

Indian Instrumental Music: A Comprehensive Study of its Evolution

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Abstract : Music as a genre is widely classified into two types- Vocal and instrumental. The Instrumental Music is known as “Vadhyasangeet”. Indian instrumental music is a crucial aspect of Indian culture that reflects the country’s vast cultural heritage and has significantly influenced the global music scene. As every art needs a strong medium to express its apparatus and uniqueness, similarly, a musical instrument is a medium to express the musical ‘Nada’, which has significance all over the world. The present paper explores the rich and diverse history of Indian instrumental music, tracing its origins and examining its evolution through various historical periods. Furthermore, it highlights the role of key instruments and musicians in shaping Indian instrumental music and discusses its contemporary significance. By examining archaeological evidence, historical texts, and scholarly analyses, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the development and impact of Indian instrumental music.

Keywords: Music, Instrument, evolution, musicians, contemporary significance.

Introduction - Indian music is one of the oldest and most diverse musical traditions in the world. The roots of Indian instrumental music can be traced back to ancient times, characterized by a complex interplay of cultural, religious, and social influences. From the resonant sounds of the Vedic chants to the sophisticated compositions of classical music, Indian instrumental music has evolved into a multifaceted art form. This study aims to explore the origins and development of Indian instrumental music, analyzing its historical context, key instruments, and prominent figures. By understanding the past, we can better appreciate the contributions of Indian instrumental music to both Indian culture and the global music landscape.

Objectives:

1. To investigate the origins of Indian instrumental music and its historical context.
2. To analyze the development of key instruments and styles over time.
3. To explore the influence of external cultures on Indian instrumental music.
4. To examine the role of prominent musicians and their contributions.
5. To assess the contemporary relevance of Indian instrumental music.

Methodology: This research is based on a comprehensive review of historical texts, archaeological findings, and academic literature. It utilizes qualitative analysis to explore the cultural, historical, and social factors that have shaped Indian instrumental music. Additionally, the study

incorporates insights from interviews with musicians and musicologists to provide a nuanced understanding of the subject.

Indian Classical Music: Vocal music involves meaningful words in any language combined with musical notes known as *Swaras*. In contrast, instrumental music uses the same *swaras*, but instead of words, it employs *Boles*. These *boles* replace lyrics and are used to create music through musical instruments. For example, in compositions for plucked instruments, *boles* like “Da,” “Dir,” and “Dara” are played. Indian classical music is mainly individualistic in nature. Consequently, our instruments are designed to be played solo. Indian musicians view music as a path to reach divinity, which is why they engage in ‘*swara-sadhana*’ (tone-culture) while singing or practicing their instruments. They become so immersed in this practice that they lose awareness of their surroundings, merging their identity with ‘*Nadabrahma*’. This solo nature of Indian musical instruments aligns with the individualistic approach to music. In Indian classical music, there are no fixed or pre-written compositions. Each instrumentalist acts as a composer and has complete freedom to interpret the medium of their choice, within the framework of a raga.

History and Development of Indian Instrumental Music: Musical instruments have played a significant role in the evolution and development of Indian classical music. The history of Indian instrumental music is vast and detailed. To better understand this extensive history, it can be divided into three main periods: ancient times, the medieval era,

and the present day.

1. The Vedic Period: The origins of Indian instrumental music can be traced back to the Vedic period (approximately 1500–500 BCE), during which music was an integral part of religious and cultural practices. The Vedas, ancient sacred texts of Hinduism, provide the earliest evidence of musical activities in India.

Music in the Vedic Texts: The Vedas, particularly the Samaveda, are rich in musical content. The Samaveda consists of melodies called “Saman,” which were chanted during religious rituals. These chants were the precursors to the development of both vocal and instrumental music in India. The Vedic hymns were often accompanied by various musical instruments. The Veena, a stringed instrument, is mentioned in the Rigveda, highlighting its significance in early Indian music. Other instruments such as the Dundubhi (a type of drum), Vanshuri (flute), and Conch were also used during this period.

Instruments of the Vedic Era

(a) Veena: The Veena, a plucked string instrument, is one of the oldest and most revered instruments in Indian music. It is mentioned numerous times in the Vedic texts and has been associated with the goddess Saraswati, symbolizing knowledge and arts. The design and structure of the Veena have evolved over time, giving rise to various forms such as the RudraVeena and SaraswatiVeena.

(b) Dundubhi: The Dundubhi is an ancient percussion instrument, resembling a kettle drum. It was used in both religious ceremonies and martial contexts. The sound of the Dundubhi was believed to possess spiritual power, often used to invoke deities or signify important events.

(c) Venu (Flute): The Venu or flute holds a prominent place in Indian mythology and culture. Made from bamboo, it is associated with Lord Krishna, who is often depicted playing the flute. The Vedic references to the Venu highlight its melodic role in early Indian music.

2. Classical Indian Music: The Development of Hindustani and Carnatic Traditions: The evolution of Indian instrumental music is significantly marked by the development of two major classical traditions: Hindustani and Carnatic music. These traditions, while sharing common roots, have distinct characteristics shaped by regional, cultural, and historical influences.

(a) Hindustani Classical Music: Hindustani classical music, primarily practiced in Northern India, has its roots in the ancient musical traditions of the Vedic and medieval periods. The influence of Persian and Mughal cultures during the medieval era played a significant role in shaping Hindustani music.

(b) Historical Background: The medieval period witnessed the fusion of indigenous Indian music with Persian elements, leading to the development of distinct ragas and talas. This synthesis was facilitated by the patronage of Mughal emperors, who encouraged musical innovation and experimentation.

(c) Key Instruments:

i) Sitar: The sitar, a plucked string instrument, became synonymous with Hindustani music. It evolved from the Veena and was further refined by musicians like Amir Khusro and Pandit Ravi Shankar.

ii) Tabla: The tabla, a pair of drums, is integral to Hindustani music. Its rhythmic complexity and versatility have made it a staple in classical performances.

iii) Sarod: The sarod is another prominent string instrument known for its deep, resonant sound. It evolved from the Afghan rubab and gained prominence in the 18th century.

(d) Influential Musicians:

i) Tansen: A legendary figure in Hindustani music, Tansen was a court musician of Emperor Akbar. He is credited with creating several ragas and significantly influencing the Hindustani tradition.

ii) Amir Khusro: A polymath and musician, Khusro is often credited with introducing Persian elements to Indian music. His contributions laid the foundation for the development of Hindustani music.

3. Carnatic Classical Music: Carnatic music, predominantly practiced in Southern India, retains a strong connection to the ancient musical traditions of the Vedic period. Unlike Hindustani music, Carnatic music remained relatively untouched by external influences.

(a) Historical Background: Carnatic music's development was closely linked to the Bhakti movement, emphasizing devotional themes. The compositions of saints like Thyagaraja, MuthuswamiDikshitar, and Syama Sastri form the core of Carnatic repertoire.

Key Instruments:

i) Veena: The SaraswatiVeena is a fundamental instrument in Carnatic music, known for its intricate and expressive sound.

ii) Mridangam: The mridangam is a percussion instrument that provides rhythmic accompaniment in Carnatic performances. It is renowned for its dynamic and nuanced rhythmic patterns.

iii) Violin: The violin, adapted to the Carnatic style, plays a crucial role in both solo and ensemble performances.

(b) Influential Musicians:

i) Thyagaraja: One of the greatest composers in Carnatic music, Thyagaraja's compositions is revered for their lyrical beauty and spiritual depth.

ii) M. S. Subbulakshmi: A legendary vocalist, Subbulakshmi's renditions of Carnatic music has captivated audiences worldwide, earning her the title of “Nightingale of India.”

4. The Impact of Persian and Mughal Influence: The interaction between Indian and Persian cultures during the medieval period had a profound impact on the evolution of Indian instrumental music, particularly in the Hindustani tradition.

Persian Contributions: Persian musicians and scholars introduced new musical concepts, instruments, and styles

to the Indian subcontinent. The fusion of Persian and Indian musical elements gave rise to unique forms and compositions.

(a) Introduction of New Instruments

i) Sitar: The sitar, a quintessential instrument of Hindustani music, has Persian origins. Its design and playing technique evolved over time, incorporating Indian musical elements.

ii) Sarangi: The sarangi, a bowed string instrument, is believed to have been influenced by the Persian rebab. It became a prominent accompaniment for vocal music in the Hindustani tradition.

b) Development of Ragas: The Persian influence led to the development of new ragas, incorporating Persian scales and modes. This resulted in a richer and more diverse repertoire in Hindustani music.

i) Mughal Patronage: The Mughal emperors, particularly Akbar, were great patrons of the arts and played a crucial role in the flourishing of Indian music. They encouraged the synthesis of Persian and Indian musical traditions, leading to innovative compositions and performances.

Akbar's Court and Tansen: Tansen, one of the Navaratnas (Nine Gems) in Akbar's court, was instrumental in popularizing the fusion of Indian and Persian musical styles. His compositions and innovations laid the foundation for the modern Hindustani tradition.

The Role of the Sufi Tradition: The Sufi tradition, with its emphasis on spiritual and mystical themes, significantly influenced Indian music. The qawwali, a form of devotional music, emerged from this synthesis, blending Persian and Indian musical elements.

5. Folk Music and Regional Traditions: In addition to the classical traditions, Indian instrumental music is deeply rooted in folk music and regional traditions. These styles reflect the diverse cultural landscape of India and have contributed to the richness of Indian music.

(a) Folk Instruments: Indian folk music is characterized by a wide variety of instruments, each unique to its region and cultural context. These instruments often reflect the daily lives, rituals, and traditions of the communities they belong to:

i) Dhol: The dhol is a double-headed drum widely used in Punjabi and Bhangra music. Its energetic beats are synonymous with celebrations and festivities.

ii) Shehnai: The shehnai, a wind instrument, is commonly played at weddings and auspicious occasions in North India. Its melodious sound is believed to bring good fortune.

iii) Pungi: The pungi, also known as the snake charmer's flute, is a traditional wind instrument associated with folk music in Rajasthan and other regions.

(b) Regional Styles: Each region of India has its own distinct musical style, shaped by local traditions, languages, and cultures. These regional styles have enriched the diversity of Indian instrumental music.

i) Baul Music (West Bengal): Baul music, characterized by its mystical and devotional themes, is a folk tradition of

West Bengal. The ektara, a one-stringed instrument, is commonly used in Baul performances.

ii) Lavani (Maharashtra): Lavani is a traditional folk music and dance form from Maharashtra, known for its lively rhythms and expressive performances. The dholki, a percussion instrument, is an integral part of Lavani music.

(c) Gamelan (Northeast India): In Northeast India, particularly in Manipur and Assam, the Gamelan tradition reflects the cultural influence of Southeast Asia. The xylophone-like instruments and metallophones are central to this musical style.

6. The Role of Indian Instrumental Music in Religion and Spirituality: Indian instrumental music has always been closely linked to religion and spirituality. It serves as a medium for expressing devotion, enhancing rituals, and facilitating meditation and transcendence.

(a) Music in Hindu Worship: In Hinduism, music is considered a divine art form that elevates the soul and connects individuals with the divine. Instruments like the Veena, Mridangam, and Flute are often used in temple rituals and devotional music.

i) Bhajans and Kirtans: Bhajans and kirtans are devotional songs that often incorporate instrumental accompaniment. Instruments like the harmonium, tabla, and cymbals enhance the spiritual experience of these performances.

ii) Sufi Music and Mysticism: Sufi music, with its roots in Islamic mysticism, emphasizes the spiritual journey and union with the divine. Instruments like the rabab, sarangi, and daf are commonly used in Sufi performances.

iii) Qawwali: Qawwali is a form of Sufi devotional music characterized by powerful vocals and rhythmic clapping. The harmonium and tabla provide instrumental support, creating an immersive and transcendent experience.

(b) Buddhist Chanting and Meditation: In Buddhist traditions, music and chanting play a vital role in meditation and spiritual practices. Instruments like the singing bowl, bells, and woodwind flutes are used to create a serene and meditative atmosphere.

7. Contemporary Indian Instrumental Music: Innovations and Global Influence: In recent years, Indian instrumental music has witnessed significant innovation and global influence. Musicians have embraced new technologies and genres, creating a fusion of traditional and contemporary styles.

(a) Fusion Music: Fusion music, blending Indian classical and folk elements with Western genres, has gained popularity worldwide. This genre reflects the adaptability and versatility of Indian instrumental music.

i) Shakti: The band Shakti, led by guitarist John McLaughlin and tabla virtuoso Zakir Hussain, pioneered the fusion of Indian classical music with jazz. Their innovative compositions have inspired countless musicians globally.

ii) Anoushka Shankar: Anoushka Shankar, a prominent sitarist and composer, has explored diverse musical landscapes, collaborating with artists from various genres.

Her work exemplifies the seamless blending of Indian and Western musical elements.

(b) Technological Advancements: Technological advancements have opened new possibilities for Indian instrumental music. Electronic instruments, digital recordings, and online platforms have expanded the reach and accessibility of Indian music.

i) Electronic Fusion: Electronic fusion music combines traditional Indian instruments with electronic beats and effects. Artists like Karsh Kale and Nucleya have popularized this genre, attracting a global audience.

ii) Online Platforms and Education: The internet has revolutionized the way Indian music is accessed and learned. Online platforms provide tutorials, performances, and collaborations, making Indian instrumental music more accessible to a global audience.

Conclusion: The origin and evolution of Indian instrumental music is a testament to the rich cultural heritage and diversity of India. From its ancient roots in the Vedic period to its contemporary global influence, Indian instrumental music continues to inspire and captivate audiences worldwide. This study highlights the historical development, key instruments, influential figures, and contemporary innovations that have shaped Indian instrumental music. By understanding its origins and evolution, we gain a deeper appreciation for its contributions to both Indian culture and the global music scene.

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