The Voice In (And Of) Indian Classical Music: Carving Out a Tradition

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North Indian classical vocal music stands apart as one of the more difficult vocal forms, requiring a range of acrobatics not found in other vocal traditions. Going back as far as the ancient Vedas, Indian vocal production gave birth to an entire system of classical music in which a variety of instruments were designed specifically to emulate the voice. Considered the apex of musical expressiveness, the voice in Indian classical music holds a unique position among the world's classical traditions.

In the pages to follow, in addition to providing an historical and musical overview, I will seek to give a sense of particular vocal ornamentations that distinguish north Indian classical vocal technique from other vocal traditions. Limited as we are to the printed page for the purposes of this study, I have used a program for linguistic analysis to give the vocal movements employed as comprehensive a visual rendering as possible, providing a mapping of how the voice moves and functions in Indian classical music. What we are left with is visual representation of what normally operates exclusively within the realm of the aural, part of a vital oral tradition that for centuries has passed music from guru to disciple in a process of mimesis, both cyclical and multigenerational. Graphical examples include the exploratory introductory section called *alap*, the convulsive *gamak*, the oscillating *andolan*, and the gliding *meend*, as well as an excerpt from a *bandish*, or song, to impart a sense of Indian classical musical performance in context. Understanding that many readers may be new to Indian classical terminology and Indian classical music in general, I will redefine words on occasion as they reappear throughout the text.

A Brief Musical and Historical Overview

Classical music of India, both of the north and south, can be referred to as "raga" music. A raga, in its most basic terms, is a set of notes defined by specific movements and emphases. Although ragas correlate with certain parent scales (also referred to as *thaats* or *melas*) the concept of raga transcends simple scale structure. While many ragas may be classified under one scale, each individual raga is defined by its inherent movements and phrases rather than the notes it contains. Each raga is performed at a specific time of day and is meant to evoke a particular mood or sentiment (*rasa*). While the classical music of north and south India (Hindustani and Karnatic, respectively)

have these elements in common, classical music in the north began to take on a distinctive shape beginning in the eleventh century with the infusion of Persian and Arabic influences. Eventually, a separation occurred and two distinct traditions were formed. Hindustani and Karnatic music differ most clearly in focus, with classical music in the south (generally) centered on pre-composed material and music in the north centered on the art of improvisation. Hindustani and Karnatic music also differ in instrumentation, with the voice remaining as one of many threads of origin that bind them. The three forms of north Indian classical music performed today are *dhrupad*, *khyal*, and *thumri*. Of the three, *khyal* is the predominant form, viewed as more dynamic than the older and stately *druphad* and considered more serious than *thumri*, which is viewed as a light classical genre. The upcoming discussion centres on elements of a *khyal* performance, and graphical analyses are drawn from its components.

Gharana

Broadly defined, a *gharana* is a musical family or lineage with its own set of stylistic features. While historically, a *gharana* was exclusively a "lineage of hereditary musicians [and] their disciples (Neuman, 1990, p. 146)," today, membership is not dependant as much on bloodlines as it is on ones association with a specific teacher or guru.[1] Each *gharana* possesses a unique set of aesthetic priorities that lead to differing treatments of ragas, repertoire, *alap*, *bandish*, *laya* (rhythm), individual notes, register, and improvisation (Bagchee, 1998). These stylistic variations between *gharanas* can be subtle and may be imperceptible to all but the seasoned listener. Borrowing elements between *gharanas* among musicians has become more common since the advent of recorded music and radio programs beginning in the mid-twentieth century, contributing to an atmosphere of musical osmosis in which an artist may embody stylistic features of numerous *gharanas*. Although a synthesis of styles is acceptable today, with whom you have studied is still a common and important question rooted in a time-tested and age-old practice. Though it may be going through changes, the *gharana* system remains an important stylistic repository built on a tradition of oral diffusion from guru to disciple.

Form

Vocal performances, regardless of stylistic features attributable to a *gharana*, follow a general structure. A listing of the primary sections found in a north Indian classical

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vocal performance follows. Many of the elements mentioned will be further discussed in conjunction with the graphical examples.

Alap

A slow, unmetered introduction to the raga using the vowels "a," "e," or words of the *bandish*. Generally begins in the lower register and moves upward. Phrases and movements that define the raga (*pakad*) are first introduced during the *alap*.

Vilambit Bandish (bada khayal)

A slow *bandish* that initiates the *tal* (rhythmic cycle) played on the *tabla* (rhythmic accompaniment instrument). After the introduction of the *bandish*, the vocalist proceeds with *vistaar*, the spreading of the raga (also may be referred to as *badhat*). Similar to *alap*, it is improvised and begins with the lower register and moves upward. Unlike *alap*, it is not free of metre, as it operates within the confines of the *tal*. The *tal* and *vistaar* culminate with the singing of the first line, or *mukhda*, the end of which marks the *sum*, the first beat of the *tal*, where the *tabla* and vocalist meet.

Introduction of Tans

Tans are improvised phrases sung on "a," "e," or words, using the vocal technique known as *gamak*. A vocalist may also used Indian solfege syllables at this time called *sargam*. *Tans* are a signature characteristic of the *khyal* genre.

Drut Bandish (chota khyal)

The final section of a performance in which a fast *bandish* is sung followed by an increased tempo on the *tabla* (very often including a change of *tal* as well). During the *drut bandish*, *tans* are sung with greater rapidity and intensity, contributing to a sense of an inevitable and dramatic climactic end.

Sargam

Indian classical music uses a system similar to solfege, incorporating the following syllables (shown with corresponding scale degrees):

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Syllable:	Sa	Re	Ga	Ma	Pa	Dha	Ni
Scale Degree:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

For the following examples I chose to sing in Raga *Bhimpalasi,* an afternoon raga that lends itself to the vocal ornamentations I wish to demonstrate. In Raga *Bhimpalasi,* the 3rd and 7th scale degrees are flat (*komal*) indicated by the use of lowercase syllables:

Syllable:	Sa	Re	ga	Ma	Pa	Dha	ni
Scale Degree:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

The ascending movement of *Bhimpalasi* omits the 2nd and 6th scale degrees (*Re* and *Dha*). They reappear in the descending movement:[2]

Syllable:	Sa ga Ma Pa ni Sa	Sa ni Dha Pa Ma ga Re Sa
Scale Degree:	1 3 4 5 7 8	8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Movements

See Example 1. *Alap* 1-4 is a continuous recording divided into four sections for ease of visual comprehension and discussion. The far vertical left-hand column represents pitches in hertz. The *sargam* syllables are listed there (with the exception of ga which appears along the right-hand column for legibility). Horizontal lines emerge from each syllable spanning the length of the graph, creating a framework in which to view the pitch movement. Pitch movement is indicated by the "speckled" line running throughout the middle of the graph. Time in seconds appears along the bottom of each example.

Meend

The slow, unmetered, exploration of a raga during *alap* often magnifies important ornaments and phrases in a methodical and meticulous unravelling of a raga. It amounts to a wealth of melodic movement perfect for demonstrating important ornaments or movements. The first movement I wish to discuss is *meend*. *Meend* is a slow glide from one note to another, both of which are equally expressed (Bagchee, 1998). *Meend* is critical to the emotive aspect of rendering a raga as it emphasizes the

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notes in-between the notes, the spaces in which the ingenuity and beauty of Indian classical music is expressed most abundantly. The *meend* first appears in *Alap* 1, during 1-2 sec. The glide is from *Sa* to *ni* (1st and 7th scale degrees). It functions in this capacity throughout *Alap* 1 (10-11 sec, 14-15 sec, 22-23 sec) acting as a band of elasticity between *Sa* and *ni*. *Sa*, with its inherent gravitational pull behaves in much the same manner as the tonic in Western music–in which the melody can move away, but is inevitably drawn back. *Sa* is an origin point of stasis that, in Indian classical thought, "gives birth to the other six notes (Rajeev Taranath, personal communication, 1993)."

During 19-21 sec. in *Alap* 2, we can observe a *meend* from *Ma* to *ga* (4th and 3rd degrees). The movement from *Ma* to *ga* is similar to the movement from *Sa* to *ni* in *Bhimpalasi*, with *Sa* and *Ma* functioning as the most important notes (*vadis*) in the raga. As such, a musician performing in raga *Bhimpalasi* will spend more time on *Sa* and *Ma*, treating them both as a point of stasis (although *Sa* has a stronger gravitational pull and serves as the primary resting point). A magnified version of *meend* from *Ma* to *ga* can be viewed in Example 2a, occurring between 2-4 sec.

Andolan

Moving now to *Alap* 3 in Example 1, we will observe the movement called *andolan*. *Andolan* is a slow oscillation of a note. The primary note during 18-20 sec. is *ga*, dressed with an oscillation that touches *Ma* twice (shown as two cones or peaks) before returning to *ga*. Turning to Example 2b however, we can observe an *andolan* (2-7 sec.) that does not quite touch *Ma* again. This is a slightly different treatment that gives *ga* even more weight, avoiding *Ma* and any hint of former resolution. The treatment of *andolan* is ultimately determined by the artist, who is bound by the parameters of a raga. In raga *Bhimpalasi*, the space between *Ma* and *ga* allows for some freedom of interpretation. In other places, *andolan* of any shape would be considered an inappropriate movement.

Referring back to *Alap* 2, directly preceding the *andolan* is a *meend* from 16-18 sec., which serves as a setup for the *andolan*. The full progression is as follows: Emphasizing *Ma* (15 sec.), the movement then proceeds to a *meend* from *Ma* to *ga* (16-18 sec.), and from there, to *andolan* (18-20 sec.). What is important to note in this progression is how the primary pitches are connected. The connective tissue between the base pitches is what allows the skeletal framework of notes, or *swaras*, to move together, creating an emotive quality that infuses life and vitality into Indian classical music.

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Gamak

Definitions of *gamak* rarely do justice to the mechanics involved. Often, *gamak* is simply referred to as a "shaking of a note," which intimates randomness. It is not random at all and in fact is a rhythmic component that is as much about *laya* (timing, rhythm) as it is about *swara* (pitch or note). It is like a controlled vibrato, with each pulse given relative to the *laya*–single, double, triple, and so forth. Example 1, *Alap* 4, begins with *gamak*, each pulse dedicated to a different note. From 0-2 sec. we have the following progression (using just the first letter of each *sargam* syllable):

Syllable: n S g M P M P n S

The mechanics of the *gamak* used in this example can be thought of as a deep vibrato, one pulse per *swara*. The range employed for the *gamak* technique is illustrated by the dip and peak of each pulse. Example 2c gives a more magnified representation of *gamak*, with four pulses per *swara*:

Syllable: nnnn SSSS gggg MMMM PPPP MMMM gggg RRRR S

Example 2d is the *gamak* technique used to perform a *tan*, the quick melodic phrases mentioned previously that are a signature characteristic of the *khyal* genre. This is included to demonstrate how quickly the *gamak* may be performed. At roughly eight pulses per second, the phrase sung is:

Syllable: PMPMPPMgMMgRgRgRS nSgMPMPMgMgRS

Although *tabla* is not included in the excerpt, *tans* are invariably sung in an intimate relationship to the *tabla* and *tal*. To be considered a *tan*, the pulses must move at a rate at least twice the speed of the *tal* (as in two eighth notes to a quarter note).

Bandish

Example 3 includes the *gamak* technique in the context of a *drut bandish* (fast song). While the movements of *meend* and *andolan* are generally reserved for the slower melodic sections of *alap* and *vistaar*, a *bandish* often contains elements of *gamak*.[3] The clearest instance is the descending *gamak* down from the high peaks found between 1-2

sec., 8-9 sec., and 38-39 sec. Example 3 also demonstrates the stamina and flexibility required to render a *drut bandish,* where the voice must be both precise and agile. Through the extended excerpt, one can view the contour of connectedness that characterizes all aspects of Indian classical musical expression, where *swaras* are less independent entities than they are cogs in a matrix in which the mundane melds with the mysterious.

Conclusions

North Indian classical music is a tradition carved out of the human voice, which for centuries has explored the unspoken, unidentified world occupied by the *notes in-between the notes.* Exploring the infinite possibilities within this sphere as few other traditions have, Indian classical music can claim a mastery of melody found in an array of nuanced movement such as *meend, andolan,* and *gamak.* The voice *in* Indian classical music is the voice *of* Indian classical music, and a variety of stringed and wind instruments pay homage to the voice with every sound and phrase they utter. To find the origins and spirit of Indian classical tradition one need not look farther than the simple instrument embedded within the frame of the human body, encased in the same vessel as the heart and soul, for which the voice provides the vehicle for expression.
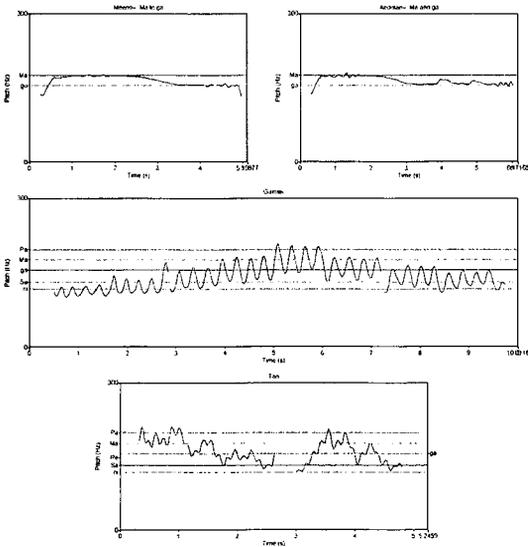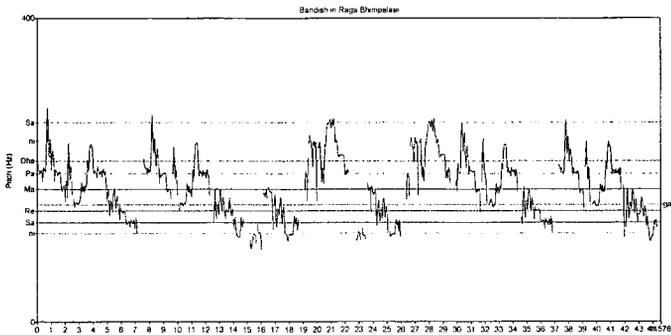
Examples

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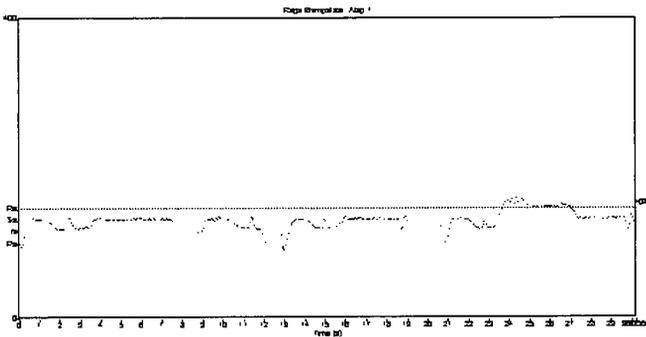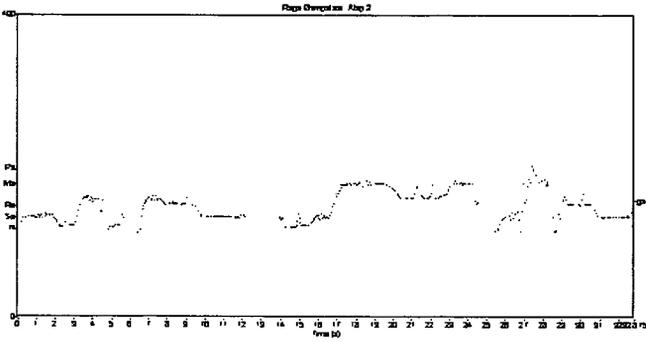
Example 1a: *Alap 1 & 2*

Example 1b: Alap 3 & 4

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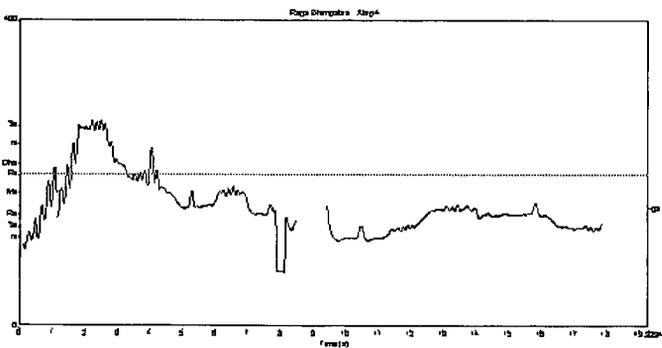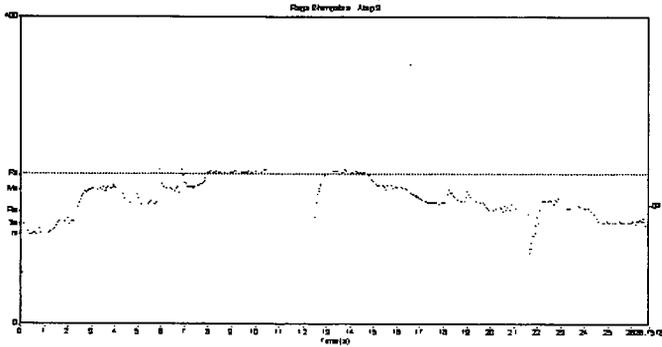
Examples 2 a,b,c,d: Meend, Adolan, Gamak, Tan

Example 3: Bandish

References

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Neuman, D. M. (1990). *The life of music in north India: The organization of an artistic tradition*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

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Endnotes

1. While it is common for an artist to remain with one *gharana* for life, some contemporary artists embody the characteristics of more than one *gharana*, having studied under more than one guru. It is important to note that one normally studies with a guru for life and will only initiate study with another after his/her guru has passed.
2. While the ascending and descending scale movement is useful in grasping the foundation of a raga, it is only skeletal. As discussed earlier, the musical connective tissue is created by a raga's inherent phrases (*pakad*). The ascending and descending movement are referred to as *arohi* and *avarohi*, respectively.
3. *Meend* and *andolan* do occur during the *vilambit bandish*. *Meend* can also be said to occur during the *drut bandish*, but does so with less emphasis.