The Oral in Writing: Early Indian Musical Notations

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The oral in writing: early Indian musical notations

It is generally agreed that written musical notation plays a relatively insignificant part in the history and practice of music in South Asia. Indian music is dependent to a large extent on oral transmission, memorization and improvisation; and although these processes may be assisted by various systems of 'oral notation', for drums, dance and melody, these oral systems serve a mnemonic function, and are seldom written down. Scholars of Indian music rarely consider them as falling into the category of 'notation', or meriting serious consideration as such. While it is acknowledged that a number of anthologies of compositions, and other didactic works, have been published during the last hundred years, using a solmization system of melodic notation, the compositions current in oral tradition are regarded as more authoritative, and the notations as lacking essential information about ornamentation. Historical antecedents for such collections are hardly recognized. Indian musicians and musicologists, and Western musicologists interested in India, are largely agreed that there does not exist any significant historical record for Indian music in the form of notated compositions from the pre-modern period.

There are good reasons for this view. Indian culture has always been at best ambivalent, and often openly hostile, in its attitude to writing, especially where the transmission of particularly sacred texts or valuable teachings is concerned. The Western belief that memory is short-term, limited in capacity, and treacherously fallible, whereas writing is comparatively long-term and reliable, is reversed in India: there, collective memory can transmit a complex tradition with astonishing accuracy over centuries, whereas writing is perishable and leads to corruption, forgetfulness, or misuse. As Daniel Neuman has expressed it:

The medium for the guru's message is not a written system (notations are considered ineffective for any but the most rudimentary lessons) but his own disciples, their message and remembrance ... ustāds typically feel that notations are either harmful or at best useful only as mnemonic devices for learning basic structures, and that real learning must be received orally.1

The teacher (guru, ustād) is of primary importance in both religious and musical traditions: as the recipient of oral tradition—the anādi-sampradāya or 'beginningless tradition'—he has access to a wisdom surpassing anything that could be learned from experience, enquiry, or books. Nothing could be more alien to Indian concepts than Guido d'Arezzo's advocacy of staff notation (by definition a written notation), on the grounds that it enables pupils to sing correctly by themselves,
without a master. In India, 'the knowledge learned from a teacher helps one best achieve his goals'.

It would be a mistake, however, to overlook the importance of notation in Indian musical tradition, merely because its significance and functions are different from those of Western notation. Orally articulated symbols can constitute a sophisticated system for representing music, and can convey various types of information about music, including historical information. Whole musical repertories, especially repertories for drums such as the North Indian tabla, are encoded and memorized in syllables; the syllables can indicate not only the strokes to be played, but also, for example, whether the composition originated on the tabla or has been adapted from some other instrument, which has implications for the style in which the composition should be rendered. Notation syllables are used orally in the teaching process as a means of communication and an aid to memory; rhythmic recitation of drum syllables, or melodic vocal improvisation using solmization syllables, can be an important ingredient of performance in the classical traditions.

The distinction between oral and written notation may be more apparent than real in South Asia. Despite the primary reliance on oral tradition, writing has a long history in India, going back to the Indus Valley script of the third millennium BC. Indian oral notations use speech-syllables; Indian alphabets are syllabic and phonetic (that is, each written symbol represents the phonetic value of a complete syllable). It is thus a short step from an oral to written notation, requiring only literacy and an act of will on the writer's part; the symbols he needs to represent music on paper (or palm-leaf, or stone) are already to hand in the locally current writing-system. The vast majority of examples of written or printed notation, in India are written representations of oral notation, with a minimum of additional symbols.

For all we know, music writing may therefore be as old as writing itself in India. However, the wholesale destruction of ancient manuscripts has deprived us of any examples earlier than the Nātyaśāstra, an encyclopaedic treatise on drama, dance and music compiled in the first few centuries AD, and the earliest surviving theoretical work on these subjects; chapter 33 of this text contains examples of a syllabic notation for drums. In the period following the production of this seminal work—roughly from the 7th to the 13th centuries—a number of treatises were written in Sanskrit in which the theory of music was further developed. A major preoccupation was the definition and classification of melodic modes or rāgas. Several of the most important extant treatises include melodies illustrating these rāgas, notated in a simple melodic solmization that has remained virtually unchanged down to modern times. After the 13th century the writing of music treatises did not cease, but the musical system underwent many changes as a result of influences from Islamic Central and West Asia, and it is not until the 17th century that we find music notation used again to any significant extent.

The early treatises provide us with a surprisingly extensive body of notated music. But here the question of the status of the examples arises: how far do they represent musical practice, and how far the invention or intervention of theorists? To what extent are they the result of oral or literate processes of composition and adaptation? In the surviving sources of the pre-Islamic period the standard practice was for each theorist to copy his examples from previously existing written sources. Where this chain of copying began is unknown, but a close connection at source with a tradition of performance seems likely. This is suggested both by the notation system, which bears all the hallmarks of an oral mnemonic system, and by the style and structure of the melodies themselves.

A characteristic of oral notations in India is that they tend to capture fully only one parameter of the music: in melodic notation, the sequence of basic pitches, without detailed indications of ornamentation, rhythm, or even octave register; in drum notations, the sequence of sonorities (produced by different techniques of striking the drum-heads), without precise indication of rhythm. One reason this can be so is that in oral transmission the notation will be 'performed' in such a way that at least some of what is missing is supplied: melodic notation can be sung with the necessary rhythm and octave register; drum notation can be recited in the correct rhythm. Such notations are never intended
to replace or precede demonstration and oral instruction, only to reinforce it; their limitations become problematic only when they are divorced, through writing, from the oral tradition of which they are an integral part.

In the melodic notation adopted by pre-Islamic theoretical sources, the degrees of a heptatonic general scale are denoted by seven syllables: sa, ri, ga, ma, pa, dha, ni (ex.1). Occasional sharpening of the third and seventh degrees is not normally reflected in the notation, though the melodic rules for this musica ficta are known. There is no fixed standard pitch—the equation of sa with C here is conventional but arbitrary—and the notation is independent of mode, in the sense that any scale-degree can in principle act as the dominant or final of a rāga. (In practice many early rāgas took sa as their tonic, and in later centuries all rāgas were transposed to this degree, which now functions as a 'system tonic' and is prolonged as a drone.)

The seven solmization syllables are abbreviations of the full Sanskrit note-names (ex.1). The forms sa, ri and dha, however, indicate that they originated in oral, vernacular usage rather than in written, Sanskrit texts. If they were merely a convention of writing, sadja would abbreviate to sa, rśabha to ri, and dhaivata to dhai. Two rhythmic values are represented, in most sources, by short and long vowels—thus sa and sā, ri and rī etc. In metrical melodies the long syllable represents one beat, a short syllable half a beat or less; but in non-metrical melodies the relationship between long and short is apparently more flexible.

These oral mnemonic symbols are used in the early treatises with remarkably few additional signs. Different octave registers may be indicated by a dot or a short vertical line above the character. In written language the superscript dot indicates a nasalization of the vowel, which could conceivably have been articulated orally when singing notation; but the vertical line is an accent that could not have been rendered as such when singing, and is thus purely a graphic resource. Not surprisingly it is of very rare occurrence. Where these octave signs are used at all they are usually quite haphazard and inconsistent; copyists have omitted, misplaced and confused them to such an extent that they cannot be taken as a guide to transcription. The theorists also had special symbols at their disposal which they could have used to clarify the rhythmic ambiguities of the pitch notation. But for the most part they do not do so: the examples are presented as little more than strings of solmization syllables, with occasional indications of rhythmic or structural division. Rhythmic division becomes more consistent in the case of metrical songs with underlaid song-text, but the majority of examples are non-metrical, textless melodies of the type called ālāpa (of which more later). The very limitations of the notation system, though they render interpretation more difficult, point to an origin in the oral tradition.

The earliest example of musical notation to survive in India is paradoxically the least typical, and seems to indicate a more than usually complex relationship between oral and literate composition; by comparison with it, the oral character of later examples emerges the more clearly. The large musical document inscribed on a rock-face at Kudumiyāmalai, near Puḍukottai in Tamil Nadu, South India, is dated to the 7th or 8th century AD. It comprises seven extended melodies in the seven earliest-known rāgas. Although it is inscribed at a religious site, and may refer to music used in ritual at that site, the purpose of the inscription is explicitly didactic: in a colophon the author, an anonymous king, states that it is 'for the benefit of pupils'. He names his own guru, one Rudrācārya, who may actually have been the composer or editor of the music, but is not otherwise known to history; unfortunately the king modestly does not identify himself, hence the uncertain dating. It is possible that he was the Pallava ruler Mahendravarman I (c.600–30).

Each section of the notation is attributed to a specific mode, and there seems little doubt that the
purpose of the inscription is primarily to teach the characteristic structure and melodic motifs of each mode. In this respect the inscription is in line with later treatises, where again notation is used in a didactic context for purposes of rāga-definition.

In some respects, however, the inscription is unique. Most obvious is the system of vowel-modifications applied to standard solmization syllables. Whereas other sources employ, for example, the single syllable sa to denote the first degree of the standard heptatonic octave-scale, here the syllables sa, si, su and se are used, in different contexts; the same vowel-modifications (-a, -i, -u, -e) are applied to all the solmization syllables. I have argued elsewhere that these vowel-modifications determine the directional movement of the melody up or down between four notional pitch-levels (indicated by the four different vowel-modifications); an example of the way the notation works is shown in ex.2. The octave register of successive pitches is also specified by means of superscript dots, which mark pitches that fall into the lower octave of a two-octave range; these octave signs are employed quite consistently (though there is a rare exception at the beginning of ex.2), whereas in later sources they occur almost at random. A further unique feature is that the sharpened third and seventh (E♯ and B♯, taking C as sa), which constituted a form of musica ficta at this period, are here distinguished with special syllabic symbols (a and ka respectively, with -u and -e vowel-modifications). The basis of the vowel-notation device may be oral, for it has been pointed out that the allocation of vowels to pitch-levels in part respects the ‘second-formant principle’ inherent in many oral notation systems. According to this principle, vowels with a high second formant (e.g. i) are associated with high musical pitches, those with a low second formant (e.g. u) with low musical pitches, and those with intermediate second formants (e.g. a, e) with musical pitches between the extremes of high and low. At Kudumiyāmalai the association of -i and -u with high and low pitch-levels respectively exemplifies the second-formant principle. The same principle is also reflected in the written forms of these two vowels, which in the Pallava-grantha script of the inscription are denoted by a superscript loop and a subscript hook respectively (illus. 2); -e and -a are written without any clear directional implications, and refer to medial levels of pitch (their order is reversed according to the second-formant principle). Most other Indian scripts use similar directional signs for the -u and -i vowels, suggesting that an appreciation of the second-formant principle is deeply embedded in Indian literate culture. One cannot say, however, that the use of these vowels in accordance with the second-formant principle at Kudumiyāmalai is necessarily a direct consequence of their sounds; writing may also have played a part.

The didactic purpose of the inscription is reflected in its musical structure and style. Each line of notation presents a relentless sequence of four-note cells,
each rhythmically identical, each melodically unique, except that the final note in successive cells is the same pitch-class throughout the line. Each rāga-section comprises between four and seven lines, each line taking a different pitch-class for measure-final. In later treatises a similar kind of melody or melodic exercise is described, in which the sequence of melodic cells is organized according to a mathematical principle, whereby all possible permutations of a given set of pitches are derived, in logical sequence and without repetition. This method, called svara-prastāra or khaṇḍa-meru, is still memorized and practised as an exercise by some musicians; like bell-ringers, the ancient theorists recognized a total of 5,040 permutations of the seven degrees of the octave. The inscription, however, is not governed by any such mathematical formula. Instead, it demonstrates the melodic characteristics of different modes—their dominants and finals, strong, weak and omitted notes, movement of auxiliaries, and typical melodic motifs. It is the earliest surviving example in South Asia, and possibly in the world, of the use of music writing for the purposes of modal analysis and exemplification.

We can only speculate about the genesis of this remarkable document, but it seems to have been a process in which the use of writing played a formative part, despite the background of oral tradition. The seven modes of the inscription were no doubt current in oral tradition, though probably somewhat old-fashioned by the 8th century; there are references to them in both technical and non-technical literature of the period. The notation has many ‘oral’ characteristics—the use of syllabic pitch-symbols, the absence of additional signs for rhythm or ornamentation, the partial observance of the second-formant principle in the association of vowels with relative pitch. But in structure the melodies are, as we have seen, didactic and analytical, and the use of vowels to denote movement between levels of relative pitch, which may owe something to their appearance in written script, has no parallel in later oral tradition.

Further evidence for ‘literate process’ in the formulation of the Kuṭumiyaṁalai music can be seen in the absence of repetition at any level, and in the rather disjunct contour of the melodic line. These stylistic features are interdependent, and are both partly due to the vowel notation. Although the majority of intervals are of a 5th or less, there is a striking number of unexpectedly wide leaps, including octaves and still wider intervals, which pose something of an obstacle to vocal or instrumental performance. These occur predominantly at two points: between notes 2 and 3 of a four-note cell, and between the final note of one cell and the first note of the next (the latter is the only point at which octave leaps occur). This consistent distribution, and the fact that a leap up or down is often compensated for by a subsequent leap in the opposite direction, make
Ex.3 The effect of the vowel notation on melodic contour and repetition in the Kudumiyāmalai Inscription: (a) the notation (line 28, bars 9-16) read as if without vowels; (b) the notation read taking the vowels into account. The bracketed groups of notes indicate: 1 dissimilation of repeated two-note motif; 2 dissimilation of unison; 3 dissimilation of repeated four-note measure; 4 ? transposition due to rotation of measure-initial vowels. The linked boxes around the vowels at the bottom indicate the rotation of measure-initial vowels.

it unlikely that wide intervals are simply the result of errors in the notation
(or in our interpretation of it). Rather, it seems that the leaps are an intended product of the vowel-notation. If we ignore the vowels, the notation can be read as a relatively conjunct melody (e.g. ex.3a); but in this reading, there is repetition of four-note cells, two-note motifs (e.g. D–C–D–C), and individual pitches (repeated as the final note of one cell and the first of the next, though not within any cell). Such repetition may well have been typical of melodies in the oral tradition, but it is quite foreign to the theoretical and didactic svara-prastāra technique of pitch-permutation, which seems to have been taken as a model by the author of the inscription: in svara-prastāra repetition is avoided at all levels. The vowel element of the Kudumiyāmalai notation almost entirely eliminates such repetition by transposing individual pitches, two-note motifs and four-note cells an octave higher or lower (ex.3b). It also consistently eliminates repetition of the same pitch ‘across the bar-line’, by introducing an octave leap in all such cases. There are additional leaps that cannot be accounted for on these grounds alone, but these appear to be due to a further feature of the vowel notation, namely a rotation of vowels applied to the initial pitches of successive cells (ex.3b)—though it is not clear why this rotation should have been desired. Thus, both the disjunct contour of the Kudumiyāmalai melodies, and the almost complete absence of literal repetition, result from the way the vowel-notation has been applied to a melodic line that might otherwise have been more conjunct and more repetitive—and hence, no doubt, closer in character to melodies in the oral tradition. We may begin to suspect the activities of an editor, whose use of writing enabled him to modify a pre-existing (written or oral) set of melodies in accordance with particular stylistic and structural objectives.

Since the Kudumiyāmalai Inscription is the earliest example of melodic notation to have survived in India, we must look to sources of a later period for examples that reflect the oral tradition more directly. The treatise Saṅgītaratnakāra or ‘Ocean of Music’, written by Saṅgadeva in the first half of the 13th century, is the best-preserved and most important of these. By his own account Saṅgadeva was Chief Accountant at the court of Siṁhala II of Devagiri (ruled 1210–47). The Yādava dynasty of Devagiri (modern Daulatabad, a ruined city that one passes on the road from Aurangabad to the caves of Ellora) were powerful local rulers who held sway over a sizable area of west-central India from c.1150 until their conquest by the Muslim Sultan of Delhi, Ala’uddin Khilji, in 1294. They attracted scholars, artists and writers from many parts of India to their court, including Saṅgadeva’s grandfather Bhāskara, a famous medical practitioner and writer from Kashmir.

Saṅgadeva’s intention in writing the Saṅgītaratnakāra was partly to synthesize and interpret the large body of theoretical literature on music that had come into existence by his time, and partly to extend
the existing theoretical systems to include musical forms and practices current in his own day. The majority of notated melodies in this work are illustrations to the second chapter, on rāga. Fifty-two rāgas are defined verbally and illustrated with notated melodies—at least two melodies each. The majority of the melodies are non-metrical, textless, apparently instrumental melodies, but for the 30 oldest rāgas, a final melody is added in the form of a metrical song with text in Sanskrit or Prākrit. Most of these songs are religious in subject matter, but a few are secular and may have an origin in classical Sanskrit drama.

Sāṅgadeva did not invent his own music examples, but copied them from pre-existing sources, some of which can be identified. In his preface to the Sangitaratnākara, Sāṅgadeva claims to have consulted no fewer than 40 earlier authorities on music, many of whose works are now lost or survive only in quotations. Consequently his treatise is largely a synthesis of earlier ideas and musical systems, often relating to periods several hundred years earlier than Sāṅgadeva himself, but presented by him as permanently valid. The rāgas for which he gives the most numerous and elaborate musical examples were probably no longer current in practice by the 13th century, but were defined and illustrated in earlier treatises, from about the 8th century onwards. Sāṅgadeva’s use of examples is part of his attempt to assert a continuity of tradition between the music of his own day and that described in theoretical works. The purpose of those who first committed the melodies to writing may have been different, but this must remain a matter for speculation.

Ex.4 comprises a non-metrical instrumental or vocal melody called ālāpa, the first of two melodies from the Sangitaratnākara which together illustrate the rāga Saindhavi (named after the district of Sindh in modern Pakistan). Since this is apparently an un-metered melody I have avoided using precise rhythmic symbols: tail-less note-heads represent the short rhythmic value of the original notation, notes with a short tail represent the longer value. The very few indicators of octave-register, shown as superscript dots, are quite unhelpful, but it seems clear that the melody follows a pattern of melodic curves within the compass of one octave.

This pattern holds the key to the structure of the melody, which has four sections, in the form A₁ B₁ A₂ B₂. The A sections show a rise from the modal tonic (transcribed as c’) to the 5th above (g’), ornamented by the upper neighbour-note (a’), and a fall back to the tonic; in both ascent and descent the third (e’) is omitted. In the B sections the same arched contour is expanded at its highest point to reach the upper tonic (c’’), or, if the seventh degree, b’—the rāga is pentatonic), and a secondary curve, from d’ to a’ and back, intervenes before the melody resolves once more on the lower tonic. In the original notation, however, there is virtually no indication of this sectional structure, apart from one punctuation mark coinciding with the end of A₂.

This melody serves essentially the same function as the melodies of the Kuṭumiyāmalai Inscription: that of demonstrating the melodic material of a mode in a systematic manner. But in most respects it is strikingly different. The notation, though based on the same oral solmization syllables, lacks the vowel-modifications of the inscription, and both octave
and rhythmic indications are rudimentary; it is an oral notation capturing only one parameter of the music—a sequence of pitch-classes. The musical style, in contrast with that of the inscription melodies, is characterized by repetition of individual pitches, small motifs and whole sections. The melodic contour is conjunct, with no leaps greater than a 4th. The organization of the Kudumiymalai melodies into four-note cells, and the systematic rotation of final pitches, are entirely lacking; instead we have an organic melody that proceeds by repetition and expansion of an arch-shaped Ursatz.

These differences suggest that Śāṅgadeva’s melodies may be closer to oral tradition, in notational resources, style and structure, than the Kudumiymalai melodies, and owe less to literate, editorial intervention. The most compelling evidence for this supposition is the formal structure of the ālāpa, which can be recognized as a generative process: a process by which this melody—and an infinite number of similar melodies in different modes—could be constructed or reconstructed in performance, without reference to notation of any kind. The process might be summarized as: start from the tonic, ascend to the 5th, return to the tonic; repeat the process with extension to the octave and more elaboration; repeat the whole with variations of detail. The same or broadly similar processes underlie most of the ālāpa melodies, in different rāgas, in the Saṅgītaratnākara.

The presence of such a process in a piece of music does not, of course, prove that it was composed ‘orally’. It was, after all, committed to writing at some point, and the possibility of modification, or even composition ab initio, at the writing stage cannot be ruled out. The almost exact repetition of B₁ as B₂—which is typical of a particular group of Śāṅgadeva’s ālāpa melodies—might be the result of copying out once the first half of the melody was notated (note, however, that A₁ has a variant beginning as compared with A₁). But the point is that the melody is composed according to a system that does not require writing for its realization. Such systems, naturally, are typical of music cultures where notation plays no major part, which we know to be the case with Indian music, past and present.
Newar Buddhist manuscript (Nepal, 18th/19th century) of syllabic notation for the drum kvatāḥ. The notation begins on the lower leaf, below a figure of Nāṭeśvara, Śiva as Lord of the Dance.
Ex. 5 Rāga Sārang, Bhaktapur (rhythm approximate)

Ex. 6 Rāga Madhyamādi: example of ālapti from chapter 6 of the Sangītaratnākara of Sarngadeva
Not surprisingly, similar processes are alive in Indian oral tradition today. A familiar feature of rāga performance—in the classical and some folk traditions—is the introductory alāp: an improvised, unaccompanied melody in free rhythm, in which the melodic characteristics of the rāga are introduced. Normally the melodic development unfolds within and around a central octave: beginning on the tonic, it ascends to the upper octave, and returns to the starting-point. In a short alāp this ascent–descent pattern might be accomplished in two stages, comparable to the A and B sections of ex.4: the first (called sthāyi in the classical tradition) concentrating on the lower pentachord of the octave, the second (antarā) completing the ascent to the upper tonic. An example is shown in ex.5, an alāp in rāga Sārang as rendered by a temple singer in Bhaktapur, Nepal. In this alāp the first two phrases (A1) map the territory in the lower pentachord of the scale; the next three (B1) expand up to and beyond the upper tonic, and descend to the starting point. These two stages, corresponding to the classical sthāyi and antarā respectively, are then repeated in reverse order (B2/B3, A2); as with the Saindhavi alāpa, the repetition is melodically almost exact, although Newar temple musicians do not use melodic notation of any kind. Coincidentally, this example resembles Sārangadeva’s Saindhavi in some of its pitch material as well as in its formal structure.18

In a longer and more elaborate alāp, such as one can hear today in the dhrupad style of North Indian classical music, the octave might be unfolded in several stages, introducing successively higher pitches before the upper octave is reached.19 Evidence for this more complex process can also be found in Sārangadeva’s work. Ex.6 is the outline of an alāpa for flute, described in words—not in notation as such—in chapter 6 of the Sangitaratnākara.20 In this chapter, on musical instruments, Sārangadeva is explicitly dealing with the desī or regional, oral traditions, rather than with theoretical systems, and his verbal instructions for playing alāpa in various rāgas on specific instruments are without precedent in earlier sources. The example shows an unfolding of the central octave in four stages (svasthāna); in each stage the melody rises to a higher point in the octave than the last, returning to the starting-point before making a fresh assault on the summit.

The generative process that this melody exemplifies is explicitly recognized and defined by Sārangadeva in the third chapter of the Sangitaratnākara:21 he terms it alapti, and states that it is applicable to all rāgas.22 We can assume that alapti would in practice have been improvised, no doubt at greater length than in the very short examples that Sārangadeva gives: today the alāp of a dhrupad performance, in which the unfolding process would be repeated
several times at successively faster tempos and in different styles, might take half an hour or even more. One final question might be asked about the relationship between ex.4 (and other notated alāpas in chapter 2 of the Sangītataratnākara) and ex.6 (and other examples of alapti instructions in chapter 6). Why is ex.6 spelled out in words, not written in notation like ex.4?

Two answers, not mutually exclusive, suggest themselves. The first is that Śrīnghadeva was not a writer of music—possibly not even a practising musician—but a writer of didactic verse. In chapter 2, on rāga, where most of the notated melodies are to be found, Śrīnghadeva is almost exclusively drawing on theoretical material from earlier written sources. Since these sources, in some cases, included notated examples, Śrīnghadeva reproduces them. But in his sixth chapter, on musical instruments, Śrīnghadeva comments on the music of his own period. He makes unprecedentedly detailed observations on the instruments in use, referring not only to their construction (precise measurements, materials etc.), but also to playing techniques. Some of this material may have been available in written sources, but no antecedent is known for his alapti instructions. These are couched in the medium of words because that is the medium in which Śrīnghadeva habitually worked; one consequence of this is that we are given some explicit indications of ornamentation, which in notated melodies is either omitted or written out.

The second answer takes account of the extreme brevity of ex.6. In chapter 3 of the Saṅgītataratnākara Śrīnghadeva has already outlined the generative process of alapti; this evidently obviated the need to represent its working-out in detail in chapter 6. Indeed, for most rāgas he gives merely the first section of alapti—just enough to identify the rāga—and leaves the reader to reconstruct the remaining sections (sometimes specifying to which pitch each section should ascend). Perhaps the inference to be drawn from this is that the recognition of a standard generative process renders detailed instructions—or notation—redundant. As the oral tradition fixes on a single model, flexible enough to be applied to all rāgas, the need to record exemplars in writing, such as the Kuḍumiyāmalai melodies or the alāpas of Śrīnghadeva’s second chapter, disappears. Conceivably this explains why, after the Saṅgītataratnākara, no significant collection of new notated melodies appears in the literature of Indian music until the 17th century.

This article is based on the author’s recently published book The rāgas of early Indian music: modes, melodies and musical notations from the Gupta period to c.1250 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).


3 Candogya Upanisad 4.9, as translated in W. Doniger O’Flaherty, Textual sources for the study of Hinduism (Manchester, 1988), p.33.

4 Śrīnghadeva, Saṅgītataratnākara, 1.5.4-6. Widdess, The rāgas of early Indian music, p.228.


6 The fact that these two scale-degrees alone are not subjected to modification with the -i vowel is due to their melodic role: since they normally lead to the next higher pitch, they cannot occupy the highest pitch-level in any context.

pitches of particular notes; that this was not done suggests that a degree of authority was vested in the sequence of pitches, such that it could be modified by octave transposition but not otherwise. The melodies perhaps already existed in written form before the vowel notation was applied to them.

13 It is likely that many of Śāṅgadeva’s rāga-melodies were taken from a work of the 8th–9th century, the Brhaddeśī of Matanga, though the surviving form of that work does not include them (Widdess, The rāgas of early Indian music, pp.184–202). Related examples also occur in the treatise Sarasvatī-hṛdaya-dalāṅkāra of Nāṇyeśa (c.1100) (ibid., pp.143–160).

14 This is discussed in R. Widdess, ‘Reflections on a medieval melody: theory, practice and musical notation in early Indian musicological texts’, The traditional Indian theory and practice of music and dance, ed. J. Katz (Leiden, 1992), pp.53–74.

15 Depending on the original date and provenance of the melody, it could have been performed on an arched harp, short-necked lute, stick zither, or transverse flute. Vocal performance would also be possible, using either the solmization-syllables themselves or non-lexical syllables. In vocal or flute performance the reiterated notes might have been rendered as sustained pitches. The source of ex.4 is Sarṅgaraṅganga, 2.2.180 ff. For related melodies see Widdess, The rāgas of early Indian music, pp.138, 156–7, 192, 198–201.


17 The singer is Ratnamala Lachimasyu, of the Dattatreya temple, Bhaktapur. He is joined by a second voice on the tonic pitch at two points. I have transcribed the example from a recording made by Gert-Matthias Wegner. Such aḷāps are sung as the introduction to dāphā hymns, the oldest Newar temple-music repertory, dating from the 17th century or earlier.

18 The classical scale structure of rāg Sārangi is 1 2 4 5 7 1; in this performance 17 varies in pitch between 17 and 6.


20 Verses 669–76. For translation and discussion see Widdess, ‘Aspects of form ...’ and The rāgas of early Indian music, pp.363ff.


22 Verses 331–3; Widdess, ‘Aspects of form ...’ and The rāgas of early Indian music, p.367.

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