



# ***Appreciation of Indian Classical Music***

The following text is adapted from (i) original leaflet in Ragas and Talas, a recording by Ravishankar and Alla Rakha, Angel records and (ii) [www.ravishankar.org](http://www.ravishankar.org)

History of the Indian music is immersed in legends and religious texts. Its roots are found in the chanting of the Vedas (the oldest text of the Hindu religion), which later developed into a more scientific and elaborate system known as the Raga Sangeet. This can be traced back nearly two thousand years.

A Raga is a scientific, precise, subtle and aesthetic melodic form with its own peculiar ascending and descending movement consisting of either a full seven note octave, or a series of six or five notes (or a combination of any of these) in a rising or falling structure called the Arohana and Avarohana, respectively. It is the subtle difference in the order of notes, an omission of a dissonant note, an emphasis on a particular note, the slide from one note to another, and the use of microtones together with other subtleties, that demarcate one Raga from the other.

There is a saying in Sanskrit - "Ranjayathi iti Ragah" meaning, "that which colors the mind is a Raga." For a Raga to truly color the mind of the listener, its effect must be created not only through the notes and the embellishments, but also by the presentation of the specific emotion or mood characteristic of each Raga. Thus through rich melodies, every human emotion, every subtle feeling in man and nature can be musically expressed and experienced.

The performing arts in India - music, dance, drama, and poetry - are based on the concept of Nava Rasa, or the "nine sentiments." Literally, rasa means "juice" or "extract" but here in this context, we take it to mean "emotion" or "sentiment." The acknowledged order of these sentiments is as follows: Shringara (romantic and erotic): Hasya (humorous): Karuna (pathetic): Raudra (anger): Veera (heroic): Bhayanaka (fearful): Vibhatsa (disgustful): Adbhuta (amazement): Shanta (peaceful). The more closely the notes of a Raga conform to the expression of one single idea or emotion, the more overwhelming the effect of the Raga.

In addition to being associated with a particular mood, each Raga is also closely connected to a particular time of day or a season of the year. The cycle of day and night, as well as the cycle of the seasons, is analogous to the cycle of life itself. Each part of the day - such as the time before dawn, noon, late afternoon, early evening, late night - is associated with a definite sentiment. The explanation of the time associated with each Raga may be found in the nature of the notes that comprise it, or in historical anecdotes concerning the Raga.

Although there are 72 parent scales upon which Ragas are based, Indian music scholars have estimated that, with all their permutations and combinations, there exist over 6,000 Ragas! But a Raga is not merely a matter of the ascending - descending structure. It must have its "chalan" - or certain note patterns characteristic of the Raga; its principle important note (vadi); the second important note (samavadi); and its main feature known as "jan" (life) or "mukhda" (face), the cluster of a few notes by which a Raga is immediately recognised.

Raga music becomes complete with "Talas" which are the rhythmic cycles of Raga. A Tala has fixed number of beats, and has its own characteristics, which distinguish it from other Talas having the same number of beats. For instance, a bar of 10 beats can be divided in different ways: 2-3-2-3 or 3-3-4 or 3-4-3 etc. Another factor which identified the Tala is "Theka" which is a fixed composition marking the particular accents and divisions of a Tala. A drummer playing Tala accompanies the instrumentalist. Most contemporary instrumental music is accompanied by the Tabla, a two-piece drum.

The traditional recital begins with the “alap” section - the stately and serene exploration of the chosen Raga. After this slow, introspective, heartfelt, sometimes sad beginning, the musician moves on to the “jor”. In this part, rhythm enters and is developed. Innumerable variations on the Raga's basic theme are elaborated. There is no drum accompaniment in either the “alap” or the “jor”. The “alap” and the “jor” evolve into the “gat”, the fixed composition of the Raga. Here the drums enter with the wonderful rhythmic structure of the “gat” and its time cycle, the Tala. From this moment on, the “gat” (which can be anything between 4 and 16 bars of fixed composition) becomes the medium for the musician to return to after his each improvisation. The step-by-step acceleration of the rhythm in the “gat” finally culminates in the “jhala”, as it becomes more and more playful and exciting. Sawal-jabab (question-answer), the dazzling and rapid dialogue between main instrument and Tabla, has the power to enthrall even the most uninitiated listener with its thrilling interplay. With the flexibility provided by Raga and Tala, within the framework of the fixed notes and beats, an Indian Musician may improvise from 25 to 90% of his or her recital.

The harmony of Indian Music is in its simplest form and is more inherent than preconceived. Ideally, the listener is requested to forget counterpoint, harmony and mixed tone colors, and to relax into the rhythmic and melodic patterns of a great cultural heritage.

