleration throughout a performance are features that the Hindustani tradition shares with other musics of the Muslim world, such as Persian classical music, and not with its South Indian counterpart. Indian musical culture exhibits both a broad based participatory quality, as one sees in the call and response form of devotional music known as Kirtaan, and an esoteric aspect where knowledge was traditionally closely guarded and passed only to trusted initiates.

The boundary between what is sacred music and what is secular is much more fluid in South Asia than in European traditions, and sometimes does not seem to exist at all. In the way that Johann Sebastian Bach dedicated all of his music, not just liturgical works, to God, musicians in India of many genres, classes and creeds see music itself as the most pure expression of the divine, almost irrespective of "content".

Even songs with lyrics about romantic love (what the Greeks would call *eros*) are seen to be expressing the human love for the God and our pain at the separation from the divine. This can be explained partly by the general belief that all art forms have a divine origin, shared by Hinduism and Sufi mysticism, but also a belief in the divine origin of sound. The *vedas* describe sound, or Naad in Sanskrit, as having two distinct aspects: the *Ahata Naada* or "struck" sound is any sound we can hear or perceive with sense organs and is produced by an action that sets air into motion. *Anahata Naada* is the

"unstruck" sound, which is eternal and omnipresent but can only be heard by those in very advanced spiritual states. However, music can put us in touch with this eternal unstruck sound, which is why humans and even animals respond to it, at least according to ancient treatises such as the "Natyashastra" and "Sangitaratnaakara". Whether they are Hindu, Muslim, or Sikh, musicians in India tend to share his attitude towards music. In art music traditions of both North and South India, teachers and students of music are described using the same terms as spiritual teachers (*Gurus*) and *Shishyas* (disciples). Concerts may have trappings of religious ritual, with the burning of incense or oil flame or other kind of invocation ceremony at the beginning, and the garlanding of the artists at the end. Often performers will touch the stage in a gesture of respect before setting foot on it. Moreover, musical practice itself is considered a path to spiritual development, and students are encouraged to practice with this in mind, rather than merely preparing for an earthly concert. There is evidence that music was used by physicians as a healing practice, and this was one of the ways that the melodic forms known as ragas developed over thousands of years.

North Indian classical music is an oral tradition; it has been taught directly from teacher to student over many generations without the use of written notation. The lack of formalized notation, and the tendency to keep access to knowledge restricted, means that we have very little concrete

information about what music in North India actually sounded like before the late 19th century, when sound recording was introduced.

Confusing things further, many and varied schools of art music claim fidelity to a common ancient ideal. The best point of entry is the area of greatest agreement, the raags themselves. Raag is a concept that can take years to understand, but it might be useful to avoid thinking of a raags as scales or even modes, but rather as integrated organisms comprised of musical phrases or gestures, which have distinct personalities and moods that are not controlled or mastered by the performer, but rather engaged in a conversation. Some Indian performers describe this in terms of being a medium through which the divine, in the form of the Raag, can flow.

New Raags are considered to not be composed or invented, but rather discovered, as one would a continent, planet or star. Other important concepts, also shared by the South Indian tradition, are the spiritual nature of music, and Rasa, meaning mood or affect. In a North Indian classical performance, each time the soloist completes a musical idea, the percussionist is given the opportunity to play a short, often improvised solo section, and so the roles of soloist and accompanist are traded back and forth throughout a performance or practice session. The improvisatory aspect of the music allows for spontaneous interaction between the soloist and the tabla player, which can be one of the most exciting and accessible aspects of a Hindustani classical performance.

The line between performer and composer, which has solidified in Western classical music since the early twentieth century, is indistinct in the Hindustani tradition. This means that every performance is simultaneously ancient, drawing on melodies and rules of engagement that are hundreds, if not thousands, of years old, and contemporary, being partly composed on the stage in real time. Until the 20th century, these traditions were held very tightly within families and never taught to outsiders.

Most North Indian classical musicians today can trace their lineages back to Miyan Tansen, court musician to the Mughal (Mogul) emperor Akbar the Great. The Mughals were Muslim kings of Mongolian origin (Mughal simply meaning Mongol), descended from Genghis Khan and Tamerlane (Timur). There was a general trend among many faiths in India at the time to achieve ecumenical understanding, with religious devotion seen as a common element, rather than force for division. It is therefore known as the "Bhakti" movement, Bhakti meaning devotion. Most of the poetry used for setting songs in North Indian classical music comes from this period. Akbar himself wished to create a new religion, or at least code of ethics "Dinal Ilahi", taking elements from various beliefs (with himself at its head, of course). His followers on the throne (including grandson Shah Jahan, who built the Taj Mahal), were not as open minded about faith or interested in music, so the court musicians spread throughout the northern territories. This is why

musicians in the North tended to be Muslim until the 20th century, even as they sang songs extolling Hindu gods.

Mughal power eventually yielded to repeated wars with Persia, followed by the guns and commerce of the British Empire, with the last of the dynasty hanging on as figureheads by the mid 19th century. Smaller kingdoms that cooperated with colonial forces were allowed limited autonomy, and were even subsidized until the end of the Raj, but aristocratic patronage was ending as a means of supporting art music around the world. In India, this coincided with the birth of Anti-colonial movements and the forging of a sense of national identity, in the face of a concerted British strategy to foment divisions within South Asian society. Since the art music had traditionally crossed regional boundaries in the subcontinent, and was not recognized as an overt threat to colonial rule, it could serve as a unifying force across linguistic and religious (though perhaps not caste, and only partially gender) barriers, and became a tangible identifier, both internally and externally (on the "world stage"), for a diverse and complicated culture.

Later, as a national film industry developed (what we now call "Bollywood", although it coexists with many smaller but also prolific regional cinemas), the need for forms that could be understood across regional boundaries facilitated the use of classical song forms in film music. These forms would eventually give way to other styles imported from the developed

world, synthesized with indigenous forms such as the Punjabi folk dance known as Bhangra.

The ability to absorb new influences while maintaining a sense of cultural self has been one of the recurring themes in the history of the subcontinent, and may be a key to the longevity and relative continuity of cultures there. However, this process has not gone in just one direction. Long before the Beatles made sitar music hip among the "counterculture" of Europe and the Americas in the mid 20th century, the influence of South Asian music had penetrated throughout the world, manifested in the diverse styles of music resulting from migrations out of Rajasthan and Punjab in the 12th century (as explored in the wonderful film "Latcho Drom").

Many of the concepts found in the musics of India, such as micro tonality, melismatic ornamentation, and rhythm cycle, can be heard in the musics of the Romani ("Gypsy") diaspora, in styles from Flamenco to Balkan fiddle music to the jazz guitar of Django Reinhardt. Other South Asian diaspora traditions from more recent migrations exist in Africa, England, and the Caribbean. The multiplicity of musical styles and genres of the subcontinent and its descendants offer a huge amount of rich musical material, and even fields of study, and have spawned traditions which may eventually transcend the limits of human culture entirely.