

Appreciating Hindustani Music
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Lecture 29
Raga Vistaar of Badhat- Improvisation in Khayal

[Music]. What we heard was an Aalaap in the raag Malkauns. Aalaap is the primary improvisational strategy or aspect or element of improvisation in Hindustani Music. A Khayal presentation has a composition at its heart, but it is primarily about “Raga vistaar” or “Raga Badhat”: these are the expressions we use which are rendered in English as improvisation. That is, a Khayal presentation seeks to elaborate or explore a raag, it seeks the flowering of a raga.

Even though a Khayal presentation revolves around the composition, the composition itself is never the whole presentation. Necessarily, a Khayal presentation necessarily includes variation and other elements that are not pre-composed.

And so, we have the bandish, which is the pre-composed part of the presentation and then we have the vistaar which is not pre-composed but is created spontaneously, on the spur of the movement and this aspect of Khayal presentation as I said has been called improvisation.

Scholars and musicologists have pointed out that it is not entirely appropriate to call what happens in Khayal as improvisation, but we will not get into that here, we will stick to the Hindi word, it is actually a Sanskrit word - vistaar - because that is what we are doing, elaborating upon the raga, exploring its many hues and colours.

So, Alaap is the most central strategy of raga vistaar. And Alaap has a long history.. For instance, the 12th century Sangita Ratnakara of Sarangadeva offers elaborate descriptions of Alaap. In fact, the Sangita Ratnakara makes a distinction between Alaap and Alapti. Alaap, according to it, is a concise presentation of a raga so that all its basic features, that is, all the lakshanas of the raga are revealed whereas, Alapti is a more elaborate artistic performance that is described as progressing in a certain manner, following a certain template. Today's Alaap of Hindustani music is Sarangadeva's Alapti, most scholars opioe this and this is Sarangadeva on Alapti:

“Alapti is described by the experts as richly endowed with melodic contours and ornaments, coloured with vocal ornaments and shadings and full of charming curves.”

Sarangadeva says also that Alapti unfolds in four stages, that is, it is not up to the whim of the performer to present an Alapti in any way. So, there is a mention of moving from the lower registers to the higher ones in the course of Alapti.

Now, Hindustani music, all genres display this feature whether it is Dhrupad or Khayal or instrumental music they start, we start with the mandra, then go into the madhya and then, we go into the tara saptak.

Interestingly, Carnatic Alapana does not necessarily and always display this feature. So, Alaap is as I said the primary strategy of vistaar in Hindustani music and there are other aspects, other strategies too, other ways too that the raga is explored.

These include Bol Alaap or Bol Baant in which the text of the composition is used. We also have taan which is actually used only in Khayal and instrumental music not in Dhrupad.

And we have sargam or singing or exploring the raga using the swaras actually uttering the swaras and all this is done in a very stylized way, typically in very specific ways with of course, considerable room for artistry.

Now, we will take a look at all these various aspects of raga vistaar in this video, first Alaap. In Alaap, the raga is explored using vowels like aaa or eeee or even meaningless syllables like ridanana or tanana etcetera, you would have noticed it in the Alaap that we heard.

Now in Khayal, most of the Alaap is done within the setting of the composition; that is, the composition is first rendered, the Alaap is performed with tala, that is within the Avartanas. So, in that sense, we might say that Alaap is Nibaddha that is, it is bound in tala because it happens within the Avartanas. But it is not tied down in tala, just like the Vilambit Khayal itself and so, it has an Anibaddha feeling.

Whereas, in Dhrupad in Carnatic music, Alaap is performed before the composition. So, in Dhrupad, the complete Alaap, a very very elaborate Alaap is performed before the composition and Alaap here is clearly Anibaddha, it is not bound. The Alaap that we heard in the beginning of this video was in the Khayal idiom, but it has links, this way of singing Alaap has links to the Dhrupad style.

In Khayal, a lengthy Alaap without the Bandish or before the Bandish is rarely performed today, though some older schools of Khayal, especially the Agra school do have this practice. This is drawn from the Dhrupad style. And you would also have noticed the use of syllables ridananana etcetera and this brings a certain pulsation to the music and this again is typical of Dhrupad Alaap as we will see in the segment on Dhrupad later.

Now, this kind of Alaap, an extensive Alaap before a Bandish is rarely performed these days in Khayal, it was performed a few decades ago, but today, these days Khayal predominantly has Alaap only within the Bandish, after the Bandish is rendered.

And again, the Alaap is typically built-up step by step from the lower range to the higher range exploring each region, each swara through various phrases. So, I will demonstrate around the Bandish that you have heard before: this is in Shuddha Sarang and Vilambit Teentaal naiyaa mori paar karo.

So, the seamless quality is maintained even in Alaap, you flow between the matras of the taal. [Music] of course, I have speeded up the Alaap; Alaap is done in a much more leisurely way and more explorations around each area. For demonstration I have just taken up two or three areas.

The second element of raga vistaar is using the text of the composition and this is done in various ways. First, we have what is called Bol Alaap. So, this is actually Alaap, in feel it sounds like Alaap, but instead of just having aaa or eeee, the actual words of the composition are used.

So, in this case, it will have the structure, the melodic contours, the melodic flow of Alaap, but instead of aaa, we have the words of the composition like in this case, it will be [Music] or [Music] and so on.

Bol Alaap so, use the words of the text [Music]. It is up to the performer what words they want to use naiyaa mori paro [Music] [Music].

This is called Bol Alaap which again has a loose setting in taal; Bol Alaap, all Alaap in the Khayal idiom is incorporated into the Avartanas, into the tala cycles.

Then, we have Bol Laya or Bol Baant. Here again, the text - Bol means words right, speech Bol in this context is the text. So, Bol Laya or Bol Baant in this what happens is there is

rhythmic play, there is considerable rhythmic complexity while using the words of the composition.

So, Bol Baant uses words or text and rhythm or meter and is also within the Taal cycle and we also have Bol Taan. So, Taan is fast melodic runs and you use the words of the text while delivering fast runs and that becomes Bol Taan.

The same words used with some rhythmic effect become Bol Baant and with faster melodic runs becomes Bol Taan. [Music] it is Bol Taan [Music]. Then, we have sargam. Sargam is actually sa re ga ma pa sa re ga ma pa dha ni, these are sargam. Now, in this kind of vistaar, the solfa syllables that sa re ga ma etcetera are used and you know that many musicians, many schools of music do not prefer this kind of, this aspect of vistaar.

Sargam involves using the actual, the solfa syllables right, sa re ma pa in this case [Music].

So, this is also part of exploration of the raga, one strategy of improvisation [Music].

And then, we have as I said Taans, Taans are a highlight of any Khayal performance because they can be dazzling. So, rather than a you know slow Alaap, intense Alaap, when you have a fast melodic run it is more impactful. Taans can be very very exciting, a very exciting aspect of the of a Khayal performance and Taans, there are you know various patterns, various kinds of Taans and so on.

Taan's are fast melodic runs and there are various patterns that musicians practice and they render it at various speeds also. [Music], this is slower Taan [Music].

So, these actually are broad categories or broad ways in which vistaar happens and how these are actually translated into performance, how is Alaap done or how is Bol Baant done or Bol Laya done, this varies widely from school to school and musician to musician and there is also some variability as regards the relative importance of these various elements. Some schools are more Alaap oriented and do not engage much with the text of the song, they do not have much use for rhythmic play also, they are mostly, their entire thrust is on tuneful Alaap. There are schools as I said that completely avoid sargam, there are quite a few of them.

And the two elements of vistaar that all schools do use are Alaap and Taan, I mean I am talking about Khayal of course, all schools of Khayal they do use Alaap and Taan, but there are some schools they do not use Bol Alaap at all, there are some schools they do not engage much with Bol Laya and so on and Dhrupad as I mentioned earlier, does not include taan or sargam, it only has Alaap and Bol Baant or Bol Laya.

Now, let us listen to Bhuvanesh Komkali's rendition of a composition in Raag Yaman and the vistaar. As I said a composition, Khayal composition is never presented just like that, it is always accompanied with some vistaar and so, here the composition itself is full of taans and the vistaar also proceeds with taan as the mainstay.

[Music].