

Appreciating Hindustani Music
Dr.Lakshmi Sreeram
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras

Lecture 49
The Sarod

Namaskar. My name is Suresh Vyas, I am a sarod player of Senia Maihar Gharana, I am here to talk about the history, evolution and techniques of sarod playing. Before we go into those details, I would like to begin by introducing the sarod to you. This will help you appreciate the changes that have taken place along with the whole history of the instrument. Let me begin with introducing the sarod to you. The sarod as you see today is made up of one piece of wood, you can see this is entirely one piece of wood.

On top of the wood is placed the metal plate which is made of mild steel. A lot of people put a tin coating or a chromium coating on this, I have not done it; so, it is a little dull. Below this steel plate is this parchment which is made of a baby goat skin, it is very thin, after placing this you place the bridges. There are three bridges on the sarod: 1, 2 and 3.

After the bridges placed you start fixing the strings, the strings are held by this piece over here made of brass. It is called the langot which has these hooks on which it is placed. Now, the way the strings are fixed, you can see there is crisscross strings going, this helps in holding the bridge in place. The bridge is not stuck like in the sitar or the tanpura; so, it is used.

So, it has to be pressed down by the strings and for that the tension has to be in such a way that it stays in the center. Now, there are totally 25 strings on the sarod of which there are 15 called tarafs or sympathetic strings, they are not played. They are tuned according to the raag that is going to be played.

And, they will resonate on their own when a particular note is played. Besides that there are totally 8 strings over here of which 4 strings are the string that we actually play the melody on which are Ma [Music] Sa [Music] Pa [Music] and Sa [Music]. There are three strings tuned to the Sa; one to the [Music] basic tonic and two to the octave [Music]. These are used for rhythm and to give tone.

Now, these three strings are tuned to the main notes of a raag and they pass over this bridge which is a flat bridge, unlike the other bridges which are sharp. This is not only flat, it has a slight curvature which gives it a Javari sound, that is why they are called Javari strings.

Javari sound is the buzz sound that we get in tanpura and sitar. So, you just hear and see it [Music], see different from this sound [Music], which is a bit sharper sound. Now, here this is a tumba, this brass piece is called the tumba which is hollow.

It is connected to the air column inside, the whole instrument is hollow and that hollow is connected with this hollow. So, the sound comes out of the tumba and it stays in for a longer period of time, that adds to the sustenance and the volume of the instrument. Besides this, I will talk about the jawa.

Now, this jawa is made of a coconut shell. We shape it out of a coconut shell and polish it and then we add this gauge with wax in it, this helps in gripping it [Music]. This is the effect of this jawa, earlier different jawa was used, but that changed later on; maybe in 1920s or 30s, [Music] that is about the instrument.

We will now talk about the history of the sarod. The sarod as you see here is a very recent instrument, it is not an instrument with any mythical or mystical past. It emerged as a distinctly identifiable instrument in the early 19th century, which is pretty recent compared to the history of Indian classical music.

Besides, available literature on the subject is sparse as well as it can be confusing and at times quite conflicting. Music being an oral tradition in India, even the history of music is transferred orally. This sometimes can lead to misrepresentation and misinformation. Also sometimes the information is given to favour a particular gharana or a particular person. History on the basis of facts and research is very rarely recorded in Indian music. However, in the recent past some scholars from all over the world have put together some facts on the basis of some documented records, some museum pieces and some verbal communications with musicians with a long lineage. Some of the theories that emerged from this research are as follows.

One theory about the origin of sarod is mentioned in the book Historical Development of Music by Swami Pragyand. He mentioned that a sarod-like instrument was seen in the Champa caves in Madhya Pradesh between the 1st and 2nd century AD. And in Amaravati in the 2nd and 3rd century BC. A sarod like veena was also seen in Gandhara caves, making claims that the sarod has descended from these instruments that are depicted in the illustrations. Hence, it is totally an indigenous instrument.

The other theory, the second theory, was proposed by Raja S M Tagore in his book Yantra Kosh. He proposes that a sarod like veena was existent. It was called Sharadiya veena, it was played by the sage Sharada and this Sharadiya veena is the predecessor of the current sarod. Lalmani Mishra opines in his book Bhartiya Sangeet Vadya, that the sarod is a combination of the ancient chitravina and the medieval rabab and the modern sur singar. In popular tradition rabab or what is also called a Dhrupad rabab or Seniya rabab is very often traced to the great near Tansen of Akbar's court. Paintings of the 17th century show Tansen and others of his time playing this type of rabab. Tansen's descendant through his son Bilas Khan is linked to the Seniya rabab. Seniya rabab belongs to ... Seniya rabab and the been influenced the technique of music of sursingar, sitar and sarod. The Seniya rabab had nearly disappeared by the 19th century, although it was played by some artists like Muhammad Ali Khan of Gaya, who was the son of the famous Basat Khan and Allauddin Khan saab, disciple of Rampur's Wazir Khan saab of Tansen lineage. In modern oral tradition, the Afghani or the Kabuli rabab is considered to have to have transformed into the sarod. The Kabuli rabab was carried by traders and warriors from Northwest of India which is roughly the location of Afghanistan.

This rabab is used for entertainment and even as a means of motivating the warriors during war, by singing songs of valour and bravery. Later some musicians who stayed back in central and northern India started learning music from the existing masters of this music. Over a period of time, they realized that their rabab was not compatible with the music that they were learning.

So, they had to restructure the rabab and it slowly transformed into the current sarod. Among these many conflicting and contested histories of the sarod, there is one that attributes its invention to Ghulam Ali Khan who died in 1850. On record, Ghulam Ali is the earliest person associated with the instrument called sarod. It is likely that he made a few changes in the rabab and that rabab, this new instrument, that he transformed - he called the sarod.

It must be noted that the folk instrument Kabuli rabab is still a very popular instrument in Afghanistan right, even Persia and even Kashmir; these theories may or may not enlighten

us on the origin of the sarod. But, one thing is very much established that the sarod came into existence in the 19th century, in the early 19th century. Besides, you must always remember that Hindustani music is a live art form and it is continuously evolving and changing.

And, as the music evolves and changes even the instruments have to undergo some changes to accommodate the new features of music. There is a lot of research going on on this sarod even today, with Indian music having travelled all over the world, globally there is a lot of research to improve the sound and the design of the sarod. In this section, we will talk about the modifications made to sarod by different masters over a period of time.

Hard evidence of stages of evolution of the sarod is quite limited, most of the evidence we have collected from drawings and descriptions of the sarod by colonial, administrators and museum pieces. Modification took place over a period of time along with the changes in the music and the milieu in which the music was performed.

Recent research by scholars on the modification of the sarod throws up the following facts. In 1864, a catalogue of musical instruments by Meadow Taylor described the instrument sarod. In 1889, the sarod was exhibited in the Metropolitan Museum New York; that sarod did not have a metallic plate. Later Naimatullah Khan saab, who lived from 1816 to 1911, introduced the metal plate on the modern sarod as it is recognized today.

This indicates the influence of the sursingar which had a metal plate and metal strings on the design of the sarod. Abdullah Khan, who lived from 1843 to 1926, a very influential figure in the development of sarod in West Bengal, experimented and brought about several changes to the design of the sarod over a period of his long career; spanning from late 19th century to early 20th century.

About 100 years after the birth of the first sarod in the 1920s and 30s, there was a quantum leap in the capability and particularly the sound of the sarod. This prominent and most influential change was made by changing the shape, the size and the material of the instrument.

This was done by Ustad Allauddin Khan saab and his brother and instrument maker Ustad Ayet Ali Khan saab. The changes that are made by Ustad Allauddin Khan saab are documented, the changes he made in the wood are as follows. The earlier sarods were made of either teak wood or walnut wood. There are still some sarods which use teak wood, the timbre of that wood was very different. It was good for the kind of music that was played at that time which was influenced by the rabab.

So, it had a lot more (Refer Time: 12:51), a lot of right hand work. So, it did not need a lot of sustain. Allauddin Khan saab who learned from the Dhrupad style in the Tansen School of Music from Usad Wazir Khan saab, wanted to perform or play that music, the Dhrupad music on the sarod which needed it to be closer to the human voice and a mellow sound for the Alap to flow in a very fluid manner. So, he changed the wood to a wood called tun locally, it is called Indian Mahogany.

It is a much softer wood, red in colour and mainly available in the region of Assam. Allauddin Khan saab also changed the shape of the sarod. The earlier sarod had an oblong belly which he changed to a round one, the diameter used to be about 7 to 8 inches, he changed it to 11 inches. This increased the sustenance of sound and the richness of sound. The sarod which is handcrafted out of a single piece of wood, the increase in the shape and size really enhance the nuances of Indian music.

The edge of the belly used to be very sharp earlier; so, you could not play for a long time because the circulation would stop. So, Allauddin Khan saab curved the edge of the belly. This not only made it easier to play, but also enriched the sound of the sarod. Allauddin

Khan saab changed the number of strings on the sarod from 17 to 25, this increased its capacity to play multiple raags, to play raags with complex scales.

Even today there are sarods with less than 25 strings. He added 2 chikaris, earlier sarods had only 1 chikari, even today there are sarods with 1 chikari. He increased the tarafs from 7 to 9, earlier sarod had 7 or 9 tarafs, today there are 15 strings. This made it possible to play raags with multiple notes, komal and tivra, komal or shuddh or the same note in the same raag. Also, it helps when you are playing music outside classical music, where you have to change scale.

So, it becomes very easy, you do not have to keep tuning the tarafs all the time. The other change that Allaiddin Khan saab made was to the bridges. Now, as you have already heard that there are 3 bridges on the sarod; he added 4 strings with other jawari things which I have already spoken about, for that he accommodated an extra small flat bridge that is not there in older sarods, even currently there are sarods who do not have that outside the Maihar Gharana.

Because of 25 strings he had to make one more layer of passage of strings on the bridge and that was quite an engineering feat. With all these bridges and all these strings, the richness of the sound is absolutely amazing. He added the tumba, the brass tumba which was not there in earlier sarods. This adds to the richness and also importantly to the sustenance of the sound.

All these qualities were needed because he was trying to translate Dhrupad music, Dhrupad gayaki of the Tansen's school, onto the sarod, which was not possible in the earlier instruments. Now, we will come to the important playing instrument called the jawa. Earlier the jawa used to be made of metal, just like the mizrab; it was similar to the mizrab which was pressed and played by the sarod player which was ok then.

Because the strings were cat gut strings, for that having a metallic jawa was a good idea, but when the sarod transformed and you started putting metal strings, metal against metal was not a very good sound. So, Allaiddin Khan saab was working very hard to use different materials. He tried materials like ivory, he tried bone, he tried wood and finally, settled for a coconut shell.

Today every sarod player is using a coconut shell as a jawa. This information indicates that the transformation of the sarod is very fluid, it keeps changing as the music changes and I am sure it will continue to change forever. At present there are 4 gharanas of sarod.

Although the basic structure of this sarod is similar, there is a difference in the material and the technique of play. The 4 gharanas are number 1: Shahjahanpur Gharana, it was founded by Inayat Khan - Inayat Ali Khan. Prominent musicians of this gharana are Abdulla Khan, Muhammed Amir Khan, Radhika Mohan Maitra and Buddhadev Das Gupta. The second gharana is Lucknow Gharana which was founded by Niamatullah Khan saab; prominent musicians of this gharana are Umar Khan, Ilyas Khan and Irfan Khan.

The third gharana of sarod is Gwalior Gharana or Bangash Gharana. It was founded by Gulham Ali Khan. Prominent players are Ustad Hafiz Ali Khan and Amjad Ali Khan. The fourth gharana of sarod is Senia Maihar Gharana or just Maihar Gharana, founded by Ustad Allaiddin Khan saab. Prominent maestros of this gharana are Ali Akbar Khan saab, Timir Baran. Bahadur Khan. Aashish Khan.

Now, we will talk about the very important aspect of Indian music called ornamentations. It is called alankar or alankara which in Sanskrit means beauty, beautification. Now, as you know music has three basic elements: melody, rhythm and harmony. Indian music uses only melody and rhythm, harmony is not used in Indian classical music. Melody is a sequence of notes or a succession of notes, when played by itself it can be quite dry and unnecessary.

To add beauty, Western classical music uses harmony, multiple instruments are played behind the basic melody to enhance the beauty of that melody. In Indian music, we use a different technique altogether, we add alankaras or ornamentations of the notes. There is never a moment where Indian classical music will be singing a single note or a sequence of notes staccato, there is always some amount of ornamentation added to add beauty, to add the aesthetics and these alankaras also decide the character of raag very often.

So, the same alankara cannot be used randomly in a raag. There is a system, there is the order, there is the proper science behind it. Now, we will try to talk, I will try to explain some of the alankaras that are used. The most common and the most known alankara is meend. meend is gliding from one note to another. I will demonstrate a meend to you.

So, we can have an arohan meend or avarohan meend, you can even have a complex mix of arohan or avarohan meend. I will just demonstrate all these meend. First arohan meend [Music], this could be 2 notes, 3 notes or many more notes [Music], avarohan meend [Music], now the combination note [Music] that is the meend. Now, another ornamentation of alankara is called kan in vocal music.

In instrumental music, we generally call it krintan. Krintan is like a grace note where the first note is very subtle, played for a shorter period of time. The main note is played for a longer period of time, you can have krintans of 2 notes, 3 notes or even 4 notes sections. So, a simple krintan of 2 notes would be [Music], 3 notes [Music]. Another ornamentation or alankara is the jamjama which is similar to the krintan.

In this you play more krintan in the same amount of time in quick succession, to give you an example [Music]. You can have even more than that [Music]. Then there is one more ornamentation called andolan. Andolan is when you oscillate around the note. Now, there is a system about how you do it, you cannot randomly oscillate any note at any point.

For example, pancham and Sa there should not be any andolan because they are achala notes, but the other notes also sometimes - the amount of andolan decides the raag that you are playing. So, if you are playing Darbari Kanada, your komal ghandar andolan will be very different, when you are playing a raag with the same scale like (Refer Time: 22:53).

So, I will just demonstrate a little andolans. This is tuned to (raga) Yaman so, I will do it in Yaman. [Music]. Now, lastly I will talk about an andolan called gamak. Gamak is when you played meend between 2 notes and quick successions, now there are two kinds of gamaks. The most common is the arohan gamak which is like this [Music], but we even have an avarohan gamak.

So, although you are going in arohan, but the gamak is avarohan [Music]. So, these are the main alankaras that I use. There are many more, but I am demonstrating a few most important ones. In conclusion, I would like to say that the ocean of Hindustani classical music is vast and in my short presentation, I have tried to touch upon the basic elements of sarod and the music that it emulates.

The sarod as you see in here today and experience today is modified and refined with experimentations of the great masters. Extraordinary grace, infinite delicacy and resounding depth in sound are among the exceptional features of this instrument, that makes it such a popular instrument for Hindustani classical music.

Its ability to play gamak, meend, krintan and other nuances provides splendid possibilities for rendition of raag. At present the sarod has evolved over centuries into the present shape, tone and construct and it is a fine instrument for the exposition of the fine nuances and the grandness of Hindustani classical music. [Music].