A Tour of Music Cultures in South Asia
Classical and Devotional Music

By Allyn Miner

Editor's Note: Readers can visit the EAA spring online supplement for audio and performance examples of the music specifically discussed in this essay.

An audience of about 3,000 descends on the open-air Nazrul Manch Theater in South Kolkata (Calcutta) every winter at the Dover Lane Music Festival to hear the senior legends and the emerging stars of North Indian classical (or Hindustani) music. The crowd, made up of the urbane intellectuals of Kolkata and a good number of foreigners, is lively. Audience members move in and out of the hall for tea and snacks between performances, but every seat is filled for the senior artists who perform between midnight and seven in the morning. In January 2012, senior representatives of the most well-known vocal and instrumental lineages are the headliners: Pandit Jasraj, Rashid Khan, Shahid Parvez, Aashis Khan, and Ba'uddin Dagar. Performers are both Hindu and Muslim. Their disciples and followers come from every religious and cultural group of South Asia.

Indian classical singer Ustad Rashid Khan. Screen capture from Khyāl Ustad Rashid Khan—Raag Hansadhwani YouTube video (online link 1).

On the background of a rich drone provided by the long-necked *tānpūrā*, singers of *khyāl* (literally "imagination"), the main genre of Hindustani vocal music, settle in for note-by-note exploration of a *rāga*, a complex melodic structure. Delicate accompaniment on the *tabla* drum and expressive hand gestures by the singer augment the phrasings, which increase in complexity as the performance proceeds. Two short lines of love poetry with overtones of devotion become the basis for an hour or more of a performance of a single rāga (Khyāl Ustad Rashid Khan–Raag Hansadhwani, online link 1).

My beloved's glance is full of magic; oh, this love has confused my heart.
Who can know the trouble it's caused; I can't get a moment's peace.[1]

The courtly ancestor of khyāl, known as *dhrupad*, was also heard at the Dover Lane festival. Dhrupad is traced to the seventeenth century and is held in special esteem. Performed by specialists, it is characterized by long tonal sustain and a restrained and subtle development of the rāga. Accompanying a dhrupad singer is the *pakhāwaj*, the barrel-shaped predecessor of the tabla, and its deep resonant sound evokes an era of courtly dignity (Dhrupad Uday Bhawalkar, Dhrupad Mela Varanasi, 2012 online link 2).

The clouds sound "jhum jhum," the rain is beginning to pound, Oh
Listen, listen. The clouds are darkening; the peacocks are calling.
It pleases the darling young Krishna, Oh.[2]

A genre was developed especially for instrumental music in the eighteenth century. The *sitār* and *sarod*, plucked lutes, had come from Central and West Asia and were modified in north India to produce the sustained sound that a rāga performance requires. Players begin with an *ālāp* (long solo), exploring the rāga in flowing phrases. The drummer joins when the *gat* (composition) commences, and its catchy line becomes the refrain for increasingly complex extemporizations. The drummer and instrumentalist interact and look to the audience for response and encouragement.

In Chennai, the cultural and political capitol of Tamil Nadu on the southeast coast of India, the Madras music season spans nearly the entire months of December and January. More than 1,500 performances were scheduled for the 2012–13 season. The music was predominantly South Indian classical or Karnatak (also spelled "Carnatic" or "Karnatik"). The musicians this year included senior legends, emerging stars, and young musicians giving their public debut. The Madras Music Academy was founded in 1927 during a period of educational and nation-building projects. Musicians selected by the Madras Music Academy performed in small and large venues throughout the city. A highly competitive environment surrounded the selection of performers. Some accomplished players come from abroad. A committee from the Cleveland Thyagaraja Festival organized a concert series in Chennai to showcase talent from North America.

A Karnatak concert performance begins with a *varnam*, a lively song by one of the great south Indian composers. Most of the concert will consist of *kritis*, a genre in which poetry is sung in three composed sections followed by variations and increasingly complex extemporizations. Kritis are celebrated for their perfect balance of poetry, melody, and rhythm. Much of the repertoire consists of songs composed by Karnatak music's three beloved composers, the "Trinity," who lived in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The poetry is largely devotional, and the composers are revered as saints as well as musical geniuses. Tyagaraja (1767–1847) lived an ascetic life in musical service to Lord Rama, never accepting the patronage of the court.

Give me the privilege of being in Your service as a royal guard.
Give me the privilege of being in Your service as a true royal guard who would destroy the six internal enemies beginning with desire and conceit.[3]

The kriti melody is set to a *tāla* (rhythmic cycle), which the drummer maintains and ornaments with an expressive vocabulary of sounds. The singer tracks the tāla cycle by striking the knee with a sequence of hand actions. Listeners follow closely as the variations resolve at a precise point in the cycle. A melody accompanist, usually playing the violin, shadows the vocalist and takes solos between sections. Many audience members know the words and the melodies by heart and are deeply acquainted with the style of the composers. A highlight of a Karnatak concert is the *rāgam-tānam-pallavī*, a long extemporized exploration of a rāga's notes and phrases

Karnatak vocalist, Unnikrishnan.. Screen capture from Kriti Unnikrishnan-Hamsanadam-Bantu Riti YouTube video (online link 3).

in increasing complexity and speed (Kriti, Unnikrishnan-Hamsanadam-Bantu Riti, online link 3).

The voice is considered the prime instrument in Indian classical music, and in the *Karnātak* system, a kriti played on the violin or the *vīna* will follow the pattern of a vocal rendition. Many audience members will recall the words of the poetry as they listen. The violin has been in the mainstream of the south Indian classical world since its adoption during the British colonial period; held by the seated player with the scroll resting securely on the foot, the player's left hand moves freely up and down the neck, producing the *gamaka* (ornaments) that bring the rāga to life. The vīna, South India's celebrated fretted lute, is capable of producing voice-like nuances by a lateral pulling of the string across the fret (Karnatak vīna Jayanthi Kumaresh, online link 4).

Jayanthi Kumaresh, vīna player. Screen capture from Karnatak vīna Jayanthi Kumaresh YouTube video (online link 4).

Rāga and Tāla

Rāgas are the melodies of Indian classical music. Each rāga consists of a specific set of notes and is defined further by its resting tones, passing tones, ornaments, and phrasings. Even when rendered as pure melody without words or fixed rhythm, a rāga is intended to express specific emotions. The profuse use of slides and micro-intonation brings the rāga to life. Many have associations with a season; some carry the reputation of having medicinal or magical effects. In Hindustani music, each rāga is associated with a time of day and is played only at the appropriate time.

The principles of rāga are described in courtly texts and records dating to around the tenth century CE. By about the fifteenth century, texts reflect two major styles, aligned with the Indo-European language area of northern India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, as well as the Dravidian-language area south and east of Mumbai. In the nineteenth century, rāga-based song genres from the court and temple came to the concert stage and were celebrated as the high art culture of India. Designated classical and compared to the great canons of Europe, music performed in rāga and tāla was promoted by educational and cultural institutions and patronized by the new urban elite.

One learns to perform a rāga by memorization and by trial and error under the teacher's guidance, and proficiency requires a long period of apprenticeship. A disciple's reverence toward the teacher and the inherited lineage is a basic foundation for musical attainment and musical identity in South Asia. The master and disciple apprenticeship is a lifelong bond. This highly valued relationship is shared with other fields of religious and traditional learning. Elements of this system remain embedded even in classroom and institutional settings and are manifested as a student's humble submission to the teacher.

Ustad Vilayat Khan

In Hindustani music, the late sitarist Ustad Vilayat Khan (1928–2004) and his family represent some of the forces at work over the last several generations.[4] Links with court music lineages, participation in emerging trends, and success in patronage and media characterize their careers. Vilayat Khan's great-grandfather was an accompanist in service to patrons in Etawah, a district center in nineteenth-century British India. The expansion of the Indian

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railway system in the second half of the nineteenth century surely facilitated the travels of his son, Imdad Khan (1848–1920), to centers across North India where he was exposed to contemporary musicians. He settled in Kolkata, a center of British and Indian political and intellectual culture, and in 1904, became the first sitarist to be recorded by the Gramophone Company of England (Imdad Khan, sitar Sohini Qawwali, 1904, online link 5). His son, Inayat Khan, in turn found support with elites of the city, was recorded by the Gramophone Company, and was the first sitarist to become widely known across North India (Inayat Khan: sitār, Gat in Raag Bihari, online link 6). Vilayat Khan grew up in a milieu of expanding concert and recording opportunities. He created a brilliant new lyricism for the sitar based on contemporary khyāl vocal music (Vilayat Khan, online link 7). He recorded in the 78 rpm then LP formats, and on All India Radio and in the growing Bombay (Mumbai) film industry. He became a star in the twentieth-century sense, receiving nationwide and international exposure, but he felt the tensions that surely faced many lineage performers in the newly competitive market. Vilayat Khan refused to accept several national awards for reasons based on what he perceived as lack of respect for his lineage and seniority. He settled in the US in the Princeton area in the 1990s. Today, his sons, nephews, and disciples are finding their way in a system that looks to corporate sponsorship and the new global media. Classical musicians compete for public attention in a market that celebrates glamorous stars. Still evident in the venues frequented by classical music lovers are the ideals of urban high culture in north India and Pakistan: dignity and refinement inherited from the courtly arts, virtuosity reflecting intense training, and emotion and imagination coming from deep dedication.

M.S. Subbulakshmi. Source: Tribute to MSS website at http://tiny.cc/jwc8sw.

M.S. Subbulakshmi

In Karnatak music, the story of M.S. Subbulakshmi (1916–2004) represents the successes and historical tensions relating to women in public life in modern India. MSS, as she is fondly known, was born in the city of Madurai, Tamil Nadu, in a lineage of women who served the court and temple elites. Women who had been attached to temples and courts as *devadāsīs* (performers) were shunned by the urban public under the social reform movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many devadāsīs retreated from the public eye, but in the early 1920s and 30s, new avenues opened for women in urban public life. As a child, M.S. was recorded with her mother by the Gramophone Company. When she performed on the concert stage in Chennai, she caught the attention of connoisseur audiences for what they saw as a seriousness that distinguished her from devadāsī performers. She became a celebrity while still a teenager, and through her long and highly public life, she became a national emblem of Indian classical music culture. A recipient of public adoration and many awards, she did work that included film roles, LP and radio recordings, national and international concert appearances, and charity work. Accounts of her life, while celebrating her musical accomplishments, celebrate as well the ideals of a South Asian woman: dedication to family, grace, dignity modesty, and devotion (MS Subbulakshmi, online link 8).

Bhajan

Bhakti is Hindu devotionalism—loving worship that brings the individual close to the deity—and *bhajan* (sung poetry) is its primary medium. Vishnu's incarnations as Krishna and Rama, the powerful Shiva, and the goddess in her various embodiments are the deities most often celebrated in bhajans.

In north and south India, beginning in the tenth to fourteenth centuries, *sant* (saint-poets) composed poems of great appeal that envisioned God as intimately accessible. Sung in colloquial languages, these poems spread quickly across India. Written collections were later compiled and expanded, some becoming the canons of new sects. The *Guru Granth Sāhib,* the fundamental text of Sikhism, is a compilation of early sant poetry.

Bhakti poems are characterized by expressions of separation and longing for the deity, plaintive entreaty to the distant god, maternal tenderness, and blissful remembrance of the deity. A complete palette of poetic imagery and rhetorical techniques, deriving from the long legacy of love poetry in Indian literature, was employed by great bhakti poets. In the bhakti approach called *sagun* (with qualities), the deity is visualized and adored in embodied form.

The sixteenth-century sant Mirabai rejected the obligations even of her marriage in a noble household in Rajasthan to surrender herself to Krishna.

> *Dwell in my eyes, Nandalal!*
> *Your enchanting form, your dusky face, your eyes made wide!*
> *The flute adorns your nectarous lip, on your heart a jeweled necklace.*
> *With tiny bells are your hips resplendant, your anklets have a sweet sound;*
> *Mira's lord is Gopal, a giver of joy to the pious, loving to his devotees.*[5]

A rich connectedness existed between Hindu devotional practices and the ecstatic practices of Sufi Islam in north India. Some sants revered by both Hindus and Muslims urged a realization of the divine not in visible form but as an indescribable presence *nirguṇ* (without qualities). In this mode, the iconoclastic Kabir of late fifteenth-century Varanasi, born into a Muslim weaver family, rejected empty habitual worship practices by both Hindus and Muslims and challenged listeners to find unmediated realization of the divine:

> *Read, read, Pandit, make yourself clever.*
> *Does that bring freedom?*
> *Kindly explain.*
> *Where does the supreme being dwell?*[6]

Bhajans are sung in homes, temples, gatherings, festivals, and in concert settings; in small or large groups, by individuals, specialists, or non-specialists. Group bhajans may be led by spiritual teachers in call-and-response format. Spiritual figures have increasingly used television and video for public exposure, and recorded bhajans are designed for both inspiration and for participatory singing. Acharya Gaurav Krishna (b. 1984) was born in a family of hereditary priests in Vrindavan, the home of Krishna devotionalism. Professionally produced videos show the young Acharya leading large congregations (Bhajan: Acharya Gaurav Krishna, online link 9).

When sung by professionals or semi-professionals, bhajans can be performed in virtually any musical style. Typical of the bhajan sound are a driving rhythm and catchy, repeating refrain. The words are given priority, and melodic devices may be used to emphasize the multiple meanings and emotions of the text. Metal or wooden clappers and finger cymbals are often used and represent the instruments used by rural sants and singer-devotees. In a group setting, the tempo of a bhajan is often gradually increased to bring the participants to more intense levels of engagement.

Anup Jalota. Screen capture from the Anup Jalota, online link 10.

Anup Jalota (b. 1953) is one of the most successful light classical singers of Hindi-language songs and, prominently, bhajans. Born in Nainital in the Himalayan foothills, he learned bhajan singing from his father and began a career singing for All India Radio. He found popular success in film work in Mumbai beginning in the 1970s. By 1998, he had released 160 recordings and had fifty-eight gold and platinum discs.[7] His smooth, crooning vocals are orchestrated with interludes by a contemporary-sounding ensemble of *santur* (hammer dulcimer), guitar, and the hand-pumped reed organ (harmonium). His sound epitomizes the light classical music of the mid and late twentieth century, which has a tremendous following among urban, upper middle classes (Anup Jalota, online link 10).

Sufi Music

The poetry of Sufism, whose practitioners moved through north India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan beginning around the twelfth century, forms the basis for music centered at Sufi shrines and performed in stage settings. The practice of *sama'*, listening to music as a means to attaining mystical ecstasy, is condoned only by specific Sufi lineages, prominently the Chishti order in South Asia. The most well-known form is *qawwālī*, whose strong soaring lead-and-chorus vocals, driving handclaps, and inspirational poetry are designed to raise listeners to blissful levels of nearness to god. Qawwālī singers belong to hereditary family lines. They draw on a repertoire of Persian, Urdu, Hindi, and Panjabi (also spelled "Punjabi") poetry and draw their melodies from folk, popular, and classical music.

A foundational Sufi poet was the thirteenth-century Amir Khusro, whose verses make up an essential part of any qawwālī singer's repertoire. Khusro saw the Beloved, his mystical goal, in the person of his spiritual teacher:

> *Every sect has a faith, a direction to which they turn. I have turned my face towards the crooked cap of my spiritual guide Nizamuddin Aulia. The whole world worships one thing or another. Some look for God in Mecca; some go to Kashi. Why shouldn't I, Oh wise people, fall at my Beloved's feet?* [8]

In a shrine setting, the spiritual leader presides over the qawwālī performance and its attendees, who are seated by order of seniority. Devotees

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The Society for History Education (SHE), a nonprofit organization based at California State University, Long Beach, publishes *The History Teacher*. SHE is an affiliate of the American Historical Association.

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Sabri Brothers screen capture from Sabri Bros Tajdar-e-Haram-1, online link 12.

respond to the music with ritual offerings of money and physical actions. A devotee rising in *raqs*, the circling dance of Sufi ecstasy, is a special occurrence in a successful assembly *(mehfil)*. In a video of a qawwālī performance at the shrine of Sufi Saint Waris Ali Shah in Rawalpindi, Pakistan, one sees the spiritual leader of the assembly, the singers, and listeners seated in the ritual rectangular arrangement. As the music builds, listeners rise to offer money to the musicians with the blessing of the leader (Mehfil-e sama' at the shrine of Haji Waris Ali Shah, online link 11).

Qawwālī became increasingly known as a concert genre in the 1950s after recordings by qawwālī groups such as the Sabri Brothers (Sabri Bros Tajdar-e-Haram-1, online link 12). LP recordings distributed in Europe and the US brought qawwālī to the world market in the 1970s and 1980s. With the phenomenal success of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan (1948–1997), qawwālī took on a new life, both in South Asia and the West. Born to a family of qawwālī professionals in the Punjab region of Pakistan, Nusrat received exposure through Radio Pakistan and later through a British cassette label. His tremendous voice, technique, and stage presence made him a regional and international star. His songs also carried the appealingly eclectic themes of Sufi mysticism to large audiences (Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, online link 13). A surge of enthusiasm for Sufi song has since developed in both South Asian and global markets. In the last few years, musicians of various genres, from pop to rock to classical, have recorded songs of Sufi inspiration, known under the broad category "Sufi music." As qawwālī and Sufi music have become world concert genres, however, a tradition continues in north India and Pakistan of modest service to shrines. Hereditary musicians who remain out of the media spotlight receive, as they have for generations, compensation that barely constitutes a living wage.

Sufi poetry is rendered in other musical settings by solo singers and ensembles. Specific styles and instrumentation are associated with some shrines. The shrine of the poet saint Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai (1689–1752) in Bhit Shah, in Sindh, Pakistan, is home to an ensemble characterized by special high and low vocalizations and accompaniment on a regional long-necked lute (*Wayee* at the shrine of Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai, online link 14).

> *You appear in innumerable forms and shapes, but the same spirit permeates every form. I do not have the power, my Beloved, to describe your various manifestations.*[9]

In Lahore, Pakistan, players of the *dhol*, the powerful barrel drum of Punjab, play sequences related to Sufi ritual recitations and spin as they play in a controlled balance of professional skill and ecstatic abandon. Pappu Sain is one of the celebrated shrine drummers of Lahore. As he plays the complex patterns based on chant rhythms, he must balance professional musicianship against spiritual abandon (Pappu Sain, online link 15). The recent growth in interest in Sufi musical practices has brought pan-regional and international attention to him and other players.

Conclusion

The classical music systems of north and south India, Hindustani, and Karnatak music represent for South Asians the aesthetic and intellectual heritage of court and temple. They consist of intricately structured vocal and instrumental genres performed in rāga and tāla, frameworks for melody and rhythm that were cultivated in specialist circles over more than a millennium. As the music was adapted to the concert stage in the nineteenth century, hereditary professionals were joined and displaced by non-lineage performers. Classical music is celebrated across religious and regional boundaries as the epitome of traditional high culture. Despite the challenge of the fast-paced market, it survives today in concert settings, in old and new media, and in global markets.

Hindu devotionalism, bhakti, is expressed as intimate love and longing for one's deity. Verses composed by saint-poets from the early centuries in all regions of India make up a vast body of bhakti literature. In sung form, the bhajans, or poems, are sung across urban and rural South Asia and in the diaspora. With sentiments and musical settings designed to appeal to mass audiences, bhajans are an expression of contemporary popular Hinduism.

The ecstatic poetry of Sufi Islamic saints in South Asia was composed in milieus shared with Hindu bhakti sants. It uses metaphors of love to evoke mystical ecstasy. Qawwālī music is traditionally performed by lineage professionals in the service of Sufi gatherings. In the mid-twentieth century, it became widely appreciated as a concert genre. The international fame of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan of Pakistan, along with a recent attention to Sufi thought, brought qawwālī a new level of regional and global recognition. Along with other genres, it is included in a thriving market niche today called Sufi music.

If classical and devotional music carry messages of traditional ideals, the vast array of local, regional, and popular genres convey other sets of meanings in contemporary South Asia. Language-specific songs carry local history and serve local purposes. The music of the Hindi film industry (Bollywood) expresses the exuberance and global mix of cosmopolitan life. These and other genres participate equally with traditional music in the teeming, live musical reality of contemporary South Asia. ■

NOTES

1. V.N. Bhatkhande, *Hindustani Sangeet Paddhati, Kramik Pustak Malika Part 2* (Hathras: Sangeet Karyalaya, 1974).
2. From Sahasras, ed., *Premlata Sharma,* trans. by Allyn Miner (Delhi Sangeet Natak Akademi, 1972).
3. Based on the blog *Thyagaraja Vaibhavam*, September 8, 2008, accessed January 8, 2013, http://bit.ly/Yrtxyw.
4. "Ustad" is an honorific for a Muslim teacher or artist.
5. Rupert Snell, *The Hindi Classical Tradition: A Braj Bhasa Reader* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1991), 105.
6. Linda Hess and Shukdev Singh, trans., *The Bijak of Kabir* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1983), 85.
7. Anup Jalota biography, accessed January 8, 2013, http://bit.ly/VSFDG0.
8. Adapted from poem by Amir Khusro, "Har Qaum Raast Raahay," *World Poetry Movement,* trans. A Schimmel, accessed January 8, 2013, http://bit.ly/WJbUOp.
9. Based on Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai, Syed, 97, accessed January 8, 2013, http://bit.ly/VUNCgm.

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