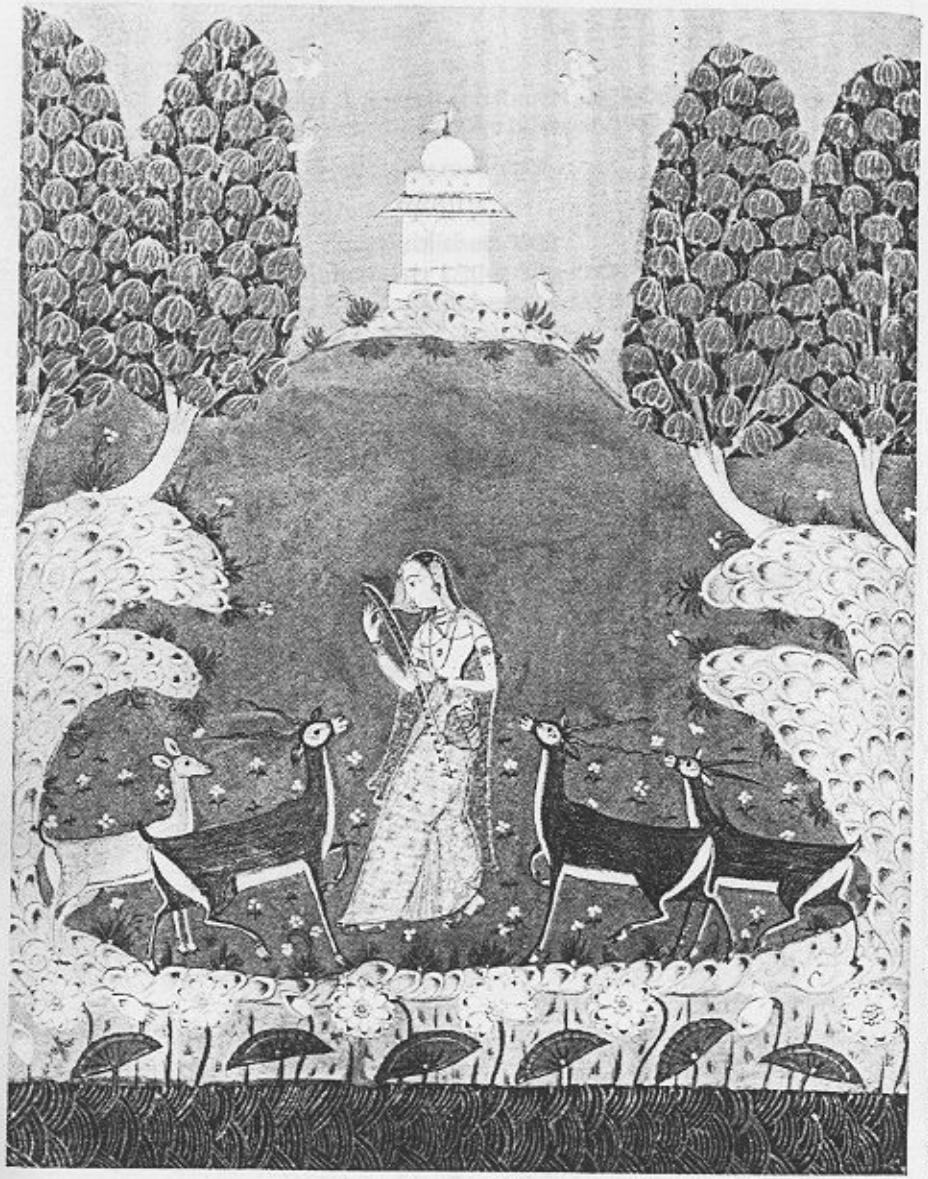

A girl playing the *vina*. One of a series of miniature paintings from Rajasthan depicting the characteristic moods of different *rags*: this is *Todi ragini*.

Indian music in performance

A practical introduction

NEIL SORRELL
and
RAM NARAYAN

with a cassette recording by
RAM NARAYAN

Foreword by
YEHUDI MENUHIN

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Foreword

It gives me great pleasure to present this excellent book to the ever-widening audiences in English-speaking countries who share my fascination with the classical musical art of India. It is an indication of how far this interest has progressed since 1955 when I first brought Indian music to the United States in the persons of Ali Akbar Khan and Chatur Lal and very shortly thereafter, Ravi Shankar, that already to-day, some twenty-five years later, so thorough, informative, fascinating and erudite a book can appear. I am particularly happy that it is so closely associated with my great and revered colleague, Ram Narayan, for I heard him as a young man in India these many years ago playing the only Indian instrument which is bowed and played like our violin, the sarangi, but how much more complicated it is, as the reader will quickly learn. I soon realised what a supreme artist he is and what unbelievable skill and imagination is required to bring out from this somewhat unwieldy yet infinitely challenging and wonderful instrument the music which lies within its body. Although our Western violin evolved from its Chinese, Middle-Eastern and possibly even African forebears, it has been totally adopted by and, in fact, integrated into Indian music, even to being played in a totally different way – an Indian way, squatting on the ground with the violin supported on one of the big toes, the wrist free to oscillate very widely and, may I say, very accurately, in imitation of the Indian singing style. The sarangi remains not only the authentic and original Indian bowed stringed instrument but the one which most poignantly, and in the hands of Ram Narayan, most revealingly expresses the very soul of Indian feeling and thought. I cannot separate the sarangi from Ram Narayan, so thoroughly fused are they, not only in my memory but in the fact of this sublime dedication of a great musician to an instrument which is no longer archaic because of the matchless way he has made it speak.

YEHUDI MENUHIN

Preface

The classical music of North India has attracted much interest outside its homeland; but so far most of the books about it available in the West have concentrated on its theoretical aspects. The Western concertgoer and student often finds it difficult to appreciate how the theory is applied in actual performance and to know what to listen for: and it is to such a listener that this book is addressed. If the gulf between theory and practice is to be removed we need to know what actually happens in the music from the participants' point of view.

For the sake of clarity and conciseness one musician's performance and explanations have been taken as the main material and incorporated into an analytical study of the important aspects of North Indian classical music. Obviously the book would have little validity unless two major criteria were met: the musician should be accepted in his own culture as a leading exponent, and his performance should be typical of that culture. Ram Narayan has not only established himself as a leading musician in India but has become one of the relatively small number to gain a world-wide reputation through concert tours and disc recordings. In India he is in demand as a concert artist and teacher. He is generally given the honoured title of *Pandit* (learned man) and has recently been given prestigious awards which confirm his high status. These include the 'Padmashri' of the Government of India and the award for Hindustani music of the Sangeet Natak Akademi. The fact that he plays the *sarangi* – traditionally an accompanying instrument – only in solo performances is certainly unusual, even unique, but the kind of music is typical of North Indian classical music. It is derived from vocal music, to which instrumental music is subservient, and the *sarangi* is perhaps best suited to this fusion of vocal and instrumental styles, being one of the most versatile of Indian instruments. The *sarangi* emerges as one of the most beautiful voices (the *mot juste*) in Indian music and yet at the same time the victim of considerable prejudice on account of its association with dancing girls, and Ram Narayan's achievement has been to overcome much of this prejudice and realise his instrument's potential to the full.

For these reasons the *sarangi* is an especially interesting and appropriate medium through which to survey the wide spectrum of Indian music. But throughout the book continual reference is made to other instruments and styles of playing and singing in order to give as complete a coverage as possible.

The career of Ram Narayan as a typical instrumental artist is discussed in the first chapter, followed by an examination of the *sarangi* and the other main instruments and their function. The remaining chapters are about the music itself. How and what the musician practises are considered at some length, since practice not only is the key to fluent performance but also sheds some light on the question of improvisation in Indian music. The progress of a typical performance, starting with a section in which the *rag* is unfolded alone and continuing with one in which the *rag* is subjected to the discipline of a *tal*, is discussed against the theoretical background of *rag* and *tal*, and finally a whole performance is presented in notation with an analysis and commentary, illustrating several of the points made earlier in the book. It is this final chapter which attempts to answer the question of what happens in a typical performance of North Indian classical music. By combining the recording with notation it is possible to give a continuous and complete description of a performance, rather than simply provide the theoretical information and leave the reader to apply it as best he can to whatever performances he may hear.

Ram Narayan's most tangible and valuable contribution to the book as it is presented is the cassette recording. The material presented there is not so much an illustration of ideas in the text as a starting point from which those ideas grew. Of equal importance to the author in writing the book was the series of interviews with Ram Narayan conducted in the space of a few days, and more impromptu conversations and lessons stretching over six years. The interviews were specifically intended to cover the topics planned for inclusion in the book, and Ram Narayan kindly consented to be virtually incarcerated in a room in the University of York and subjected to whole days of conversation, all of which was recorded. The insights and explanations thus obtained from him, and also from several others at different times, are cherished because they come from respected practising musicians, and it is on these foundations that this book rests. Any errors, omissions and obscurities are, of course, the sole responsibility of the author. I should like to thank Mark Resmer for taking the photographs of the instruments, and the following institutions for kindly making the instruments available for photography: University of York: (3, 5, 6, 7, 13); Victoria and Albert Museum (2, 4, 8, 9, 12, crown copyright); Horniman Museum (11); Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan (10). The photograph of Ram Narayan is by Sepp Stieger, and the frontispiece from the Victoria and Albert Museum (crown copyright).

Musical terminology, including names of Indian instruments, is spelt according to the transliteration policy, but the diacritical marks are given once only, in the Glossary, and are omitted in the body of the text. Names of people and places pose a different problem. In many cases there is already an accepted English spelling (retained in this book) which does not conform to the transliteration policy ('Calcutta' is a good example) and it is the author's opinion that musical terms and other words which may be consulted in a dictionary are more important from the point of view of precise and consistent transliteration than names of people and places.

The Glossary shows the spelling as it appears in the other pages of the book, and as it is written in Devnagri script, with transliteration according to the policy set out above. A brief definition is given which is kept very simple and should not be taken as complete but rather used in conjunction with the fuller discussion elsewhere in the book.

Notes

1 In only a few cases is the pronunciation significantly different for Sanskrit, beyond the inclusion of the inherent short a. Also, some of the Sanskrit letters not used in Hindi have been omitted, while others which are included are found in Hindi but not in Sanskrit.

2 This and the next six letters with a dot underneath are retroflex consonants: the tongue is curled back and touches the hard palate. The same letters without a dot underneath are dental consonants: the tongue touches the front teeth. The English equivalents lie somewhere between the two, which is why the same English words have been given for both sets of consonants in the pronunciation column.

Notation

The purpose of the music examples in this book is to give as clear an idea as possible of what is happening. They are limited to the main melodic instrument (or voice). Thus, when the *sarangi, tambura* and *tabla* are all playing only the *sarangi* part is notated, but in such a way as to show how its part fits into the *tal* marked by the *tabla*. There is certainly no need to notate the drone, supplied by the *tambura* (beyond indicating which notes are used), and it is felt that verbal explanations of the part played on the *tabla* are preferable to attempting an actual notation, mainly because no really satisfactory one exists and there would be a risk of complicating the whole transcription beyond the limits of usefulness. In the interests of maximum clarity to the maximum number of readers the system of notation chosen is the familiar Western staff notation. Although alien to Indian music, and thus unable to cope with all the subtle nuances of that music, it can give a remarkably thorough representation which should be readily comprehensible to the majority of readers. In India there is no notation system which even attempts to go beyond the simplest outline of the music, and notation is in any case not normally used in the learning and performance of music. The great simplicity of the Indian system known as *sargam* (named after the notes Sa, Re, Ga, Ma, etc., and an equivalent of Western tonic sol-fa) is useful when nothing but the outline of a musical structure is conveyed, and occasionally it is used in this book.

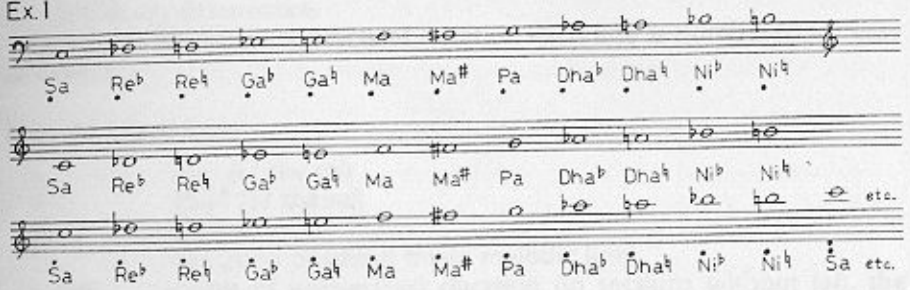
Sargam notation uses the abbreviated names of the notes of the heptatonic scale:

Full name	*Abbreviated to*
Sadj	Sa
Risabh	Re
Gandhar	Ga
Madhyam	Ma
Pancam	Pa
Dhaivat	Dha
Nisad	Ni

These abbreviations are used not only in writing but also in speech and even in the course of a vocal performance. Lines under notes indicate flattening and a vertical line next to a note (applying only to Ma) indicates sharpening. These signs are not, however, used in this book, where the policy is to request the

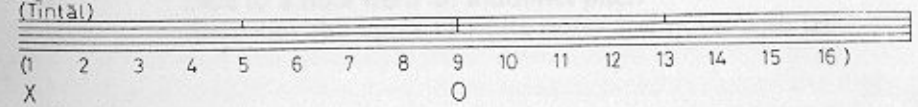
reader to do no more than learn the abbreviated names of the notes; any accidentals are shown by the usual Western signs. If the Indian note name appears with a dot above it is in the uppermost of the three main octaves recognised in Indian music, and if it appears with a dot below it is in the lowest octave; a note name with no dot is therefore in the middle octave. It is important to realise that these registers are derived from the range of the human voice and there is no concert pitch in India. Thus Sa is what lies suitably in the voice or on the instrument. For the sake of simplicity and consistency, Sa is always C in the staff notation, and apologies must be made to those readers with perfect pitch who will immediately notice that the transcriptions of material on the cassette have been transposed by almost a perfect fourth. The relation of *sargam* to staff notation, applicable to this book, may be simply shown in Ex. 1.

Ex. 1



In sections with a *tal* some of the Indian notation system has been retained. The *sam* is shown by a cross (x) and the *khali* by a zero (0). Otherwise, the subdivisions of the *tal* are shown by a full bar-line at the end of the cycle, a half bar-line at the *khali* and a quarter bar-line at the other *tal*is (Ex. 2).

Ex. 2



Other symbols are commonly found in staff notation, but the use of some in this context needs clarification. Key signatures are given to show the accidentals in the *rag*. Since many *rags* have unusual scales, by Western standards, the signatures may look somewhat odd; for example, that of *rag Sri* has F♯, A♭, and D♭, signifying that in this *rag* the Ma is sharp, and the Dha and Re are flat. Time signatures are more straightforward; for example *Tintal*, by far the most common *tal*, is shown as $\frac{16}{2}$ in slow tempo and $\frac{16}{4}$ in medium and fast

tempi. In long examples, one cycle of the *tal* takes two lines of notation in slow tempo and one line in medium and fast tempi. Dynamics (which staff notation only indicates very vaguely anyway) are used for expressive purposes, but are not normally shown in the notations, mainly because Indian concepts and terminology do not correspond to those of Western music, where dynamic contrasts are frequent and pronounced and where it is essential to the interpretaton of the music to indicate them in the notation. The listener to the cassette will notice that they rise and fall quite a lot in the *alap* section but remain fairly level in the *tal* section. Accents on individual notes are, however, more important and noticeable and are a significant feature of Ram Narayan's bowing technique and rhythmic skill. They are indicated by the sign > above the note. On occasions there may be some doubt whether or not a note has been accented sufficiently to demand this sign, and the author can only offer his opinion. Slurs indicate bowings, or breaths in vocal music (as well as being the usual sign for tied notes), and a comma above the stave indicates a cessation of the sound in the main melodic line and the point (as near as possible) where this occurs. This applies to sections where the duration of notes is not indicated by tails.

Two of the biggest problems in transcribing Indian music into staff notation concern ornamentation and rhythm. Much of the former could only be heard in detail by slowing the tape to half or even quarter the normal speed. Even then the task of representing the sound visually is very difficult, and the best one can hope for with this system of notation is that the result is reasonably, rather than totally, accurate. Similarly, the fluid and intricate rhythms of Indian music stretch staff notation to its limits. The results were arrived at by two different methods. In *alap*, *jor* and *tans* without *tal* no attempt was made to indicate the free rhythms in the usual way. Instead, notes are shown without tails, the white ones being considered as longer and more sustained than the black ones. In the long examples included on the cassette (Exs. 81 and 82 in Chapter 5 and Ex. 85 in Chapter 6), rather than in the short demonstration items like scales and *paltas*, the approximate duration of such notes is shown by arranging them to indicate, as near as possible, their occurrence in time. (Groups of very short notes had to be spaced slightly in the interests of legibility.) A two-second pulse was recorded over the music and the events within each two-second period grouped accordingly. Each line of notation represents approximately eight seconds. In the sections with *tal*, the beats of the *tal* (as played on the *tabla*) determine the note durations and proportions, and the conventional method of notating this can be used, even though at times it inevitably looks more complicated than it may sound. In this context, very short notes are shown by the usual small grace-notes.

The lack of frets on the *sarangi* makes intonation a special problem. Occasionally very short notes may sound slightly sharp or flat, compared to their pitch when sustained, and the more noticeable instances are shown by

vertical arrows. The various Indian embellishments, especially the rapid oscillation called *gamak* which is frequently used, are also difficult to notate accurately since the precise pitch (limits of the oscillation) is difficult to hear. The oblique line, indicating a slide (glissando), is used for both *gamak* and the longer unidirectional slide called *mind*. Sometimes the sign occurs without a note at one end, and this indicates a slide to or from an indistinct pitch. Variations of intonation and ornaments such as *gamak* and *mind* are important aspects of *sarangi* style. Another (which is really a speciality of Ram Narayan) is the sounding of an open string while playing on the adjacent one. Usually the open string is the next higher one and in most cases it is the first string, tuned to Sa. Playing in this way intensifies the drone, and often leads to quite strong dissonances, by Western standards, as, for example, when the leading-note (Ni) is sounded against the open Sa. The notation shows the more obvious instances of this playing on two strings, rather than slavishly attempting to indicate every occurrence.

Finally, in the longer extracts of notation each line is numbered for easy reference.

Résumé of symbols

×	*sam* (of the *tal*)
0	*khali* (of the *tal*)
>	accent
'	cessation of sound (main melodic line)
∘ and ·	notes of unspecified duration (in sections without *tal*), the former being longer than the latter
↑	slightly sharp
↓	slightly flat
⁄	upward slide
\	downward slide
⁄'	slide from a note to an indistinct pitch
'⁄	slide to a note from an indistinct pitch
	(both can also apply to white notes and notes with tails)

Introduction

Indian music has come to play such an important part in Western musical life that it has lost much of its alien character. Perhaps it will soon be taken as much for granted here as Western music is in India. This interest has affected not only audiences but also performing musicians and composers. The scholarly study of Indian music has a longer history, which fact is reflected in a large number of writings on the subject.

What should be learnt from a musical culture different to our own is not so much the superficial data of scale, rhythmic pattern and so on, but rather the underlying priorities which gave rise to the system and which motivate the musician. Paradoxically, it seems that the surface elements of Indian music, which are the most 'exotic' and least translatable into other musical languages, are what have been seized upon and used in the West. All kinds of interesting experiments and 'fusions' (rather a misnomer) have taken place but have had limited success or little lasting value. However slow the progress, it is steady and suggests that the future of music lies in a world view which will vindicate genuine fusions.

The word 'influence' can be misunderstood and even emotive. It should not suggest a frantic search for something new, or the domination of a weak and decaying culture by a stronger one, but rather a confirmation of what is already, perhaps only subconsciously, believed, plus the means to raise this belief from the subconscious and give it a tangible form in a truly synthesised work. True influence is hard to isolate because it is so completely assimilated.

The two main elements of Indian music, *rag* (melody) and *tal* (rhythm), are refined to an unsurpassed level, and it can be argued that pure melody (by which I mean a single strand of music on which all the attention is focused) and complex rhythm have declined in the West, at least in the classical music of about the last two centuries. Improvisation, too, has most certainly become so undervalued in Western classical music that musicians are generally incapable of coping with it. A jazz musician who cannot improvise, on the other hand, would be as absurd as an Indian in the same situation. The term 'improvisation', however,

tends to be used loosely, and this book attempts to show what it means in North Indian classical music. The main question is: how much is really improvised and how much pre-composed (worked out beforehand, not written down) and reproduced from memory? No simple answer can be given, but at least the myth that Indian music is all, or even mostly, improvised should be rejected. What improvisation there is takes place within the narrow limitations of a strict discipline, and it can be said that for an Indian musician the narrower the limits the sharper the focus, and the really good musician is one who can find the greatest freedom within the narrowest limits, demonstrating this perhaps by improvising on just two or three notes for an extended period. This also assumes that the improvisation will impress the audience. The musician not only expects understanding and appreciation from the Indian audience but also the spontaneous expression of such feelings. The frequent nods and other gestures of approval, and ejaculations of 'wah, wah!' encourage and reassure him and help create a relaxed, yet serious atmosphere.

To be able to perform at all the musician must be thoroughly versed in the rules and intricate details and subtleties of *rag* and *tal*. A *rag* is a unique melodic structure with infinite possibilities of variation. To discuss it briefly is all but impossible and to translate it, completely so. A word like 'mode' will not do, still less 'scale', though both are useful as part of a complete definition. Each *rag* is distinguished from all others (the number runs into several hundred, but only about fifty are commonly heard), and sometimes the differences are of the minutest detail. The scale may have as few as five or as many as twelve notes, and they must be rendered in a particular ascending and descending sequence and with different degrees of emphasis and special embellishments. All these details must be learnt and there is relatively little scope for deviation from what are known as the 'rules of the *rag*'. *Tal*, or time cycle, parallels *rag* in many respects: just as a *rag* has a number of notes organised in a hierarchy, so a *tal* has a number of beats which have certain important qualitative differences. The most common *tals* in North Indian classical music (numbering around a dozen) have between six and sixteen beats. In performance the main function of the *tabla* (drums) is to maintain the basic form of the *tal*, especially when the main artist is improvising, but the *tabla* accompanist

may, usually at the discretion of the main artist, have some chances to show his skill in more complicated rhythmic passages. Quite probably he will spend half of the complete performance not playing at all, since it is the practice, especially in instrumental music, for the main artist to begin with a long section, called *alap*, in which the *rag* unfolds slowly and in free time. Only when it has been explored in depth and its subtleties brought out will the musician move on to other sections and bring in the *tabla*. In Indian classical music there is normally one main artist and one drum accompanist, plus a *tambura* (drone instrument) player. Instances of duets between singers or instrumentalists (usually on different instruments) are becoming increasingly common, but the emphasis is always on a single melodic strand and for most of the performance the musicians take it in turns to play. Experiments in Indian orchestral music have also taken place, but there too the result may be described as a concerted unison with rhythmic accompaniment, and most would agree that Indian classical music remains essentially chamber music for soloists.

The phrase 'North Indian classical music' makes frequent appearances in the pages of this book. The kind of Indian music most heard in the concert halls of the West is North Indian classical music, which in India is usually known as *Hindustani Sangit*. Hindustan here refers to the northern part of the subcontinent (including Pakistan and Bangladesh) which includes all of India except the four southernmost states (Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Kerala). The dividing line is not so sharply defined but is useful in distinguishing between the area of North Indian (Hindustani) music and that of South Indian (Carnatic) music.

These two traditions of classical music in India may both be referred to by the Sanskrit term *sangita*, which means the fusion of song, instrumental music and dance, as is explained in the verse:

Gītam vādyam ca nṛityam
Trayam saṅgītamucyate
Song, instrumental music and dance – these three make *sangita*.

An important point is that, if we take *sangit*(*a*) to be an equivalent of 'music', then 'music', in the Indian sense, must include dance. Also, this threefold association reflects the traditional Indian belief, with roots in

the Vedic period (around 1000 B.C.), that vocal music is pure sound, instrumental music is a manifestation of sound, and dance depends on both, but physical movement (hand gestures etc.) can accompany and intensify music. The pre-eminence of vocal music is stressed throughout this book, and instrumental music is, to a very large extent, vocal in conception and often a replica of vocal pieces. (This is even more the case in South Indian music than in North Indian.) One is reminded of the Elizabethan view of music as 'apt for voices or viols', and the parallel is yet more striking since the North Indian equivalent of viol, the *sarangi*, is probably the instrument most closely connected with the human voice and vocal repertoire.

North and South Indian music have more in common than not, and until the sixteenth century they were not regarded as distinct traditions. Even today they share the same fundamental principles: drone, *rag* and *tal*. The systems of *rag* and *tal* differ, more in terms of detail and classificatory procedures than underlying concepts, and there are other important differences of style, form, and instruments. South Indian pieces tend to be shorter, with more important words and less scope for improvisation. The northern *theka* (time-keeping pattern of the *tal* played on the *tabla*) is absent, and so in a South Indian concert one finds much more use of hand-claps to keep the *tal*. These are basic points, and this book in no way sets out to do justice to the South Indian system. It is encouraging to see that North and South Indian musicians are becoming increasingly interested in and knowledgeable about each other's style, and this has led to exchanges of musical elements, especially *rags*, and even performances of both styles simultaneously. Nevertheless, no leading musician can be said to represent both traditions. Ram Narayan has a deep respect for South Indian music and its unsurpassed rhythmic complexity. He too has been attracted by South Indian *rags* and plays one of them, *Sarasvati*, quite often, though in a completely North Indian style, but he is on the whole wary of straying into a musical no-man's-land between North and South.

The term 'classical' as applied to music in India is problematic (as is also arguably the case in the West). Many Indians are conversant with this term and even use it as a loan word in Hindi or other Indian languages. Adjectives like 'classical' and 'art' rather clumsily refer to music which is usually performed by highly trained musicians before an

audience representing some kind of élite, generally in urban areas. They imply a minority interest and the importance of lasting, timeless music based on a clearly defined tradition and code of practice. When the theory is written down it carries even more weight and can become wrongly regarded as a set of rules, with the result that the true nature of the relationship between theory and practice – theory being an explanation and to some extent rationalisation of what happens in practice, rather than a prescription for what must happen – becomes obscured.

Indian 'classical' music has been the subject of countless treatises over many centuries. They undoubtedly help give it the dignity of learned discussion (most are written in Sanskrit, that most scholarly and respected of languages) and the weight of tradition, but they should not in themselves be taken as the main reason for raising Indian music to its exalted position. A musical system is only as good or as valid as it functions in practice. Most musicians know little, if any, Sanskrit, and they never learnt their art from books. Learning Indian music means learning how to perform it: consequently anyone wishing to learn it thoroughly (rather than just reaching an acceptable level of appreciation and understanding) must do so through performance, with a teacher whose medium of communication is music. In this way theory and practice become one, and in the same way interpretation is part of the learning process from the beginning and not separated, as in the West, from the acquisition of basic skills, with interpretation – or 'making real music' – coming later. The Indian musician, not surprisingly, is often unable to verbalise coherently and at length about music or to relate it to a discrete corpus of written theory. The onus is on the writer to describe as clearly as possible what actually goes on in performance, and to make it clear if he is not discussing the music of his own time.

The musical treatises are excellent research material and give the scholar important insights (perhaps the only ones) into the historical development of Indian music. Some of them are notoriously obscure and as a whole they do not give anything like a complete picture of Indian music as it is now performed. They are of paramount importance to the music historian but much less so to the performer or listener today. Although this book is concerned with present musical practice a

brief historical survey must be provided at this stage.

The first extant treatise which deals with music, although it is primarily concerned with the dramatic arts, is the *Natyasastra* of Bharata Muni. Details of the author and the date of the work are uncertain, with possible dates ranging from the third century B.C. to the fifth century A.D. Heptatonic modes, though nothing called *raga*, and many terms still in use today are discussed, but confusion arises if it is assumed that an unchanged definition accompanies an unchanged word. The first detailed discussion of *raga* is in Matanga's *Brihaddesi* of around the ninth century A.D. The later *Sangitaratnakara* of Sarngadeva (thirteenth century) mentions over two hundred *ragas*, but among the obscurities of this monumental work is the question whether the subject is the music of the author's own time or of earlier periods.

Whatever Sarngadeva was describing, it was certainly a Hindu tradition of great refinement. By this time Muslim invaders had established themselves in northern India (Delhi fell to Muhammad Ghuri in 1192) and music was one of the glories of Indian culture which attracted their attention and admiration. Amir Khusraw, the famous poet at the court of Ala-ud-din Khalji of Delhi (1296–1316), rated Indian music above all others in the world and expressed great humility before it. In view of this the persistent legend that he invented many of the instruments and forms of present-day North Indian classical music is even harder to accept. The Muslims did, however, exert an enormous influence over the centuries. It is generally thought that this was the main reason for the rift between North and South Indian music announced in Ramamatya's *Svaramelakalanidhi* (1550), and the relative lack of Muslim influence has continued to distinguish South Indian music from the more heterogeneous northern system. This subject can generate controversy, and Hindu musicians in the north would be justifiably upset at any simplistic suggestion that their music is the creation of Muslim invaders. Even the overwhelming predominance of Muslim names among North Indian musicians does not constitute irrefutable evidence, since we cannot be sure exactly how many are descended from Hindus converted to Islam. One of the most famous converts was Tansen, the leading musician at the court of the Mughal Emperor Akbar (1555–1605), who was an exponent of the *dhrupad* style of vocal music which is regarded as a Hindu tradition, in contrast to the

Muslim *khyal* tradition. The latter gained ascendancy as recently as the eighteenth century and with it such instruments as the *sitar*, *sarod*, *sarangi* and *tabla* came into prominence. This broad distinction does not mean that the *dhrupad* and *khyal* styles or traditions are mutually exclusive. There has been much interaction between them and also between vocal and instrumental music, and the florid *khyal* style has absorbed much from *dhrupad*: for example, the slow, dignified unfolding of the *rag* in the early stages of the performance. (The salient features of *dhrupad* and *khyal* are discussed in Chapter 5.)

The twentieth century must be regarded as a period of great upheaval and change. India's freedom from imperial rule had important cultural repercussions. The system of court patronage declined, musicians perform to larger audiences in concert halls, and the radio has become the most important patron. Music has therefore spread to a larger public and significant efforts have been made to remove some of the secrecy and exclusiveness which have hitherto surrounded it. In the early years of the century two pioneers applied themselves in different ways to the wider dissemination of music. *Pandit* Visnu Digambar Paluskar founded a music school on which many others have been modelled, and this new direction in music education has posed a direct challenge, if not threat, to the traditional method by which the pupil lives *en famille* for a long period with his *guru* or *ustad* (master). The other pioneer, *Pandit* Visnu Narayan Bhatkhande, devoted himself to the theory of North Indian music and the preservation of compositions through notation. He was faced with the considerable problem of relating Sanskrit theory to the practice of his own time, and his writings have proved of great value to later authors on Indian music in the English language, among them Walter Kaufmann and Nazir Ali Jairazbhoy.

The elaborate theoretical basis of Indian music can be reduced to the elements *rag* and *tal*, and also drone. All three need not be present at the same time – even the drone may be implied rather than actually heard, though this is very rare – since the *rag* may be rendered without *tal* (as usually happens in the early part of the performance) and lengthy drum solos can present and vary a *tal* without any melodic accompaniment. A typical performance will, however, include all three, and the simplest definition of Indian classical music (North or

South) is music which is based on them. Here it is important to distinguish between those *rags* and *tals* which are accepted as part of the classical repertoire and those which are not. This is decided on a consensus of musicians, critics, scholars, and, to a lesser extent, audience. It is not even a simple matter of deciding that either a *rag* is 'classical' or it is not, since all shades of grey exist, expressed by such clumsy terms as 'light classical' or 'semi-classical'. *Rags* (and, more rarely, *tals*) may be adapted from folk music and it is quite common to talk of 'folk *rags*'.

This opens another very important dimension of Indian music. In a predominantly rural country such as India the music of the majority is what may be loosely termed 'folk'. To the Westerner it may not sound very Jifferent from Indian classical music, since the vocal techniques and emphasis on a single melodic strand with rhythmic accompaniment are parallel. The variety of such music is huge and this book cannot attempt to deal with it. The point to be made is that the use of language leads to the erroneous assumption that categories of music such as 'folk', 'popular', and 'classical' are autonomous. This is no more true of India than anywhere else. The fact that a *rag* is called 'folk' today does not mean that it cannot be called 'classical' tomorrow, and this may be true of the whole history of Indian music. 'Popular music' in this context may be defined as that which is listened to rather than performed by a large percentage of the population spread over a wide area, as opposed to 'folk music' which is more restricted to small areas and in which there is a higher ratio of performers to listeners. The popular music of India is mainly film songs, emanating from the largest film industry in the world and one in which songs, dances, and other musical events are regarded as indispensable.

It is not for us to probe the aesthetics of the much-maligned Indian films with their stereotyped plots and song, dance and fight routines. The fact is that the audience expects at least half a dozen songs per picture and these become the hit songs of the moment. The din of such music from public loudspeakers and transistor radios contributes as much to the characteristic noise of Indian towns and cities as the traffic or street vendors. 'Playback singers', as they are called, like Lata Mangeshkar and Kishore Kumar, are public idols, and their wealth, if not their fame, is matched by that of the 'music directors', the

composers of the songs. These men wield great power and influence in the industry and some of them are even good musicians! The feeling has grown that film music should not merely be churned out according to established formulas, mixing a cocktail of influences from Western rock and jazz, Spanish and Latin American music, Middle Eastern music, as well as that of India itself, but should seek to reflect the best in Indian folk and classical music. In any film session, electric guitars, organs and saxophones will be side by side with *sitar, sarod, sarangi*, etc. It is appropriate that the Bombay jet-set, whose glamorous and degenerate existence is an unending source of fascination for the film-goers, should have Western-influenced music, but the scenes of 'real' India, the India of the poorer townsfolk and villagers, which are romantically inserted into each film, are appropriately accompanied by snatches of folk or classical music. Good musicians, capable of playing such music, are therefore sought by the music directors and paid handsomely for their services.

Although film music does not sound like classical music to the Indian it often uses instruments and even *rags* and *tals* which may be called 'classical'. The relation of classical to popular is therefore much the same in India as it is in the West: in both cases classical music is nowadays performed in concert halls to a paying audience, or in private houses to an invited audience, or on the radio and on commercial disc recordings, and it is something of an élitist art for a minority, with the leading performers enjoying respect and a high status in the community; and its function is to provide aesthetic enjoyment and entertainment for music lovers.

Much is made of the spiritual and religious side of Indian music, but, while not disputing its relevance (especially in the south), I would maintain that it is not of paramount importance in the sense that music is part of some ritual only understood through extra-musical factors. Indeed, it can be argued that Indian music is one of the most absolute or emancipated there is, and this obviously helps explain why it has been so easily accepted and enjoyed by audiences all over the world. Extra-musical associations can, however, be helpful in gaining a deeper insight. The Hindu capacity for absorption and synthesis is reflected in the association of music with devotion and also with the other arts. *Rags* are often connected with deities and depicted in paintings or described

in verse. One story even talks of them as human bodies, in this case broken and mutilated by bad performance! To perform a *rag* correctly, then, is like bestowing gentle, exploring, and loving caresses on a human body. In India there is no rift between devotion and sensuality and they are both incorporated into music.

1
The artist

Since this book is a study of North Indian classical music in performance, based on the art of one particular leading musician, it is appropriate that the background, musical education and career of this musician should be discussed. As in the study of the music itself, however, the particular will be related to the general: facts about the life of one artist are of some interest in themselves but of far more value for the light they shed on the culture to which the individual belongs. It would obviously be impossible to document the careers of all musicians, just as it would to present detailed analyses of all kinds of Indian music, so a number of generalisations, which I believe to be valid, must be permitted. Ram Narayan is both a typical and unique Indian musician. It is hoped that, by taking his career as the central theme, answers to the question of what constitutes typicalness and uniqueness among Indian musicians will gradually emerge.

Udaipur: the early years

Ram Narayan was born on 25 December 1927 in Udaipur, Rajasthan, into a family of poets and musicians. Among the instruments frequently played in this region of India is the *sarangi*, a prominent folk instrument of Rajasthan, but Ram Narayan himself did not come from a family of *sarangi* players. His great-great-grandfather, Bagaji Biyavat, was a singer who came from the nearby village of Amber (Ambesar) to Udaipur and sang to the Maharana, for which he was rewarded with an elephant. His great-grandfather, Sagad Danji Biyavat, his grandfather, Har Lalji Biyavat, and his father, Nathuji Biyavat, were also singers. Ram Narayan begins his genealogy with Bagaji because it was he who first came to Udaipur and started the family tradition of music. Bagaji's wife is also remembered with special respect as a *sati*, having herself, as a dutiful Hindu wife, cremated at the same time as her husband. Sagad Danji, like

Ram Narayan

his father, was also well received at the Udaipur court, and was rewarded with land for his cremation. Ram Narayan suggests that the musical standards in his family declined somewhat after this time and farming became the preoccupation. His father, while not being an outstanding musician, played a significant part in that he was the first to take up an instrument. He was interested in the *bin* but is remembered as a *dilruba* player. Ram Narayan's mother was also a lover of music.

It is traditional in India for musicians to learn from their fathers. Ram Narayan was no exception, though in his case the unusual fact is that he did not learn his father's instrument. Nowadays it is becoming increasingly common for young musicians to abandon the family tradition and take up a different instrument, especially if it is more fashionable. A career as a *sitar* or *sarod* player, or as a singer, is more appealing than as a *sarangi* player, for example, so the sons of many of the older generation of *sarangi* players have taken up other instruments or vocal music, or have perhaps avoided a musical career altogether. There are many reasons why the *sarangi* is not a prestigious instrument and is very much in decline. One of the main reasons is its association with dancing girls and other women of ill repute. Ram Narayan's father was worried about his son taking up *sarangi* for this reason, but was reassured by the promise not to become involved in such despised activities. The fact that Ram Narayan should have taken to an instrument which was not only outside the family tradition but also regarded with considerable disapproval is indicative of his independence and single-mindedness. In his own words, the *sarangi* was his 'first love', and he was not bothered about whether or not he would earn money by playing it; he just could not help himself.

The way in which Ram Narayan first became interested in the *sarangi* makes a colourful story and is best told in his own words:

> If anybody dies in the family, one person has to go with the ashes to put them into the Ganga [the river Ganges, which is sacred to Hindus] and there is a priest who will guide you how to do it. When you go there you must write down your name and those of your children, so they have the whole list of your family there. (I can see my great-grandfather's signature.) The place is Hardwar [one of several holy places on the Ganges, in the foothills of the Himalayas]. I went there when my father passed away and took his ashes, and I wrote my name. So when my son goes there he will definitely know the priest, whom we call Ganga Guru. He is not actually a *sadhu* [holy man; the English

word 'priest' is being used loosely] but rather a person who takes care of the family and knows its history. When I go there he gives me whatever I need and we do the same when he comes to us. He would bring water from the Ganga, which is holy and could be used to cure sickness. He was not a *guru* in the musical sense but he did give some spiritual guidance, mainly telling us about the Ganga.

Now, when I was very small our Ganga Guru used to come to Udaipur once a year to my house and to others where he knew the family history. He had a very small *sarangi* and he used to sing stories from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* [the two most famous Hindu epics] while accompanying himself. I still have this instrument. When I was about two or three years old he came, and had too much luggage because some people had given him clothes. He decided to leave some of his things in my house, including his *sarangi*. He never came back, and we were told that he was dead. After three years I came across the instrument which I found in my house. It was in very bad condition. I had a stick; I had seen people playing *sarangi* so I knew there must be a bow, so I used this stick. I was playing on our balcony and an old woman was watching me from another house. And I felt she was very much impressed by my playing. So I went on playing and playing for about two hours. Then my father came and the woman told him I had been playing the *sarangi* for two hours. My father asked if I liked it and I told him I did and asked him to fix the instrument properly. So he did it, and made a bow, and the first lesson I received was from my father, which is fantastic. During that lesson I learnt so much.

The main thing Ram Narayan learnt from his father was a fingering technique, which is extraordinary since this technique, learnt from one who was not himself a *sarangi* player, has been strictly adhered to by Ram Narayan ever since, and is the basis of his unsurpassed mastery of the instrument. Equally important, his father encouraged him to learn the *sarangi*, overlooking his truancy from school and even agreeing to allow him to devote himself entirely to the instrument. Thus the young boy went for lessons with Uday Lal, a leading *sarangi* player and vocalist in Udaipur. He had learnt from Allabande and Zakiruddin Dagar, who were famous exponents of the *dhrupad* style of singing, which, despite its relative lack of popularity in the concert hall, is still probably the most respected vocal genre in North Indian classical music and is noted for its meticulous attention to the minutest details and subtleties of *rags*. Ram Narayan's music owes much to *dhrupad*, especially in the *alap* portion of a recital, as we shall see later.

The other main vocal style of North Indian classical music, in Ram

Narayan's youth as today, is *khyal*. This allows a greater display of surface virtuosity (complicated ornamentation, fast runs and so on) than *dhrupad*, and has influenced not only Ram Narayan but also other eminent instrumentalists. An interesting point is that most of Ram Narayan's teachers were vocalists rather than *sarangi* players. Yet this is not surprising since *sarangi* music is, perhaps more so than any other North Indian instrumental music, vocal in origin, and no *sarangi* player has ever been without a firm grounding in singing. The first *khyal* singer from whom Ram Narayan learnt, also during his boyhood in Udaipur, was Madhav Prasad. He was originally from Lucknow, an important musical centre and the seat of the most refined Muslim civilisation in India. It was quite common for musicians of that time to travel from state to state and from court to court. Madhav Prasad spent some time in Nepal and then went to the court at Maihar (famed for its connection with the name of the late Allaudin Khan, the father of Ali Akbar Khan and the teacher of Ravi Shankar).

By the age of twelve or thirteen Ram Narayan's technique had greatly improved. While other *sarangi* players in Udaipur were accompanying dancing girls he played solo, having already at that age decided on this unusual course. His musical repertoire, however, was by no means complete, and the music he was playing was not, in his words, 'real classical music'. He supported himself, very adequately, by teaching music at the Vidya Bhavan school and at a girls' high school called Rajasthan Mela Vidyalay, earning about three times his father's salary from the court of ten rupees per month. Madhav Prasad pointed out that while he might prosper materially in this situation he would never really progress as a musician. Ram Narayan was deeply impressed by the simplicity and dignity of Madhav Prasad, whose singing in Udaipur attracted the most discerning audience, including *sadhus* and wrestlers (in India very polite men and great music lovers; often wrestlers are musicians and vice versa). It was enough for Madhav Prasad to tell Ram Narayan that his main string was sharp, and then witness his numerous attempts to correct the fault, to humble the young musician and make him immediately resign his teaching posts. His decision to give up a secure existence in favour of a precarious life as a travelling musician naturally did not please his family, and he in turn came to have cause for anxiety. Madhav Prasad left Udaipur, travelling to Jodhpur, Beawar,

Bikaner, Gwalior and Lucknow. Ram Narayan accompanied him, learning the whole time. In Lucknow Madhav Prasad fell ill and Ram Narayan, with no other teacher or means of livelihood, became anxious. The advice his ailing teacher gave him was to go to Lahore and learn from the famous *khyal* singer, *Ustad* Abdul Wahid Khan.

Lahore: a musician's apprenticeship

Accordingly, in 1943 Ram Narayan journeyed to Lahore and presented himself at the radio station, where he thought he would have the best chance of finding work. There he met a music producer, *Pandit* Jivan Lal Mattoo, and told him he was a singer, thinking that only vocal music was broadcast and that he would stand no chance as a *sarangi* player. Jivan Lal Mattoo, however, noticed his fingernails which betrayed the fact that he was also a *sarangi* player. Ram Narayan admitted it and, after a demonstration of his abilities as a singer, agreed to try one of the *sarangi*s there. He played two *rags* (*Gaur Sarang* and *Multani*) for an hour, and those listening, including staff artists (musicians employed on a regular basis by the radio) were impressed. To his surprise Jivan Lal Mattoo offered him a job as a *sarangi* player at a salary of 130 rupees per month (which also astonished him). He commenced his duties the next morning at 7 a.m.

The task of becoming accepted as a pupil by Abdul Wahid Khan was much less easy. In many ways this formidable man was a typical Indian musician: he hated superficiality and refused to teach anyone whose sincerity and dedication he doubted. He was also very possessive about his knowledge and this secrecy led him to forbid recordings of his performances. It was in 1947, a few days before his death, that Jivan Lal Mattoo, realising that posterity might be denied recordings of a great artist, secretly taped a radio broadcast at which Abdul Wahid Khan sang the *rags Patdip, Multani* and *Darbari*, accompanied by Ram Narayan on the *tambura* and his brother Chatur Lal on the *tabla*. By this time Ram Narayan had been with him for about four years, having become his pupil through the intercession of Jivan Lal Mattoo, himself a pupil and probably the most favoured one. All three left Lahore in 1947 at the time of Partition, when the city became part of Pakistan, and moved to Delhi, where Abdul Wahid Khan died.

How much exactly Ram Narayan learnt from Abdul Wahid Khan is difficult to assess. There were probably relatively few lessons but what was taught in those sessions was clearly of immense value. Ram Narayan also gained information, by proxy as it were, from Jivan Lal Mattoo who also later taught Abdul Wahid Khan's young son, Hafiz Ullah, and procured him a job in Delhi radio as a *sarangi* player.

The question of how much a musician learns and how a relationship is established between master and pupil is interesting, and many aspects are unique to India. If Ram Narayan states that he learnt from a musician whom he respects then this must be accepted, yet some traditionalists would also look for evidence of a relationship with a particular master sanctified by the ceremony called *ganda bandhan*, and also for membership of an established tradition, or *gharana*. Many musicians attach great importance to the *ganda bandhan* ceremony and to belonging to a *gharana*, though in Ram Narayan's case neither has any real significance. In the *ganda bandhan* ceremony the master and pupil (*guru* and *sisya* if Hindu, or *ustad* and *sagird* if Muslim) ritually accept each other by tying a thread to one of their wrists and offering flowers, sweets and money in front of witnesses from each other's family and friends. The master undertakes to teach the student to the best of his ability and the student pledges his complete trust, respect and obedience. Formerly it was the custom for the master also to maintain the student in his household, a debt which the student would repay when he became established and the master too old to earn his living. Ram Narayan went through the *ganda bandhan* ceremony with Madhav Prasad and also with one Girdari Lal in Udaipur, from whom he had a few lessons before leaving for Lahore, but not with Uday Lal or Abdul Wahid Khan, both of whom he considers just as important as his teachers. A lot depends on the attitude of the master; some do not wish to bother with the ceremony while others will not be prepared to teach even a note until it has been performed.

Ram Narayan gave an account of his early experiences with Abdul Wahid Khan which sheds some light on the sometimes complex and stormy relationship between master and pupil. Abdul Wahid Khan was singing the *rag Multani* at a party given by dancing girls. Bare Ghulam Ali Khan, already a formidable singer in his own right, was present and Abdul Wahid Khan asked him to join him in the rendition of just one

phrase of four notes, but Bare Ghulam Ali Khan found himself unable to perform it in the same way, whereupon he took Abdul Wahid Khan as his *ustad* and performed the *ganda bandhan* ceremony there and then. Next morning, however, when he went to his *ustad*'s house the master told a dancing girl, Hirabai, to teach him. Bare Ghulam Ali Khan took this as an insult and never came back. Jivan Lal Mattoo asked Abdul Wahid Khan why he had done this to a great singer. The reply was: 'Maybe he is a great singer but he is not a great man. If he were he would have abided by my decision and accepted her. Why should I teach proud people?' This taught Ram Narayan that complete devotion and surrender would be the only way of penetrating Abdul Wahid Khan's peevish intransigence. He went as far as offering 100 out of his monthly salary of 130 rupees.

Abdul Wahid Khan belonged to the Kirana *gharana*, that is a tradition of *khyal* singing which arose in the town of Kirana and was passed down from master to pupil (usually father to son). *Gharanas* (from the word '*ghar*' meaning 'house') exist mainly in the realm of *khyal* singing and take their names from their place of origin, for example Gwalior, Agra, Jaipur, Delhi and Patiala. Each *gharana* has its distinctive style and repertoire and boasts a number of famous singers who are acknowledged members. Many talk of *gharanas* also in relation to instrumental music, particularly for the *tabla* and sometimes for the *sitar, sarod* and *sarangi*. Another school maintains that *gharana* should not be applied to styles of *tabla* playing, the correct word being *baj*, and it should be noted that the four main traditions of *dhrupad* singing are referred to as *banis*, never as *gharanas*. In the case of the *sarangi* one very rarely hears mention of any *gharanas*, though certain North Indian musicians are anxious to establish a kind of musical pedigree by claiming membership of one *gharana* or another, in which case they will tend to link the *sarangi* with the name of one of the important *khyal gharanas*. This is hardly surprising, considering the especially close ties between *sarangi* playing and vocal (*khyal*) music. In a sense Ram Narayan can claim some connection with the Kirana *gharana* through Abdul Wahid Khan. On his own insistence, however, since he is not strictly following Abdul Wahid Khan it is not correct to call him a Kirana *gharana* musician. Once again his independent outlook emerges in the statement that every musician should have his own *gharana*, in the

sense that he must establish his own style based on that of his *guru* or *ustad*, rather than follow the teacher exactly throughout his entire career. There is no doubt that Ram Narayan has established his own very distinctive style and that many other *sarangi* players are imitating it, yet one could not speak of a 'Ram Narayan *gharana*' (as opposed to 'style') since he has not actually taught most of these musicians and the tradition is still young.

In fact it is artists like Ram Narayan who reflect a decline of the *gharana* system. His son, Brij Narayan, plays *sarod* rather than *sarangi*. This is significant in itself but many overlook or dismiss the fact that his daughter, Aruna, is learning the *sarangi* from him and, I would be the first to say, is playing more like him than any other *sarangi* player.[1] Both children are already giving concerts. In a number of other families, where the *sarangi* may have been played for several generations, one often finds the younger members turning to other instruments, like *sitar, sarod*, violin or harmonium, largely because of the decline in popularity and low status of the *sarangi*, but also partly as an expression of their independence. This is bound to disrupt tradition though not as much as one might think since Indian music, both in its broad outlines and in many of its small details, can be adapted from one instrument to another, therefore the special traits of a style or *gharana* can often be transferred in this way. This can easily be understood if one accepts that Indian music is basically vocal and that all musicians must be able to sing, so that what is first of all sung may subsequently be reproduced instrumentally.

Throughout his time in Lahore, Ram Narayan learnt only through singing; he no longer needed help with *sarangi* technique which he had mastered by that time. It is of considerable interest to reiterate that he learnt the first essential of *sarangi* technique – the fingering system – from his father who was not a *sarangi* player. Yet so confident were both father and son in the unique efficacy of this system that any attempt by other teachers to alter it was firmly resisted. This point enables us to clear up a doubt concerning Ram Narayan's teachers, among whom is sometimes numbered one Mehboob Khan. Ram Narayan denies that he was ever taught by him. What happened was that his father took him to meet Mehboob Khan (from Jaipur) when he was staying in Udaipur and accompanying dancing girls on the *sarangi*. The meeting was

arranged with a view to procuring Mehboob Khan as a teacher, and he agreed to this. The problem, however, was that he considered Ram Narayan's fingering technique to be wrong and insisted on changing it, which Nathuji Biyavat could not permit, so on this crucial matter of fingering the whole plan came to nothing. Contact between the two *sarangi* players was not, however, completely lost. They met again in Jaipur in the 1950s when Mehboob Khan was suffering financially from the decline in the dancing girl business and, even more so, from that of the *sarangi* as an instrument to accompany them. Apparently Ram Narayan helped him obtain a post at the local radio station, and this action only served to intensify the rumours that he was Mehboob Khan's pupil.

Delhi: the vocal accompanist

On moving from Lahore to Delhi, where he remained from 1947 to 1949, Ram Narayan continued to work as a radio *sarangi* player whose main function was to accompany vocal music. (Times have not changed, and what *sarangi* players there are as permanent staff artists in All India Radio are primarily employed as accompanists.) His duties were from 7 a.m. to 9 a.m. and from 5 p.m. to 11 p.m. In Lahore he had been allowed the occasional solo 'slot' of about ten or twelve minutes and he had already begun to think of a career as a soloist; in his words he 'wanted to be independent, not a slave'. From the beginning he had refused to remain in the background and had insisted on projecting his own ideas and musical personality. This led to singers complaining that he had not accompanied them properly, by which they meant he had not consistently followed their lead, but had concentrated on showing his own skill and ideas.

The technique and musical characteristics of vocal accompaniment in North Indian classical music will be examined in more detail in the next chapter, but some of the main points should be outlined here since Ram Narayan's career can best be understood as a confrontation with and ultimate rejection of this traditional role of the *sarangi*. The first point to make is that the *sarangi* and the human voice are considered to be especially close; the *sarangi* is the best instrument to accompany the voice because it comes closest to it in sound and technical versatility.[2]

Many other leading instruments of North Indian classical music, for example the *sitar, sarod* and *bin*, were used in the past in accompaniment to vocal music, but they have become firmly established as solo instruments, and the only instruments still used to accompany vocal music are, apart from the ubiquitous harmonium, bowed instruments – especially the *sarangi*. 'Accompaniment', as well as its Indian equivalent *sangati*, is something of a misnomer, since what the *sarangi* plays comes after the vocal part and is mainly an imitation of it, thus it 'shadows' or 'echoes' rather than 'goes with'. It provides a kind of commentary on the vocal part and fills in the gaps between vocal phrases, when the singer pauses for breath, or to think of the next phrase, or even to listen to the *sarangi* player. It is on this last point that the controversy arises. Some singers require the constant background music of the *sarangi* but are otherwise unconcerned with what happens outside their own performance. They expect the *sarangi* player to keep to his role of imitation. Compare one singer's view of *sarangi* accompaniment with that of a *sarangi* player (Ram Narayan): the singer maintained that the *sarangi* player should be there to help the vocalist and not try to steal the show, for in so doing he might destroy the singer's self-confidence and concentration and jeopardise the performance, while Ram Narayan's view is that the *sarangi* player is there to keep the vocalist in tune (in addition to the drone instrument, the *tambura*) and give him inspiration. More than this, he must be more alert than the singer and guide him. It is only a poor singer who fears that the *sarangi* player might steal the show, while a good one will enjoy the element of friendly competition and encourage the *sarangi* player. It was partly this jealousy which he encountered from certain singers that determined Ram Narayan to abandon accompaniment and devote himself to a solo career.

The implications of vocal accompaniment for a *sarangi* player's musical knowledge and versatility are far-reaching. He must be conversant with all the vocal styles and forms in North Indian classical music as well as being at least competent in all the main *rags* and *tals*. His music will be vocal in conception (as, to repeat a main theme of this book, it should be). It is a measure of the close link between the *sarangi* and vocal music that not only will any *sarangi* player claim some skill as a vocalist but that also many great singers, at least in recent times, played

sarangi (in varying degrees of ability). Curiously enough, a large number of these singers eschewed the accompaniment of the *sarangi* in their own recitals, preferring instead the harmonium, an import from Europe now used widely in all kinds of Indian music, much to the chagrin of traditionalists. Fear of an accompaniment which is both out of tune and too prominent is a main reason for rejecting the *sarangi*. A singer, while not necessarily being compelled to accept a particular *sarangi* player, is often not familiar with his accompanist's special merits or failings. In nearly every case the singer will look down on his accompanists, both on *sarangi* and *tabla*. It is the fate of accompanists in India to be in a conspicuously lower position than the main artist; they sit on either side in attitudes of humility before the master who dominates the stage. If they are not particularly good they will probably be taken for granted and have to suffer indifference and virtual anonymity. Those few who are outstanding, however, can command respect and attention from both singer and audience. Past *sarangi* players like Ghulam Sabir and Gopal Misra fell into this category. Ram Narayan too received acclaim from some, though not all, of the singers he accompanied. In his experience, the better the artist the more likely he was to give encouragement and appreciation, since a truly good singer need never fear the accompanist who aspires to be his equal. Some of those musicians whom he respects as great masters and who did help him by their encouragement were Omkarnath Thakur, Krishna Rao Shankar Pandit, Mushtaq Hussain Khan (singers) and Ahmad Jan Thirkwa and Kanthe Maharaj (*tabla* players). These musicians would even express their admiration in public, during the course of the performance, and the two *tabla* players mentioned, veritable giants of music who knew no superiors, would even call out, over the head of the singer as it were, such things as 'very good', or 'play that bit again'. (It should be remembered that moments of excellence in an Indian performance are marked by spontaneous outbursts of approval, usually verbal and sometimes through clapping, both from the other participating musicians and from the audience.)

Ram Narayan's efforts, from the beginning of his career, to elevate the status of the *sarangi* were bound to lead to its establishment as a true solo instrument (in his hands at least). Accompaniment, in its strict sense, held little attraction for him. His aim, even in that situation, was

to influence the course of events and even the duration of the performance, and to share equally the praise – and blame. Mediocre singers resented his assertiveness and mischievousness. He would deliberately expose them by emphasising particular notes, thereby confusing them and making them lose the tonic. One singer was led to complain to the Delhi radio officials that this had happened and Ram Narayan had made him sing the wrong *rag*. Ram Narayan, well aware that the tonic was always clearly audible from the drone instrument, the *tambura*, retorted 'I didn't snatch the *tambura* from his hand!' Incidents such as this made him give up the job and move, in 1949, to Bombay where he has lived ever since.

Bombay: from accompanist to soloist

The move was not undertaken in the most fortunate of circumstances. He had neither friends nor job and his reputation as an accompanist followed him, causing singers to avoid him. Yet Bombay was a better centre for music than Delhi, with many concerts and music clubs. At first Ram Narayan played in Deodhar's music school and also met two great singers who encouraged him and appreciated his skill as an accompanist: Omkarnath Thakur and Krishna Rao Shankar Pandit. In 1954 he took the momentous decision to give a solo public recital. The occasion was a big music conference organised by the prominent Bombay impressario, Brij Narayan (no relation). In India, a music conference is a grand festival, not a forum for lectures and discussions. It is usually held in honour of a great musician, living or dead, and lasts several days. Many of the leading names in Indian music are engaged and they perform, one after the other, in concerts lasting several hours,sometimes all night. Music lovers await the main conferences, held in most of the centres of North Indian classical music like Bombay, Calcutta, Delhi, Gwalior, Benares and Jullunder, with eager anticipation, and attendances are high.

At this 1954 Bombay conference Ram Narayan was engaged primarily as an accompanist. The duration was eight days and on each day he accompanied at least one vocalist, including Kesarbai Kerkar, Bare Ghulam Ali Khan, Amir Khan and Krishna Rao Shankar Pandit. Also present were the *sitar* players Vilayat Khan and Ravi Shankar, the *sarod*

player Ali Akbar Khan, and the *tabla* players Ahmad Jan Thirkwa, Shanta Prasad, Anokhelal and Alla Rakha. The favourable response to his accompaniment encouraged Ram Narayan to try a solo performance. Unfortunately he was allotted a very bad time. On the same day there was a double duet of Ravi Shankar and Ali Akbar Khan, on *sitar* and *sarod* respectively, and Kishan Maharaj and Keramatullah Khan on *tabla*. Ram Narayan was asked to play before this big event and evidently the atmosphere was not good. Indian audiences can be impatient and this leads to merciless cruelty. They had come to hear the main item, not a lone and lowly *sarangi*, and after only ten minutes they succeeded, by their hooting and general noise, in wrecking the performance. For three days Ram Narayan could neither eat nor sleep, and seriously contemplated giving up the *sarangi* altogether in favour of singing. This would have been an easier course of action than persevering with a career as a *sarangi* soloist, but his courage returned and he gave more intimate recitals, away from the glare of publicity, to small audiences of between about fifty and two hundred.

In 1956 he made a second attempt at a big programme, again arranged by Brij Narayan. Probably around two thousand heard him play *rag Gavti*, accompanied on *tabla* by Keramatullah Khan, for about an hour, and the response was very enthusiastic. From then on Ram Narayan, who had brought the *sarangi* forward as an instrument capable of sustaining a full public recital (as opposed to short slots on the radio of no more than half an hour), was accepted as a soloist.

This important break with tradition and the unprecedented success which crowned it did not bring an immediate end to Ram Narayan's problems. The prejudice against the *sarangi*, especially as a solo instrument, continued, and largely as a result of this he was faced with financial difficulties. Bombay is probably the most expensive city in the Indian subcontinent and, as a young musician with a family, he felt keenly aware of this, but Bombay did offer one very important source of money: films. The Indian film industry, centred on Bombay, is now the biggest in the world, and film music dominates the musical scene wherever there are cinemas or transistor radios. During the difficult period of transition from accompanist to soloist financial pressures forced Ram Narayan to play for a while in films, an activity which he regarded as degrading for a classical musician of his calibre and which

he abandoned with relief.

India and the West: the concert platform

The welcome gap left by Ram Narayan's departure from the film industry has been filled by concert tours, both in India and abroad. He is regularly asked to perform at important music conferences in India, and he makes on average one visit of a few months to the West each year. Foreign tours bring prestige to a musician from any country but no more so than in India, where to have been abroad gives an enormous boost to a musician's reputation and can make his career. Ever since artists like Ravi Shankar and Ali Akbar Khan, who, be it noted, have always enjoyed the highest reputation in India as well as abroad, made a point of performing and teaching regularly in the West, all kinds of musicians have set their sights on foreign tours. In some cases, it must be admitted, young or otherwise inexperienced musicians have made names for themselves in the West but are unknown or held in low esteem in India. This kind of thing was common in the sixties when Indian music was nearly a cult in the West and almost any nonentity could set himself up as a master, but now it appears that audiences are more discriminating and the artists they go to hear are generally among the best. Quality has been preserved, though the widespread appeal of a decade ago has diminished. Nevertheless, anyone familiar with the musical life in India itself will regret that even more fine Indian musicians never come to the West or have died without ever leaving India, and also that instrumental music dominates in the West while in India it is subordinate to vocal music.

Ram Narayan's reputation has grown steadily both in India and abroad. He made his first trip to Europe in 1964. Before that he had visited Afghanistan (in 1952) and China (in 1954). In both countries he was received enthusiastically, though for different reasons. Indian music is understood, highly respected, and often performed by musicians in Afghanistan and Ram Narayan enjoys a high reputation there. To the Chinese, however, Indian music is as alien as to Europeans; Ram Narayan's solution of the problem in 1954 shows his independent outlook and adaptability, as well as an impish sense of humour. During his tour of China he asked a local boy to sing him some

well-known Chinese song, which he played in his next concert to a huge audience. Until then reactions to Indian music had been less than ecstatic, but this audience recognised the tune and responded with wild enthusiasm, shouting 'Lam Lalain!' and demanding several encores.

The visit to Europe in 1964 was of more importance; for one thing it was the first trip to the West (Europe and North America) where Ram Narayan has established himself as a leading Indian musician, and for another it was undertaken with his brother, the distinguished *tabla* player, Chatur Lal, to whom he was particularly close and who exerted a strong personal and musical influence on him. Chatur Lal was born in 1925. A main reason for his interest in the *tabla* was so that he might be able to provide accompaniment for his younger brother's *sarangi* playing. He took lessons in Udaipur from one Nathu Prasad and later also from Abdul Hafiz Khan and *Ustad* Jehangir Khan of Indore. While Ram Narayan devoted himself to the *sarangi*, however, his brother allowed this early interest in the *tabla* to lapse before he had gained real proficiency, and instead concentrated on farming, which was even more important in the family than music. Meanwhile Ram Narayan travelled and became a professional musician in Lahore. After Partition he moved to Delhi and Chatur Lal visited him there. It was at this point (1948) that Ram Narayan persuaded his brother to return to the *tabla* and he even managed to secure him a post at the radio station – a modest beginning, commensurate with his skill, of one hour a day (7 p.m. to 8 p.m.), which allowed him plenty of time to practise. About a year later Ram Narayan moved to Bombay, thereby temporarily loosening the close contact with his brother. In 1951 he met Ravi Shankar in Calcutta who spoke enthusiastically of Chatur Lal's prowess as a *tabla* player. It seems hardly credible that in barely three years he had progressed from mere competence to a position as one of India's leading *tabla* players. In the next few years he toured North India with such artists as Ravi Shankar, Ali Akbar Khan, and Vilayat Khan, and in 1954 visited America with Ali Akbar Khan. His continuing association with the leading names of Indian music and an increasing skill as a soloist secured his reputation in India and abroad. He was at the height of his powers in 1964 when he came to Europe with his brother. It was in October 1965, back in Delhi shortly after this tour, that he died, aged just forty. The blow was so severe for Ram Narayan that he could no

longer play. The slightest thing would make him cry and for two years he could only give a concert if he had steadied his nerves beforehand with alcohol. The dose increased and the heavy drinking, practised by quite a few other famous Indian musicians, threatened to become a serious problem. He was helped to overcome it by a wise man who told him to rededicate himself to his art and live both for himself and his brother. To this day Ram Narayan preserves a special love and loyalty to Chatur Lal, both as a cherished brother and as a remarkable musician.

Chatur Lal's short career in many ways resembled that of his brother. Both took up instruments which were not in the family tradition and both showed a certain eclecticism of style. Ram Narayan had a brief but profitable association with the Kirana *gharana* of *khyal* singing, yet has developed his own style which shows only superficial similarities with it, and Chatur Lal, whose training was unusually piecemeal, absorbed influences freely from all traditions of *tabla* playing, demonstrating if anything more self-reliance in the development of his unique style. The number of traditions (referred to either as *gharana* or *baj*, and distinguished by geographical locations) of *tabla* playing is often put at six: those of Delhi, Ajrada, Punjab, Farrukhabad, Benares and Lucknow. Ram Narayan recognises four: Delhi, Ajrada, Farrukhabad and Purab. This seems to be evidence for the fact that nowadays the tendency is to make a broad, if over-simplified, distinction between a predominantly Muslim Western style centred on Delhi and a predominantly Hindu Eastern (Purab) style centred on Benares. An expert will be able to identify techniques of playing and specific compositions from any one of the six or more traditions, but even the layman will probably be able to distinguish between the light, nimble and intricate Delhi style, where much of the right-hand work is done with only the first two fingers, and the heavier Benares style, where comparable strokes have the second finger reinforced by the third and where influences from the ponderous *pakhavaj*, the drum of the hallowed *dhrupad* style, have made themselves felt. Chatur Lal absorbed influences from the Delhi, Purab, Ajrada and Farrukhabad styles, and also studied South Indian drumming with the *mridangam* player Ramnad Eswaran. There is also a suggestion that he learnt from a leading *sitar* player whom he accompanied, though this is strenuously denied by Ram Narayan, who asserts that an accompanist–soloist relationship is not a student–teacher

relationship and that a *tabla* player can only really learn his art from other *tabla* players.

It will interest the reader to know that the *tabla* playing on the cassette which accompanies this book is by Chatur Lal's son, Charanjit Lal Biyavat, who was born in 1955 and had his initial training from his father and also from his father's teacher, Abdul Hafiz Khan. The recording was made during his first European tour (with his uncle).

The meaning of music: artist and audience

Foreign tours, including the production of disc recordings and radio broadcasts, take up an average of two months of Ram Narayan's year. The rest of the time in India he is invited to give concerts or participate in big music conferences, and he also teaches at the recently established National Centre for the Performing Arts in Bombay. He has lived for and by music for nearly all his life, a fact which may easily be taken for granted, yet the reasons and stages of becoming a professional musician should be examined more closely. In the first place it must be assumed that he showed very early musical aptitude and interest and grew up in a musical environment. He developed, almost by accident it would appear, a passion for the *sarangi* which was encouraged by his father despite the fact that the *sarangi* was an instrument outside the family tradition and the object of considerable prejudice. After initial technical guidance from his father Ram Narayan went to teachers outside his family, community and religion and devoted himself to the study of North Indian classical music. Within a few years he was competent enough to secure a good job and earn his livelihood. His explanation for becoming a professional musician is simple: 'if you are not professional then you are not a musician at all. It is a full-time job and demands all your attention.' The corollary to this which he proposes is that if the musician is good he automatically becomes professional, though there are exceptions to either proposition. The point made, and it is one to which we shall return as it is unquestionably a general rather than purely personal view, is that North Indian classical music is a highly sophisticated and revered art which is not easily mastered, therefore it belongs to those who devote themselves entirely to it, not to charlatans and dabblers. Time spent earning a living in any

other way would preclude a total commitment to music. Ram Narayan was certainly fortunate that external circumstances enabled him to devote himself to music. There is no question of his taking up music automatically as a hereditary profession, as would happen in certain families of Muslim musicians. Thus there were no external pressures on him to become a professional musician, but, on the other hand, there were no insurmountable obstacles placed in his way either.

For Ram Narayan and Indian musicians in general music has a deeper significance than as a means of earning a living. The spiritual and religious side of Indian music is sometimes exaggerated at the expense of its appeal as music which demonstrably crosses cultural boundaries, yet it is important, not least to the musicians themselves. Ram Narayan, a Hindu, is conscious of a Hindu tradition going back to Vedic chant and other temple music. When music was adopted as a court entertainment its function changed, if not its essential nature. Listening to music in the court or other small gatherings of devotees or in the large modern concert hall cannot be convincingly equated with praying in a temple. Similarly, a Western music lover would not equate liturgical music heard in church with, say, a Mozart symphony heard in the Festival Hall, yet both experiences could well be described as deeply spiritual. An important distinction, however, is that in the West we are not conscious of an unbroken tradition in the way that Indians regard their *rag*-based music. There the musician expresses his individuality and effects innovations within a system which can never be drained of its possibilities. Change of course happens, otherwise stagnation would result, yet it is never based on the idea of destroying and beginning anew. Thus we find little evidence of major upheavals in Indian music history (despite the history of invasions, colonialism, and political, social and religious turmoil in the subcontinent) comparable to those in Western music (commonly cited examples being the beginning of the seventeenth and twentieth centuries).

Ram Narayan's insistence on a religious basis, however, does not restrict the appreciation of Indian music or the grasping of its spiritual content to Hindus. It does not matter what the religion of the artist or listener is. Nowhere have Hinduism and Islam, the two major religions of North India, interacted and co-operated more fruitfully than in music, which is dedicated to God, by whatever name He is known. The

story goes that the sixteenth-century Mughal Emperor Akbar visited the saint and musician Svami Haridas, the *guru* of his leading court musician Tansen, and considered the Svami to be even greater than the celebrated Tansen. The latter's rejoinder was: 'the difference is that I sing for you and he sings for God'. Nothing expresses better the dualism, rather than dichotomy, of music as spiritual discipline and secular entertainment. The concert artist gives his audience peace of mind and relaxation as well as intellectual stimulation and aesthetic enjoyment. In Ram Narayan's words 'music is my religion. I can reach God directly. There cannot be a better approach to God than music. It gives me everything.' Through the peace of mind and happiness it gives him he tries to communicate his feelings to the audience, so that they should feel as he does. 'Through my music I try to help people. They should get relief and feel happy. If you are perfectly in tune, then you are a different person.' Being in tune, an ideal pursued nowhere more diligently and successfully than in India, again brings spiritual bliss through music and affects not only the performer but also the audience.

There are some artists who like their audience to show this by maintaining the silent and placid attention normally found among Western concert-goers. On the other hand, to give the impression that Indian audiences listen to music in a state of trance or religious ecstasy, or even that they should, would be false. The ideal setting for a recital of North Indian classical music, which, it must be remembered, is Chamber Music according to our concepts, is a small gathering of appreciative listeners who sit, like the artists and in close proximity to them, on the floor. In this relaxed atmosphere the artist converses with the listeners and the communication is both ways. The main vehicle of expression is, of course, the musical sound, but the complete communication also involves facial and hand gestures and occasional verbal interjections. Some artists gesticulate and talk to their audience during the performance a great deal, others hardly at all, but in all cases it is important to see the artist and observe the physical expression which accompanies and intensifies the musical expression. Music is never a purely auditory experience.[3] It is a physical act performed by the human body, so going to a concert and listening throughout with eyes closed seems odd behaviour and I have rarely observed it among Indian audiences. In order not to appear intolerant, however, I willingly

concede that several Indian artists perform for appreciably long stretches with their eyes closed, and that Indian music can be listened to in this way, and perhaps this intensifies its spiritual content. The normal practice is for the audience to take an active part in the performance, showing their appreciation at each stage, thereby encouraging the artist and, to some extent, influencing the course of events. Head movements, raised hands and shouts of 'wah, wah!' all express immediate approval and the artist expects such reactions to his more inspired ideas. Just as Ram Narayan sees it as his function to give peace of mind and happiness to his audience so he expects them to assist him: 'I make use of them to give me good inspiration. I am here to give them something through my music, and certain things I want to confirm in front of an audience.' In his case the expectation is not of loud and frequent audience response. He takes the expression on the face rather than applause as an indicator of successful communication, and in many ways prefers the silent discipline of a Western audience because he feels it his duty to lead the audience. When an Indian audience responds vociferously to a phrase he feels obliged to improvise further on the same idea. This can obviously be a wonderful thing, contributing to the spontaneity of Indian music, but there is also the danger that the artist's overall conception of the piece and train of thought will be disturbed. At the other extreme total silence will tend to signify insensitivity or disapproval. The ideal clearly lies between the two; similarly the artist must develop a balance between too great an awareness of the audience on the one hand and oblivion on the other.

Somewhat surprisingly, Ram Narayan does not make any real distinction between Indian and Western audiences to his music. There are three main reasons which are closely related. One is the fact that, in his words, 'I don't change music. I can't.' The second is the conviction that his music cannot in some way be adapted or simplified and the onus is on the audience to appreciate what he offers and believes to be true and noble music. The third is the very interesting proposition that music can be listened to equally well in the West as in India because its effect is universal. The systematic investigation of this hypothesis would require an enormous amount of work, but the assumption here is that there is some evidence to support it, to the extent that the Western listener who has become accustomed to the sound of Indian music and whose initial

interest has been aroused can be made aware of its principles and structures, and so move towards a true understanding and appreciation.

Notes

1 Indian musicians are by no means restricted to the male sex, and the use of the third person masculine pronoun in this book is for the sake of brevity and should not suggest that the feminine is excluded. Female musicians tend to be singers or dancers. Some play instruments of the plucked variety like *sitar* and *sarod*, and, very often, the *vina* of South India, but none as far as I know plays classical drums or the *sarangi*, with the sole exception of Ram Narayan's daughter.

2 This association of bowed instruments with the human voice is widespread and by no means confined to India. Tinctoris (c. 1487) mentioned that 'over the greater part of the world the viola with a bow is used in the recitation of epics' (quoted in Baines 1961: 217), while Bachmann suggests that the practice of bowing may have arisen from the need to provide an instrumental equivalent and companion to the human voice (1969: 137).

3 I have not forgotten such recent developments in the West as electronic and environmental music, but I am prepared to ignore them for the purposes of the argument I propose and which I still consider to be valid.

2
The instruments

The emphasis of this chapter is on the *sarangi*, which is Ram Narayan's instrument and which takes the leading part on the cassette. It is not, however, the only instrument heard in the recording, nor would it be in a normal recital. To discuss the *sarangi* alone would therefore give a distorted view of the instruments of North Indian music and of its place among them. At the other extreme, it is beyond the scope of this book to attempt a detailed description of all the instruments; for one thing the variety is enormous, and for another relatively few are what may be called the standard instruments. Here a distinction may be made between those instruments on which North Indian classical music can be played and those played by acknowledged masters and which are accepted as the important concert instruments. Potentially, any melodic instrument can play the *rag* music of India; even the piano has been tried – not very successfully I may add, and very much to the annoyance of purists, who quite reasonably maintain that such music cannot be played on a keyboard. (The phenomenal success of the harmonium in North India is a paradox to which I shall return.) The question as to which instruments can be called standard or important will be answered in the course of this chapter.

The classificatory system

The best way to begin a study of Indian instruments is the one devised by the ancient Hindu theorists to impose order on the chaos of rich variety. Their classification system is basically the same as that arrived at only in the present century by Erich von Hornbostel and Curt Sachs. In both cases the system is based on acoustical principles, and there are four main groups: strings, wind, drums and percussion. The more precise terminology of Hornbostel and Sachs is chordophones, aerophones, membranophones and idiophones. The first three suggest

clearly enough that strings, air and membranes are the main determinants of the sound, while the fourth indicates that the instruments are made of naturally sonorous material (such as wood or metal) and do not require additions such as strings or skins. The corresponding Sanskrit names are *tata vadya, susira vadya, avanaddha vadya* and *ghana vadya*, meaning stringed or stretched, hollow, covered, and solid instruments, respectively. Of these four groups *tata vadya* and *avanaddha vadya* are the most important in Indian classical music, since any recital, in the North and South, is virtually certain to include at least one instrument from each group. The stringed instrument used as a drone, the *tambura*, is nearly always present and some kind of drum is indispensable to keep the *tal*. Among solo melodic instruments those of the *tata vadya* group are generally the most revered and certainly the most widely used in classical music. They include the *sitar, sarod, sarangi* and *vina*. The most common drum of North Indian classical music is the *tabla* (actually a set of two drums) and in the South it is the *mridangam*, which has a northern counterpart known as *pakhavaj*. The instruments mentioned so far are the main ones of Indian classical music, but before considering them in more detail a few examples of *susira vadya* and *ghana vadya* will be given.

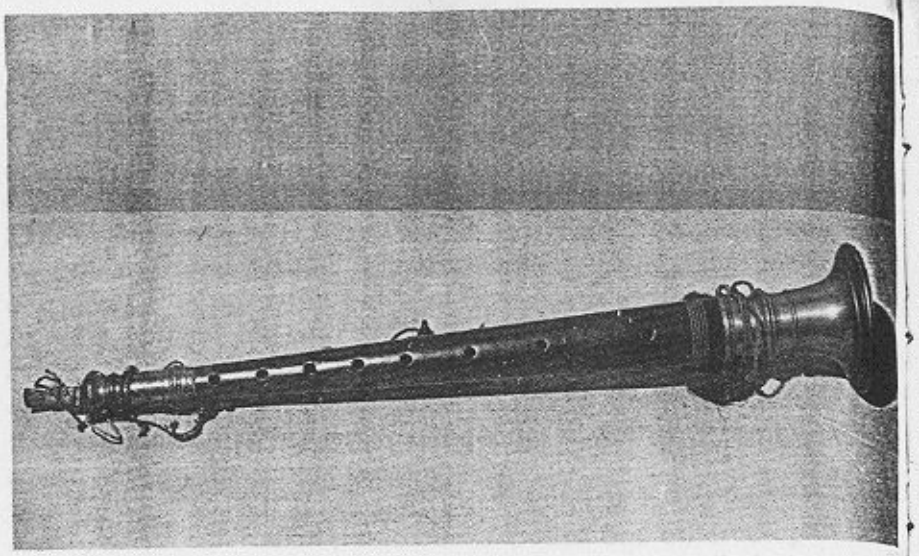
Wind instruments

These appear to be comparatively recent newcomers to Indian classical music, though they are of great antiquity and, indeed, the flute is the instrument on which the Lord Krishna charmed everyone who heard him, especially women. He is always depicted playing a transverse instrument such as is used in South Indian classical music. The northern version, usually known as *basri* (from *bas*, the word for bamboo, from which it is made) is larger and consequently has a lower pitch and mellower tone. The length and number of holes are not standardised; the range may be from a foot or less to $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet in length, with six to eight holes, plus the mouth hole. The music played is closely related to vocal music and the instrument is able to capture the sustained legato of the human voice. The beautifully mellow and subdued tone of the larger instruments and the seductive graces and languorous slides which they produce make the smaller metal Western flute sound, by comparison,

exactly what it is: small and metallic. The great pioneer of the North Indian *basri* was Pannalal Ghosh and his example is being followed, to some extent, by Devinder Murdeshwar and G. S. Sachdev, while in the South the masters of the smaller flute include T. R. Mahalingam and T. Viswanathan.

The *sahnai* of North India and its larger southern counterpart, the *nagasvaram*, are the main Indian oboes, that is wind instruments with conical bores and double reeds. The *sahnai* is normally about $1\frac{1}{2}$ to 2 feet long, made of wood, with a metal bell at the lower end, and with seven holes, plus sometimes one or two which are not fingered but may be stopped with wax or left open; they influence the pitch of the instrument. The blowing and fingering techniques are both difficult and the instrument has not been easily adapted to North Indian classical music. Another reason is that, in common with many shawms, it is essentially an outdoor instrument and its tone can be loud and raucous. It is still used extensively in processions and especially at weddings. Indeed, if live *sahnai* music cannot be had at a wedding it is very common for a recording to be used instead, so closely is the sound of this instrument bound up with happy and auspicious occasions. If a recording is used it will almost certainly be by the late Bismillah Khan, unquestionably the finest *sahnai* player of recent times and the musician who was responsible for establishing the instrument 'indoors' on the concert stage.

The instrument *sahnai*, and certainly the word, was probably introduced into India by the Muslims at least four hundred years ago. A much more recent import, also a wind instrument but with free reeds made of metal, is the harmonium which was brought to India by nineteenth-century European missionaries. Other European instruments have found their way into Indian classical music, in particular the violin, and also the clarinet and even the trumpet,while Indian film music depends not only on wholesale filching of Western popular idioms but also on instruments like the saxophone, vibraphone and electric guitar. No foreign instrument, however, has caused such a commotion as the harmonium and none is used as extensively, be it in classical, light, film or folk music. It is probably the most widely used of any instrument in North India. (It has not gained such popularity in the South and musicians there must be relieved, as well as amused at all the



The *sahnai* (*above*)
The Indian harmonium (*below*)

fuss it has caused in the North.) Some accounts of Indian instruments fail to mention the harmonium altogether, thereby perhaps hoping that it will just go away! This refusal to recognise it spread even to All India Radio, the most powerful patron of music, who imposed a ban on its use in broadcasts. Recently this ban was lifted, but only partially and with strict controls. The controversy stopped short of duels or other physical violence, as far as I know, but it has certainly been lively and heated and has still not abated.

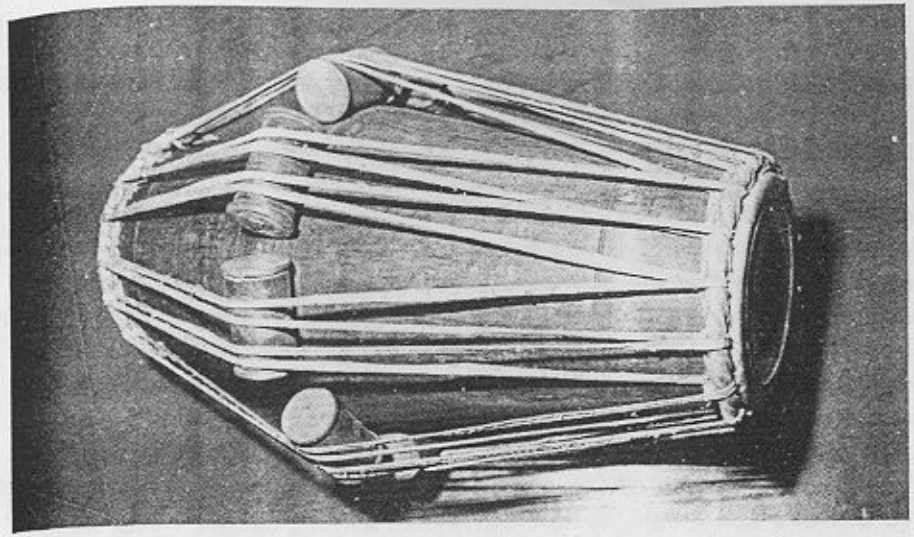
The Indian harmonium is not the cumbersome pedal instrument of Europe but has been reduced to a smallish portable box, measuring approximately two feet by one foot by nine inches (high), the back of which opens to act as the bellows. On the top is a keyboard, like that of a piano but with a much smaller range, usually of about three octaves. This is played with one hand while the other works the bellows. Harmless enough in appearance and tolerable in sound – so why has the harmonium caused such a furore? The answer is very simply that the combination of keyboard and reeds which are pre-tuned and cannot easily be adjusted flies in the face of the basic tenets of Indian music: fluid grace and precise intonation according to *rag*. A keyboard instrument cannot produce a true slur or portamento, nor can it produce notes other than those available on the keyboard, and twelve to the octave is really a sadly restricted palette. Thus the finer nuances of Indian music are denied. The point about the harmonium, however, is that it is normally only used as an accompanying instrument; the listener's attention is focused on the singer, *tabla* player or dancer, or whomsoever is being accompanied, and this artist will certainly aim to bring out all the subtle nuances of the art. So the harmonium is nothing more than a convenient background sound, and convenience is its main attribute. It has all but taken over the *sarangi*'s traditional role as an accompanying instrument because it is easier to play and does not have to be tuned and kept in tune, both of which take time and cause bother on the *sarangi*. Some singers also prefer the sound of the harmonium, considering its forthright, powerful and steady tone more suited to vocal accompaniment than the delicate and fluctuating sounds of the *sarangi*. More will be said on the subject of accompaniment when the *sarangi* itself is discussed later in this chapter.

Percussion instruments

The *ghana vadya* group has few examples of relevance to North Indian classical music. Dance, which is part of classical music according to the traditional definition of *sangit* (see p. 3) usually requires several small bells, called *ghunghrus*, which are worn around the dancer's ankles. A melodic instrument called *jaltarang* (literally 'water waves') consisting of a number of porcelain bowls of different sizes filled with different amounts of water and struck with two bamboo sticks is sometimes used in classical music, especially of the faster kind. In fact, most of the criticism levelled at the harmonium can also be applied to the *jaltarang*. It too is incapable of bringing out the slides and other ornaments of the music, though the tuning is easily adjusted by altering the amount of water in each bowl. It appears to be more popular in the South than the North, and South Indian music boasts at least one other idiophone of culinary origins. This is the simple earthenware pot called *ghatam* on which the player, using only his bare hands, is able to produce a wonderfully rich variety of sounds and rhythms.

Drums

Good *ghatam* playing can enthrall the listener for long periods, but the instrument, for all its versatility and interest, does not normally carry the rhythmic burden in a concert alone; the main instrument for keeping the *tal* in Indian music, North or South, is the drum. The importance of rhythm in just about every kind of Indian music has led to an enormous variety of drums in the subcontinent – greater, according to some, than in the whole of Africa. In Indian classical music, however, the number can be drastically reduced to two. These are the *mridangam*, the most important drum of South Indian classical music, plus its rarer northern counterpart which is also known as *mridang* (really a generic term in India for barrel drums) but more usually as *pakhavaj*, and the main drum of North Indian classical music, the *tabla*. The word *mridanga*, meaning 'body of clay', appears in the *Natyasastra* and the instrument is certainly of great antiquity. Nowadays the body is a hollowed wooden barrel, about two feet along, with skin heads covering each end, and connected by leather straps. The skins are the remarkable feature of this



The *pakhavaj* (above)
The *tabla* (below)

drum, and also of the *pakhavaj* and *tabla*. There is not a single skin, as on most drums, but at least two plus the distinctive black spot, called *syahi*. On to the main skin is fixed another which is only a ring running around the circumference and about half an inch wide. The right-hand skin (the smaller of the two) of the barrel drum has a permanent black spot, carefully applied in layers and consisting variously of boiled rice, manganese dust, iron filings and water. This hardens and is permanent (although after some time it may crack and need replacing). Both drums of the *tabla* pair have this black spot. The left-hand skin of the barrel drums, however, usually has a white paste of rice or wheat or flour with water which is applied and removed at the beginning and end of each performance. These drums have, according to B. S. Ramakrishna (1970), harmonic overtones which make them unique in the world, and it is the black spot which makes this possible.

The *mridangam* is used in almost every concert of South Indian music and the variety of sounds which can be obtained from it by the hands (none of these drums is ever struck with anything but the hands unless it is to tune it) as well as the extremely complex art of South Indian rhythm make it arguably the most sophisticated drum in the world. Its northern counterpart, the *pakhavaj*, is slightly larger and has prominent tuning blocks inserted under the leather straps and against the barrel near the left-hand end. It is not often heard nowadays since it is connected with the *dhrupad* tradition, which is regrettably in a state of decline. As well as accompanying *dhrupad* singing and *dhrupad* instruments, most notably the *bin*, it may be found in the ensemble which accompanies classical dance. It has the respected, auspicious status of the *dhrupad* tradition and a suitably noble and ponderous sound.

The *tabla* is easily the most common drum of North Indian classical music. It is used in accompaniment to vocal music, dance, and music played on the most common instruments of North Indian classical music, including the *sitar*, *sarod* and *sarangi*, and it is also respected as a solo instrument with an extensive repertoire. The word *tabla* applies to a set of two small kettledrums: a right-hand drum, *daya* or *dahina*, made of hollowed-out wood, and a larger left-hand one, *baya* or *dagga*, made of metal. Traditionally the *baya* was made of clay or copper and the sound was supposed to be superior to that of the modern nickel alloy *baya*, but the clay has proved too fragile and the copper too expensive

for modern use. The skins have already been discussed. The *daya* is tuned precisely to the Sa (occasionally to some other important note) of the *rag*, which is also the practice on the right-hand head of the *mridangam* and *pakhavaj*. This is done on the *tabla* by hammering the blocks which tension the leather straps and stretch the skin, and then the fine tuning is done by lightly hammering the hoop which holds the skin. Since adjustments of tuning take place at any point during a performance (on any instrument) it is easy for an unitiated observer to think that this hammering, which is often done with great finesse and rhythmic precision, is actually part of the performance! The skin on the *baya* is similarly tensioned to give the right sonority, but it is not tuned to a precise pitch. A final comparison between the *tabla*, on the one hand, and the *mridangam* and *pakhavaj* on the other, involves the legend (which cannot be given any credence) that the *tabla* was evolved by splitting the *pakhavaj* in two. What is certain is that the *pakhavaj* is a single drum with the plane of the heads perpendicular to the floor, while the *tabla* is two single-headed drums with the plane of the heads parallel to the floor – or virtually so, because in practice the player tilts both drums slightly and they are held in position by rubber or cloth rings placed under the drums.

The technique of playing *tabla* is very difficult. Even before the complicated rhythms are attempted the students must devote time – perhaps a matter of years – to mastering the basic strokes. There are a number of recognised strokes, each producing a distinctive sound, called *bol*s. The word *bol* comes from the verb 'to speak' and the linguistic associations do not stop there. Each *bol* has its spoken equivalent, which is not unusual since we find this association of drum sound with spoken syllable in various degrees of sophistication all over India as well as extensively in Asia, Africa and even Europe, but the Indian mnemonic system is especially thorough, systematic and useful. According to some there are seven basic sounds on the *tabla*: two on the *baya* and five on the *daya*, and according to others there are nine: the extra two being on the *daya*. Ram Narayan gave the number as thirteen: two on the *baya* and eleven on the *daya*. We have here yet another example of the variety of Indian traditions and lack of standardisation.

In the same way, there is no fixed size for the *tabla* and there are as

many as six major styles of playing, known as *baj*, which refers specifically to the playing style, or *gharana*, which refers more to the line of musicians associated with it. Broadly speaking, these may be grouped in the western part of North India, around Delhi, and the eastern part (by no means the extremes of India in either direction) around Lucknow and Benares. Further *gharanas* are of Farrukhabad, related to Lucknow, and Ajrada, related to Delhi, and of the Punjab, which is unrelated to any.

Differences of *baj* will not only affect the repertoire of compositions but also the use of *bols* and their method of production, and even possibly the size and appearance of the drums themselves. These differences, while noticeable, are not great enough to make the *gharanas* mutually incomprehensible but are only small variants of a clearly recognised system. Some of the more important *bols* will be briefly discussed, but the number will be limited in order to avoid a lengthy and confusing account. Many *bols* have more than one spoken and written equivalent, and conversely there is no guarantee that a given spoken *bol* will be played in the same way by all *tabla* players. The two basic *bols* played on the *baya* are *ghe* and *kat*. The former is played by pressing the heel of the hand against the head of the drum and making a bounced stroke with one or two fingers on the skin between the *syahi* and the *kinar* (the layer of skin around the circumference of the drum). A resonant, booming sound is produced. Different pressures from the heel of the hand vary the pitch and a sliding movement across the skin can produce a very effective glissando. This way of playing the *baya* with the heel of the hand pressing the skin explains why the *syahi* on that drum is placed off centre (whereas it is in the centre of the *daya*): the heel acts effectively as an edge of the drum head which 'corrects' the irregularity. The fingers then strike the skin between the *syahi* and its nearest point to the edge of the head. *Kat* is played by slapping the surface of the *baya* with the flat of the hand and is without any of the resonance of *ghe*.

The *daya* has a richer variety of *bols*. *Ta* is produced by striking the *kinar* with the first finger while the third finger rests lightly on the skin between the *kinar* and the *syahi*. This damping action is important to achieve the clear sound of the Sa (or whatever note the *daya* is tuned to) and eliminate another note which lies approximately a minor seventh

below. This stroke is sometimes also called *na*. *Tin* is produced in the same way but the first finger strikes the skin between the *kinar* and *syahi* instead of on the *kinar*. *Tu* is produced by a glancing, bounced stroke of the first finger on the *syahi* and is distinguished by the clear sound of just the note approximately a minor seventh below the note to which the *daya* is tuned. Other *bols* may be produced on the *syahi* without a bouncing action.

If *ta* (*daya*) is combined with *ghe* (*baya*) the composite *bol* is called *dha*, and if *tin* (*daya*) is combined with *ghe* the composite *bol* is called *dhin*. *Ta*, *tin*, *dha* and *dhin* are certainly among the most important and extensively used of *tabla bols*. When they are spoken there is a clear difference in quality between *ta* and *tin*, on the one hand, and *dha* and *dhin* on the other: the aspiration necessary to pronounce *dha* and *dhin* correctly contributes to a resonant sound from the chest paralleling that produced by the *bol ghe* on the *baya*. The distinction between *bols* produced with the low, booming sound of the *baya* (like *dha* and *dhin*) and those without (like *ta* and *tin*) is crucial to the structure and articulation of *tals* and will be discussed in Chapter 5, as will the arrangement of *bols*, including those described above, into special patterns. The *tabla*, of course, plays an important part in the cassette recording, and this will fortunately give the reader a far better idea of *bols* and their combinations, as well as the capability of the *tabla* for virtuoso display, than any verbal description.

Plucked stringed instruments

The third instrument on the cassette (apart from the prominent *sarangi* and *tabla*) is the *tambura*, which is a stringed instrument, hence classified under *tata vadya*, used solely as a drone. It bears many resemblances to the *sitar* but has few strings and no frets. The main similarities are the gourd resonator, the long neck and the bridge. *Tamburas* are made in many different sizes; some are very small (only about $3\frac{1}{2}$ feet or less) and have the advantage of being more easily transported. The number of strings is usually four, but five or six may also be found. The *tambura* heard on the cassette has four strings, tuned Ṇi Sa Sa Ṣa. This is quite a common tuning nowadays, but the more traditional tuning has Ṃa or Ṗa instead of the Ṇi. The player sits behind

the main artist and gently plucks the strings with the side of the fingertips. This action demands no great skill but is nevertheless not as easy as it may seem. The right pressure must be exerted at the right angle and at the right moment, otherwise the sound will be uneven. The paradox about the *tambura* is that such an instrument should be used to provide a drone in the first place. A stringed instrument which is plucked seems hardly the best means of ensuring a constant sound; better would seem to be a wind instrument like the harmonium, and indeed one does find a small key-less harmonium, called *sur peti*, used for this purpose. No instrument, however, can match the *tambura*'s special timbre which is characterised by a rich and complex harmonic spectrum. Not only are the notes vibrant with harmonics, which greatly assist the intonation of the singer or instrumentalist, but they are lasting. Thus the *tambura* is the ideal drone instrument for the intimate chamber style of Indian classical music. Merely plucking the strings correctly could not give this unique sound. It is the design of the bridge, combining ingenuity with simplicity of means, that contributes most to the sound. Unlike the bridges on instruments like the violin, those of the *tambura* and *sitar* have a flat, bone surface on which the strings lie for about half an inch. The front of the bridge is filed into a smooth curve so that the string leaves it at a fine angle. This angle is crucial and must be prepared carefully and periodically adjusted, especially on the *sitar*. If it is too small the sound will be harsh and jangly and if it is too great the sound will be dull and lifeless. A correct *javari*, as this curve on the bridge is called, is the main reason for the sweetly shimmering, slightly buzzing tone of the *sitar*. The same is basically true of the *tambura*, but it is by no means the whole story. On the flat surface of the bridge and under each string is pulled a short length of thread. When it has been pulled to the correct part of the bridge the sound from the plucked string suddenly increases in intensity and duration, and the instrument emits its special buzzing sound. Because of these trifling bits of thread the whole instrument seems to become transformed, and it is possible to pluck the strings in a fairly slow rhythm without fear that the sound of the previous string will decay too soon.[1]

The *tambura* player, often a relative, friend or pupil of the main artist, is concerned only with producing the kind of sound desired by the main artist, who also tunes the instrument. The plucking of the strings is in no

way intended to coincide with notes of the melody or beats of the *tal*. From the very beginning to the very end (the *tambura* starts and ends the piece and continues without any breaks throughout) an independent pattern is maintained, something like Ex. 3.

Ex. 3

This is all that the *tambura* will play. The strings are never stopped and thus it can never be used melodically, nor does it present any greater technical demands than those already mentioned. It is both unsurprising and a little unfair that the *tambura* player, the only one who must always keep going and never change or rest, is traditionally given no credit whatsoever and certainly takes no share of the applause. If the main artist is bad the task is without doubt fatiguing and boring but if he is good then it is both a pleasure and a privilege.

A separate drone, normally played on the *tambura*, is essential in vocal music and for instruments which do not have an inbuilt drone, such as the *sarangi* and flute. (The louder *sahnai* has its own accompaniment of one or more drone instruments which are really *sahnais* producing only one note.) Plucked instruments, like the *sitar* and *sarod*, often have a *tambura* accompaniment but it is not essential. One school of thought maintains that the sound of the *tambura*, which is similar to that of the *sitar*, masks and otherwise impairs the clarity of the main instrument's sound. The *sitar* has, among its many strings, two, called *cikari*, which are always tuned to Sa, an octave apart, and are never stopped but plucked in the gaps between the melody notes in order to maintain a pervasive (if not constant) drone. There are four or five playing strings apart from these and eleven sympathetic strings, called *tarabs*. North Indian chordophones make great use of sympathetic strings which add a substantial contribution to the vibrant, shimmering sound. It is always the practice to tune the *tarabs* to the notes of the *rag*. The playing strings of the *sitar* are often tuned to the following notes:

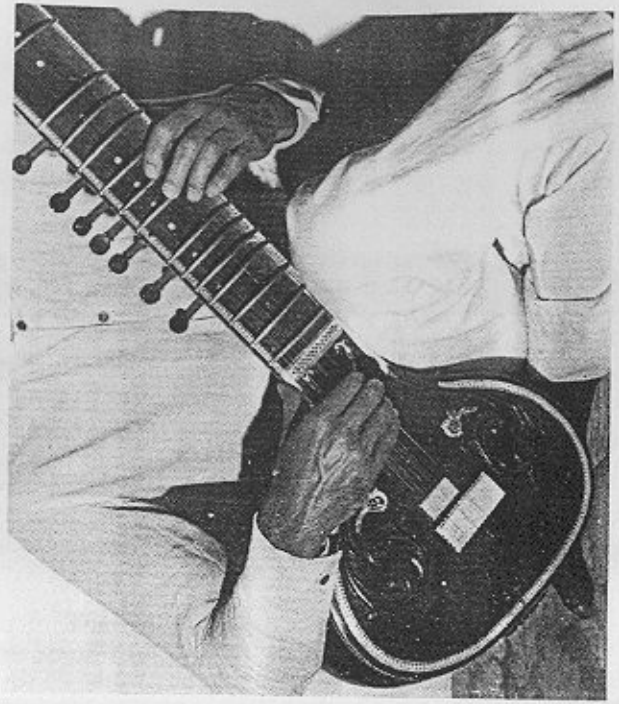
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Ma	Sa	Pa/Ma	Sa	Pa/Ma	Sa	Sa
					cikari	

Another tuning, pioneered by one of the greatest living *sitar* players, *Ustad* Vilayat Khan, actually eliminates one string altogether and keeps the overall register of the instrument high. The first two strings are again tuned to Ma and Sa and the *cikari* to Sa and Sa, but the middle two strings may be tuned to any of five or six notes, according to the *rag*. If, for instance, the Ga and Pa are present in the *rag* and relatively strong notes the tuning may be:

1	2	3	4	5	6
Ma	Sa	Ga	Pa	Sa	Sa

which gives the equivalent of a major chord on strings 2 to 6. Another tuning may have Ga♭ on number 3 and Dha♭ on number 4 (another major chord, as it happens), and so on. The point is that in the Vilayat Khan style strings 3 to 6 are only played open, numbers 3 and 4 sparingly, and all the melody is played on the first two strings. Another leading player, Ravi Shankar, has gone in the other direction, exploiting a wider range and playing melodies in the very low octave, while Vilayat Khan prefers to leave this register and its attendant style of music to the bass equivalent of the *sitar*, the *surbahar*, a larger instrument with a wooden (rather than gourd) resonator, which is tuned at least one octave lower than the *sitar* and is best suited to the slow and serious kind of music such as *alap*.

The strings of the *sitar* are plucked by the first finger of the right hand, on which is clipped a metal plectrum, called *mizrab*. The first two fingers of the left hand (occasionally the third also) stop the strings by pressing them against the curved wire frets, of which there are usually nineteen or twenty. These frets are attached to the long neck of the *sitar* (about three feet in length) by threads and can be moved to change the scale or simply for fine tuning. They obviously help the player find the correct notes and play in tune, and simple plucking is not difficult, so the *sitar* is quite easy to play in the beginning stages. Fast playing presents problems but perhaps the most difficult aspect of *sitar*



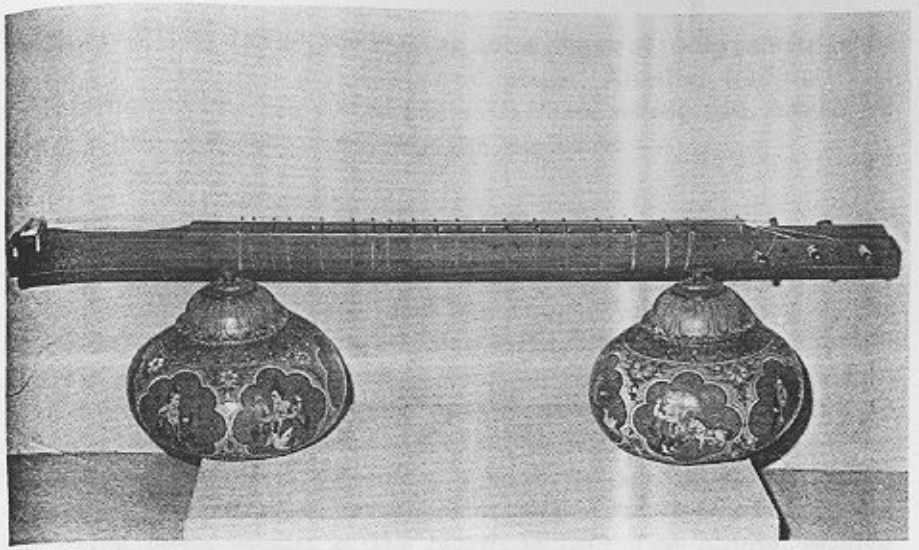
The tambura (left)
The sitar (below)

technique, as well as the most distinctive and important, is pulling the string sideways with the fingers of the left hand in order to produce the slides and subtle ornaments essential to Indian music.

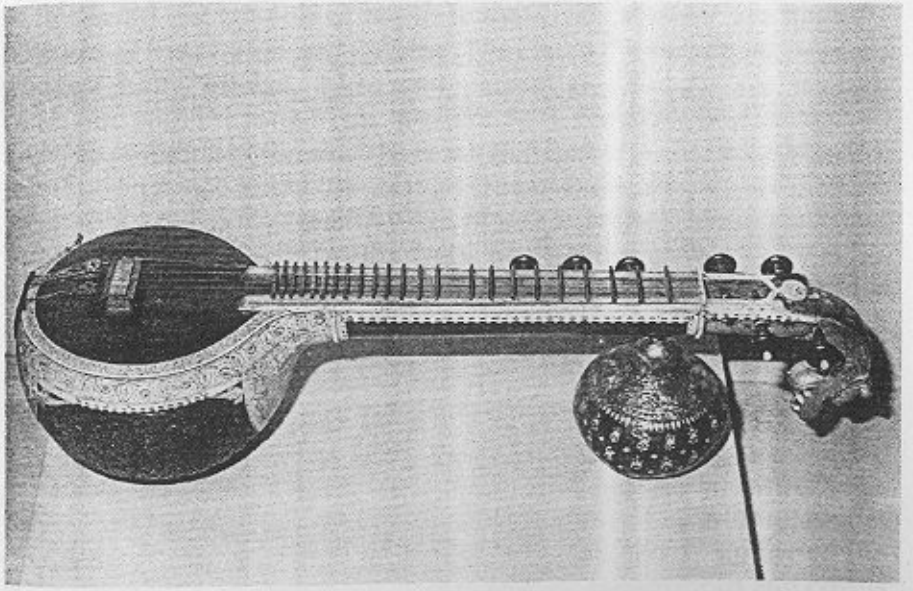
Not a great deal is known for certain about the history of the *sitar*, and this is not the place to engage in controversial arguments on the subject, but it seems that the frequent and systematic use of the pulling technique has come relatively recently, perhaps only within the last eighty or hundred years. Vilayat Khan's grandfather, Imdad Khan, was noted for it, and Vilayat Khan himself has developed it to the extent that his whole style is based on it. The significant point is that this represents a merging of instrumental and vocal techniques, and the name for this style is *gayki*, literally 'singing'. Yet again we see that instrumental music aspires to the condition and, no less so, to the status of vocal music.

The *sitar*, *surbahar* and *tambura* are all long-necked lutes. Other kinds of plucked stringed instruments of North Indian classical music include the *bin*, *sarod* and *surmandal*. The *bin*, or *rudra vina*, is perhaps the most venerable of North Indian instruments, like its counterpart, the *sarasvati vina*, of South Indian music. Unlike the *sarasvati vina* or *sitar* it is not classifiable as a lute but as a stick zither. It has a long (about four to five feet) bamboo stick to which are fixed twenty-four immovable straight frets. At each end of the stick is attached a large gourd resonator. (According to one legend the Lord Shiva was inspired to create this instrument while contemplating his wife's breasts.) There are usually four main strings and three used as *cikari*. No instrument can quite match the deep and noble tones of this instrument which is used only for the dignified *dhrupad* style, either solo or with *pakhavaj* accompaniment. Unfortunately, the decline of *dhrupad* has led to the virtual disappearance of the *bin* from the concert hall. Among the very few distinguished exponents of this difficult instrument are *Ustad* Asad Ali Khan and *Ustad* Zia Mohiuddin Dagar.

Similar to the *bin* is the *vicitra vina*, but the main difference is that the latter has no frets and the strings are stopped not with the fingers but with a round or ovoid piece of glass. This permits slides and ornaments of the utmost delicacy and smoothness, and again it is fair to presume that a closer approximation to the human voice has been the main impetus behind the invention of this instrument. Its southern counterpart is called *gottuvadyam*, and is played rather more



The *bin* (*above*)
The South Indian *vina* (*below*)



frequently.

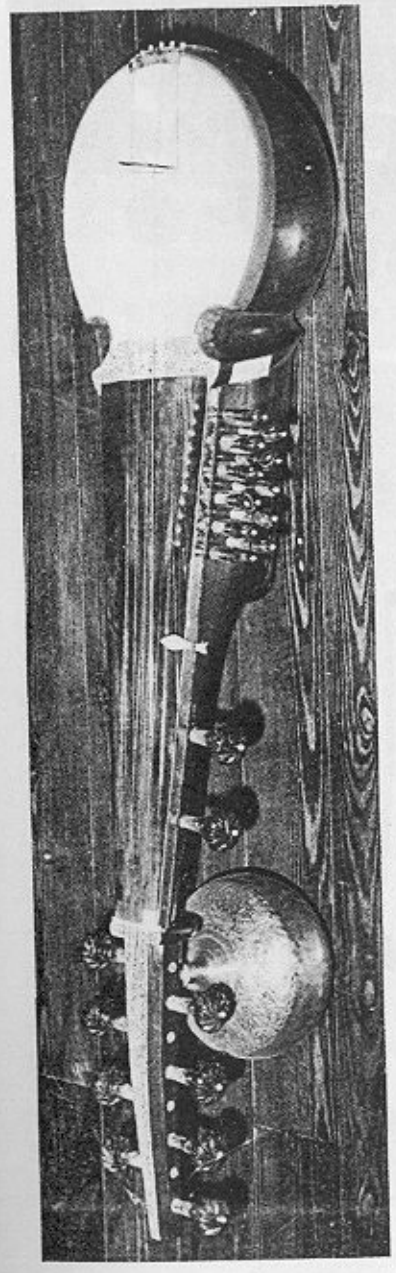
Two structurally related chordophones which have a limited but significant role in North Indian music are the *surmandal* (or *svaramandala*) and the *santur*. Both are board zithers, and the *surmandal* may also be called a psaltery, while the *santur* may be called a dulcimer. Thus the open strings of the *surmandal*, tuned to the notes of the *rag*, are plucked while those of the *santur* are struck with two wooden hammers held in each hand. The *santur* is used a great deal in the folk music of Kashmir but only rarely in North Indian classical music, for the obvious reason that, in common with instruments like the *jaltarang*, it cannot produce the essential ornaments. The *surmandal* is favoured as a kind of drone instrument for accompanying vocal music, in which case the singer usually accompanies himself by strumming the strings over and over again. (Its use does not obviate the need for a *tambura*.) Often one finds singers using Western autoharps as very acceptable substitutes, and on the cassette Ram Narayan accompanies his own singing by strumming the sympathetic strings of his *sarangi* – a spontaneous and effective way of achieving the same effect.

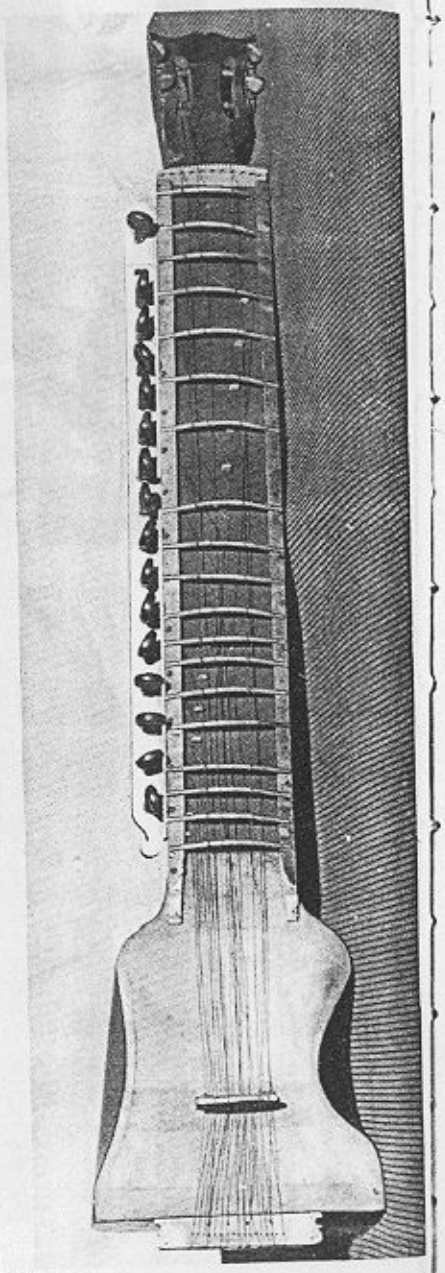
Before describing the main bowed instruments of Indian music, especially the *sarangi*, one other important and increasingly popular plucked instrument must be considered. This is the *sarod*, a short fretless lute, which bears so many resemblances to the *sarangi* that one is tempted to postulate a common origin in the *rabab* of West and Central Asia and view one as a plucked equivalent of the other. The *sarod* has a rounded wooden body covered with skin and the front of the neck is a polished metal plate. There are usually eight main steel strings, of which four are stopped with the fingers of the left hand and four are used as drone strings, and about fifteen sympathetic strings. The fingers and thumb of the right hand hold a wooden plectrum. Often at the top end of the instrument there is a small extra gourd-shaped resonator made of metal. It is not thought to make much difference to the sound but to have been added to give the instrument a more Indian appearance. The *sarod* is generally thought to be a modified version of the *rabab* of Afghanistan. Its great rise in popularity as a solo classical instrument is recent; formerly it was used for vocal accompaniment, as were the other leading plucked chordophones, such as the *sitar* and *bin*. The great *Ustad* Allaudin Khan, father of Ali Akbar Khan, the leading *sarod* player of today, and teacher of Ravi Shankar, was a noted *sarod* player. Another tradition was represented by the late *Ustad* Hafiz Ali Khan, whose son, Amjad Ali Khan, is one of India's finest younger musicians.

Bowed stringed instruments

The *sarangi* has made the transition from vocal accompaniment to solo performance more recently and less conclusively than any of the plucked chordophones. As was noted in the previous chapter, it is Ram Narayan alone who has used the *sarangi* only as a solo instrument, and in so doing has had to overcome considerable opposition. There is no doubt, whatever other controversies surround the *sarangi*, that it is the most important bowed instrument of North Indian classical music. The European violin has established itself in this position in South India and has made some impact in the North as well. The tuning, playing position, and fingering technique have all been modified to suit Indian music. It is held against the chest, rather than under the chin, and the scroll rests on the foot of the player (seated cross-legged). The other main bowed instruments of North Indian classical music are basically mixtures of the *sarangi* and the *sitar*. They have the skin cover, waisted wooden body, bridge, bow, and playing position of the *sarangi*, combined with the long neck, movable frets, metal playing strings and fingertip stopping of the *sitar*. They are also free of the associations with prostitution which blight the *sarangi*. One of them, the *dilruba* (literally 'heart robber') has four main strings, fifteen to twenty-two sympathetic strings and eighteen to twenty frets, while the slightly smaller *esraj*, found more in Bengal, has fewer frets and sympathetic strings. There is also a kind of phono-fiddle, called *tar sahnai*, which is basically an *esraj* with a brass horn attached to the lower end of the body, and its name suggests, as its nasal sound confirms, that it is a stringed equivalent of the North Indian oboe, the *sahnai*.

In folk music one often finds the word *sarangi* being used in the generic sense of the English word 'fiddle'. The variety of instruments bearing the name *sarangi*, some of which are structurally unrelated to the classical one, as well as of those which are clearly similar to the *sarangi* but have a completely different name, is enormous and covers

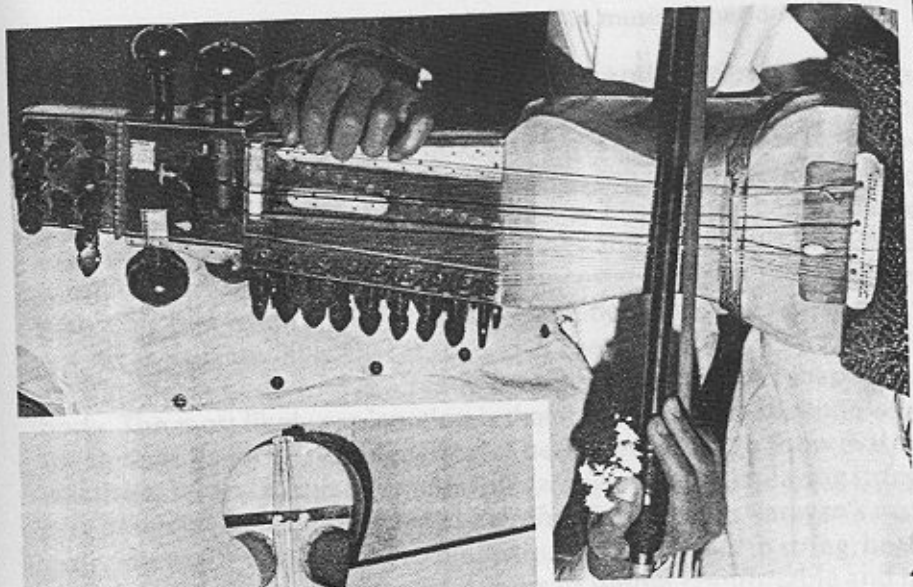


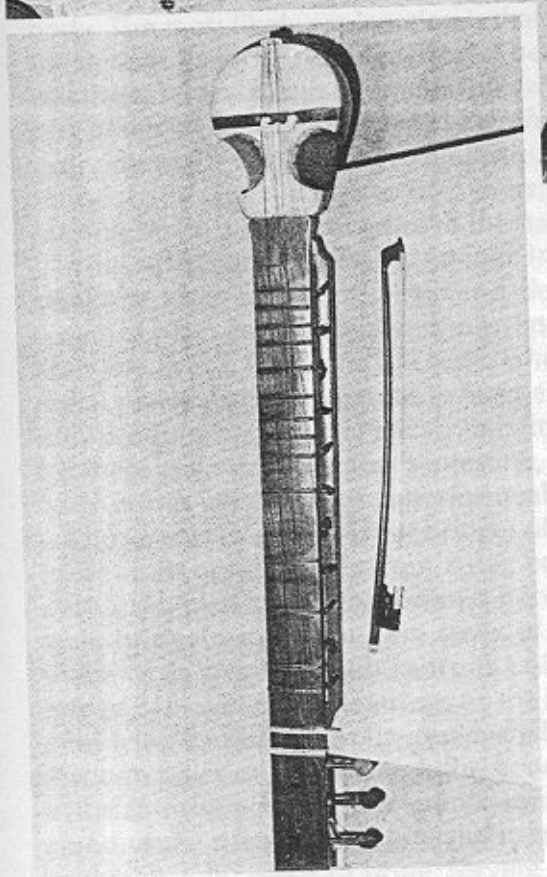


The *sarod* (above)
The *dilruba* (below)

virtually the whole of North India, from Pakistan and Afghanistan to Manipur, with areas of especially rich variety being in Rajasthan, Kashmir and Uttar Pradesh. Instruments bearing the name *sarinda* and *cikara*, while having a distinctive shape, may be related to the *sarangi*, and in the state of Rajasthan alone one finds several instruments quite similar to the *sarangi*, though generally smaller and with various differences (which are beyond the scope of this summary) going under names such as *sindhi sarangi, gujratan sarangi, dhani sarangi, derh pasli sarangi* and *jogiya sarangi*. Three other instruments which are of recent origin and are experiments in hybridisation have not gained wide acceptance, though they are of interest. The *alabu* (gourd) *sarangi* incorporates the *f*-holes, scroll, bridge, tailpiece and four strings tuned in fifths of the violin, and another obscure instrument, the *punya pratap vina*, was also designed as a combination of violin and *sarangi*, while the *sur sagar*, basically a large *sarangi*, was an attempt by the late-nineteenth-century *sarangi* player Mamman Khan to incorporate some of the auspicious sounds of the *bin* and *sitar* by adding thirteen plucked steel strings, two of which were used as *cikari*. The interesting point that these experiments seem to have in common was that they were efforts not only to increase the versatility of the *sarangi* but also to enhance its low status by changing its appearance and borrowing features from more respected instruments. We shall examine the reasons for the *sarangi*'s unfortunate image later, but first the structure of the instrument will be described.

The following description is of what may be considered a typical *sarangi* of North Indian classical music (such as the one played by Ram Narayan) and it must be stressed that there is a marked lack of standardisation applicable to this instrument – its structure, tuning and technique – as there is to many other Indian instruments. The whole *sarangi*, measuring about 26 to 27 inches in length, is sawn, chiselled and carved by hand from a solid piece of wood. This is usually *tun* wood which has been seasoned for one year and preferably treated with *geru* (red ochre) dissolved in water in order to restore the wood's natural colour and give it a natural sheen. With time the red colour changes to dark brown or black, and the *sarangi* keeps a mat finish rather than shiny, since polishes and varnishes should not be used. The best *sarangis* are made in the state of Uttar Pradesh, where *tun* wood is found in





The *esraj* (above)
The *sarangi* (right)

abundance, and especially in the town of Meerut.

Three main portions of the instrument may be distinguished: the body (resonator), neck, and peg-box. The body is hollowed from the wood, leaving a thickness of about $1\frac{1}{4}$ to $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches at the bottom and top and a quarter of an inch at the sides. It is covered with goat skin which is glued on. The body has an integral inferior (i.e. at the lowest point of the instrument) stringholder which is a section of the wood measuring about five inches by $1\frac{1}{4}$ by one, with holes drilled for all the strings. The skin cover on the body often has three holes cut or burnt which may help the sound, though this has not been definitely established. In any case, it is important to point out that the body would not be airtight in the absence of such holes, as there is a hole, about $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches in diameter, drilled in the top of the body at the rear of the instrument. If the body were airtight the considerable downward force of the strings on the skin would compress the trapped air and cause the skin to burst. The same force could also split the body itself, so to prevent this a wooden bar is inserted inside from top to bottom just below the skin. The shape of the body is irregular, with the waisting deeper on the left side than on the right[2] and the body and neck flow together in a straight line on the right side, whereas on the left there is a bulge at the top of the body.

The lower end of the body is often protected by a metal plate which is nailed or screwed on. This plate is a sign of a well-maintained *sarangi* and may also indicate that it is old. There is no doubt that old *sarangi*s are best and they last as long as the body is good, therefore protecting the body with pieces of metal is worthwhile, if a little unsightly. Ram Narayan acquired his instrument from Uday Lal and has played it in all his concerts and recordings. It was made in Meerut almost certainly at least fifty years ago.

The neck of the *sarangi* becomes slightly narrower at the top. It is pierced in front by two rows of holes for the sympathetic strings which are attached to small pegs in the right-hand side. Each hole has a small bone ring to protect the wood from the sharp metal string. (All the sympathetic strings are of metal, usually steel and/or brass.) There are twenty-four strings at this point, nine of which emerge from holes down

the right-hand side of the front of the neck, and the remaining fifteen from holes diagonally from near the top left-hand corner to about the centre at the bottom. The peg-box, which has two sections both hollow, houses about another eleven small pegs in the upper section, also for sympathetic strings. The lower section has four larger pegs, three of which are for the main gut playing strings and the fourth for a metal sympathetic string. Why it should be necessary to give this last string such a big peg when all the other sympathetic strings have small pegs is not clear. It is unlikely that it is to give the instrument a symmetrical appearance, since we have already noted the asymmetrical shape of the body. The most likely explanation is that it is a relic from the time when the *sarangi* had four playing strings. There is evidence to show that this was the case, and to this day many folk *sarangis* have four playing strings, one of which is generally used as a drone. One of Ram Narayan's many experimental modifications to his instrument was a fourth string, but he found that it lay too close to the others to permit comfortable and fast playing, so he quickly reverted to the standard practice of having three playing strings on the classical *sarangi*. In the 1940s he also substituted a steel first string for the usual gut and, despite finding it responsive and easier to play, decided it gave the wrong sound. It is odd that, so long after the event, there are still some who think that Ram Narayan uses metal playing strings whereas in fact he insists that the instrument can only produce its characteristic sound with gut strings. The usual material for these main strings is goat's intestine, but Ram Narayan uses Western harp strings which are of superior quality and the gut is varnished.

The *sarangi* usually has four bridges of which two are essential. All are made from bone, ideally from a stag but more often from a camel, or even from plastic now that bone is becoming difficult to procure. The main bridge rests on the skin cover of the body, and is carved in the shape of an elephant with its trunk pointing to the right. It is the only bridge over which all the strings on the instrument pass; the three main ones lying in notches on the top and all the sympathetic strings passing through holes drilled through the bone. Obviously the skin could not withstand the pressure alone and would be torn, so a leather strap is glued to the sides of the body and used to support the two feet of the bridge. A solid piece of bone, serving as the other essential bridge, is placed at the top of the neck and carries only the three main gut strings.

Its purpose is to raise them from the neck of the instrument and keep them more or less parallel to it. The distance from main string to neck varies according to the size of the player's fingers, but it is usually in the region of half an inch. The other two bridges both carry a set of about five or six sympathetic strings, and have a rectangular or square surface of about $\frac{3}{4}$ inch by $\frac{3}{4}$ inch. They are really miniature versions of the *sitar* or *tambura* bridge, complete with *javari* and sometimes even threads, and their function is purely for acoustical enhancement: those sympathetic strings which pass over them ring out with a special tone which is obviously related to that of the *sitar* or *tambura*.

The ornamentation on the *sarangi* is generally less impressive than that on plucked stringed instruments and does very little to camouflage its almost grotesquely complicated appearance. Usually one finds designs representing perhaps leaves or purely abstract shapes carved around the holes in the right-hand side of the neck. On most *sarangis* the two openings on the front of the lower section of the peg-box are carved into the shape of an engrailed arch and a narrow window or niche. Both are unmistakably derived from Muslim architecture. The engrailed arch design, found in many Indian buildings of the Mughal period such as the Red Fort in Delhi, is also often used on the neck of the *sitar*. The smaller opening may be a representation of the *mahrab*, the niche which the worshipper faces. Sometimes a strip of bone in the shape of a minaret is fixed to the neck below the first string to protect the wood and assist the movement of the fingers.

The *sarangi* bow (*gaj*) is convex (curving away from the hair) and the stick, which is usually made from a hard and heavy wood like *sisam* or *abnus*, is rigid. The hair is from a horse's tail and is about 22 inches long, though this varies considerably. The nut is tied in position by an elaborate criss-crossing of strong thread and cannot be adjusted without loosening this thread. Generally bows maintain their tension very well and never need adjustment. Rosin must be applied to the hair and a piece is kept at hand, but some players, caring less for the appearance of their instrument than easy access, have a lump of rosin stuck to the top of the peg-box or side of the body. Also among the *sarangi* player's equipment, sometimes separate and sometimes attached to the instrument by a length of thread, is a tuning handle which is made of wood and is about $4\frac{1}{2}$ inches long. At one end is a notch

into which fit the heads of the small pegs. The sympathetic strings are tuned with the help of this handle since the small pegs cannot easily be turned by the bare fingers.

It is unnecessary to describe the sound of the *sarangi*, as it can be heard on the cassette. Two important points should be made: one is that the sympathetic strings, and there are normally as many as thirty-six of them, contribute so much to the sound that they may be called the soul of the *sarangi*; the other is that the *sarangi* is regarded in its own culture as the instrument which sounds closest to the human voice. Both points may be developed further. The sympathetic strings are essential to the sound; without them it is dry and lifeless. They also assist intonation, never an easy matter on this instrument. Assuming the strings are tuned correctly, when a note is played in tune on the main string the sympathetic string or strings which are tuned to it will vibrate, giving the player both visual and aural confirmation of his intonation. What is arguable is whether the instrument really needs as many as thirty-six sympathetic strings. It may well seem ludicrous to a Westerner that an instrument should have thirty-nine strings of which only three are actually played, and even in India the number of sympathetic strings on one instrument does not reach this figure either on other stringed instruments, or even on folk *sarangis*. Even the classical *sarangis* of the past appear to have had far fewer sympathetic strings, so it would seem that the number today is the highest ever. What has undoubtedly helped the instrument may at the same time be hastening its decline. One of the commonest objections to the *sarangi* is that it takes far too long to tune, especially if the *rag* changes from one item to the next. Either one has to wait while it is done properly or else the embarrassed *sarangi* player makes a hasty adjustment with the result that the instrument does not sound at its best or is even blatantly out of tune. Small wonder that the harmonium, for all its defects, is so often preferred.

Ram Narayan is very conscious of the tuning problem and recalls that old masters used to say that he who can tune the *sarangi* correctly is already half a *sarangi* player. For Ram Narayan there can obviously be no compromise, given that the solo *sarangi* is that much more exposed. It was his idea that tuning should be included on the cassette, and the first item gives an idea of how this was done for one particular *rag*

(*Bhairav*). The pitch of the Sa is a slightly flat F which is high by the standards of other *sarangis*. Ram Narayan chose this pitch as the most suitable around 1956 when he began to establish himself as a soloist. The first main string (the one nearest the left side of the instrument) is tuned to Sa, the middle one to Pa a perfect fourth below, and the third to Ṣa an octave below the first. The nine sympathetic strings along the right-hand side of the neck are tuned to the notes of the *rag*. In the case of *Bhairav* they are:

Sa Re♭ Ga Ma Pa Dha♭ Ni Ṡa Ṙe♭

The fifteen sympathetic strings arranged in a diagonal line across the neck are normally tuned in semitones spanning a major ninth from Ṇi or Sa, and they only need slight adjustment, rather than complete re-tuning according to *rag*. The other sympathetic strings are tuned rather at the player's whim, though since they tend to sound more clearly than the others it is advisable to tune them to important notes of the *rag*. A typical tuning by Ram Narayan would be (for *rag Bhairav*, among other *rags* of the same scale):

Ṇi Sa Re♭ Ga Ḍha♭

for those near the left of the neck, and:

Ṇi Sa Re♭ Ga Ma Ṣa

for those near the right of the neck, both left to right. The sympathetic string fixed to the fourth large peg is usually thicker, consisting of two twined strands of brass, and may be tuned to Ṣa (in unison with the lowest playing string).

It is because the *sarangi* has been accepted as the instrument whose tone comes closest to the human voice that it has always been used primarily as an accompaniment to vocal music. This use of this kind of instrument in this kind of way is by no means peculiar to India. The idea of bowing an instrument may well have come from the desire to produce an equivalent of the human voice, and in medieval times it was realised in the Near East and Central Asia that bowed instruments were

ideal to produce the sustained sounds as well as the slides, slurs and, importantly, the timbre nearest actual singing. The accompaniment could continue unbroken when the singer had to pause for breath. Four possible ways in which the instrument accompanies the voice may be listed:

(1) the instrument plays consistently in unison with the voice
(2) the instrument provides harmony or a counter-melody
(3) the instrument alternates with the voice, providing interludes
(4) the instrument 'shadows' the voice, imitating what has just been sung and occasionally anticipating the voice and playing in unison with it.

In North Indian classical music number 2 is ruled out since there is no concept of harmony. Arguably the accompaniment is a kind of counter-melody but what really happens is covered by number 4. The basic rule of accompaniment is: 'where the voice goes the fingers follow'. The *sarangi* player literally echoes the phrases of the singer. (Interestingly, one can even speak of a double echo, since the *sarangi*'s sympathetic strings then echo the played notes.) Since a great deal of the music is improvised, the *sarangi* player cannot know what is coming but must have a very quick ear, as well as good technique and thorough knowledge of *rag* and *tal*. Some portions are, however, pre-composed and it is at these points that the *sarangi* can play in unison or even anticipate the singer. Thus number 4 also includes elements of numbers 1 and 3. When the singer pauses for breath or to consider his next phrase or specifically to allow the *sarangi* player some attention, the latter will improvise, perhaps paraphrasing what has just been sung. The point is that he will generally attempt to reproduce everything that the singer presents and even, in a spirit of friendly rivalry, try to better it. When the harmonium is used to accompany vocal music the whole nature changes and it does not attempt nearly as much but tends to provide only a discreet background, aware, as it were, of its limitations. A good *sarangi* accompanist will definitely enhance the performance and make it an exciting experience, but a bad one, who will be just as prominent, will almost ruin it. The harmonium fits comfortably, dependably and unobtrusively between these two extremes.

The *sarangi* is also the traditional instrument to accompany rhythmic solos, performed on drums or danced. It plays a simple tune, called *lahra*, which fits the structure of the particular *tal* being used, and simply repeats this time-keeping melody over and over again. This is not quite as simple as it sounds since the *sarangi* player must accompany and not lead, so he must adjust immediately to rubati and changes of tempo, as well as keep a steady beat through complex cross-rhythms. An example of *lahra* will be given in Chapter 5, showing how it relates to *tal*. If the classical *sarangi* player's roles may be given as three, namely playing *lahra*, accompanying vocal music, and playing solo, then there is no doubt that playing *lahra* is the most menial task, and a good *sarangi* player will feel insulted if asked to do it unless it is for a drummer or dancer of the first rank whom he definitely respects. The art of solo playing is Ram Narayan's speciality (although his career has encompassed the widest possible use of the *sarangi*, including *lahra* and vocal accompaniment) and is discussed in the rest of this book.

A necessarily brief account of Ram Narayan's playing technique will enhance the appreciation of his artistry. The *sarangi* is held against the left shoulder, the bottom resting on the floor, or cushioned by a piece of cloth, and gripped between the feet. (The player sits cross-legged on the floor as is customary in Indian music.) The left hand is used to stop the strings and the right hand holds the bow in a reverse or underhand grip. The special feature of the left-hand technique is that, on all *sarangi*s, the strings are stopped not with the fingertips (as on a violin or guitar) but with the flat of the fingernails. As we have seen, the playing strings are raised from the neck and there is no fingerboard, thus the fingertips touch the neck while the strings touch somewhere between the middle of the nail and the cuticle. The actual fingering is completely unstandardised; one might almost say there are as many fingering patterns as there are players. Ram Narayan's own technique has the benefit of simplicity, logic, and consistency. Its value has obviously been proved. He learnt it from his father who devised it specifically for the *sarangi* and did not use it on his own instrument, the *dilruba*. It is best shown by the following diagram:

	3rd string		*2nd string*		*1st string*	
open:	Ṣa		Ṗa		Sa	
stopped:	Ṛe♭	1st	Ḍha♭	1st	Re♭	1st
	Ṛe	finger	Ḍha	finger	Re	finger
	Ġa♭		Ṅi♭		Ga♭	
	Ġa	2nd	Ṅi	2nd	Ga	2nd
	Ṁa	finger	Ṡa	finger	Ma	finger
	Ṁa♯		.		Ma♯	
	Ṗa		.		Pa	
	.		.		Dha♭	
	.				Dha	
	.				Ni♭	
					Ni	
					Ṡa	
					Ṛe♭	
					Ṛe	3rd
					Ġa♭	finger
					Ġa	
					Ṁa	
					Ṁa♯	
					Ṗa	
					Ḍha♭	
					Ḍha	
					Ṅi♭	
					Ṅi	
					Ṡa	
					.	
					.	
					.	

The second finger is used more than the first because it is the strongest of all the fingers. The third is used perhaps most of all, especially in the higher register where consecutive notes are played with this one finger. This can easily cause intonation problems but it has many justifications. If consecutive notes were played in the top register with consecutive fingers, the fingers would be too far apart even if bunched tightly together, and correct intonation would be impossible.

The third finger has a narrower nail than the other fingers (except the fourth which is almost never used as it is too weak) and this assists in finding the note accurately. Moreover, the hand is turned slightly in the highest register so that a smaller part of the nail touches the string. The only finger which could interfere, especially in fast playing, by hitting the string between the third finger and the bridge is the fourth, but it is relatively easy to keep it out of the way. This finger may be used to touch the first string to give a very high Sa three octaves above the open string but is too weak for any other use, although some other *sarangi* players do use it more. The final point in favour of playing consecutive notes with one finger is the most important, since it lies at the heart of Indian music. Graces, slides and slurs, used correctly, are essential. Western music is more concerned with a clean jump from one note to the next (thus consecutive notes are usually played with separate fingers on stringed instruments) while Indian music emphasises not only the stopping points of notes but also what lies between them. Even in fast playing, Ram Narayan insists, 'there must be some grace'. There is also an important qualitative difference between playing a phrase like Dha Pa Ma Pa fast, using Ram Narayan's fingering – 3222 – and what may seem a simpler and more obvious fingering: 3212. The latter is considered to be light and frivolous, lacking the heavier and nobler quality of the former, and the difference is noticeable however fast the tempo.

Articulating separate notes at high speed using only one finger is very difficult[3] and is achieved by a slight wobbling motion of the left hand. This is not the same as the vibrato which is used on sustained notes. Ram Narayan's beautiful tone is partly due to his use of vibrato, which he insists is not inspired by Western string playing, although the technique and resultant sound are virtually the same; this kind of consistent vibrato is uncommon in Indian music, as opposed to the selective and very precise kinds which are essential ornaments in certain *rags*. His bowing technique is also distinctive and, again independently of Western music, takes into account the difference between up and down bows. Unlike many players Ram Narayan keeps his right hand low so that the bow is more or less at right angles to the string, and he uses the full length of the bow. Other players, both in classical and folk styles, tend to use shorter bows, concentrating on the upper half, so that the

sound is choppy and gritty. Ram Narayan also delights in playing open strings – especially the first – against stopped notes on an adjacent string so that clashes of a semitone are often heard (as on the cassette). This is no more than emphasising the relationship of notes to the drone.

Not much is known for certain about the *sarangi*'s history. One legend says it is derived from the *ravanhattha*, a folk spike fiddle ascribed to the demon of Hindu mythology, Ravana. Another even more fantastic story tells of a man who came across a monkey trapped in a tree; its torn guts, blown by the wind, were giving out melodious sounds. The man removed the skin and guts and attached them to a wooden frame, thereby creating the first *sarangi*! What probably happened in reality is that the instrument came to India from Central Asia, which is regarded as the birthplace of bowing, with the Muslim invaders more or less in its present shape but almost certainly under a different name, possibly *rabab*. The word *sarangi* is Sanskrit and means 'spotted doe or antelope', 'bow', and 'having colour'. Ram Narayan and others believe that the word is really '*saurangi*' which has much the same meaning, in this case 'a hundred colours' (in Hindi). Whether true or not this is a poetic idea which underlines not only the *sarangi*'s beautifully rich and vibrant tone but also its universality: it can produce all notes and microtones and imitate other instruments, as well as the human voice.

The *sarangi* is mentioned in the sixteenth-century *Ain-i-Akbari* but not as a court instrument. It seems that it must have existed for several centuries as a folk instrument (and it is still very popular as such) before being incorporated into classical music. This transition probably coincided with the rise of the *khyal* vocal style during the reign of Muhammad Shah II (1719–1748), a veritable golden age of North Indian classical music. No names of *sarangi* players emerge, however, until the mid nineteenth century, by which time the number was extensive.

At some point in its history, and certainly by the nineteenth century, the *sarangi* came to be associated with dancing girls, and this notoriety earned it a stigma from which it has suffered ever since. Apart from objections to its tone and construction are the prejudices against the players, usually from the lower castes, and their involvement in prostitution. Written accounts of this century and last are full of disparaging remarks about the *sarangi* and especially *sarangi* players.

One of the most scathing was, understandably, by a Victorian clergyman, the Reverend M. A. Sherring, who declared that nearly all professional singing and dancing women in India were prostitutes, and many of them were taught and accompanied by *sarangi* players (1974: 274–5). Any inference that because a woman is a prostitute she cannot be a good musician is totally unjustified, since many of India's greatest female musicians, music lovers, and patronesses of music have been courtesans. Not only were the white colonialists outraged; one Indian writer, Imam, in the middle of the nineteenth century deplored the fact that many self-styled *kalavants*, who were an especially respected class of musicians, had taken to accompanying dancing girls, 'thus putting even the devil to shame' (1959: 14). At a present-day *mujra*, a performance by professional dancing girls, one will still find the *sarangi* but even this, its most despised role, is being usurped by the harmonium. The decline of the *sarangi*, attributed to its technical difficulty as well as to its immoral associations, is widely lamented. Even in the film industry, where it found a niche and valuable patronage, it is becoming hard to find good players, and other instruments, like the *sahnai* and *sarod*, are being used in sad scenes to which the *sarangi*'s plaintive tones were ideally suited.

It would be foolish to assert, as some do, that there are no longer any good *sarangi* players, with the obvious exception of Ram Narayan, but he does occupy a somewhat lonely position as an outstanding virtuoso of the instrument. The other great names of this century are all past. Among them must be mentioned Badal Khan (born about 1833 or 1834 and died over a hundred years later in 1937) whose uncle, Haider Khan, was one of the first known *sarangi* players, Bundu Khan (1886–1955), Shakoor Khan (1916–1975) and Gopal Misra (1920–1977). These were artists of great skill and musicianship who, with Ram Narayan, have ensured that the *sarangi* is loved and respected by real music lovers, whatever its associations.

Notes

1 An excellent study of the tonal structure of the *tambura* by B. C. Deva is included in his *Psychoacoustics of Music and Speech* (The Music Academy, Madras, 1967).
2 Left and right are from the point of view of the player when he is correctly holding the instrument.
3 The reader may attempt the vocal equivalent of this by singing up and down a scale fast to the sound 'ah', so that each note is heard rather than a smooth slide.

3
Practice

It is obvious that Indian music, being technically very difficult, can only be mastered through the most disciplined and assiduous practice. In this there are definite parallels with Western classical music. Both cultures lay considerable stress on virtuosity and solo performance, and the musician is unlikely to succeed unless he undergoes a very thorough training from an early age. It is easy for the European to take all these points for granted, but it should be borne in mind that in a large number of world musical cultures solo performance and hence solo practice, of the kind found in Indian and Western music, would be meaningless. This raises a number of questions which are beyond the scope of this book. Suffice it to say that Indian and Western classical music are among those musical cultures, often somewhat clumsily called 'art music', which attach great importance to practice and view actual performance rather like the tip of the iceberg.

The importance of practice

How practice relates to performance in terms of musical content will be discussed later in this chapter. First some attempt must be made to answer such questions as how much does the musician practise? and how is the importance of practice assessed? The first of these questions is the easier to answer, and quite a lot has been spoken and written on the subject. Some Indian musicians take their *riyaz*, the word commonly used in North India for practice, to almost fanatical extremes. Daily stretches of between six and twelve hours, or even more, are often mentioned, and such musicians clearly believe that one's status and credibility as a musician are in direct proportion to the number of hours spent practising. Normal eating and sleeping habits are often sacrificed for the sake of the art. I was told of one musician who tied his hair to the ceiling to prevent himself from falling asleep,

and of another who took his instrument everywhere he went so that any spare moment could be used for practice. The latter was undoubtedly one of the outstanding musicians of his time and his sense of duty was equalled by a genuine love of his instrument, which is significant. The sceptic is bound to ask if long hours of practice will in themselves produce excellence, quite apart from the question of whether such lengthy sessions actually did happen. It is reassuring that some eminent musicians in India put the matter into perspective by stating what should be obvious to any intelligent musician: what and how one practises are more important than how long; ten minutes of correct practice with full concentration are worth more than any number of hours of unsystematic doodling.

It follows from this that the musician must be thoroughly trained in the correct methods of practice. In the West, guidance is normally given, but actual practice is left to the student to do in private between lessons. This often happens in India too, but the traditional way of learning from an *ustad* or *guru* means that the student will be under the same roof as his teacher and therefore all his practice will be supervised. Veteran musicians often speak of lowered musical standards nowadays, and point to the decline of the *guru* system as a main cause; undoubtedly this system, which integrates music with everyday life, and practice with performance, has contributed enormously to the high standards of Indian music. Another feature, apart from the thoroughness which such a system fosters, is its emphasis on patient, unhurried learning. In one household, where *dhrupad* singing was taught, the pupils would practise early every morning for months on end just holding one note. They would even go about their morning chores singing the note, and no further exercises would be attempted until a long and completely steady sound had been achieved. Several masters would expect their students to practise on just a few exercises for between six months and two years before any instruction in *rag* and actual compositions was given.

For an aspiring musician to attempt such discipline and to be so patient there must be complete trust in the master and complete devotion to the art. This word 'devotion', like the Sanskrit *sadhana* which is often used with the same meaning by Hindu musicians, indicates an integration of musical achievement with the religious

aspects of harmony and self-perfection. For Ram Narayan the religious motivation is certainly important; he used to practise daily in the temples of Udaipur in order, as he put it, 'to get inspiration from God'.

What Ram Narayan practised then and now is the main consideration for the remainder of this chapter, and it sheds light on what I think are some of the most important questions raised:

(1) what is the aim of practice?
(2) what exactly does the musician practise?
(3) how is the practice systematised?
(4) how does the material of practice relate to that of performance?

The first of these questions has already been partly answered. It may seem that a general answer is obvious: the aim of practice is technical mastery. But this simple answer can be qualified in a number of ways. For one thing, technical perfection cannot be the only aim of an improvising musician for whom practice involves a large and significant element of composition. Ram Narayan distinguishes between physical practice and mental practice, the latter being virtually synonymous with composition. Another leading musician, the late *Ustad* Amir Khan, told me that he worked out his ideas in his head on train journeys (which are usually very long in India!). In a sense he was practising mentally and in a sense composing: retaining some ideas and discarding others, though of course nothing was ever written down. The Indian musician thus spends much time thinking music and thinking about music, and often his practice will serve to try out ideas which have come in this way. The more prosaic aspect of practice, namely the pursuit of technical perfection, is still there, and it should not be surprising that Indian musicians have a practical and workmanlike approach to their art. For Ram Narayan, a deeply religious and idealistic man, the main attributes of a musician are that he should be in tune, be in time, have a good tone quality, and have command of fast tempi. These basic qualities, of a completely practical nature, can only be attained through hard practice.

Materials for practice

Having developed the motivation for practice, which must come largely from within, the musician must have the correct material for practice,

which must, for the most part, be taught. But such is the importance of creativity in Indian music that mere repetition of received ideas will not suffice. The practice must grow from basic exercises so that more ideas suggest themselves without outside help, and the musician extends his technique and repertoire. Constant variation and extension of what may seem to be relatively little material is the essence of Indian performance, and it applies equally to practice. Without it stagnation occurs, and, in Ram Narayan's words, 'the practice does not mean anything'.

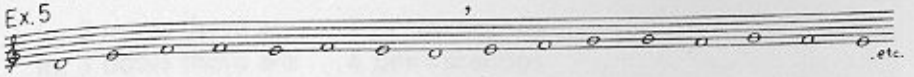
This is why the teacher will often give a student a small number of simple exercises with instructions to practise them daily for a year or more. These little exercises, sometimes remarkably similar to their Western counterparts, are known in Hindi as *paltas* (and sometimes by the Sanskrit name *alankara*)[1] and are the *fons et origo* of fruitful practice. Ram Narayan has devised a set of *paltas* which he uses for practice and teaches to his pupils, encouraging them to develop further ones on their own, as he did. Naturally, these *paltas* are particularly suited to the *sarangi* and to Ram Narayan's unique style of *sarangi* playing, and he has the concept (also found in Western music) of a particular *palta* being an exercise for a very specific technical problem, for example, bowing, crossing strings, playing in a particular octave, producing *gamak*, etc. *Paltas* for other instruments do not differ very much from the ones given below, since a good *palta* develops musical fluency and technical proficiency on whatever instrument it is played, and in all cases the underlying conception is vocal. Although Ram Narayan tends to practise on relatively few *paltas* and his entire repertoire is not very large it would be pointless to try and give the complete number here. Rather, it is appropriate to offer a few which he regards as special favourites, and to show how *paltas* can serve as a basis for performance material. Some of his more important *paltas* are performed on the cassette and he demonstrates ways of improvising on them and developing them into music suitable for concert performance.

A *palta* is distinguished from other exercises (such as scales) by the fact that it moves within a small range and repeats the constituent notes, for example Ex. 4

Ex. 4

which has two Sa's, three Re's and three Ga's. The *palta* is then extended over the range of the instrument by transposing it to each degree of the scale (Ex 5).

Ex. 5

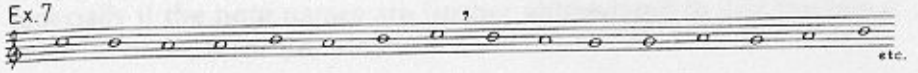


In descent Ram Narayan tends to keep the shape of the *palta* and simply transpose it downwards (Ex. 6)

Ex. 6

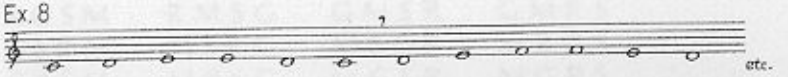
but many other musicians prefer to elicit a further variation, by inversion (Ex. 7).

Ex. 7



This *palta* is a slightly extended version of another, a great favourite of Ram Narayan (Ex. 8)

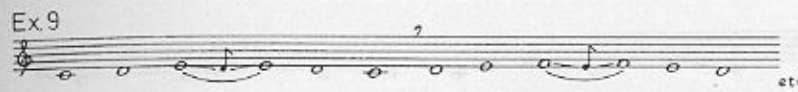
Ex. 8



which should be practised at first with one note per bow, then with six notes per bow, and finally with as many notes as possible per bow. Bow control is no less important on the *sarangi* than on any other bowed instrument, and the importance of being able to sustain a note with a very slow and steady movement of the bow cannot be overestimated. In his early years Ram Narayan used to practise timing himself for a full minute on one bow. When the above *palta* is played in one bow the problem of articulating the repeated notes in the middle (Ga Ga Ma Ma,

etc.) arises. This is usually solved not by altering the speed or pressure of the bow, as would probably be the case on a European stringed instrument, but by slightly wobbling the left hand, producing what can be notated as in Ex. 9—

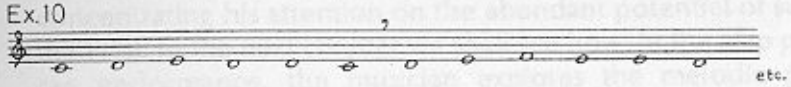
Ex. 9



—in other words a simple embellishment which is typically Indian and a basic part of *sarangi* technique. Practising with different bow pressures, accents on individual notes, and so on is also recommended.

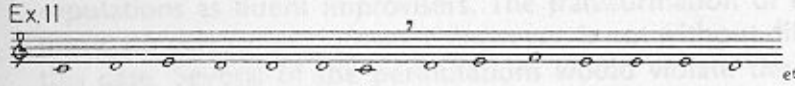
This simple *palta*, which already can develop so many basic aspects of technique, may be varied in several ways, for example Ex. 10

Ex. 10



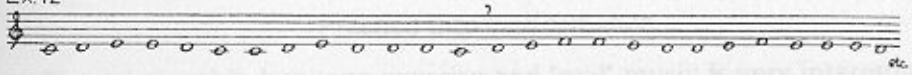
or Ex. 11

Ex. 11



and combinations may be used (Ex. 12).

Ex. 12



When this is played fast with many notes to a bow the left hand 'wobble' is exercised and a fast *gamak* is produced. *Sarangi* playing – in fact all North Indian classical music – without *gamak* is as unthinkable as Western classical music without, say, vibrato.

The complicated movements of *paltas* make them tiring to play but they help concentration, exercising both fingers and mind. In fact *palta*, itself meaning variation, generates further variations and is therefore an important basis for improvisation. Improvisation in Indian music means freedom within relatively tight constraints; the artist exercises his

imagination on what can seem the meagrest of material, and extracts beautiful and even surprising possibilities from it. Thus the requirement that the student should practise only on one or two *paltas* is not an insult but a challenge. There is one *palta* which is often used in India because of its enormous variety of note patterns – probably more than the student will ever need. It is derived from the permutations of a given number of notes. This can be put quite simply:

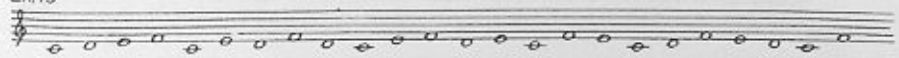
for 2 notes there are	2 permutations
for 3 notes there are	6 permutations
for 4 notes there are	24 permutations
for 5 notes there are	120 permutations
for 6 notes there are	720 permutations
for 7 notes there are	5040 permutations

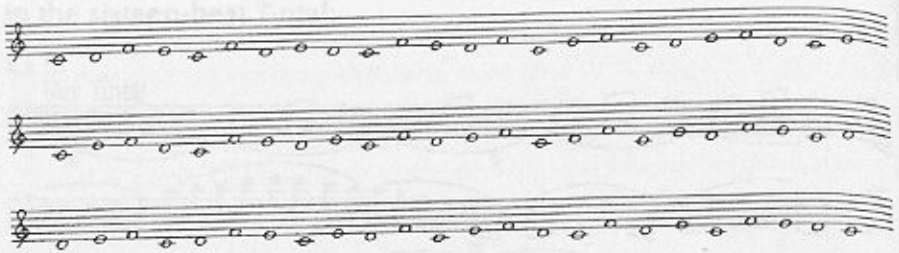
assuming the notes are treated equally. Infinite possibilities of variation arise if rhythmic alterations, repetitions of notes, etc. are introduced. The straightforward permutations of four notes give what is probably the ideal length and complexity for a *palta* of this kind. The structure of this complicated *palta* can easily be grasped from its *sargam* notation, especially if the note names are further abbreviated to just the initial letter (S for Sa, R for Re, etc.):

S R G M	S R M G	S G M R	R G M S
S G R M	S M R G	S M G R	R M G S
R S G M	R S M G	G S M R	G R M S
R G S M	R M S G	G M S R	G M R S
G S R M	M S R G	M S G R	M R G S
G R S M	M R S G	M G S R	M G R S

to be read one column (downwards) at a time. This is also given in staff notation as Ex. 13.

Ex. 13





The next stage, as usual, is to transpose the whole thing to start on successive degrees of the scale, which would make the whole exercise ten times the length of this notated extract if it is played in ascent and descent within the compass of only one octave.

Mastery of this kind of exercise not only improves technique but also enriches the musician's store of ideas for improvisation by concentrating his attention on the abundant potential of such limited material. In the next chapter we shall see how, in the *alap* portion of a *rag* performance, the musician explores the melodic possibilities inherent in just a few notes. It is an open secret that practising *paltas* such as this one has helped many of the leading artists to establish their reputations as fluent improvisers. The transformation of exercise to music suitable for performance, however, is not without difficulties in this case. Several of the permutations would violate the rules of a particular *rag*, so the musician would need a thorough knowledge in order to use the *palta* in a *rag*.

Practice into performance

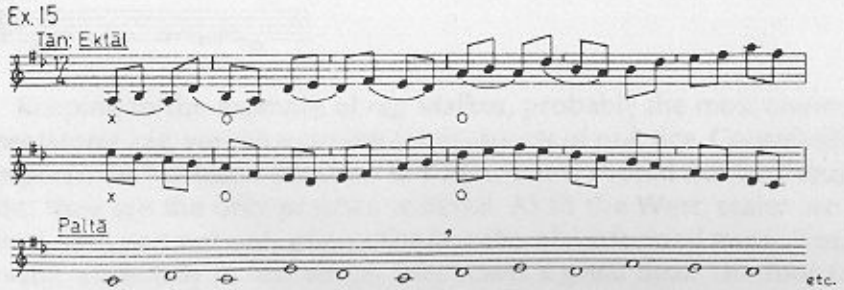
The relationship between exercise and 'real' music is very interesting and of central concern to this chapter. As I have implied so far, there is not the separation between these categories in Indian music that we find in Western music. Ram Narayan is by no means alone in stressing the importance of *paltas* and other practice material as a basis for improvisation and music generally presented to an audience. We have already seen how one *palta* exercises *gamak*. The *palta* can also be used as the starting point of a more extended line (Ex. 14)

Ex. 14

in which the last four notes of the *palta* Sa Re Ga Ga Re Sa (Ex. 8) are used. The rest of the line is a straight ascent and descent of a particular *rag* (and it would be modified to fit other *rags*). Such extended patterns of notes, usually played or sung fast, are called *tans*. When they are performed very fast they add a very obviously virtuosic dimension to Indian music, and almost any performance one is likely to hear nowadays will abound in them. For Ram Narayan the relationship between *tan* and *palta* is so close that, in his words, 'every *tan* has some portion of *palta*'. This becomes apparent to anyone fortunate enough to hear both his practice and his concerts. The starting point is a knowledge of several *paltas*; from these others are composed, and the greater the repertoire the greater the variety of *tans*, which must be characterised by interesting and distinctive melodic shapes.

Not only must *tans* conform to the rules of the *rag* but they must also fit into a particular *tal* if they are to be performed in the section of the performance with *tabla* accompaniment. This will be dealt with in the next chapters, but a few examples may be given here of *tans* in particular *rags* and *tals* which clearly show their derivation from *paltas* (although they were not especially composed to demonstrate this but are extracted from the course of actual performances). In each case the *tan* is given, followed by the *palta* from which it is derived. In the first example (Ex. 15) the *rag* is *Marva* and the *tan* is in the twelve-beat *Ektal*:

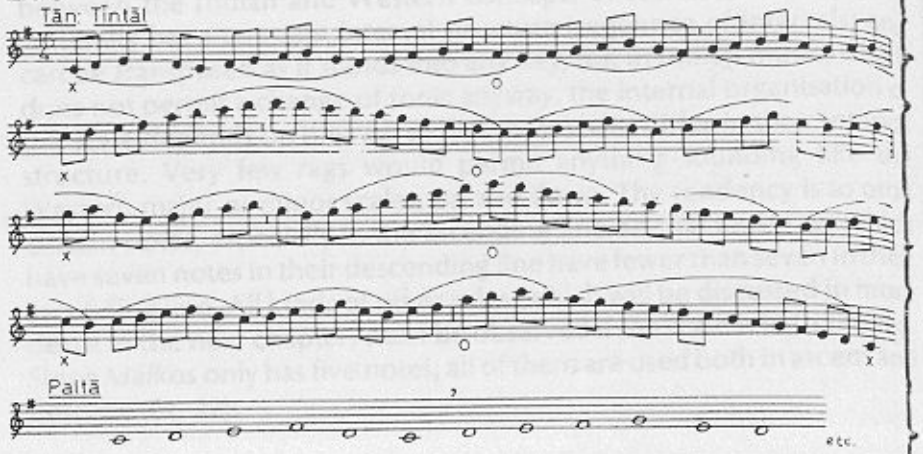
Ex. 15



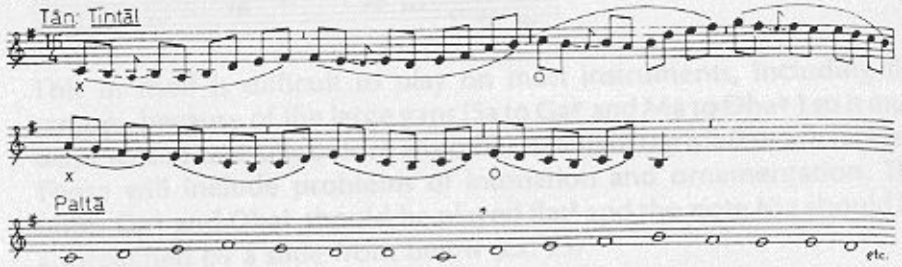
In the next three examples (Exs. 16–18) the *rag* is *Yaman* and the *tans* are

in the sixteen-beat *Tintal*:

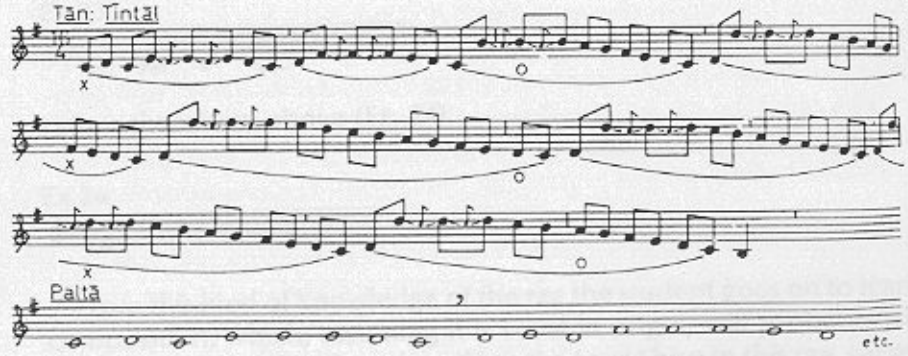
Ex. 16



Ex. 17



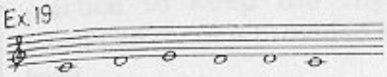
Ex. 18



Practising in *rag* and *tal*

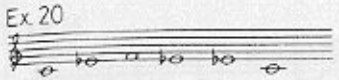
The close relationship between practice and performance has now been demonstrated, but it must be emphasised that the absorption of *paltas* into performance can be achieved only through a knowledge of *rag*. A *palta* is initially an abstract exercise in no particular *rag* or *tal*, and the musician in the early stages is more concerned with technical proficiency than understanding of the complexities of the *rag* and *tal* systems. As knowledge of *rag* increases *paltas* are modified, or new ones created, to fit into a particular *rag*. For example, in the *rag Malkos* the *palta* in Ex. 19

Ex. 19



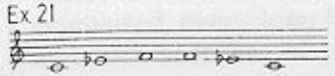
cannot be used, since the *rag* has no Re and the Ga is flat. But even the modified version (Ex. 20)

Ex. 20



is unsatisfactory, since in *Malkos* Ma should be a much stronger note than Ga♭. Thus we arrive at the ideal solution (Ex. 21), which on the surface is not very different but fits the *rag* much better.

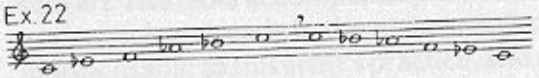
Ex. 21



Keeping to the example of *rag Malkos*, probably the most common pentatonic *rag*, we can examine other aspects of practice. Considerable importance has been attached to *paltas*, but it should not be thought that they are the only practice material. As in the West, scales are an important part not only of practice but also of performed music. Indian music, especially in fast tempi, uses scales a great deal. The four *tans* notated above (Exs. 15–18) may start out as *paltas* but they all continue in more scalar patterns, ironing out, as it were, the angularities and narrow

bends of the *paltas*. There is, however, an important difference between the Indian and Western concepts of scale: a Western scale generally has a constant interval structure (sequence of intervals) and can be transposed as it stands into any key, but in Indian music, which does not permit a change of tonic anyway, the internal organisation of the scale depends on the *rag*, so that most scales differ in their interval structure. Very few *rags* would permit anything sounding like the Western major or minor scales, up and down. The tendency is to omit certain notes, especially in the ascending line, so that most *rags* which have seven notes in their descending line have fewer than seven in their ascending line. All kinds of other rules (which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter) must be observed if the scale is to fit the *rag*. Since *Malkos* only has five notes, all of them are used both in ascent and descent (Ex. 22).

Ex. 22



This in itself is difficult to play on most instruments, including the *sarangi*, because of the large gaps (Sa to Ga♭ and Ma to Dha♭) so it must be practised carefully before any other details of *rag Malkos* are tackled. These will include problems of intonation and ornamentation. The notes Ga♭ and Dha♭ should be played flat[2] and the note Ma should be approached by a slide from below (Ex. 23)

Ex. 23

rather than from above (Ex. 24).

Ex. 24

From this kind of knowledge of the *rag* the student goes on to learn a composition, which, assuming it is vocal in origin, will probably have words. These words, often describing the Lord Shiva in this *rag*, serve as

inspiration and help create a 'portrait' of the *rag*; they must therefore be borne in mind when practising in order to bring out the character of the *rag* (which in this case is generally considered to be virile and dignified). This does not mean that the *rag* cannot be conceived in another, more abstract way; much depends on the background and attitude of both teacher and pupil. Apart from the musical 'rules' of the *rag* it is the mood which the student must learn and understand, and the words (if any) are merely an aid to this understanding. The composition, whether it is vocal (with words), or purely instrumental (without), will be in a particular *tal*, and the musician must keep the rhythm of the *tal* in his mind throughout. Usually there is no *tabla* player on hand during practice to keep the rhythm for him, and even when *tabla* accompaniment is provided he should still be able to keep the *tal* in his head.

Paltas and scales may also be organised in the framework of a *tal*. A good example is the ascending and descending line of *rag Bhimplasi*, which may be played on the *sarangi* as in Ex. 25.

Ex. 25

These thirty-two notes fit very conveniently into the most common North Indian *tal*, *Tintal*, which has sixteen beats. For practice purposes this extended scale, covering most of the instrument's range, can be treated rather like a fixed composition around which variations are improvised, everything fitting into *Tintal*. Some of these variations may introduce snatches of *paltas* and develop into fully-fledged *tans*. In fact, the practice becomes virtually indistinguishable from actual performance.

Methods of practice

At this point a distinction between practice and rehearsal can be made. In the West these may be broadly differentiated as a solo activity, in the case of practice, and a group activity, in the case of rehearsal. Practice also involves exercises, scales, etc., whereas rehearsal means the

preparation of a fixed piece for performance. Practice certainly exists in India, where the musical terminology includes at least one word for it. Rehearsal, on the other hand, is rare and a musician, if he talks about it, is likely to use the word 'practice' or one of its Indian equivalents. Very often the soloist will not have played with the *tabla* player (and anyone else involved in the performance) before the concert; the artists may even be complete strangers to each other. More likely, however, the main musician will perform as often as possible with the same *tabla* player, whom he knows and trusts. There may well be some practice sessions involving both musicians in which they adjust to each other's temperament and try out various ideas, but it is extremely unlikely that they will even attempt to play through an entire piece in the way it might happen in performance. The most obvious reason for this is the amount of improvisation – spontaneous creation – involved in the music, but also significant is the fact that Indian music is essentially a solo art. The *tabla* accompanist provides an audible realisation of a beat, a *tal*, which is already in the main artist's mind; thus a *tabla* player is not indispensable to this artist's practice, and rehearsal is not as important as in the West, where it is a prerequisite of a successful performance involving more than one musician.

Ram Narayan and other North Indian musicians of my acquaintance do not, then, practise – or rehearse – entire concert pieces by playing them through, as a Western musician would. Theoretically, the Indian musician could do this, even allowing for the claims of improvisation and the lack of a fixed (notated or otherwise) version of a concert piece. A less advanced musician may prefer to rehearse a piece beforehand and, having fixed it in as much detail as possible, present it in this tried and trusted way, taking no risks. It says a lot for the leading musicians that they are confident and experienced enough to leave the details of a performance to the moment and inspiration of the performance itself. What is played during practice and performance may bear surprisingly little resemblance to each other, although, as I have tried to show, the one is unquestionably the basis for the other.

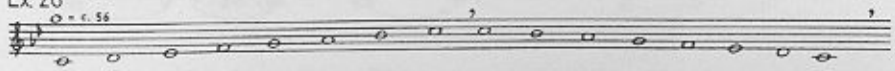
There is nothing – or should be nothing – unsystematic about Indian music practice. The more systematic it is the less time it needs and the more it encompasses. After three years of hard practice Ram Narayan learnt exactly what was of value and what was not, and since that time he

has never had to practise more than three hours a day. He admits that some of the time spent in those early years was wasted. The daily schedule was gruelling by any standards: 10.30 a.m. to 5 p.m. and again 10 p.m. to 4 a.m. at night. Once he had gained mastery of his instrument and learnt to systematise his practice he could not only reduce the hours but go for days or weeks without practice and then only need a couple of hours a day for about four days to regain his form. Similarly, if he is asked to play a *rag* with which he is not very familiar he will practise it for a few days, concentrating on its ascending and descending line and a few *palta*s which he has composed and chosen for that particular *rag*. It is highly likely that he, and musicians in general, practise far more *rag*s than they actually perform. The convention that a *rag* must only be performed at a particular time of the day or night does not apply to practice. Even if all his performances are between the hours of 8 p.m. and 11 p.m. the musician must know *rag*s of other times of day. The reasons for this will be examined in the next chapter. Suffice it to say here that one of the functions of practice is the thorough knowledge of material which might never be used in actual performance, as well as of that which most definitely is.

Examples on the cassette: scales and *palta*s

Items 2 and 3 on side 1 of the cassette illustrate some of the materials and methods of practice discussed in this chapter. They are in the morning *rag Bhairav*. The first one presents the scale of the *rag*, with variations, and the second presents some *palta*s, with ways of developing them. Each note of the scale is first played with one bow in a slow tempo. The aim of the exercise subsequently is to keep the bow speed more or less constant while gradually increasing the speed of the left hand, in other words gradually fitting in more notes per bow. The first example (Ex. 26)

Ex. 26



presents the scale with one note per bow, the second (Ex. 27)

Ex. 27

with two notes per bow, the third (Ex. 28)

Ex. 28

with three notes per bow, and the fourth (Ex. 29)

Ex. 29

with four notes per bow. The exercise could be continued with five, six, seven and eight notes per bow, but Ram Narayan, while keeping to the spirit, departs from the letter of this straightforward pattern, although he does end by playing eight notes per bow (Ex. 32). This final version is preceded by two which are irregular. Ex. 30 starts out with five notes per bow but has an overall sequence of 5+8+8+8+3 notes per bow. Similarly, Ex. 31 starts out with six notes per bow but continues to produce an overall sequence of 6+8+8+8+2 notes per bow.

Ex. 30

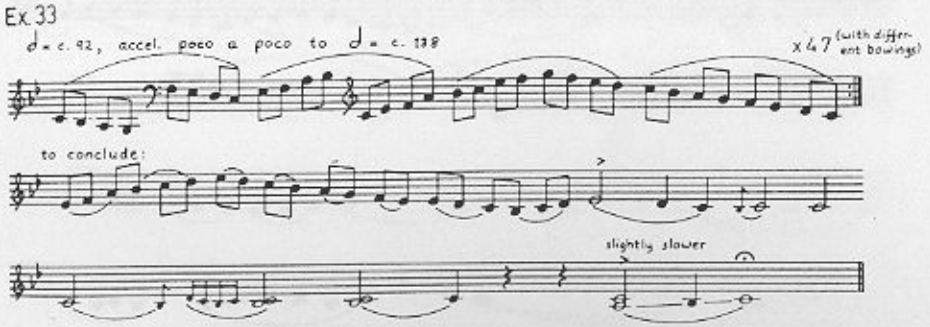
Ex. 31

Ex. 32

Such scales are to Indian music precisely what they are to Western music: excellent practice material but not quite 'real' music as they stand. It is easier to justify this remark in terms of Indian music than Western, since the scale as played here could not be called *rag Bhairav*.

It is no more than an arrangement of all the notes used in the *rag* in a complete ascending and descending row. As a first step towards making this 'real' music – i.e. a *rag* – the rule must be observed that in *Bhairav* normally two notes, Re♭ and Pa, must be omitted in ascent. The next example (Ex. 33) shows just this. In fact it is nothing more than the straight ascent and descent of *rag Bhairav* over two and a half octaves – virtually the entire compass of the *sarangi*. In itself it is not a very interesting idea, and the fact that Ram Narayan plays it here a total of forty-seven times may suggest an intolerable combination of undistinguished music and repetition. The exercise, however, is transformed into music of great excitement and variety by the use of the bow, which changes in different, often unexpected, places and accents different notes. Thus the line is broken up and rearranged into all kinds of groups, and what is inherently a very four-square structure is animated by this special use of asymmetry. This way of using the bow to vary an unchanging melodic line is a characteristic of Ram Narayan's virtuosity, and it occurs in nearly every one of his recitals. The sheer speed, which steadily increases, also contributes to the excitement. In Ex. 33 the starting tempo is approximately ♩ = 92; by the end it is approximately ♩ = 138. After the forty-seventh playing of the scale there is a short concluding passage to round off the piece, and this is included in the notation.

Ex. 33



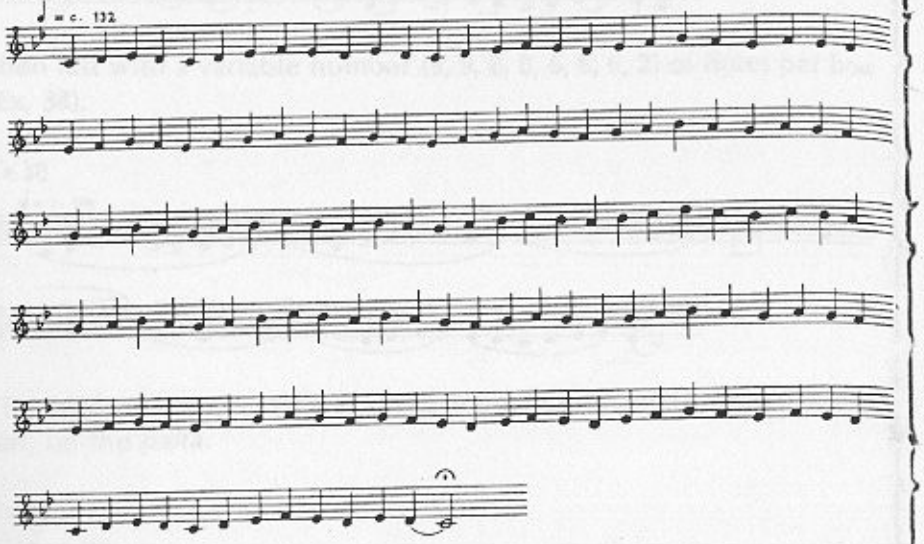
Still in *rag Bhairav*, Ram Narayan goes on to demonstrate some important *palta*s and ways of varying and developing them, illustrating his dictum that '*palta* makes *tans*'. The first one (Ex. 34) may sound like a

random string of notes, but analysis reveals that it is a regular thirteen-note *palta*:

Sa Re♭ Ga Re♭ Sa Re♭ Ga Ma Ga Re♭ Ga Re♭ Sa

with an implied internal grouping of 4+4+2+3 notes (although another possibility is 5+5+3).

Ex. 34

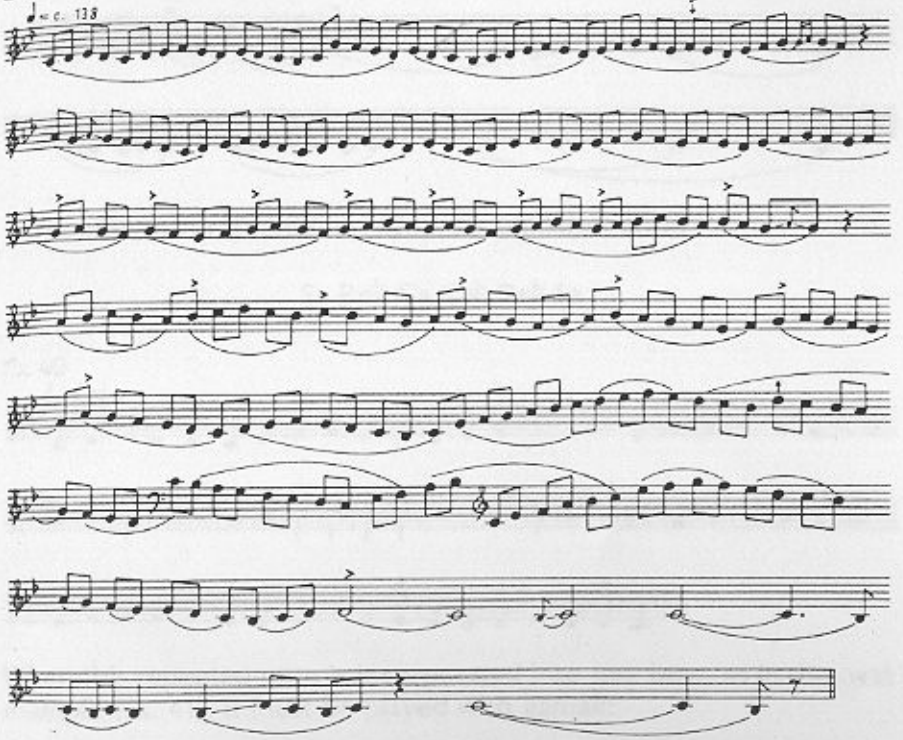


This is subtly disrupted in the next playing – the same *palta* but within a smaller range – by the asymmetrical bowing and disposition of accents:

Ex. 35

Between Exs. 35 and 36 Ram Narayan plays the open first string twice. This serves no function (other than checking the tuning) as far as the *palta* is concerned, and is not included in the notation. In Ex. 36 the *palta* is intact at the beginning and reappears later. Otherwise it can be regarded as an improvisation on the *palta* with the creation of *tans* whose interest is again enhanced by irregular bowings and unexpected accents. Near the end the crooked shape of the *palta* is 'ironed out' into a straight descent and ascent of the scale over two and a half octaves, plus a concluding slower passage (cf. Ex. 33).

Ex. 36

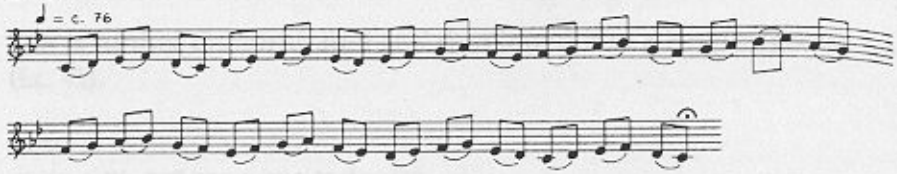


The preceding *palta* moved entirely step-wise. The next one (Ex. 37) introduces a leap of a third:

Sa Re♭ Ga Ma Re♭ Sa

It is played quite slowly with two notes per bow,

Ex. 37

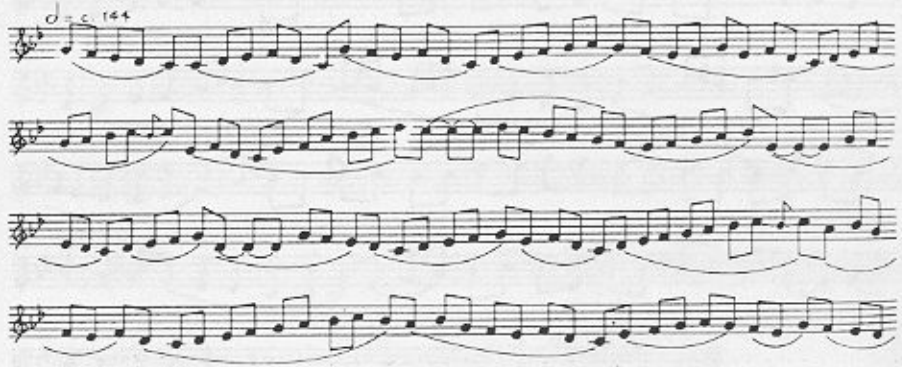


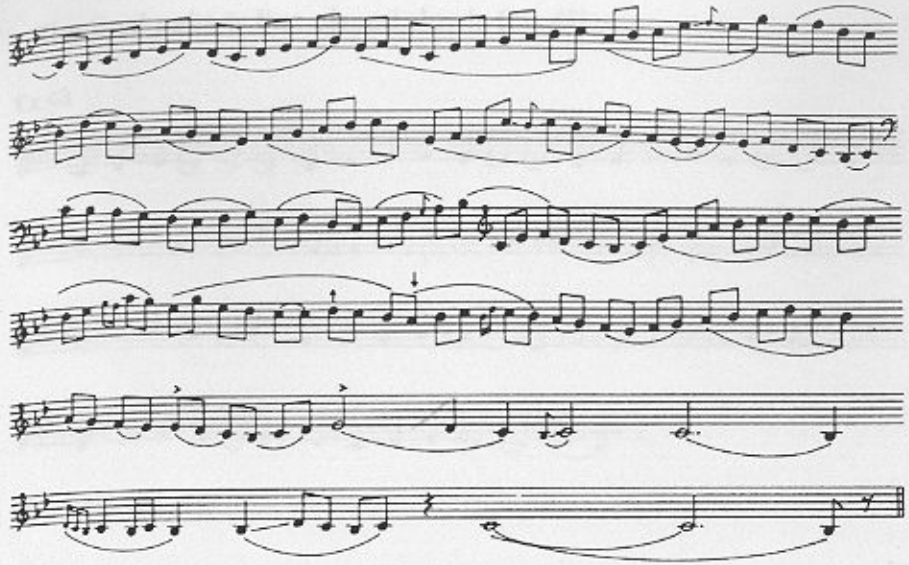
then fast with a variable number (9, 9, 8, 8, 6, 6, 6, 2) of notes per bow (Ex. 38).

Ex. 38

The third version (Ex. 39) is again an improvisation, in the form of a long *tan*, on the *palta*.

Ex. 39

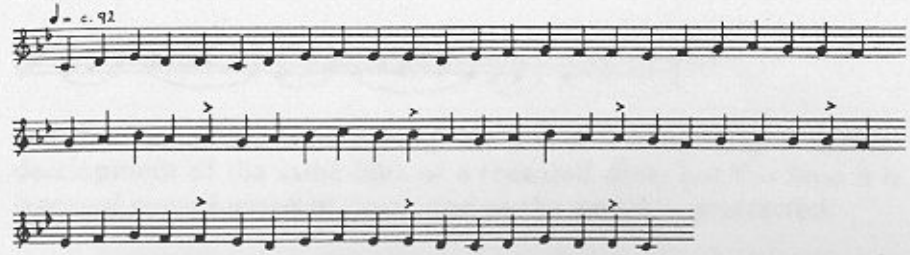




The next *palta* (Ex. 40) introduces a repeated note:

Sa Re♭ Ga Re♭ Re♭ Sa

Ex. 40

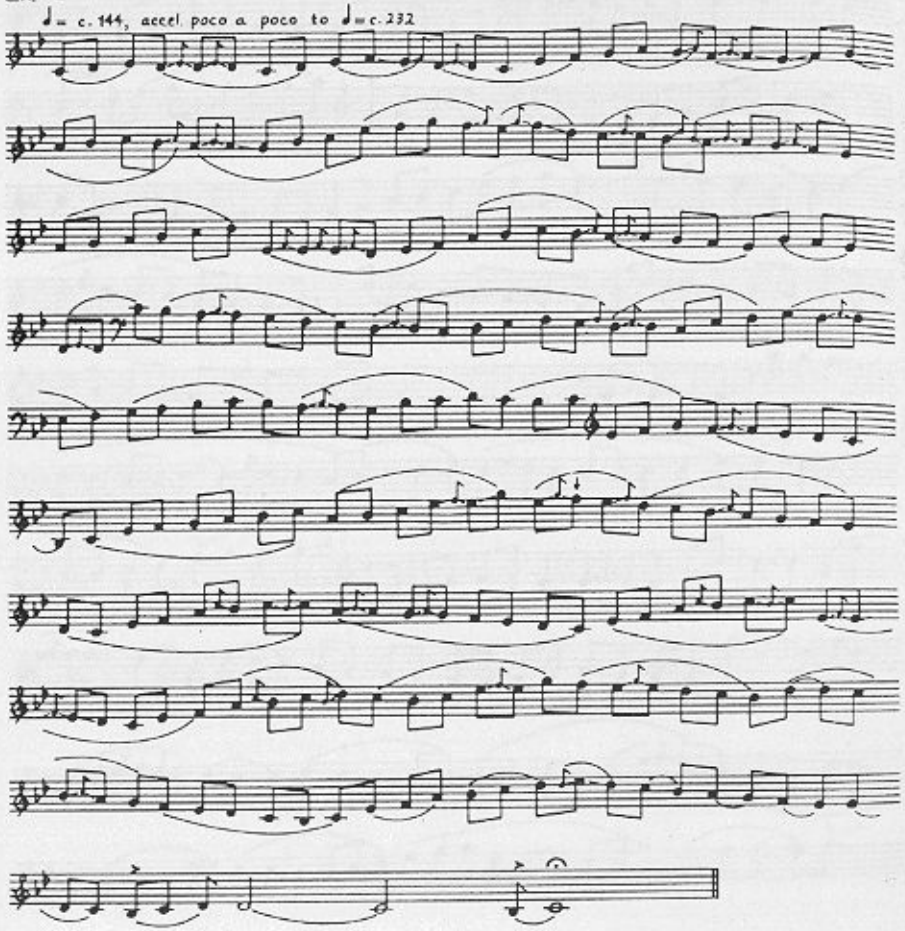


When this repeated note is incorporated into one bow, as in the next example (Ex. 41), it must be played with *gamak*:

Ex. 41

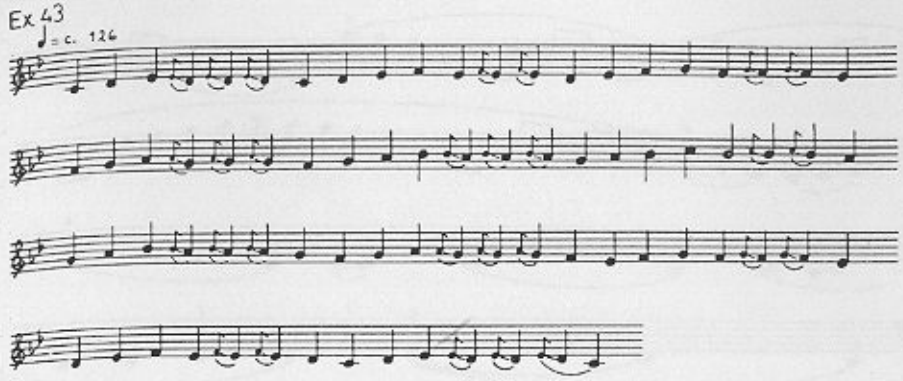
This is further demonstrated and developed into a lengthy *gamak tan* (Ex. 42).

Ex. 42



The final *palta* is first played slowly (Ex. 43)

Ex. 43



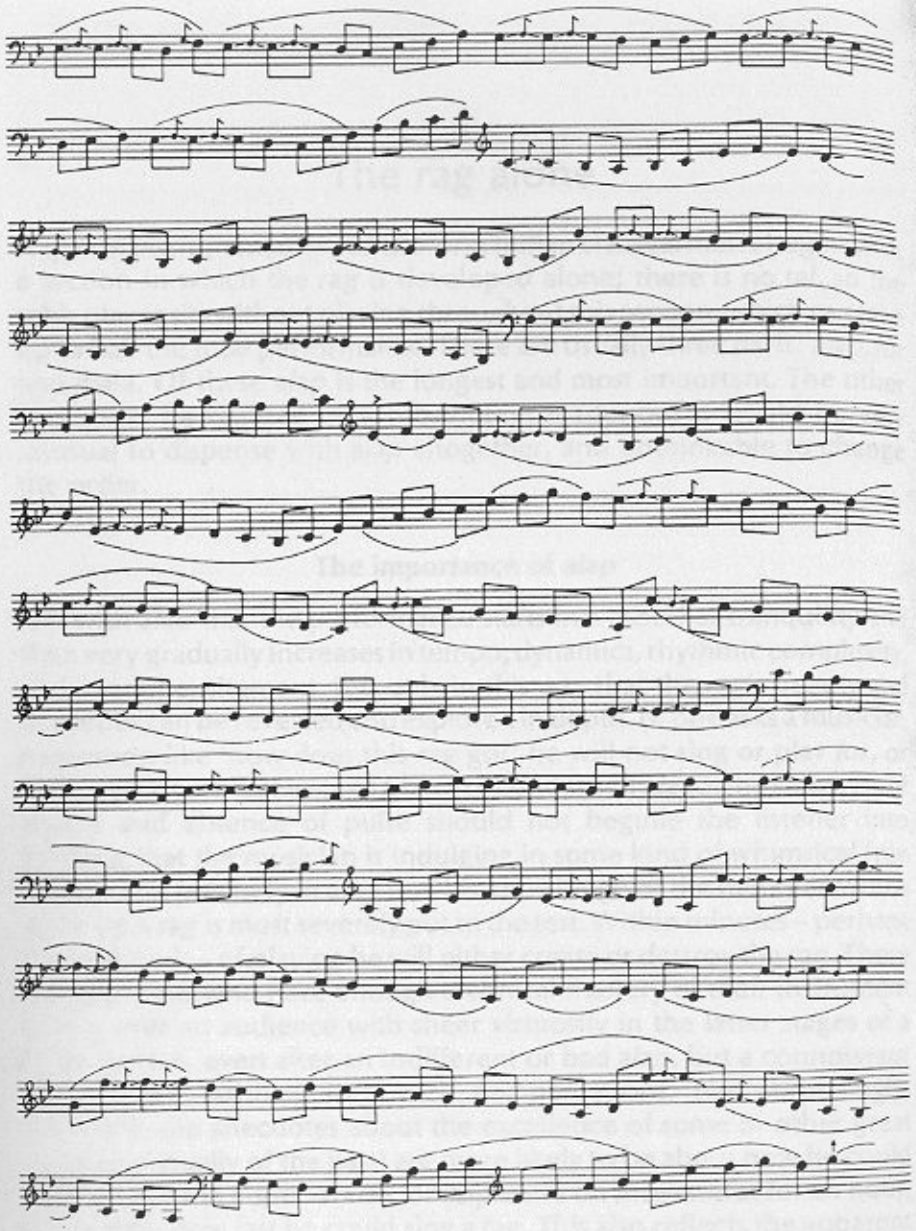
then fast (Ex. 44)

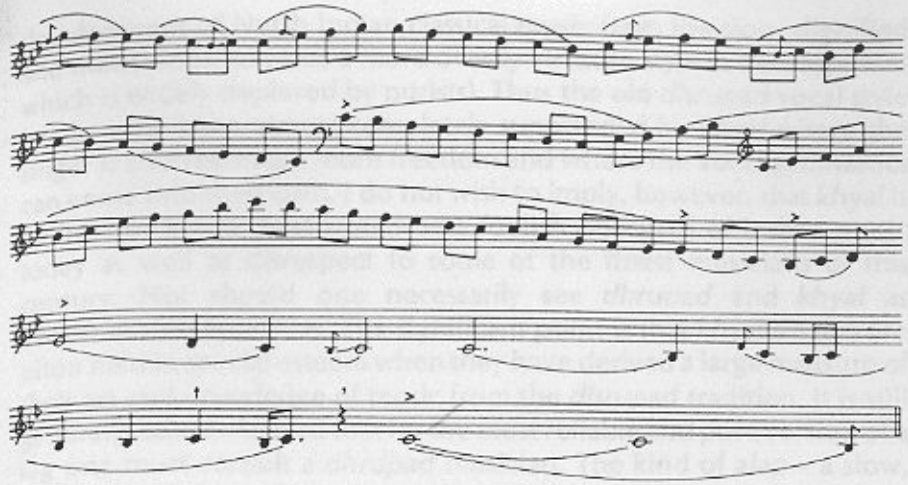
Ex. 44

and then extended into a long *tan* (Ex. 45). It is really a further development of the same idea of a repeated note, but this time it is repeated twice instead of once, and so the *gamak* is protracted:

Sa Re♭ Ga Re♭ Re♭ Re♭ Sa

Ex. 45





The increasing length and musical interest of these examples shows how simple exercises can be spontaneously transformed into something more sophisticated. The imagination of the musician and his skill in improvisation enable him to extend a small amount of material into long sections of music. Practice becomes virtually indistinguishable from real performance and this creative process is at the heart of North Indian classical music.

Notes

1 *Palta* literally means a return or an exchange. This can be extended to mean musical variation and the term can also refer to variations in the course of a performance, as, for example, in the *palta*s of a *tabla* solo. *Alankara* means ornament or decoration, and can also be virtually synonymous with *gamak* in its general sense of embellishment.

2 Indian musicians often talk in these terms and the immediate question is: flat relative to what? The only answer is: relative to other *rag*s using the same notes. There are a few musicians who have an absolute scale of microtones, and many theorists maintain that intonation is rigidly systematised down to the smallest detail. I am doubtful on this point and shall return to this highly controversial aspect of Indian music in the next chapter.