

# Notating Indian classical compositions

In North Indian classical music (Hindustani music),  
we do not notate music for performance  
because classical performances are always extemporaneous.  
But we do use notation to teach and learn music.  
When you learn a new raga, you notate a few basic melodic phrases  
and simple compositions in that raga so that you can recall them later.

For the traditional style of notation, please follow the link in the description box.  
Here, I will illustrate my method for staff notation of Indian classical compositions.

The composition I have chosen for illustration is a *bandish* in Raag Kedar,  
set to the Teentaal (16-beat) rhythm cycle, and performed at a lively tempo (*dрут*).  
Explanations follow after the score and audio.

The Muscorescore-generated audio does not correctly render Indian music,  
so click on the sound-mixer icon and choose the YouTube video as the audio source.  
However, the video cannot be synced as  
line repetitions are not specified when notating Indian classical compositions.

## Bandish in Raag Kedar, Teentaal (16-beat rhythm cycle)

Composition by Pt. Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande

*soch samajh man meet piyarava*  
*satguru naam kare sumiranva*

*ghari-ghari pal-pal umar ghaTat sab*  
*ajahun chet mati mand chaturva*

♩ = 150+ (*dрут*)

## Explanation

### Title

The title mentions the type of composition ("*bandish*" in this case),  
the name of the raga (Raag Kedar), and the rhythm cycle (Teentaal) it is set to.

### Subtitle

The subtitle gives the name of the composer where available,  
followed by the lyrics of the composition in romanized form, divided by stanza.

### Tempo marker

In Indian classical music, tempo is never specified precisely in terms of bpm.  
Rather, markers such as "*vilambit*" (slow), "*madhya-laya*" (medium), or "*dрут*" (fast)  
are used to indicate the recommended tempo range.

### Key signature

Because Indian classical music is based on ragas,  
most compositions have internal consistency in terms of  
which notes in the scale are sharp, flat, or natural.  
For this reason, I use key signatures when notating.

For instance, Raag Kedar uses both versions of the fourth note,  
but the sharp variant is more important than the natural variant in this raga.  
I, therefore, use a G-major key signature to notate compositions in this raga.

It is important to recognize that Raag Kedar is not a major scale with G as the tonic.  
It is a scale that begins on C, and uses both variants of the fourth note,  
but the augmented variant is more important to the raga.

### Time signature

In Indian classical music, melody is notated around the rhythm.  
The composition in the above example is set to Teentaal,  
which is a 16-beat rhythm cycle.

In my system of staff notation, each quarter note signifies a beat,  
and each measure is devoted to one cycle of the rhythm.

So, in the case of a 16-beat rhythm cycle, each measure has 16 quarter notes.

In the case of a 12-beat rhythm cycle, each measure would have 12 quarter notes.

And so on. I use the time signature to give you this information.

### Dashed barlines

Indian classical rhythm cycles tend to be long (16-beat cycles, 14-beat cycles, etc.),  
so each cycle is divided into sections.

For instance, Teentaal is a 16-beat cycle divided into four sections of four beats each.

Ektaal is a 12-beat cycle divided into six sections of two beats each. And so on.

In my notation, I use dashed barlines to divide each measure into sections.

### Notating the composition around the rhythm

Classical compositions are set to specific rhythm cycles.

This means, each line of a composition would (usually but not always) be the  
same length as a single cycle of the rhythm it is set to.

In my example, the composition is set to Teentaal,  
so each line of the composition is 16 beats long.

However, it is also important to fit the accented and unaccented syllables of lyric  
into the groove of accented and unaccented beats in the rhythm cycle.

So, for instance, in order to nicely fit the composition I have used here  
into the groove of the Teentaal cycle, each line of the composition  
begins on the 9th beat of the cycle and ends on the 8th beat of the following cycle.

When notating the composition,

I simply fill in the melody and lyric into the appropriate beat in the measure  
to indicate which syllable of lyric must be sung to which beat of the rhythm cycle.

The syllable that falls on the first beat is highlighted in red,  
because this syllable (called "*sam*") plays a very important role  
in classical performances (details available on the "Rhythm" page of my website).

I mark the end of each line of lyric with a slash (or sometimes a vertical bar).

I start a new stanza in a fresh measure.

No information is provided about repetition of a line or stanza.

This is because there are no fixed rules as to how many times  
a certain line or stanza should be repeated.

That depends on the singer, the context, what sounds natural in that moment and so on.

### Lyrics

Below the score, there are two rows of text.

The first row is for the lyric and the second row for the Indian notation,  
which I think is important to know for anyone learning Indian classical music.

### Word of Caution

Indian classical music is essentially an oral tradition.

The emphasis has always been on training your ear.

Notations tend to be rudimentary,  
simply providing the skeleton of the melody without the ornamentations.

Please use them as a stepping stone to understand the patterns,  
while aiming to learn to sing or play by ear.

There are a few reasons why the notations are not more detailed.

For one, ornamentations are more like "variations" on the main theme,  
and artists are free to personalize them to some extent.

For another, ornamentation in Indian classical music is so profuse  
that it is not just labor intensive to notate all of it, it is also confusing for students.

Compositions play the role of helping students understand  
the flow-patterns of a raga's melody.

Notating all the ornaments can be counterproductive,  
because it provides too much detail before the student has had a

chance to get an overview of the melody structures -  
somewhat like trying to understand the pattern of fine wrinkles on a face

before you know where the eyes, nose, and mouth go.

In other words, it is recommended that students learn the basic structure  
of a composition before attempting to replicate ornamentation,  
which is often acquired naturally in the course of becoming familiar with the music.