HINDU MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

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Hindu musical instruments are remarkable for the beauty and variety of their forms as well as for their magnificent range of expression. The sculptures and paintings of the Ajanta caves, descriptions in the Ramayana and the Rig-Veda, and the writings of the famous theoretician Bharata all show that these qualities have remained basically unchanged for the last two thousand years.

According to ancient sources the invention of music—rakti, or “the power of affecting the heart”—was attributed to Brahma and was presided over by his wife, Sarasvati. Many elements of the Indian musical system were also supposedly of divine origin, and this mystical, religious aspect has been preserved to the present day. Various Indian deities have been associated with specific instruments; they or their attributes can be seen in paintings decorating the instruments and sometimes are symbolized by the instrumental shapes themselves. For example, the peacock, the bird consecrated to the goddess Parvati, appears very often as a decorative element on stringed instruments, as a functional element on many vinas, and even as an entire instrument, as in the case of the mayuri illustrated above, the name itself meaning a peacock. The vina is associated with Sarasvati, the goddess of learning, and the flute too has its Vedic connotations, for Krishna with his fair Gopi companions on the banks of the Yamna “played and sang those witching strains that, like those of Orpheus, held all creation spellbound.”

It is only natural that an art so sacredly conceived should be perpetuated, unchanged, as an essential element of Hindustani religious life. The desire to maintain through music the magic of Vedic literature could not be stilled even by the Mohammedan invasions, which brought to northern India the idea of music as a profane art. And, while previously the higher branches of the musical profession had been reserved for Brahmans or others of high caste, Mohammedan prejudices succeeded in lowering the status of the performer as well as of music in general.

Still, the tenacity of the earlier tradition is evident in the Indian musical style. The chief element is melody, and harmony is almost completely neglected, limited primarily to a drone accompaniment. Melody is based on “authentic” melodic units, allegedly established fourteen centuries ago by professional musicians of original...
genius. Any later melody is thus a recombination of older, prescribed elements, and Indian music is formed by the submission of “individual creation” to the welcome limitations of a ready pattern. These melodic patterns, or raga s, assign a place to each individual note of a modal scale. They have their own ethos, or mood, and their own pictorial associations. Among specific things the ragas denote hours of the day, the six Hindu seasons, and the planets, and aesthetic form thus becomes an expression of religious thought. For example, a raga is associated with a particular season because only at that time is that raga’s god at leisure to attend the place where his favorite tune is sung and to inspire the performer. Many legends exist about the power music has over men, animals, and inanimate objects. One tells of a musician who sang the raga of night at midday. The powers of the music were so strong that it instantly became night and darkness surrounded the palace as far as his voice could be heard.

To an especially large degree Hindu music is a continuous interplay of freedom and law, fantasy and stability, variation and tradition. The rigidity of melody imposed by the prescribed ragas is softened by ornamentations known as gamakas, in the form of grace notes, slides, tremolos, and variegated shadings. It has often been said that “without gamakas a melody cannot smile.”

Tonally the Indian octave is subdivided into twenty-two small intervals that are called srutis. These correspond roughly to quarter tones but are not based on exact distances between notes, which allows much freedom in performing gamakas. The human voice is the ideal instrument for producing the flexible gamakas, and indeed the voice is the backbone of the Indian instrumentarium.

Rhythm, in Indian music, is characterized by a balance of free and formal elements comparable to the ragas and gamakas of melody. Time is organized into short rhythmic patterns, called talas, which are defined quantitatively by long and short stresses rather than qualitatively by loud and soft beats as in the Western system. However, to permit individual variation of patterns no exact time values are established for the beats, and, although each pattern is repeated over and over again throughout a piece, different talas can be employed simultaneously, resulting in a system of cross rhythms. Such rhythmic complexity is indigenous to Indian music and accounts for the tremendous importance of the drum.

The flexibility of Indian music, both rhythmically and tonally, requires instruments that allow great freedom. An examination of the Hindu instruments currently on exhibition at the Museum reveals their wondrous variety and their relation to Hindu musical style. It is extremely difficult to date these instruments with any degree of certainty, as their forms, like the formal elements of the music itself, have persisted, virtually unchanged, since antiquity.

Among the stringed instruments are several forms of the vina, considered to be India’s national instrument. It has often been thought that the vina is one of the oldest Hindu instruments, but this misconception arises from terminological confusion, as the word, derived from the Egyptian name for harp, originally referred to a type of Indian harp that became extinct about a thousand years ago. The invention of the vina

![Sitar, inlaid with ivory, found mostly in central and northern India. Crosby Brown collection](image)
Vinas, or stick-zithers, with gourd resonators. ABOVE: North Indian vina, or bin, played only by professional musicians. Crosby Brown collection. BELOW: South Indian vina, with the belly of a lute replacing the lower gourd. Gift of Alice Getty, 1946
Sarod and sur-sanga, two examples of Indian lutes, decorated in gold and green. The sarod, found chiefly in upper India and the Punjab, has a banjo-like tone. The front of its belly is parchment. Crosby Brown collection is attributed to Narada, the mythological son of Brahma and Sarasvati, and this lineage explains the high esteem in which it is held.

The north Indian vina, or bin, is a zither consisting of a round stick with a calabash or gourd at each end, which give volume to the silvery tone of the plucked strings. It is supposed to represent Sarasvati, with its curved neck, two gourds or breasts, and frets or bracelets. The player holds the stick obliquely across his chest,
resting one gourd on his left shoulder and the other under his right arm. Owing to the complicated finger technique, solo performance is usually limited to professional musicians, who grow their fingernails to exaggerated lengths in order to pluck the strings. The bin illustrated on page 70 has twenty-three large movable frets projecting from the stick; the most minute difference in finger pressure on the frets causes a variation of pitch, making the instrument especially suitable for the performance of intricate embellishments and microtones. It is interesting to note that a similar instrument was described and accurately illustrated in Mersenne’s *Harmonie universelle* of 1636.

The south Indian vina, older than the bin, is relatively rare and differs from the northern form in that the lower gourd is replaced by the body of a lute with a wooden soundboard. The vina shown on page 70 has four melody strings; the three drone strings at the side of the fingerboard are employed as accompaniment or to mark time.

An important variety of stringed instrument is the tamboura, which supplies a drone accompaniment and is therefore indispensable in any performance of Indian music. Since it is used exclusively as a drone instrument there is no necessity for frets. The strings are never stopped but are always struck open by the fingers, without the use of a plectrum. Changes in pitch for different ragas are obtained by the movable bridge. The instrument when played is held vertically with the bowl resting on the right thigh. The tamboura illustrated on the opposite page is ornately inlaid with ivory and has, on its belly, polychromatic paintings of Sarasvati, sitting on her peacock and holding a tamboura, and Ganesa, the elephant-headed god. The European offshoot of the tamboura-sitar family of the Near East was the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Italian *colascione*.

Closely related to the tamboura in general appearance is the sitar, also called Sundari, “the beautiful.” The invention of this instrument is ascribed to Amir Khusrau, a poet and singer at the court of Sultan ‘Ala’u’d Din of Dehli in the twelfth century. The sitar is one of the most popular stringed instruments of India, particularly in the north. It has many features of the vina, among them being the movable frets that permit great tonal freedom, but as it does not require the arduous finger technique of the vina it is much easier to learn. The sitar is plucked with a plectrum; only one string is used for melody, while the others are used as open strings for drone accompaniment.

Another type of stringed instrument is the sarangi, considered to be the Indian fiddle. Hewn from a single block of wood, it has sympathetic strings and produces a tone like that of the viola d’amore. The sarangi is played mainly in the north of India, occasionally for theatrical performances of the famous Nautch companies. Relatives of this instrument are the sarinda of southern India, the esrar, a combination of the sitar and sarangi, and the rabob and sarod, India’s modern lutes. A
Front and back views of a tamboura inlaid with ivory. This south Indian instrument can produce a buzzing tone when pieces of silk or quill, placed between the bridge and strings, are manipulated. The paintings show the goddess Sarasvati on a peacock, Ganesa, the elephant-headed god, and other deities. Gift of Alice Getty, 1946
remarkable member of the lute family is the mayuri, a sitar in the shape of Sarasvati's sacred bird, the peacock. The mayuri is not highly esteemed by any but Nautch musicians and is rarely found outside of northern India.

Equally diverse are the members of the wind family, which, being unkeyed, are especially appropriate for producing flexible melodic lines and pitches. Flutes, however, are of secondary importance as Brahmins are forbidden by law to play them and the instruments are thus relegated to the lower castes. The one exception is the murla, which was played by Krishna and was looked upon in Indian mythology with much the same veneration as the lyre by the Greeks. Brahmins consider the trumpet a most sacred instrument and have given it a prominent place in their rituals. One of the many types of conch-shell trumpets, the sankha, is supposedly to be blown by Siva on the Day of Judgment. It is purportedly the most ancient wind instrument known to man and has a long and involved religious history. Perhaps one of the most interesting and original of the trumpet family is the nyastaranga, which cannot really be defined as a musical instrument since it cannot produce an independent tone. It is played by being held next to the throat so that the vibrations of the larynx set into action a tough spiderweb hidden in the mouthpiece. In this manner the timbre of the human voice is altered and takes on an oboe-like tone.

Reed instruments are also found in numerous shapes throughout India. In view of the central role of the drone in Indian musical culture, it is not surprising that the bagpipe has a long and important history. According to Dravidian tradition, India was the home of the bagpipe, which appears either as a primitive oboe or with both a chanter and a drone. The north Indian oboe is very popular, being played in pairs, one for the melody, the other for the drone, at weddings, ceremonies, and festivals. Expert oboists are paid fabulous sums and frequently grants of land for their performances, and, having a continuous tradition behind them, they often hold hereditary appointments.

Bells, as in the Christian ritual, are used daily in the religious ceremonies of India, in company with gongs. The use of bells is as old as Hinduism itself, and there are many directions for their use in early Vedic literature. The ghanta, or
hand bell, is often decorated with figures of gods and their symbols, such as Vishnu’s eagle. But bells are not exclusively religious in function. Gunguru, or ankle bells, have great significance for a dancer and actually symbolize the profession itself. Before entering this career, a dancer ties on the bells in a solemn ceremony, and the professional life so adopted cannot be abandoned. “The dancer who has tied on the bells” has become a proverbial expression for devotion to a purpose from which one cannot depart.

Drums, too, have sacred importance throughout India. The mridanga, signifying “made of clay,” is supposedly the father of Indian instruments. According to mythological accounts in the Puranas, Brahma invented this instrument so that Ganesa could accompany Mohadeva’s victory dance in celebration of his defeat of the invincible demon Tripurasura. The reverence with which drums were held is shown by the fact, related in many epics, that capture of the drum meant defeat of the enemy. The dundubhi and other large drums were particularly regarded with great veneration.

This is only a brief glimpse into the complicated and rich world of Indian instruments. The Museum’s extensive collection of musical instruments contains about two hundred that are Hindu, and of these only a fraction is at present on view. In their workmanship, beauty, and delicate balance of form and function they give delight to Western eyes.