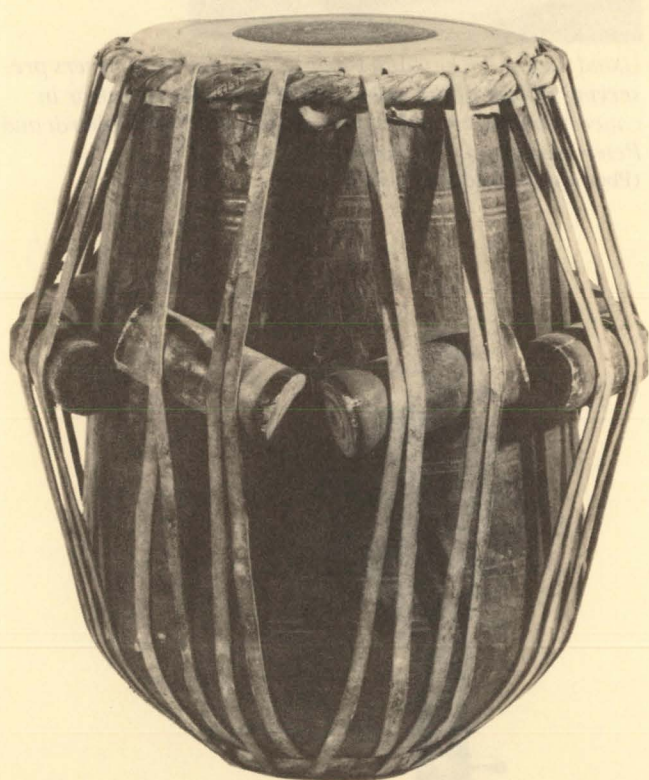


The Music of India

Peter Row



Drums from the collection of the National Museum of Natural History are on display in the Hall of Musical Instruments during the Festival.

(Photo by Victor Krantz)

The Indian subcontinent harbors an extraordinarily rich and multifaceted musical culture comprising a variety of regional, folk, popular, and religious themes as well as two systems of tones. These different genres vary considerably in form and style, yet they are strikingly similar.

With few exceptions, the different types of Indian music are performed by small ensembles that include a lead vocalist or instrumentalist, at least one percussionist, and often one or more instrumentalists providing imitative melodic accom-

paniment. (There is no harmony in Indian music.) The ensembles also use a drone instrument, usually a *tampura* (a four-to-six-stringed, long-necked lute), which plays only the tonic and one or two other important pitches of the mode being performed. Within the basic ensemble frame-work, musical texture may vary from a single voice or instrument performing over a drone to a complex performance in which all instruments and the voice simultaneously play variations of the same melody. Underlying the melodic component are tuned drums and often other percussion instruments, each elaborating on the rhythmic framework of a piece.

The basic elements of Indian musical language are melody and rhythm (known as *raga* and *tala* respectively in classical terminology). The melody types and rhythm structures of folk, popular, religious, and art music are closely related, but they overlap so that clear categorization by genre is virtually impossible.

A *raga* is a set of musical materials forming a unique modal identity on which composition and improvisation are based. These materials include: 1) pitch, 2) ascending and descending patterns, 3) pitch functions such as tonal centers, weak and ornamented tones, 4) a set of basic motivic patterns capturing the essence of a *raga*, 5) a definite ethos, and 6) in the northern system, a particular time of day (or night) designated as its performance time. A *raga* therefore is not a piece of music but the melodic vocabulary employed in making a piece of music. A characteristic feature of a *raga* performance is the rich and colorful use of ornamentation in the form of shakes, glides, and various kinds of vibrato. In fact, the space between the pitches is nearly as important as the pitches themselves.

A *tala* is a specific rhythm structure repeated cyclically throughout a piece, providing the basic rhythmic framework for that piece. The prescribed elements of *tala* are: 1) the number of beats, 2) the pattern of accents, 3) the grouping of beats into "measures," and 4) the specific drum strokes associated with the *tala*'s beats. Theoretically any *raga* can be combined with any *tala* though certain combinations are traditionally considered aesthetically better than others.

Myriad instruments are employed in Indian ensembles, but more important is the voice, which represents the ideal. Thus, most Indian instruments are designed to imitate the voice's ability to produce all the subtle intra-tonal ornaments so crucial to Indian melody. The most common melody

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instruments are plucked-string instruments such as the *sitar*, *sarod*, and *veenas*. Bowed instruments like the *sarengi*, *esraj*, and violin usually serve to accompany vocalists.

The role of the drummer varies from simple "timekeeper" to active and equal participant, performing an improvised dialogue with the melody line. Drummers play either the barrel drum (known as *mridangum* in the south and *pakhawaj* in the north) or a two-drum set (used only in the north). The latter, called *tabla*, consists of a wooden drum with a small head and a larger kettle drum. All of these drums are played with the hands and tuned to the tonic of the drone.

In this year's Festival, most of the principal instruments of India are presented in a series of concerts and lecture-demonstrations. The informal lectures explore such topics as the structure of the music, procedure in the use of ragas, the interrelationships between melody and rhythmic accompaniment, and the relationships of folk and classical traditions in Indian music.

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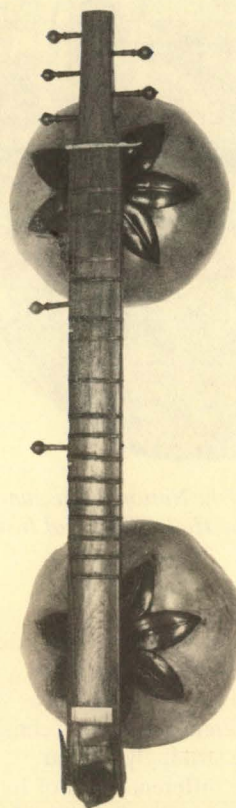
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Ustad Asad Ali Khan and Pandit Gopaldas, performers preserving the art of the veena and the pakhawaj appear in concerts and lecture-demonstrations. Arnold Burghardt and Peter Row are the lecturers.

(Photos by Arnold Burghardt)



A veena from the collection of the National Museum of Natural History is on display in the Hall of Musical Instruments during the Festival.
(Photo by Victor Krantz)