Aspects of Raga in North Indian Classical Music

Ty Rust

MUHL 338: Non-Western Music
Ranjayati Iti Raga

“That which colors the mind is a raga.”
A Raga has:

- musical rules
- extra-musical associations
Musical Rules
A raga has a scale.

scale: an ordered collection of pitches
There is an **ascending** and a **descending** form of the scale.

**Musical Rules**

Ascending and descending forms can be the **same** or **different**, i.e. there can be a different number of notes ascending vs. descending.
A raga must consist of at least five notes (pitches).

*Most ragas use 5 to 7 notes.*
A raga must contain **Sa** (the tonic).

**Sa** is moveable.
It can be any pitch that is comfortable for a singer or natural for a particular instrument.

*(like Western movable “Do”)*
A raga must also contain either Ma (4th) or Pa (5th) or both.

Sa ... Ma Pa ... Sa
Sa ... Pa ... Sa
Sa ... Ma ... Sa

A common pattern for the 4 strings of the tambura to play is:
Pa Ṣa Ṣa Sa
Sa & Pa have only one form.

There are raised or lowered versions of the other pitches.

Besides their natural (shudha) positions, there can be a higher pitched (tivra) version of Ma and lower pitched (komal) versions of Re, Ga, Dha, & Ni.
A representation on the Western keyboard (*with Sa as C*)
The mathematics of Indian tuning theory (showing the 22 possible pitches)
An imaginary keyboard (with Sa as C)
Musical Rules

There are more important and less important pitches in a raga.

These notes can be something other than the tonic (Sa).

The most important note in a raga is called \textit{Vadi} (or King) the secondary tonal center is the \textit{Samvadi} (or Prime Minister note). Notes that are not used in the raga are called \textit{Vivadi} (or enemy notes) and are avoided.
Musical Rules

There may be characteristic melodic movements (short musical *riffs*) associated with a raga.

There are also characteristic ways of approaching or ornamenting certain notes within a raga.

These are aspects that a student encounters when learning compositions in a particular raga.
Example: a scale

THAT

Todi That

Sa Re Ga Ma Pa Dha Ni Sa

audio: Ravi Shankar - *History of Indian Music*
Example: a raga

Rag Multani

Sa

Ni

Ga Ma Pa

Ni Dha Pa Ma Ga Re Sa
Other (“extra-musical”) aspects of Raga

mood, time or occasion, magical properties...
Other aspects of Rag

Mood

There are some associations of mood with Western scales.

“Bad guy comin' in, Arnie! ... Minor key!”
Other aspects of Rag

Mood

The Nine Moods (Nava Rasa)

- Shringar - Love
- Hasya - Comic
- Karuna - Sadness
- Raudra - Furious
- Veera - Heroic
- Bhayanak - Terrible
- Vibhats - Disgusting
- Adbhuta - Wonderment
- Shanta - Peace
Other aspects of Rag

**Time**

associated time of day, season, or occasion
Other aspects of Rag

Time

Time Of Day

- 8 three hour time periods or a general description of time of day

6:00 am

6:00 pm

6 - 9 pm

9 pm - midnight

midnight

noon

3 - 6 pm

noon - 3 pm

9 am - noon

6 - 9 am

late morning

early morning
Other aspects of Rag

**Time**

**Season**
Six seasonal times are recognized including “rainy season”, spring season, etc...

**Occasions**
Ragas for weddings, and other life-cycle events
Other aspects of Rag

Magical Properties

Some ragas were associated with the power to heal, to bring the rains, to melt stone, etc...

“Raga Kedar was believed to cure diseases and melt stones if correctly performed. For example, jailers allegedly used to teach inmates, for an appropriate fee, how to sing raga Kedar. If the stones of the inmate’s cell did not melt, the jailer would claim that the raga had not been performed in its correct form and at the proper time.

The Mallar ragas, were believed to create rain. As pupils were advised by their music masters to perform these ragas only during the monsoon season, rain usually did occur either at once or shortly after the performance.”

The Music of India - William Kaufmann
Ragamala Paintings

In the 16th-19th centuries there were collections of miniature paintings done depicting each raga with a scene and an accompanying poetic description. A set of these depictions were known as ragamala (a garland of ragas).

As the various aspects of individual ragas have changed over time there may not be a one to one correspondence between the earlier artists depictions and the associations with contemporary ragas.

Bilaval

“Preparing for her lover and with jewels on her person, the fair-hipped one, praying ever to her god of love; such is Bilaval, beautiful as the blue lotus.”