



# DIGITAL HUMANITIES PROJECT

MONSOON 2018

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## A Structured Approach to Composing Music

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# 1 Introduction

As a starting point, it helps to understand that composers are generally not creating something out of nothing when they write a new musical composition. Instead, they are creating it out of their past experience. That is their understanding of music theory, what they've studied and listened, what they would like to hear themselves – or maybe even just to answer some specific musical question they have. It may seem obvious for one to learn music theory to compose music. Gaining knowledge about music is essential to produce music. In the field of music, some of the knowledge tends to get packaged under the heading of theory and some don't. So, what aspects of music theory should one learn first?

Learning just a little bit of theory can be 'dangerous' because it leads to great confusions. Partly this is because lots of aspects of standard music theory arguably don't make so many logical arguments in the beginning phases. The way music theory is generally taught tends to mix up some genuine music fundamentals, culture specific notations and style/genre specific advice. There are many terms that have rather uncertain meanings, or multiple meanings in different contexts, or different meanings for different people to interpret. So, it should be already evident that the more one learns, better is the probability for one to compose good music.

Composition is something one can never fully learn. There is always a lot to learn. At the same time, even a newcomer to music can pick out a pleasing melody on an instrument and perhaps with a bit of effort and add some accompanying lines. So, it makes more sense to call music composition a journey rather than a destination.

In this report, we'll try to explore the minimum needs that one might need to get a kick-start to compose music. Along with that, we'll try to approach the composition in different methods. First, we will try to study compositions that follow a particular scale and *Rāga*. In Indian context, these can be called "*Rāga* based compositions". Then we will try to compose bits of music by altering the notes but abiding to the patterns of the *Rāga*.

The next effort will be to study and observe correlation between *Rāga*, Scale and style/genres of music. We will also try to take a composition/song and try to

present it in a different style/genre. This will help us understand the certain traits that define a specific genre and thus give us better scope to compose songs in that genre.

Many of us like music because there are these certain songs that we can never forget. We will also try to select a song that we like and try to analyze different patterns in the song. We will try to make a note of as many features as possible that we have learned so far. Then we will try to alter the melody of the song, without the song losing much of its original essence. The expectation out of this experiment is to understand the thought process of composer rather than getting a new composition out of the song.

Most popular form of musical composition is song. Songs usually have a context involved, they have lyrics. We will make an effort to understand common scales and *Rāga* patterns used in some repeated contexts across various composers. Given our experience from the above experiments we will try to prepare a set of guidelines for a song that can lead to decent composition.

Though we may try to structure the approach in a deterministic fashion, compositions often require something more than a set of guidelines. Guidelines may only help us to produce decent results but not creative and amazing ones. The creative results are only a result of continuous exposure to the field and the experience.

## 2 Musical Compositions

Musical compositions can refer to an original piece of music, wither a song or an instrument music piece, the structure of a musical piece, or the process of creating or writing a new song or piece of music. The word "song" is widely misused by people in the popular music industry to describe any musical composition, whether sung or played only by instruments. A song is a single work of music that is typically intended to be sung by a person. If a pre-existing poem is set to music, it is an art song. Songs that are sung on repeated pitches without distinct contours and patterns that rise and fall are called chants (Bhajans in Indian context). Songs in a simple style that are learned informally are often referred to as folk songs. A musical composition, in the early days, was composed by a single person and this person was also responsible for the arrangement of the song (that is composing the background scores for the lead melody and choosing the right instruments to play various background scores). Now-a-days, composer typically write the lead melody while rest of the orchestration is handled by his crew (or outsourced to an arranger to do the orchestration).

### 2.1 Different Forms of a Song

A song is typically a musical composition involving at least one person's vocals. But the modern era claims the compositions that have no human vocal element also as songs. Songs usually have a typical structure which can factored easily based on the repetition of the lyrics or the melody and the length of the melody. Different structures (or elements) that comprise a song have different names in western and Indian music contexts but are more or less similar. Some of these structures are confined to a specific form or genre of compositions and sometimes turn out to be the deciding factors in determining the genre of the composition.

## 2.2 Songs in Western Music

### 2.2.1 Introduction

Introduction is a unique piece that comes at the beginning of the song. Generally, introductions are comprised of instrumental music and no lyrics. This section of the song usually builds up suspense for the listener so when the downbeat drops in, it creates a pleasing sense of release. Introduction is also responsible for building up the atmosphere for the song.

### 2.2.2 Verse

A verse roughly corresponds to a poetic stanza because it consists of rhyming lyrics most often with an AABB or ABAB rhyme scheme. The easiest way to identify a verse is based on its melodic pattern. In many songs, there will be sections of the song with the same melodic pattern but different lyrics. Each of such sections can be called a verse. Some songs also have a pre-verse which doesn't have a repeat but acts as an interlude between the introduction and the verse.

### 2.2.3 Chorus or Refrain

There are arguments about chorus being different from refrain. Technically, refrain is defined as anything that is not a verse. Chorus is the not changing, both lyrically and melodically, but a repeating section seen usually after a verse. In most songs, refrain and chorus remain the same. Generally, chorus or refrain carry the heaviest of the emotions of the song and turn out to be the signature of the song. Chorus is usually sung by a group of vocalists and is longer than a word while a refrain doesn't levy such rules.

### 2.2.4 Bridge

The bridge is a section used to break the repetitive pattern of the song and keep the listener's attention. This can be thought of as a transition in the song. Often, bridge ends up being a section that contrasts with the verse. For example, in western music theory, *middle eight* refers to a section of the song with a significantly different melody and lyrics, which helps the song develop itself in a natural way by

creating a contrast to the previously played, usually placed after the second chorus in a song. A song employing middle eight might look like,

$$Intro \rightarrow \{V - C\} \rightarrow \{V - C\} \rightarrow MiddleEight \rightarrow \{C\} \rightarrow \{C\} \rightarrow \{Outro\}$$

$$V = Verse, C = Chorus$$

### 2.2.5 Outro

If a song ends at the end of a verse or chorus, it might be abrupt to listen. An outro signals the listeners that the song is nearing its end thereby giving a good sense of closure. Outro need not necessarily have a unique melody or lyrics. In songs, a certain verse or chorus of the song is played repeatedly at the end with a fade-out effect on the volume or played with gradually slowing down the tempo.

### 2.2.6 Elision

An elision is a section of music where different sections overlap one another, usually for a short period. It is mostly used in fast-paced music, and it is designed to create tension and drama.

### 2.2.7 Instrumental Solo

A solo is a section designed to showcase an instrumentalist (e.g. a guitarist or a harmonica player) or less commonly, more than one instrumentalist (e.g., a trumpeter and a sax player). The solo section may take place over the chords from the verse, chorus, or bridge, or over a standard solo backing progression.

### 2.2.8 Ad lib

In Latin, *ad libitum* means "at will"; this is often shortened to *ad lib*. An *ad lib* section of a song (usually in the coda or outro) occurs when the main lead vocal or a second lead vocal breaks away from the already established lyric and/or melody to add melodic interest and intensity to the end of the song. Often, the *ad lib* repeats the previously sung line using variations on phrasing, melodic shape, and/or lyric, but the vocalist may also use entirely new lyrics or a lyric from an earlier section of the song. During an *ad lib* section, the rhythm may become freer

(with the rhythm section following the vocalist), or the rhythm section may stop entirely, giving the vocalist the freedom to use whichever tempo sounds right.

## 2.3 Songs in Indian Music

The song structure in Indian context is very different. Most songs in western music tend to follow the standard structures defined above. But in Indian context, the modern semi-classical and film songs tend to maintain a balance between the Indian and Western song structures where as the classical songs, bhajans, etc, tend to abide by the Indian song elements.

### 2.3.1 Alapana

*Ālāpana* is the introduction (in western context) of the song. It is usually not written by the original composer but is left to the one rendering the song. The one who renders may choose not to include an *Ālāpana*. It generally consists of a long *ākāram* set in the same *Rāga* as the song. It can also be rendered by one or multiple instruments instead of vocals.

### 2.3.2 Pallavi

*Pallavi* marks the beginning of the song. This is the start of the song. The first two lines of the songs. They occur after every other stanza in the song.

### 2.3.3 Anu Pallavi

The pallavi is followed by two or three more lines and is called the anupallavi. Generally, there is only one anupallavi in any song. This may go to a higher frequency than pallavi and adds beauty to the music

### 2.3.4 Chattai Swaram

Chittaswaram literally means “Chitta seitha swaram” meaning the swarams which were composed for the kriti in an orderly fashion. These swarams are composed or formalized by vocalists, musicians and yester year musicologists.



These notes are not written by the composer. Most of the Deekshitar krithis have chiitai swaram sung. Subbrama Dekkshitar's book on Deekshitar kritis do not mention chittai swaram with the kritis. They were composed later.

### **2.3.5 Charanam**

This is the stanzas of the song which have the same tune. There can be more than one charanam for a song. Pallavi is sung after every charanam. These form the end of root of the song.

### **3 Composition Styles**

Like distinct styles in prose and poetry, there are distinct styles in musical compositions. There are also different styles in the renderings of these musical compositions.

#### **3.1 Different Genres in compositions**

#### **3.2 Comparison of Indian and Western compositions**

## 4 Elements of Musical Compositions

### 4.1 Rhythm

Rhythm generally means a "movement marked by the regulated succession of strong and weak elements, or of opposite or different conditions". In the performance arts, rhythm is the timing of events on a human scale; of musical sounds and silences that occur over time, of the steps of a dance, or the meter of spoken language and poetry. In some performing arts, such as hip hop music, the rhythmic delivery of the lyrics is one of the most important elements of the style.

### 4.2 Melody

A melody is a linear succession of musical tones that the listener perceives as a single entity. In its most literal sense, a melody is a combination of pitch and rhythm, while more figuratively, the term can include successions of other musical elements such as tonal color. It may be considered the foreground to the background accompaniment. A line or part need not be a foreground melody.

Melodies often consist of one or more musical phrases or motifs, and are usually repeated throughout a composition in various forms. Melodies may also be described by their melodic motion or the pitches or the intervals between pitches (predominantly conjunct or disjunct or with further restrictions), pitch range, tension and release, continuity and coherence, cadence, and shape.

### 4.3 Tempo

Tempo is the speed or pace of a given piece. In classical music, tempo is typically indicated with an instruction at the start of a piece (often using conventional Italian terms) and is usually measured in beats per minute (or bpm). In modern classical compositions, a "metronome mark" in beats per minute may supplement or replace the normal tempo marking.

## 4.4 *Rāga*

*Rāga* is a melodic framework for improvisation akin to a melodic mode in Indian classical music. While the raga is a remarkable and central feature of the classical music tradition, it has no direct translation to concepts in the classical European music tradition. Each raga is an array of melodic structures with musical motifs, considered in the Indian tradition to have the ability to "color the mind" and affect the emotions of the audience.

A scale is merely a prescribed set of notes. So long as you use only those notes, you have plenty of room for creativity. A song, on the other hand, is rigidly defined by specific musical phrases arranged in a certain way. This leaves very little room for creativity, but it does make for a very recognizable piece of music. A raga is somewhere in between a scale and a song, though closer to a scale than to a song. It leaves you plenty of room for creativity while also being quite easily recognizable (with practice).

What makes a raga more easily recognizable than a scale is the way in which its melodic contours move and flow. Certain musical phrases can be extremely evocative of a raga while others may sound strangely out of place even when you use only the prescribed notes of that scale. Unfortunately, there are no fixed rules for precisely which phrases are characteristic of a raga and which aren't. Familiarity with the raga and an intuitive feel for it are what help you understand the way a raga glides and flows. This is why, in Hindustani classical music, we discuss ragas in terms of their *chalan* (movement).

Having said that, all ragas have certain observable qualities, and these have been distilled into a set of guidelines for students to get them started. For instance, within the parameters of a given scale, a raga may leave out certain notes in ascending phrases and use them only in descending phrases. It may have a base note (*griha svara*) that is different from the tonic. All ragas have "vādi" and "samvādi" notes, which are their most important and second most important notes, and musical phrases in that raga tend to gravitate toward and cluster around these notes. Also, ragas have landing or resting notes called "nyāsa," which are notes on which musical phrases in that raga resolve naturally.

To continue with our earlier analogy, getting a raga from a raga scale is like fine-tuning a color scheme. Given a palette comprising blue, green, gray, white, and yellow, for instance, you could emphasize blue and green with sparing use of yellow for a certain effect. Or you could emphasize yellow and white and use only a touch of blue and green for an entirely different effect. Similarly, you can get many, many ragas out of the ten raga scales in the video above. In fact, according to one of the prevalent systems for classifying ragas, these ten scales are considered to be the "parent scales" from which most ragas are derived.