

## 58. Ram Narayan (India) Rag Bhairav (for Unit 6: Further Musical Understanding)

### Background information and performance circumstances

*Rag Bhairav* is an example of Hindustani Classical Music from Northern India. Its instruments and melodic style are related to Persian music, but, over the centuries, Hindustani music has evolved its own elaborate, expressive style.

The word “rag” (or “raga”) is a Sanskrit word meaning colour. A rag is not just a particular pattern of notes (akin to our Western scale) but also involves particular characteristics and moods associated with the pattern. More than 300 rags have been identified, of which about 100 are in common use. Each rag is associated with a time of day; *Rag Bhairav* is intended for performance in the morning and portrays such moods as serenity and peacefulness.

Performances of rags take place in much the same way as traditional Western concert performances where a few performers entertain a reverent audience. The performance is improvised but within the bounds of a very strict compositional process. A complete performance could last anywhere from a few minutes to a couple of hours. The audience will be expected to have an intimate knowledge of the rag being performed so that they can fully appreciate the knowledge and skill of the performer.

### Performing forces and their handling

There are three instruments playing in this *Rag Bhairav* performance:-

**Sarangi** – the principal bowed string instrument of Hindustani music and the instrument playing the melody throughout our recording. It has three strings which the performer plays with the bow and there are up to 35 sympathetic strings. Unusually the player stops the strings with the nails of his left hand, near the cuticle; this contributes to the sarangi’s notorious technical difficulty. The performer on our recording, Ram Narayan, is one of the instrument’s greatest exponents who has popularised the instrument in an international career spanning over five decades.

**Tampura** – a long-necked, fretless, lute-like, plucked string instrument with four (sometimes five) strings. Its simple function in Rag Bhairav is that of a drone. Each of its open strings (tuned to the main notes of the rag, “Sa” and “Pa”, as notated on p.509 of the Anthology) is plucked in turn throughout a performance. The timbre of the Tampura is particularly noteworthy; a very resonant, “buzzing” tone quality, rich in overtones, is produced by the instrument. This very distinctive timbre is even given its own name in Indian music, *jivari*.

**Tabla** – a pair of hand drums consisting of a small, right hand, wooden drum called *dayan* and a larger, left hand, metal drum called *bayan*. Both drums have a circular black spot (made of a mixture of gum, soot and iron filings) in the centre of the drumhead to enhance their ringing, bell-like timbre. The drums are played using the fingers, palm and heel of the hand; a skilled player can create a wide range of timbres by varying his hand strokes, where he strikes the drumhead and the pressure he uses.

In Anthology No. 58, the tabla enters on Line 19 and, whilst clearly utilising a range of playing techniques and being permitted to use improvisation, never ventures into similar levels of solo virtuosity; it maintains a steady rhythmic accompaniment to the dominant melodic sarangi.

## Structure

The structure of *Rag Bhairav* can be looked at from two different aspects.

First of all there are vital melodic and rhythmic components; the use of fixed rag and tal patterns. Both are essential foundations upon which the players’ creative compositional processes rest, rag for the melodic sarangi and tal for the rhythmic tabla. We will discuss the features of rag and tal in relation to Rag Bhairav in greater detail in due course during discussion of Melody and Rhythm respectively.

Secondly the piece divides clearly into two sections; *alap* followed by *jhala*. Familiarity with Hindustani music would lead one to expect a *jhora* section in between (typified by a more rhythmic style of sarangi playing and possibly an increase in tempo but still with tabla absent). Some writers maintain that there is a brief *Jhora*, starting at line 14, but if so it would form a very brief section. The other two sections have the following characteristics and functions:

- *alap* (Lines 1–13) – the literal meaning is “introduction” and during this slow, meditative section the notes of the rag are gradually revealed. The sarangi plays in free time with particular emphasis on important notes and an increase

in range as the section progresses. The accompaniment is provided by a tampura drone.

- A brief jhor (Lines 14–18) – A stronger sense of pulse is presented.
- jhala (Lines 19 to the end) – the entry of the tabla signals the commencement of the jhala section. Here, the sarangi improvises around the rag in a more rhythmically structured way, aided by the tabla's repetition of a standard rhythmic cycle (tal) with some improvisation of its own. The speed gradually increases as does the complexity and virtuosity of the melodic line with a wider melodic range and shorter note lengths.

Before leaving consideration of structure one further valid interpretation is worthy of mention. Textbooks often mention the concept of a gat or "composed" section. Features of the gat are: entry of the tabla using a fixed tal pattern, and changes of pace from slow (vilambit) to medium (madhya) to fast (drut). The section from Line 19 onwards, as well as containing obvious improvisational freedom, does have a "composed" element to it, exemplified not just by the tabla tal but also by the similarity of the recurring melodic shapes at the start of each tal cycle (compare the opening phrases of Line 19, Line 21, Line 23, etc.). Therefore alap – gat seems as valid an interpretation of the structure of *Rag Bhairav* as alap – jhala.

## Texture

- The opening of the extract consists of a melody and drone texture. The sarangi plays the melody and the tampura the drone.
- The SARANGI sometimes plays two note chords (e.g., the opening notes of Line 1).
- The resonance of the sarangi's sympathetic strings creates a fuller sounding texture.
- The texture changes at Line 19 with the entry of the tabla to provide the pulse. The rest of the piece consists of a fusion of three continuous elements; improvisatory sarangi melody, ostinato-like tampura drone and rhythmically exciting tabla drum patterns.

## Melody

Two separate features of Melody need to be considered; firstly analysis of Indian rags and the particular rag being used here, and secondly how the player treats the rag in this performance.

### **Rag**

- The basic scale of Hindustani music has, rather like our Western chromatic scale, 12 notes from which any rag can be considered a subset.
- Rags can have between five and seven notes; our Rag Bhairav has the maximum seven notes and is therefore called a sampurna or “complete” rag.
- Every rag has an aroha (ascending) note pattern and an avaroha (descending) note pattern; because the same set of notes is used ascending and descending in Rag Bhairav it is a sampurna-sampurna rag.
- The concept of shruti (use of microtones) is understood by performers. This may sound as “out of tune” notes to Western ears but is, in fact, a very finely honed technique used to enhance notes of the rag.
- The particular intervallic structure, or that, of Rag Bhairav, when transcribed into Western notation (although it must be remembered that pitches in Indian music do not precisely correspond), looks like this:-



- Sa and Pa are known as the aschal swaras (literally “fixed notes”) of the Hindustani scale – not dissimilar to our Western tonic and dominant in some respects.
- A characteristic motif within a rag is known as a pakad.
- Every rag has two notes known as vadi and samvadi which traditionally receive emphasis to give the rag its inherent character. In Rag Bhairav the vadi is stipulated as Dha and the samvadi as Re. In this performance it is the vadi, Dha which our performer generally highlights more; evidence of this can be found in the alap with double-stopping of Line 1 and then emphasis of the upper octave Dha at the start of Line 5. Plenty of examples of the importance of Dha also occur in the jhala section, e.g., the melodic line of the opening two lines (Lines 19 & 20) has an octave range extending from high Dha to Low Dha. Later on Re takes on a more prominent role; the figurations around Lines 26 and 27 clearly identify Re as the starting note of phrases and the highest note present. Contrary to academic theory, Ga is also chosen as worthy of particular attention, evidence abounds but the most persuasive case can be found during

the jhala section when Ga is frequently the melodic note of choice at the structurally vital start of every tabla rhythmic pattern.

## Performance

- Within the rules and expectations of the rag, the melody is largely improvised.
- At the start of the alap the performer focuses on the notes Sa and Dha.
- By Line 3 the range has extended upwards and Pa is highlighted.
- The technique of meend (sliding between notes) is clearly used in the middle of Line 3.
- As the alap progresses phrases become more extended and the range increases.
- Lines 14 and 15 could be considered the dramatic climax of the first part of the work for two reasons. Firstly a series of tans (very rapid scalar patterns) is used. Secondly, the highest Sa is reached.
- At the start of Line 16 there is a good example of gamak where, as tradition dictates in Rag Bhairav, Dha is stressed by use of wide vibrato or shake.
- In the jhala section there is some varied repetition of material (see example given above under Structure).
- Much use of ornamentation pervades the jhala.
- The melodic climax of the whole performance comes at lines 26 to 28 where rapid ascending and descending tan patterns combine to create a breathtaking feeling of virtuosity.
- Gradually the piece unwinds, to end, as it began, with focus on Sa.

## Rhythm and metre

- The opening alap has no metre. It is a rhythmically free combination of long and short notes, chosen to emphasise important notes of the rag.
- Figurations increase in rhythmic excitement, particularly when the tans arrive in Line 14.
- As the piece develops further more elaborate rhythmic figurations appear which are notated as shorter rhythms, triplets, dotted rhythms and irregular groupings. This can be seen in Line 20 for example.
- When tabla enters on Line 19 it performs a tal (which literally means “clap”, derived from the original tradition of handclapping before tabla playing became the norm). We now understand tal as the concept of a recurring rhythmic cycle in Indian music.
- A tal is divided into vibhags, something akin to bars in Western music except that each vibhag could have a different number of beats depending on the tal being used.
- The start of the cycle is called the sam.
- A khali (literally “wave”) denotes a contrasting vibhag where a wave of the hand to mark the time was traditionally used instead of a clap.
- Our tal in Rag Bhairav is called a tintal. As Anthology p. 519 makes clear, it is a 16 beat cycle which divides into four vibhags. Each vibhag has four beats.
- On p.519 the four vibhags are annotated with X, 2, 0 and 3. These are explained as follows: X represent the first clapped vibhag (sam); 2 and 3 represent the other clapped vibhags; 0 represents the contrasting “waved” vibhag. This explains the translation of tintal as “three claps”.
- Also vital to understanding the principle of tal are the related features of bol and theka. Bol is the concept of spoken syllables representing the different sounds created by the tabla, and theka is the fixed pattern of bols for any particular tal.
- Represented below is the tintal rhythmic cycle with its theka sounds underneath. Careful listening to the tal section of Rag Bhairav will lead to familiarity with the subtly differing tone quality of each bol. You will also notice that, whilst additional rhythmic complexity is included (within the spirit of improvisation inherent in this music) the actual theka notes (the 16 beats of the cycle) are placed with unwavering regularity of tone and rhythm.

X				2				0				3			
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
dhā	dhin	dhin	dhā	dhā	dhin	dhin	dhā	dhā	tī	tī	tā	tā	dhin	dhin	dhā

## Tonality & Harmony

Given that the totally dominant structural features of Hindustani music are Melody and Rhythm it should come as no surprise that tonality and harmony are worthy of only brief mention.

- Harmony only occurs in two respects. Firstly, the double stopping of the sarangi creates harmony although not in any tonality-defining way. Secondly the drone of the tampura interacts with the melody to create either consonance when Sa and Pa also occur in the melody, or dissonance at other times. (N.B. The tampura is rather subdued in our recording so the effect is difficult to hear.)
- Tonality is never present in a Western music sense. What does emerge is the emphasis on particular tones (Sa and Pa along with Dha and Re as discussed in the Melody section).
- The tabla is actually tuned carefully by the player to ensure that the notes produced matches Sa as chosen by the sarangi player (written as C on our score but sounding approximately a perfect 4<sup>th</sup> higher). This adds to the effect of emphasis mentioned above.