RAGA

RAGA AS A KEY CONCEPT

R-aga (Hindi/Urdu: *r-ag*, Tamil: *r-agam*) is a concept of melodic organization in Indian classical music, operating between the levels of scale and melody as these terms are understood in Western music. Several ragas may share the same scale (*that, mela*); each raga can serve as the basis for an infinite number of melodic compositions or improvisations. Raga is central to Indian musical theory, aesthetics and practice; but it also links musical sounds with associated cultural meanings, and thus has important connections with the visual arts, literature and drama/film. It is a central feature of both the Northern (Hindusthani) and Southern (Karnatak) branches of the Indian classical music tradition, which is recognized internationally as a symbol of South Asian culture.[i] To some extent raga distinguishes classical music from other types of South Asian music; but elements of raga also occur in many types of folk, devotional, ritual, stage and film music in South Asia.[ii] There is no direct equivalent in Western music; raga encapsulates aspects of the relationship between music and meaning that have only recently been explored by Western theorists (see later). Although a technical term of music, *raga* has found its way into common parlance, in expressions such as 'he sings his own rag' (i.e. 'blows his own trumpet'), 'he sings a long rag' (talks long-windedly), or 'rags, cooking and turbans [turn out differently each time]'. Such expressions reflect different aspects of the concept of raga as a musical term, and the importance of music as a source of cultural metaphors.

RAGA AS A MUSICAL CONCEPT

Raga is a noun derived from the Sanskrit root *ranj*, 'to colour', especially 'to colour red', and hence 'to delight'. Red is the colour of passion, hence raga implies the emotional content of a song, by which the listener is delighted. In this general sense, the term is used by Kalidasa and Bharata.[iii] In its technical musical sense, of a melodic structure having a particular emotional affect, the term is first defined by Matanga, who sets out an elaborate system of ragas and other melodic structures in his musical treatise *Brihad-desi* (ninth century AD?).[iv] Matanga's definition combines the structural and aesthetic aspects of the concept: 'That particularity of notes and melodic movements…by which one is delighted, is *raga*'. Musical treatises from this time onwards define ragas principally in terms of their tonal characteristics – scale, strong and weak notes, omitted notes, melodic motifs etc. But the limitations of such technical definitions were recognized early: around 1100 AD, Nanyadeva observed that 'There are many variants among the ragas [which] are subtle and difficult to define, just as the different flavours of sugar, treacle and candy…cannot be separately described, but must be experienced for oneself'.[v] It is therefore the performances of musicians trained in the oral tradition, and the melodic compositions handed down in that tradition, that are regarded as the true expressions of raga.

There is no fixed number of ragas. A peformer may have a working repertoire of around 50 ragas, but many more are attested in collections of compositions or theoretical works. Theoretical sources from different periods and regions show that while some raga names, and some elements of structure, have survived over many centuries, others have disappeared as new ones are introduced. Creation of new ragas is limited by the belief that ragas are not human works but living, spiritual or semi-divine beings; an apparently new raga is therefore more likely to be a little-known old raga, a raga from a different regional tradition, or a variant or combination of existing ragas, than a wholly new creation. For the same reason ragas are often held to be immutable; but it is recognized that schools and individuals have different idiolects, and historical scholarship has shown that significant changes can occur over a period of generations.[vi] For each musician, it is his own teacher's interpretation that is definitive.

Asked to define a raga, a musician might play one or more characteristic phrases or motifs, or render a complete composition. Theoretical texts often combine the motifs of a raga into an inflected octave scale, showing how different motifs, and even different pitches, may be taken in ascent and descent. In performance, the raga is usually presented in the form of a pre-composed song or instrumental melody, set in any appropriate metrical cycle (*tala*), and elaborated with pre-composed or improvised variations. The pre-composed material can be optionally preceded by an unaccompanied, non-metrical, improvised introduction, the *alap*, conceived as a discourse on the raga, during which the musical structure and aesthetic character of the raga are gradually unfolded in a sequence of different pitch-registers and rhythmic styles. During such improvisation, the performer may conceive himself or herself as a conduit through which the raga flows, rather than as the performer or creator of a musical 'work'.

RAGA AS CULTURAL SYMBOL

Throughout its history, the musical concept of raga has been linked with extra-musical domains in a variety of ways. In the earliest sources, ragas are assigned aesthetic functions in the domain of drama: different ragas are deemed suitable for different phases of the drama, characters, settings or emotional situations.[vii] At the same time many ragas bore (and still bear) the names of provincial or exotic regions of the then-known world, or of tribal ethnic groups, [viii] suggesting perhaps a Tantric attribution of power to the DESI domain; Matanga's *Brhad-desi* reflects this approach.

As music became recognised as an art-form in its own right, independent of drama, associations with contexts and powers developed in parallel. From the 11th century, ragas were assigned a time of day and/or season of the year at which they should be performed – associations which remain important in the Hindustani classical music tradition, and in some traditions of temple music, where ragas are assigned to a daily cycle of eight periods. Devotional poetry intended for singing is hence normally ascribed to ragas, and sung by devotional singers in either classical ragas or local equivalents at the appropraite hours or

seasons. Time associations seem initially to have been explained as increasing the auspiciousness of ragas when performed at the correct time, but later came to be seen as essential for the aesthetic appreciation of the music.[ix] The 17th-century Orissan treatise *Sangita-narayana* states that 'Violation of the correct times for performance surely leads to complete ruin', except that 'it is not a fault in ensemble singing, at the order of a king, or on the theatre stage'.[x] Seasonal associations led to the attribution to ragas of powers over the natural world: thus the spring raga Hindol could cause flowers to blossom, the rainy-season raga Malhar could produce a downpour, if performed correctly.[xi] The incendiary properties attributed to raga Dipak led to its avoidance in practical use.

The power of ragas was initially conceived in terms of the benefits resulting from their performance – primarily aesthetic benefits, analysable in terms of the theory of RASA. Health and good fortune were other benefits of music in general. The great 13th-century musical theorist Sarngadeva framed his treatise *Sangita-ratnakara* with reference to medical (Ayurvedic) principles, though he did not attribute therapeutic properties specifically to ragas.[xii] The *Sangita-narayana* allocates the benefits of raga according to the number of notes to the octave: ragas with seven notes confer 'Long life, merit, fame, good repute, success, health, wealth, long lineage which brings prosperity to the kingdom'[xiii]; those with six are suitable for 'the praising of heroism in battle, of beauty of form and qualities';[xiv] those with five are 'to be sung in the expulsion of disease, in the destruction of one's enemies, in doing away with fear and grief, and in rites of propitiation of the planets'.[xv] Therapeutic powers were first attributed directly to ragas by Mughal writers, who 'explained the purported emotional effects of the Hindustani ragas by drawing relationships between the ragas and the Unani humours, and the [notes] and the astrological bodies. In this way, the extramusical associations of the ragas, and in particular their auspicious timings, became indispensible to the wellbeing of listeners'.[xvi]

The powers of ragas were and are attributed to divine agency. In the 13th century, Sarngadeva assigned a patron deity to each raga. Later, ragas were themselves represented as semi-divine beings. In a famous story from the *Brhad-dharma Purana* (13th century?), the musician Narada is taken to heavenly realms to confront the souls of the male ragas and female raginis cruelly injured by his inept performances; when Siva sings them correctly, each raga or ragini presents him- or herself in person.[xvii] Pictures of ragas, along with scales, notes and microtones, represented as gods and goddesses, occur in the Jain *Kalpa-sutra* (14th century).[xviii] This divine personification of ragas was partly secularised in the *ragamala* verses and paintings popular in the 16th and 17th centuries, where many ragas and raginis are interpreted as amorous heroes and heroines (*nayaka* and *nayika*).[xix] Thus ragini Gondakiri, 'a girl of dark complexion, [lying] on a bed of soft flowers and thirsting for love, looks here and there in her anguish, waiting for her lover's arrival.'[xx] Some ragas however retained explicitly divine identities: Raga Bhairav, named after Siva's terrifying manifestation, 'carries a drum and a trident, is wearing a snake as necklace, has a white complexion, is shining and is besmeared with ashes. He has the crescent and Ganga [on his head], has [the ascetic's] twisted hair, is wearing an elephant's skin, is unusually handsome and has three eyes'[xxi] —these are all iconographic attributes of Siva. Albums of paintings based on such raga verses, from the Mughal, Rajasthani and other

provincial courts, are among the masterpieces of South Asian painting of the 16th to 18th centuries, and reflect the high status of music as a courtly art-form.

The extra-musical powers and associations of ragas are a traditional topos in literature and drama as well as painting. Thus the raga Malhar is equated with the rainy season in most texts, though also represented in some as a wandering ascetic. Both these meanings are evoked in a 17th-century Nepalese ragamala painting (fig. 1),[xxii] and in Bankim Chatterjee's Bengali novel *Anandamath* (1882), where the song *Vande mataram* is sung in rag Malhar by a band of yogis striding through the monsoon night.[xxiii] (Set by Rabindranath Tagore to a melody in a different raga, this song became an emblem of Indian nationalism in the 20th century.) Raga Malhar is also brilliantly used to link the awesome powers of nature and the hero's internal conflict in Satyajit Ray's film *Jalsaghar*.[xxiv] Elements of raga can be heard in popular movies too, performing characteristic aesthetic roles alongside imported Hollywood film-score clichés and other international genres.[xxv] Thus in *Mughal-e-Azam*,[xxvi] for example, motifs of the raga Darbari Kanada are used ironically to set the heroine's lament on being imprisoned by the emperor Akbar: not only is it a melancholy raga, but it is associated with the court (*darbar*) of Akbar in all its grandeur, since it is believed to have been invented by his court musician Tansen.

IS RAGA UNIQUE?

There is no exact equivalent to raga in Western music. As an entity between scale and tune, raga finds its closest relatives in the *dastgah* of Iranian music, the *maqam* of Arab, Turkish and Central Asian musics, the Jewish prayer modes, and the *pathet* of Javanese gamelan. Like raga, these entities are defined in terms of pitch-structure but may have aesthetic or cultural meanings; many musicologists would now describe them all as *modes*, the definition of this Western musical term having been expanded by theorists to take account of the special characteristics of raga and other Asian modal systems.[xxvii]

Research in linguistics, cognition and musical analysis suggests that raga may be a characteristic South Asian formulation of more widespread phenomena. Structural relationships between ragas have been aptly compared with lexical systems.[xxviii] It seems plausible to regard a raga as a cognitive schema, a memory structure comprising an ordered array of categories representing temporal or spatial organization of experience, which can generate expectations and frame improvised behaviour.[xxix] Raga also shows similarities with 'intonation theory', according to which conventional musical figures constitute the expressive vocabulary of a culture and a period, and trigger affective and other culturally-defined meanings.[xxx] In South Asia, a combination of orally-transmitted performance practice, emphasis on memory, and rigorous shastric analysis,[xxxi] has brought to consciousness and refined in unique ways aspects of musical communication that perhaps underlie all musics.

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[i] The many sources discussing raga in English include: Walter Kaufmann, *The ragas of North India*, Indiana 1968; Nazir Jairazbhoy, *The rags of North Indian music, their structure and evolution*, London 1971; Walter Kaufmann, *The ragas of South India*, Indiana 1976; Joep Bor et al., *The raga guide: a survey of 74 Hindustani ragas* (set of 4 audio CDs with book), London 1999; Harold Powers and Richard Widdess, article 'India, sub-continent of: III. Theory and practice of classical music, 2. Raga', in Stanley Sadie, ed., *The New Grove Dictionary of Music,* London 2001; George Ruckert and Richard Widdess, 'Hindustani raga', and Gayathri Rajapur Kassebaum, 'Karnatak raga', in Alison Arnold, ed., *The Garland encyclopedia of World Music, vol 5: South Asia*, New York and London, 2000, pp. 64–88 and 89–109.

[ii] Cf. Charles Capwell, *Music of the Bauls of Bengal*, Kent, 1986, pp. 142–5; Regula Burghardt Qureshi, *Sufi music of India and Pakistan: sound, context and meaning in qawwali,* Cambridge 1986, 47–53; Gordon Thompson, 'What's in a dhal? Evidence of raga-like approaches in a Gujarati musical tradition', *Ethnomusicology* vol. 39 no. 3, 1995, pp. 417–32; Józef Pacholczyk, *Sufyana Musiqi: the classical music of Kashmir*, Berlin 1996; Ingemar Grandin, 'Raga Basanta and the spring songs of the Kathmandu Valley: a musical Great Tradition among Himalayan farmers?', in Frank Bernède, ed., *Himalayan Music: state of the art*, special issue of *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research* vols. 12-13, 1997, pp. 57–80; Edward O. Henry, 'Melodic structure of the khari biraha of North India: a simple model', *Asian Music* 33/1, 2002, pp. 105–24; Richard Widdess, '*Carya* and *caca:* change and continuity in Newar Buddhist ritual song', *Asian Music* vol. 35 no. 2, pp. 7–41.

[iii] See Richard Widdess, *The ragas of early Indian music*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1995, pp. 40–42.

[iv] Ibid.

[v] Ibid.

[vi] Jairazbhoy, *The rags of North Indian music*; H.S. Powers, 'An historical and comparative approach to the classification of ragas', *Selected reports in ethnomusicology* vol. 1 no. 3, 1970.

[vii] Widdess, *Ragas of early Indian music*, 43–5

[viii] Ibid, 22–8

[ix] Mukund Lath, 'An enquiry into the raga–time association', in Sumati Mutatkar, (ed.): *Aspects of Indian music*, New Delhi 1987, pp. 113-119

[x] *Pariccheda* 1, v. 341. Translated by Jonathan Katz, *The musicological portions of the* Sangitanarayana*: a critical edition and commentary*, DPhil dissertation, University of Oxford 1987, vol. I, p. 89.

[xi] Vidyarthi, G, 'Effect of ragas and mannerism in singing: a chapter from Ma'danul Moosiqi written in 1856 by Hakim Mohammad Karam Imam, a courtier of Wajid Ali Shah of Lucknow', *Sangeet Natak Akademi Bulletin* 13-14, 1959, pp. 6-14

[xii] Sarngadeva, *The Sangita-ratnakara of Sarngadeva*, ed. and trans. R.K. Shringy and P.L. Sharma, vol.1, Varanasi, 1978; vol. 2, New Delhi, 1989

[xiii] 1.158; Katz, *Sangitanarayana*, I, p. 39.

[xiv] 1.222; ibid. I, p. 58.

[xv] 1.266; ibid. I, p. 70.

[xvi] Katherine Brown, *Hindustani music in the time of Aurangzeb,* PhD diss., SOAS, 2003, p. 223.
[xvii] Mukund Lath, 'Some thoughts on the early history of raga-painting', in G.C. Pandey, ed., *Some aspects of Jain art*, Jaipur, pp. 37-46.
[xviii] S. M. Nawab, *Masterpieces of the Kalpasutra paintings,* Ahmedabad 1956
[xix] K. Ebeling, *Ragamala painting*, Basel and New Delhi 1973
[xx] *Sangitanarayana* 1.284; Katz, *Sangitanarayana*, I, p. 74.
[xxi] Somanatha, *Ragavibodha* 5, v. 178; translated Emmie te Nijenhuis, *The ragas of Somanatha*, Leiden 1976, vol. I, p. 18.
[xxii] Gert-Matthias Wegner and Richard Widdess, 'Musical miniatures from Nepal: two Newar ragamalas', in Pratapaditya Pal, ed., *Nepal: old images, new insights*, in press.
[xxiii] Information courtesy of Julius Lipner, whose study of the *Anandamath* is in press.
[xxiv] *Jalsagar/The Music Room*, dir. Satyajit Ray, 1958.
[xxv] Anna Morcom, 'An understanding between Hollywood and Bollywood? The meaning of Hollywood-style music in Hindi films', *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* vol. 10 no. 1, 2001, pp. 63–84.
[xxvi] Directed by K. Asif, 1960; music by Naushad. See Morcom, 'An understanding between Hollywood and Bollywood?'.
[xxvii] Mantle Hood, *The ethnomusicologist,* Los Angeles 1971, pp. 324 ff.; Harold Powers, 'Mode', in Stanley Sadie, ed., *The New Grove Dictionary of Music*, London 2001
[xxviii] Harold Powers, 'The structure of musical meaning: a view from Banaras', *Perspectives of New Music,* vols. 14 no. 2 to 15 no. 1, 1976, pp. 308–34.
[xxix] Bob Snyder, *Music and memory*, Cambridge, Mass. 2000, pp. 95–106.
[xxx] See the useful summary of intonation theory as applied to music in Raymond Monelle, *Linguistics and semiotics in music*, London 2002, pp. 274–303.
[xxxi] Sheldon Pollock, 'The theory of practice and the practice of theory in Indian intellectual history', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 105 no. 3, pp. 499–519.