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*Rāgā Bhīmpalāsī*

*Rāgā* is a concept that is difficult to compare with the musical traditions of cultures outside of the Hindustani world. What a *rāgā* truly represents is beyond the scales and modes of Western music, and each carries an intrinsic emotional and aesthetic appeal that is intensely specific. There are several defining characteristics of a *rāgā*, including but not limited to the ascending and descending scales it uses, the *vādī* and *samvādī* (commonly labeled “pillar tones”) it uses, the emotions it reflects, the time of day in which it is played, and the ways in which notes interact with one another. The *rāgā* then serves as a foundation upon which the performer improvises and explores. A fundamental aspect of North Indian music centers on the relationship between the tonic (Sa) and the *vādī* of a particular *rāgā*. The drone that is produced in support of the melody emphasizes the tonic, so that the listener always has a point of reference both in relation to Sa as well as to the *vādī* and *samvādī* (Danielou 1968: 22).

Classical music in India is closely connected with God. However, the religion that is associated with the music varies. It is most often considered a part of Hinduism, but is also extensively played by Muslims. *Rāgā* is described as a communication with God, or as a manifestation of the spirit’s essential emotions through music (Ruckert 2004: 18). In a sense, classical performance is a meditation on emotion, and explores the deepest reaches of human feeling to create an aural image of how the artist feels.

The social setting of classical music performance in India is a dynamic aspect of the musical culture, and today is quite different from what it once was. Historically, Hindustani classical music was strictly limited by class and caste, so that only those who belonged to certain hereditary groups were qualified to play for members of the upper classes. By the early 1900s, concerts were being presented to the public in which general audiences could listen, and despite some objection from the upper castes, the social context was revised (Ruckert 2004: 14). There

are still those who object to the public performance of classical music, but overall it has become acceptable to play for most audiences. Today, a wide variety of public and private concerts exists, in settings from house parties to large concert halls. Much of the original aristocratic orientation of the music has disappeared. Through virtuosic players such as Ali Akbar Khan and Ravi Shankar, Hindustani classical performances have become increasingly popular internationally (Ruckert 2004:15).

*Rāgā Bhimpalāsrī* (also called *Bhimpalāsī* or *Bhimpalāshrī*) is an afternoon *rāgā* that belongs to the *Kāfī thāt*. It expresses the emotions of peace, tenderness, pleasure, and touches upon ambition (Danielou 1969: 229). The *vādī* is Ma, and the *samvādī* is Sa. In the ascending scale, Re and Dha are omitted, while the descending scale is heptatonic. Some scholars believe it is really a combination of two *rāgās*, *Bhim* and *Palāsī*. This technique is often used to combine the lower tetrachord of one *rāgā* with the higher tetrachord of another (Wade 1979: 75). The overall character or tone of the *Bhimpalāsrī rāgā* is often described as follows: “with wide lotus eyes and fragrant with celestial flowers, Bhimpalāshrī, the sages tell, sings with her deep voice to the lute. Her lovely form is the embodiment of art” (Danielou 1969: 229; Kaufmann 1968: 363).

Nikhil Banerjee is known as one of the great *sitār* players of the twentieth century. He studied under both Padmavibhushan Allauddin Khan and his son, Ustad Ali Akbar Khan. Banerjee is known for his detailed and virtuosic *rāgā* explorations, and is well known among the connoisseurs of Indian classical music (Banerjee 1992: liner notes). Although Banerjee’s talent earned him a great deal of respect as a musician, he only recorded a handful of performances, so there are few records of his improvisational ability. Among the select recordings that preserve his work is a performance of the *rāgā bhimpalāsrī*. In this performance, Banerjee is

accompanied by Kanai Dutta on the *tāblā*; a *tanpūrā* provides the drone. The piece begins with a prolonged *vīstār ālāp*, which progresses into a slow *rūpāk gāt*, followed by a *masitkhānī gāt* set in a fast *tīntāl* and finishes with an intense *jhāllā*.

Banerjee's choice of *gāt* is very intentional, and is important to how the listener should interpret the piece. The *masitkhānī gāt* is an ancient form that is commonly associated with Indian upper class music. It is known only by a few performers today, and to play such an aged music style requires not only individual talent, but participation in a school of music that possesses knowledge of the form. Banerjee chooses this *gāt* quite possibly because it requires a true mastery over the music to play in such a manner. The *rūpāk gāt* is also a rare style. Most improvisations will stick to even rhythmic patterns, but recently many of the virtuoso players such as Ravi Shankar and Ali Akbar Khan have begun to use odd-beat *tālā* and fractional *tālā* to better explore their musical abilities (Slawek 2000: 194). Banerjee does this, choosing to explore the *bhimpalāsri rāgā* with a *rūpāk tālā*. Additionally, the use of two *gāt* to explore one *rāgā* is uncommon and can be difficult to perform smoothly. This gives some insight into the status of Banerjee as a performer, as well as the prestige that is associated with his approach to exploring *rāgā*. This performance appears to be an unusually difficult piece that is intended to demonstrate Banerjee's artistic abilities.

Banerjee's *ālāp* is complex and fully sets a foundation for his explorations in the later sections. The form of the *ālāp* involves a statement of the general theme, followed by a restatement and exploration of it at the lower pitches of the *sitār*. The following portion moves this exploration into the instrument's mid-range and ends in the upper range, becoming increasingly virtuosic and complex as the improvisation continues. Finally, just before the *tāblā*

enters, Banerjee runs through the entire range of the *rāgā* and then returns to the initial theme for the entrance of the metered section.

In the first *gāt*, Banerjee uses a special meter, *rūpāk tālā* (a seven beat pattern). Within this section, there is a brief introductory segment that has two parts: the *sthāī* and the *antārā*. Banerjee begins by playing the *sthāī* in a clear, single plucked pattern that gradually develops into a double plucked pattern. This is then resolved, after which the *antārā* starts. In the *antārā* Banerjee explores several ways of voicing the instrument, including *mīnd*<sup>1</sup>, *todā*<sup>2</sup>, and a wide range of registers (Slawek 2000: 191). After the *antārā* concludes, he begins to improvise on the *rāgā*.

The first improvisational style that Banerjee uses in the *rūpāk gāt* is a basic *upaj* an improvisation that does not imply any specialized technique; *upaj* can also mean simply “to improvise” (Slawek 2000: 200). Banerjee emphasizes Sa in this style, using primarily the upper register of the *sītār*. Ma is also prominent, but Sa is used more to resolve ideas and to create a basis for each new approach to the improvisation. Also, some light *mīnd* are used to create excitement. This section concludes with a prominent cadence that is marked by increased rhythmic density in the *tāblā*. The next improvisational style Banerjee explores is *todā*. This adds a new layer of intensity to the piece, as well as a thicker texture. He also begins to use the drone strings more often to complicate the sound. In the second half of this improvisation Banerjee stops using the drone strings as well as the *todā* style and begins to pluck the notes individually in order to create a contrasting sound and texture. This is resolved with a strong

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<sup>1</sup> *Mīnd* is a stylistic embellishment; the string being played is either pushed or pulled in order to raise the pitch. These are often called melismas when compared to vocal music (Slawek 2000: 191).

<sup>2</sup> *Todā* is a style of improvisation that involves strumming or plucking each note twice inside the normal subdivision. This helps to create very rapid bravura passages (Slawek 2000: 191).

cadence as in the previous section. In the third improvisational style, Banerjee uses *tān*<sup>3</sup> to further develop the performance. After the conclusion of this section, he moves on to a *gamak*<sup>4</sup> style of improvisation. The next improvisation is a *todā tān*, which is more rapid than the first style, but also emphasizes repeated notes. Sa is especially important here, primarily played in the mid range. In the middle of this improvisational section, emphasis is moved up to Ma, from which a *tihāī*<sup>5</sup> emerges to conclude the idea (Slawek 2000: 201). The next style Banerjee uses involves a fusion of a *sapāt*<sup>6</sup> style with a *gamak* style. This style transitions with a short cadence into a complex *tān* where *savāl-javāb*<sup>7</sup> is used to explore the *rūpāk gāt* one last time (Slawek 2000: 200). The final improvisational style of the *rūpāk gāt* is used to transition into the next *gāt*, consisting of a short *laykāī*<sup>8</sup> section followed by a rapid *sapāt tān* that resolves with the use of a clearly played *tihāī*.

The next section, a *masitkhānī gāt*, is set in *tīntāl* (a sixteen beat pattern). The *masitkhānī gāt* is distinctive in that it contains three primary themes that are used as the basis of improvisation, which also briefly recurs throughout the *gāt*. The first of these is a *sthāī*. At the end of the *sthāī*, Banerjee performs a *mukhrā*<sup>9</sup> in order to transition into a brief improvisation in simple *upaj* style (Slawek 2000: 200). After this he returns to the theme to play the *Manjhā*, the

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<sup>3</sup> *Tān* is a general term for improvisational styles that have a rapid technique. When used alone, *tān* implies a dense note pattern that is very virtuosic (Slawek 2000: 201).

<sup>4</sup> *Gamak* is an improvisational style that involves the use of heavy *mīnd* and note bends or shakes (Slawek 2000: 201).

<sup>5</sup> *Tihāī* is a special improvisational style used at the end of passages to resolve an idea. It involves repeating an idea or phrase in the music three times in order to create tension and then release it in a large cadence (Slawek 2000: 201).

<sup>6</sup> *Sapāt* improvisation uses large scalar runs over an octave in length to create and resolve tension (Slawek 2000: 200).

<sup>7</sup> *Savāl-javāb* is a technique in which the melodic instrument and the *tāblā* alternate short virtuosic rhythmic patterns that get increasingly short in order to display both player's abilities to respond quickly to what they are hearing (Slawek 2000: 200).

<sup>8</sup> *Laykāī* is a type of improvisation that emphasizes the use of rhythmic offbeats and tension to create energy. Often the *sitār* will play alternate rhythms to the *tāblā* (Slawek 2000: 200).

<sup>9</sup> *Mukhrā* is used at the end of an introductory section in *gāt* to move directly into improvisation before the expected point in the form (Slawek 2000: 200).

second portion of the introductory piece, which moves straight into the *antarā* (the third portion). The *antarā* is special in the case of the *masitkhānī gāt* in that it is used as a point of departure for improvisation in a higher range (Slawek 2000: 191). This high pitched passage marks the beginning of the improvised section.

After the high pitched improvisation, Banerjee makes a brief return to the *sthāī* and plays it three times. The next section is an improvisation in *todā* style. After a brief cadence, Banerjee moves on to play in a *sapāt* style, concluding with a *tihāī*. The next section returns to the *todā* style briefly before developing a *laykārī* style to conclude the fourth style of improvisation in this *gāt*. At this point the *antarā* theme is repeated to articulate a strongly accented *laykārī* section. After this last style is resolved, the *sthāī* is played one last time before transitioning into the *jhāllā* section. The *jhāllā*, which usually is a part of the *alāp*, is used here to conclude the *masitkhānī gāt*.<sup>10</sup> The *jhāllā* also concludes the piece in an extremely rhythmically intricate and rapid passage. There is heavy emphasis on the drone strings here and the texture is very dense until the last note, when the *tāblā* and *tanpūrā* exit so that the *sitar* can repeat the *sthāī* one last time.

This performance demonstrates Nikhil Banerjee's mastery of *rāgā*. As Banerjee himself once stated, "My approach to music is very deep. I do not compromise with anybody or anything else in the world. I do not care. I want to really go beyond this materialistic world... not for the sake of enjoyment, entertainment, no. A musician must lift up the souls of the listeners, and take them towards space" (Banerjee 1992: liner notes). This performance truly does lift the listener towards space, as Banerjee intends. That is ultimately what *rāgā* is about, a journey within the soul that reaches out toward divinity.

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<sup>10</sup> It is not uncommon for *masitkhānī gāt* to end with the *jhāllā*, instead of placing this portion at the end of the *alāp*. This is one of the intricacies of the *masitkhānī gāt* that makes it a difficult form to play and interpret (Slawek 2000: 200).

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