

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
**INDIAN MUSIC**

Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

**Overview** The significance of sound in Indian culture is evident in ancient Vedic tradition, in which chanting and singing are highly cultivated arts. Speech is even deified as the Vedic goddess Vac. Correct sound production was considered essential for cosmic order as well as capable of creating good and evil for individuals. Today that belief underlies thousands of rituals and ceremonies; a single misplaced syllable in a particular prayer, it is said, can result in an unintended death. Although India is far from unique in this belief in the power of sound, the sheer number of musical traditions, instrumental and vocal, their cultural power and their continuity (whether real or imagined) with the past is remarkable.

### Classical

**Origins** Music and musical instruments are described in several early Sanskrit texts (the Vedas; *Natyasastra*, 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> c. CE; *Brihaddesi*, 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> c. CE; *Sangitaratnakara*, 13<sup>th</sup> c. CE) and in early Tamil texts (*Cilappadikaram*, 5-6<sup>th</sup> c. CE; *Tevaram*, 7<sup>th</sup> c. CE) and depicted in temple sculpture.

**Division** Persian and Turkish influences in Muslim courts in north India (from about 1200 CE) produced a division of Indian music into two traditions: Hindustani in the north and Carnatic (Karnatic) in the four southern states. The divergence solidified over the next few centuries with patronage from the Mughals in the north and Vijayanagar in the south. Both traditions reached their apogee in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

**Hindustani** Although Hindustani music is usually traced to the Delhi Sultanate (1206-1526 CE), little is known of its early history. One historical figure, however, was Amir Khusrau (1253-1325 CE), who is credited with introducing instruments (*sitar* and *tabla*) and new genres of music. Most Hindustani musicians, however, trace their descent from Tansen, a vocalist and instrumentalist at the Mughal court of Akbar in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. Modern practices, including the popular *khyal* vocal genre, date from the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

**Carnatic** The early history of Carnatic music is also shadowy. Purandara Dasa (1484-1564 CE) is considered the founder, but he is more legend than history. Modern Carnatic music derives from the Maratha court at Thanjavur in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, when three men composed the repertoire that defines the tradition today: Syama Sastry (1762-1827), Tyagaraja (1767-1847) and Muttuswami Dikshitar (1775-1835)

**Comparison** Lyrics in both traditions draw largely on Hindu mythology and the two epics. Hindustani and Carnatic music are also both based on two key features: *ragas* ('colours', melodies or melodic formulae) and *tala* (rhythmic cycle). In the Carnatic tradition, however, the emphasis is on vocal music, and most compositions, even with instrumentation, are written to be sung. Further, while both traditions use scales to define a *raga*, Carnatic musicians employ semi-tones (*sruti*) that enable them to produce more *ragas*. Finally, while improvisation is integral to both schools, Hindustani musicians improvise to a greater extent.

**Instruments** The major instruments of the Hindustani tradition are the plucked strings (*sitar*, *sarod* and *tanpura*), the oboe-like *shanaï*, a six-hole flute and two drums (*tabla* and *pakhavaj*). In the southern tradition, the *sitar* is replaced by the *vina*, and the 6-hole flute by an 8-hole flute. The *tanpura* was popular in the south but has given way to

the harmonium (*sruti* box), and the *shanaï* becomes the *nagasvaram*. More significantly, Carnatic music includes instruments not found in the north: a pot drum (*ghatam*), two barrel drums (*mridangam* and *tavil*), a set of small tambourines (*kanjira*) and a violin.

**Violin** The history of the violin—introduced by French and/or British colonialists in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, taken up as a popular instrument in south Indian cities and courts, and now an integral part of south Indian classical music—is one of those examples of cross-cultural borrowing that defies categories such as ‘indigenous’ and ‘foreign.’

#### Other

**Folk** Local and regional traditions of music flourish all over the country. Some are narrative-based, such as the hereditary, itinerant bards in Rajasthan and central India who sing epic tales to the accompaniment of string instruments. These folk traditions have influenced and been influenced by court traditions, both Hindu and Muslim. Nevertheless, at the risk of generalisation, folk music has several distinct characteristics. First, percussive music is used to stimulate spirit possession. Second, collective singing and instrumentation is common. Third, women are often lead performers.

**Film** Beginning in the 1930s, with the first talkies, film music has developed into a separate genre and industry. Drawing on diverse sources, such as jazz, big band, swing, Urdu poetry and Indian folk music, composers in Bombay (and Madras) created film scores and songs that are remembered even today. The industry continues to grow, and Hindi film music is now arguably the most popular form of entertainment in the country.

## Reading

Amanda Weidman, *Singing the Classical, Voicing the Modern: The Post-colonial Politics of Music in South India* (Duke, 2006)

Amanda Weidman, Musical genres and national identity. In Vasudha Dalmia and Rashmi Sadana (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Indian Culture* (Cambridge, 2012), pp. 247-263

Daniel Neuman, *The Life of Music in North India: The Organization of an Artistic Tradition* (Chicago, 1990)

Janaki, Bakhle, *Two Men and Music: Nationalism in the Making of an Indian Classical Tradition* (Oxford, 2005)

Bonnie Wade, *Khyal: Creativity within North India's Classical Music* (Cambridge, 1984)

Richard Widdess, *Drupad: Tradition and Performance in Indian Music* (Ashgate, 2004)

Richard Widdess, *The Ragas of Early Indian Music* (Clarendon, 1995)

## Discussion questions

Analyse the historical and cultural influences that led to the formation of Hindusthani music. How did a musical tradition with roots in the Vedas become transformed by musical traditions from Muslim courts in Persia and central Asia? Discuss instruments, lyrics, melodies, performing styles and patronage. Describe also the cultural position of Hindusthani music in contemporary India. Has it risen or fallen in cultural status? Has its audience or venues changed?

The history of the violin in Carnatic music exemplifies the cross-cultural exchange that characterises Indian culture as a whole. Describe that history, explain the controversy surrounding it (indigenous origin vs foreign import) and then analyse that controversial history as representative of India culture.

During the height of the nationalist movement (1920s-1940s), music became a potent symbol of 'Indian-ness.' The courtly traditions of north India and south India were standardised into classical forms in order to represent Indian tradition as opposed to cultural forms corrupted by colonial influences. By contrast, film music, which first emerged in this period, presented itself as an inclusive and populist form that expressed the spirit of Independence. Analyse the politics of music during the nationalist movement, especially its ability to represent a national identity.