Richard David Williams

Sound, Text, and Image: Picturing Music through *Ragamala*

What does sound look like? In pre-colonial north India, music scholars, poets, and painters developed images and descriptions for the musical entities known as *raga*s, and strung them together in a series or "garland" (*mala*). While it is not clear precisely when listeners began to conceive of music this way, by the 1500s, *ragamala* poetry and paintings were well established, and proved to be extremely popular until the nineteenth century.

Indian art musicians compose and improvise on the basis of *raga*, which is often translated as "mode": a *raga* provides a defined set of notes, and the conventional sequences they should follow, so it shares aspects of a scale and a tune, but does not quite correlate with either. *Raga* was first theorised by music scholars writing in Sanskrit from around the eighth century, and over time it was explored in terms of dominant notes, melodic patterns, and signature motifs. Beyond these technical properties, each *raga* also carried emotional and aesthetic meanings: *raga*s have names, and over the centuries have been assigned genders, seasons, times of day, feelings and moods, colours and deities.

From the mid-fourteenth century, music treatises started to describe how to visualise *raga*s, beginning with the *Sangitopanisat-saroddharah*. The technique in this work closely followed a method of mental imaging used in meditation and tantric ritual known as *dhyana*. These early *raga* visualisations were similar to the iconographies of deities, detailing the number of heads and limbs of the *raga*'s body, its complexion, the colour of its clothing, and the animal it took as its vehicle:

> Vasanta has six faces and ten hands, and is of the colour of coral. He carries cymbals, a conch, a skull-tipped staff, a fruit, a *cakra* wheel, and a lotus in his hands. Two hands hold a *vina*, and two grant beneficence and fearlessness with their gestures. He has a cuckoo as his vehicle, and he is sung in the months of *caitra* and *vaishaka*.[1]

From this period onwards, the different *ragas* were arranged into clusters or families, typically involving six principal *raga*s and their associated *ragini*s, who could be called their wives and children. Over time, the imagery evolved and became less godlike, as poets and painters increasingly turned their attention to depictions of human lovers, warriors, and sages instead.

Different systems emerged, each with its own sets of families and iconographies, so *raga*s could assume quite different forms. The folios in this collection are based on a system developed in 1570 by Ksemakarna, a musicologist working for King Ramcand of Rewa in central India. Ksemakarna's *ragamala* sequence is especially elaborate, covering 84 musical entities, arranged into family units of 6 *rāga*s, their 5 wives, and 8 sons. While this system was taken up by upcountry painters based in the Pahari courts from the end of the

---

[1] Translation adapted from Allyn Miner, *The Saṅgītopaniṣat-saroddharaḥ* (New Delhi: IGNCA and Motilal Banarsidass, 1998), p. 93.

seventeenth century onwards, the images in this collection suggest the *ragamala* was also circulating between the northern Deccan and Rajput courts.

While this kind of visualisation was originally explored in highly technical studies on music, verses from these esoteric works were copied and illustrated in courtly paintings and became a very popular subject in artists' workshops. In the examples in this collection, the *dhyana* verse appears above the image: painters did not always follow these prescriptive verses to the letter, and schools of artists developed their own interpretative stance to each *raga*. The viewer of the painting could read the verse, imagine the vignette in their own mind, and then nuance that image by examining the painting. Looking at these paintings today, the silent partner in this exercise is the music itself, but in the courtly context these visualisations would stimulate conversations about the emotional and symbolic textures of musical sound. Courtly patrons and music lovers commissioned *ragamala* poems both as books and painted images, and often decorated their music rooms with wall paintings of *raga*s as well. To be taken seriously as a connoisseur, learning the different iconographies, timings, and emotional layers of each *raga* was a must.

Poets and painters devised multiple methods for describing the layered meanings of a *raga*. The musicological approach was to dissect the *raga*'s formal, scalar properties: which notes to perform and emphasise, and which time of day and season to play or sing. In Ksemakarna's *ragamala*, the *raga*s are also associated with other sounds in nature: for example, *raga* Vangala (catalogue entry no. for ML1433) is associated with the sounds of beans being ground down with a stone. However, the visual route was to focus on the *dhyana*: above the image of Vangala, the Sanskrit inscription tells us that the *raga* embodied a learned man, reciting the Vedic scriptures in a white garment, with a rosary and cup, who takes pleasure in conversation, dance, and song.[2] Artists might go one step further, expanding on the prescribed image, exploring the emotional mood of the *raga*, and elaborating on the details to create a particularly poignant image. In this instance, the artists who worked on Vangala did not incorporate the wiseman's love of dance and song (or the sound of beans!): instead, he is dressed as an ascetic, adorned with sectarian markings upon his brow and a tiger-skin stretched out beneath his meditating body. His fair body is entwined with a rosary, and his telling fingertips suggests that sacred chant is emanating from his lips, the ephemeral sound of his utterances contrasting with the heavy solidity of the building before him.

Under the Mughal Empire (1526-1857), the visualisations of *raga* continued to be described in Sanskrit and Classical Hindi, but also in Persian, the predominant language of Mughal intellectuals. Scholars of music were especially intrigued by the power of the *raga*s, which they learned about from reading older treatises and discussions with hereditary lineages of musicians, who passed on the tales about the *raga*s' supernatural properties that they had inherited from their forefathers.[3] Music makes an impression on us because a *raga* is aligned with the celestial bodies above and the elements and humours below: Megh (literally "Cloud") could summon the rains or sooth its listeners, Dipak ("Flame") was highly

[2] Klaus Ebeling, *Ragamala Painting* (Basel: Ravi Kumar, 1973), p. 72.
[3] Katherine Butler Schofield, (2010). "Reviving the Golden Age again: 'Classicization', Hindustani music and the Mughals," *Ethnomusicology* 54:3 (2010), pp. 484–517.

combustible, and could start fires or fevers, while Kedar, when performed correctly, could even melt stones.

Ragamala gradually fell out of fashion over the nineteenth century, partly because the aesthetic worlds of the Mughal *ancien régime* were denounced as decadent and effeminate in colonial India, and partly because approaches to musical interpretation were changing. While many of the associations about particular *raga*s persist in the musical imagination, professional artists today prefer not to be constrained by the iconographic definitions of ancient texts: musicians hope to convey their own emotions and images when they perform, rather than having to follow a template set by *ragamala* paintings.

However, the historical popularity of *ragamala* attests to the depths and pleasures of this genre, as intellectuals, poets, and painters grappled with the meaning and emotional weight of music, and translated it across media, languages, and images.