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FOLK MUSIC OF INDIA

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SIDE ONE:

FOLK SONG FROM WEST BENGAL
FOLK SONG FROM HARYANA
NAGA SWARAM — A SNAKE CHARMER'S MELODY
TAMIL FOLK SONG

SIDE TWO:

RELIGIOUS SONG FROM KERALA
SANAI GATH
RAJASTHAN FOLK SONG
FOLK SONG FROM SOUTH INDIA
FOLK SONG FROM SOUTH INDIA

DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET
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Library of Congress Catalogue Card No. R 59-55

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MUSIC of INDIA -- FOLK

--TRADITIONAL & CLASSICAL

Introduction by Wasantha Wana Singh

Early in its history simple scales of five and seven tones were used on a variety of string, wind and percussion instruments in India.

According to Indian mythology, the Hindu trinity, Brahma, Vishnu and Maheswara (Siva), men of great knowledge who were enlightened of the natural forces of the universe (creation, preservation and destruction), were great musicians of their day. They were looked upon as superbeings, or gods, who inspired the rishis (sages) Bharata, Thumburu, Narada and others. The legend is that the sage Bharata acquired his knowledge of music directly from the great Brahma and systematized the art and introduced it to the world as sangita, a term used by Bharata meaning the embodiment of song, instrumental music and dance.

After Bharata had learned the art of music from Brahma, he taught it to the inhabitants of Indra's heaven (Gandarva Loka) -- the gandarvas, kinnares, and apsarases (singers, instrumentalists and dancers) -- who were said to have performed this celestial music, called Marga Sangita, in the presence of Isiwara, the supreme god. Following this, Bharata taught the sangita and the lasya nrthya (gentle female dance) shown him by Siva's consort, Uma Devi, to his disciples.

Music which is practiced in conjunction with the Vedic liturgy is called celestial music. Any form of music maintained by the people of a province or region is called terrestrial music, or desiya sangita. It is observed and preserved to suit the natural disposition of the local populace. These terms correspond to "sacred" and "secular" as used in Western music. The Indian scale is divided into 22 sections, and each section is called a sruthee (microtone), out of which seven tones are selected for the main tones of the scale. These tones are called swaras.

When we compare the Indian with the Western scales, we find that the former possesses all twelve tones of the latter, in virtually the same tuning, and that the additional ten sruthees produce tones which are almost directly halfway between the half steps of the chromatic scale, and are loosely called quarter tones. Such tones are not always introduced as fixed steps, but may appear as carefully controlled sliding tones. The fine art of such sliding tones (called mhir in India) has no parallel in the West.

The combination of five, six or seven swaras (tones) selected from the 22-sruthee scale of India, forms a melodic foundation or a skeleton pattern with set laws of progression in ascension and descension. This pattern, expressing a definite feeling or philosophical concept, is called a raga. The word raga originated from the word ranj meaning to color, and it implies color of mind, i.e. emotion. A Musician must always observe rules to preserve the purity of the raga. However, within the rules of the raga he is allowed to improvise, which makes him a composer as well as an instrumentalist. For this reason there are no complete written scores of Indian music as it is performed, for each instrumentalist interprets the raga according to his inclination, but well within the formula. The ragas themselves, and foundation melody-patterns, are of course written down.

There are six fundamental ragas (a seventh is mentioned in Indian mythology) from which other male ragas and female raginis are derived. Indians recognize the validity of performing a particular raga at a suitable time of the day and season of the year. In this respect, legend states that, once long ago, in the court of the great Mogul emperor, Akbar, the celebrated court musician Tan Sen was ordered to sing a night raga at noon, the consequence of which brought darkness down on the place where he stood and wherever the sound of his voice reached.

The expression of rhythm is prevalent throughout India. In every corner of the land, one may see children as well as adults expressing rhythm on numerous types of drums. Occasionally one may encounter a youngster producing some very intricate rhythms on an empty can or a wooden box.

The thala, or the time measurement, in Indian music is independent of the melody which it accompanies, and runs in cycles with a major accent, a minor accent and a minus or silent accent. The singer and the instrumentalist, who carry the melody, and the drummer, who marks the time, must have perfect aural coordination in order to go around as many cycles of rhythm as they desire and then meet at the sama, or the major accent, without pre-arrangement. Hindu timing is divided into three sections: the first, thala, which moves in bars consisting of a fixed number of beats. The second, laya, regulates this movement with three different speeds -- vilambitha (slow), maddya (medium), and dhrutha (accelerated time). The last is mathra, or the minor unit of thala.

Thala may be compared with a study of the rhythmic aspect of form in Western music; laya with a study of tempo, and mathra with studies of individual measure forms, or meter. The complicated

pattern of thala, which is composed of mnemonical sentences, is called the bola and is divided into three sections. The first mnemonical phrase, which portrays the skeleton pattern with its accentuation, is called the Teka. Each phrase varies by degrees and is played with embellishments, carefully avoiding repetition. Some thalas are composed of tremendous variety of mnemonical phrases. To master these it takes a lifetime of patience, endurance and energy.

In comparing the music of India with that of the West, the comments of the late Sir Rabindranath Tagore, famed poet of India, will be of special interest:

"For us, Hindu music has above all a transcendental significance. It disengages the spiritual from the happenings of life; it sings of the relationship of the human soul with the soul of things beyond. The world by day is like European music; a flowing concourse of vast harmony composed of concord and discord and many disconnected fragments. And the night world is our Indian music; one pure, deep and tender raga. They both stir us, yet the two are contradictory in spirit. But they cannot be helped. At the very root nature is divided into two, day and night, unity and variety, finite and infinite. We people of India live in the realm of night; we are overpowered by the sense of the one and the infinite. Our music draws the listener away beyond the realm of everyday joys and sorrows, and takes us to that lonely region of renunciation which lies at the root of the universe, while European music leads us a variegated dance through the endless rise and fall of human grief and joy."

Indian dancing has two outstanding characteristics, the use of the hands to tell a story, by means of gestures, and the complicated foot work. The art of dance is used, primarily, to tell the stories and myths concerning the gods and heroes of mythology. It is interesting to note that the gesture language of the Hindu dance has survived the ages of crises that the Indian civilization has been forced to undergo. It is closely related to the symbolical language of the finger, hands and of the bodily postures which form an intrinsic part of the daily ritual of the devotee of Yoga practice.

Since Yoga is the study of mind over matter, it is only natural that all dancers must learn the aspect of bodily control which forms a fundamental part of this practice. When it is mentioned that both the musicians and the dancers learn Yoga in order to interpret the arts of India, it does not mean that they are able to walk on embers, or stick pins into themselves. This is only a lower aspect of the same science.

A distinguishing feature of Indian dance is the dancers' foot-work, which produces musical articulation from the ankle bells. These bells, accompanying the music, frequently echo the mnemonical phrases beaten on the drum but sometimes produce counter effects. Therefore, an Indian dancer is considered a musical instrument, producing melody from her bodily movement, rhythm from her foot work and words to her composition through her hand gestures.

Notes on Musical Instruments by Harold Courlander

Among the truly vast number of musical instruments used in Indian classical, traditional and folk music, these are perhaps the best known and the most commonly seen:

Sarangi: A box-shaped or roughly boat-shaped instrument with four main strings and a varying number of sympathetic strings, ranging from seven to as many as one hundred. The word sarangi means 100-stringed. This instrument is played with a bow, and is very popular in the north and central states. Variants of the sarangi, some of them older forms, are the dilruba, the taus and the sarinda.

Israj: A nineteen-stringed bowed instrument. Four strings are played with the bow, the rest are sympathetic.

Sitar: A seven-stringed instrument played in the manner of the steel guitar.

Vina or veena: A variant of the sitar, with two large calabashes attached, one at each end, to act as resonators. The vina is made of bamboo, with frets, and has seven strings.

Sur bahar: A stringed instrument resembling the sitar, but larger.

Tanpura: A stringed instrument.

Pungi: A blown instrument made of two small reeds and a gourd or calabash.

Vani: A bamboo flute.

Bansri: A type of flute.

Shahnai: An oboe-like wind instrument of North India.

Karatali and manjira: Small cymbals used by singers in a chorus.

Nadhaswaram: Variant of the shahnai.

Kattyavana veena: A xylophone-like instrument with wooden keys.

Kartals: Wooden hand clappers.

Chungarus: A string of small bells tied on a ribbon, used for religious songs and dances.

Ghara (also known as ghaghar and matka): An earthen pot played by striking with a stick. The tone is controlled by a hand over the natural opening.

Jalatarang: Composed of numerous bowls partially filled with water to produce specific tones. They are played by striking them with wooden sticks.

Mirdam: A barrel-shaped drum with two heads and tapering ends. The center of each head has a circular piece of parchment cemented to it. One head is pitched high, the other lower.

Pakavaj: A drum similar to the mirdam, especially favored by Moslems.

Tappu: A shallow, wheel-shaped finger drum.

Dolak: A barrel-shaped two-headed drum, played with the palm and fingers. It is used to accompany soloists and in group singing.

Tabla: A set of two small drums used for beating time.

Duff: A small hand drum.

Nugara: A large kettle drum.

Khol, algoza, baya, mirdanga: Drums of various styles.

Gopi-jantra: A small barrel-shaped drum with a single head. A gut cord affixed to the head passes through the body of the drum. The drum is held under the arm with the open end forward, and the cord is held taut and plucked to produce drum tones. Varying the tension on the cord changes the tone. Other instruments widely used are the harmonium and bagpipes.



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SIDE I, Band 1: Folk Song from West Bengal (Champa Bothri Desha Dekai) -- This is a love song in which the young man compares his sweetheart to the champa flower surrounded by the beauty of nature. The instruments used are the israj, sitar, flute, gopi-jantra, and dolak, with a harmonium in the background.

SIDE I, Band 2: Folk Song from Haryana (Punjab, Northern India). This is a love song sung by the young people of this region. The instruments used are the sarangi, the pakavaj and the kartals.

SIDE I, Band 3: Tamil Folk Song from the province of Madras, South India. The instruments used are the vani, a bamboo flute, the mirdam and the violin.

SIDE I, Band 4: Naga Swaram -- played on three reed instruments, two of which hold the drone and are made of wood (sometimes sandalwood), while the third carries the melody and is made of silver. The drum is barrel-shaped and is played with a stick on the left side and with the fingers and palm of the hand on the right. Cymbals accompany the other instruments. This type of music is very popular in the temples of South India and also is used at marriage ceremonies and other auspicious occasions. In this particular piece the instrumentalist is performing a snake charmers' melody (composed in the ragini asaori) which usually is played on the pungi.

SIDE II, Band 1: Religious Song from Kerla -- the main instruments here are the ancient kattyavana veenas (made of wooden slabs) which are used as percussors in the gamelan. The playing technique is much the same as with Western xylophones. The drum accompanying the singing and instruments is the dolak. It is very popular among folk musicians. Kerla, located in Malayalam, means "the cocoanut country."

SIDE II, Band 2: Sanai Gath (Raga Kaphi) -- a classical piece played on the shahnai (Indian oboe), with the accompaniment of the tabla and baya drums and a drone. Mr. Bismillah is unanimously considered one of India's best performers on this particular instrument. His co-artist, the drummer, is also well known.

SIDE II, Band 3: Rajasthan folk song -- played on the sarangi, gopi-jantra, sitar in the background, and the tabla and baya.

SIDE II, Bands 4 and 5: Folk Songs from South India. Instruments in Band 4 are flute, violin and mirdam. Instruments in Band 5 are flute, mirdam and tappu. This particular type of song is popular among the laborers working in the tea gardens, rowing boats, or doing any heavy duty work.



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SIDE I, Bands 1 and 2: Unnaippol (parts 1 and 2): Sung by Turaiyur M. Rajagopala Sarma, accompanied on a veena, khol and violin. The raga Kamboji is a "morning" piece, sung in the Tamil language of South India. Unnaippol means "like you."

SIDE I, Band 3: Sangeeta Gnamamu: sung by Kumari Shyamala, accompanied by veena and khol, in Telegu.

SIDE I, Band 4: Theruva Theppo: Sung by D. K. Pattamal, accompanied by veena, khol, and violin. The raga Kamas is an "evening" piece, sung here in the Tamil language of South India by a well known singer from that area.

SIDE II, Band 5: Raga Bhairari (or Bhairavi): Played on the jalatarang by master Dattopant and Group. Instruments, in addition to the jalatarang, are the tabla and the tanpura. This raga is an "early morning" piece.

SIDE II, Band 6: Raga Saarang: Played by master Dattopant and Group. Same instruments as in Band 5. This raga is a "mid-day" piece.

SIDE II, Band 7: Aag (or Aaj) Mere Ghar Pritam: Sung by Kumari Juthika Ray, with orchestral accompaniment. This piece is a Bhajan, a type of song which is exclusively religious in content. The language here is Hindi. Kumari Juthika Ray is a famous Bhajan singer.

SIDE II, Band 8: Niravadhi Sugadha: played by T. N. Rajarathnam Pillai on the nadhaswaram. The nadhaswaram resembles the shahnai of North India and the European clarinet. This type of piece is played on ceremonial occasions, such as weddings. The performer is one of the well known South Indian players of this instrument. He is accompanied on a nugara.

SIDE II, Band 9: Parmaarth Cha Panth Vikat Nach Aakale: sung by Dattopant in Marathi. This song is a type called Bhav Geet. The first line of the song reads: "Roads to good deeds are difficult to follow." The singer is accompanied by a harmonium and a tabla.

Photograph of Bengali street musician,
Courtesy of Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York City, Music Department.

Harold Courlander, editor
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