

Chapter 9: Music

Summary

South Asian music runs on two big ideas: raga, a set of rules for building a melody, and tala, a repeating cycle of beats. This chapter explains both in plain terms, then compares the two classical systems, Hindustani music in the north and Carnatic music in the south, and the instruments and teaching traditions that carry them. It moves on to songs of devotion and poetry (qawwali, ghazal and Baul music), the folk music of all eight countries, bhangra, and the film songs that many people in the region hum every day. By the end you'll be able to clap a tala and find its first beat.

Concepts Covered

1. Raga
2. Tala
3. Sargam
4. Hindustani Music
5. Carnatic Music
6. Gharana
7. Guru-Shishya Tradition
8. Sitar
9. Tabla

10. Veena
11. Qawwali
12. Ghazal
13. Baul Music
14. Folk Music
15. Bhangra
16. Film Music (Filmi)

Prerequisites

- **Chapter 3: Empires and Encounters** for the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal courts where much of northern music took shape.
- **Chapter 5: Faiths of South Asia** for Sufism, bhakti and the devotional settings of many songs.
- **Chapter 6: Languages and Scripts** for Urdu, Bangla, Punjabi, Tamil and Telugu, the languages these songs are sung in.

Turn it up



Maybe you've heard a film song at a wedding, a qawwali on your parents' playlist, or a tabla beat sampled in a hip-hop track and wondered how it all fits together. Music is one of the easiest ways into a culture, and one of the hardest to explain.

This chapter gives you the vocabulary to talk about it, and even to count along. Every tradition has a story. Let's find it!

9.1 "Where Is Beat One?"

Zara Hossain has played violin since she was seven, so when her friend Arjun Reddy invites her to a South Indian classical concert at a community hall in Minneapolis, she's curious. Ben Lindqvist comes too, mostly for the snacks at intermission.

The first surprise is the violinist. He sits cross-legged on a low stage, and instead of tucking the violin under his chin, he rests its scroll against his foot and holds it against his chest. Next to him a singer and a drummer with a long, two-headed drum face the audience. The second surprise is the audience. All around Zara, people are slapping their thighs with an open palm, tapping their fingers one at a time, then flipping their hands over and back, in perfect time with the music.

Zara tries to tap along the way she would in orchestra, counting "one, two, three, four." It doesn't work. The melody seems to float over the beat, and the musicians land together on some moments with a huge smile, as if they've all arrived home at once. "Where is beat one?" she whispers. Arjun grins and shows her his hand: palm, pinky, ring, middle, palm, flip, palm, flip. "It's Adi tala. Eight beats. Watch where they all land."

How does a whole room know where "one" is when Zara, a trained musician, can't find it? That's what this chapter is about.

9.2 Two Big Ideas: Melody Rules and Beat Cycles

Think about how most pop songs work. A song is in a key, like C major, which tells you which notes to use, and it has a time signature, usually four beats to a bar, which tells you where to clap. Western classical and pop music add harmony on top: chords, several notes at once.

South Asian classical music works with similar ingredients but puts the weight in different places. There is usually no chord harmony. Instead there's

a steady drone, a note held underneath everything, often from a stringed instrument called a tanpura (or tambura) or an electronic box. Over that drone, one melody unfolds in great detail, guided by a **raga**, while a drummer keeps a repeating beat cycle called a **tala**.

A cooking comparison helps. A scale is like a list of ingredients. A raga is more like a recipe: it tells you not just which ingredients to use but how to combine them, which ones to feature, and which steps give the dish its character. Two cooks can follow the same recipe and make different meals, and two musicians can play the same raga and sound completely different. The rest of this chapter fills in that picture.

9.3 Raga and Sargam

Sargam: the names of the notes

Before you can talk about a raga, you need names for the notes. In South Asian music the seven basic notes are **sa, re, ga, ma, pa, dha, ni**, then sa again an octave higher. Singing the notes with these syllables is called **Sargam** (a word made from the first four: sa-re-ga-ma). It works a lot like "do, re, mi" in Western solfege, which you may know from music class or *The Sound of Music*. In the south, re is often called ri.

There's one big difference from a piano keyboard. Sa isn't fixed to one pitch. The singer or main player chooses a comfortable note to be sa, and everything else is measured from it. Sa and pa (the fifth note) never change. The other five notes can each be lowered (komal, "soft") or, in the case of ma, raised (tivra, "sharp"), which gives twelve notes in all, the same twelve as in Western music.

Raga: a melodic framework

A **Raga** (राग, *RAH-ga*) is a framework for creating melody. The word comes from a Sanskrit root meaning "color" or "feeling," because each raga is meant to color the listener's mood. A raga sets:

- **which notes** may be used (often five, six or seven of them),
- **how to go up and down:** the ascending line (aroha) and descending line (avaroha) can use different notes,
- **which notes to emphasize** and where to rest,
- **characteristic phrases** that instantly identify the raga, a bit like a musical signature, called the pakad,
- and **how to ornament** notes with slides and shakes.

That's why a raga is *not* just a scale. Two ragas can use exactly the same notes and still sound different because of their phrases and emphasis. For example, the Hindustani ragas Bhoopali and Deshkar share the same five-note scale (sa, re, ga, pa, dha) but are treated as separate ragas. In Carnatic music, the raga with Bhoopali's notes is called Mohanam.

In northern India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, many ragas are linked to a time of day or a season. Some are traditionally performed at dawn, some at dusk, some during the monsoon. Southern musicians pay less attention to these timings. A raga performance can last a few minutes or more than an hour, often starting slowly, with no beat at all, while the musician explores the raga note by note, then speeding up as the drum enters.

Try singing it



Pick a comfortable note as your sa and sing "sa re ga pa dha sa," skipping ma and ni. You've just sung the five notes of Bhoopali (Mohanam in the south). Now try singing them in a different order or lingering on ga. Does it start to sound like a tune?

9.4 Tala: The Beat That Comes Back Around

A **Tala** (ताल, *TAAL*) is a repeating cycle of beats that organizes time in a piece of music. The word also means "clapping of the palms," which makes sense, because talas are traditionally counted with claps, waves and finger taps.

The key idea is the *cycle*. Western music thinks in bars that go by one after another. A tala is more like a clock face: the beats go around and around, and the most important moment is when the cycle comes back to the start. That first beat is called the **sam** (pronounced like the English word "sum"). Musicians may improvise wildly in the middle of a cycle, playing across the beat or against it, but they aim to land together on sam. When they do, listeners often nod, smile or clap. That's what Zara saw in the concert hall.

A tala is divided into sections, called vibhag in the north. Each section starts with either:

- a **clap** (tali), a strong hand clap or palm slap, or
- a **wave** (khali, खाली, *KHAA-lee*, "empty"), a sideways wave of the hand or the back of the hand. On the tabla, the khali section is played mostly with light strokes that leave out the deep, ringing bass, so it sounds lighter. Hearing the khali tells a listener that sam is coming soon.

In written notation, sam is marked **X**, khali is marked **0**, and the other claps are numbered 2, 3 and so on.

Four talas to count

Here are four common talas. The first three are Hindustani; Adi tala is Carnatic. Read the "how to count" column out loud while clapping, and you'll be doing what millions of music students do every day.

Tala	System	Beats	Sections	How to count it
Teentaal (Tintal)	Hindustani	16	4 + 4 + 4 + 4	Clap on 1 (sam), clap on 5, wave on 9 (khali), clap on 13
Rupak	Hindustani	7	3 + 2 + 2	Wave on 1 (sam is also khali), clap on 4, clap on 6
Dadra	Hindustani	6	3 + 3	Clap on 1 (sam), wave on 4 (khali)
Adi tala	Carnatic	8	4 + 2 + 2	Palm on 1, then pinky, ring, middle finger on 2-4; palm on 5, flip hand on 6; palm on 7, flip on 8

Teentaal ("three claps") is one of the most common talas in Hindustani music, used for countless compositions. Rupak is unusual: it's the only popular Hindustani tala that begins with a wave, so sam is a quiet beat. That can be confusing at first, and it's a good test of whether you're really

counting or just waiting for the loudest beat. Dadra's six beats are often used in lighter classical songs and film music. Adi tala ("first" or "primary" tala) is the most widely used tala in Carnatic music. In Adi tala the hand keeps counting the same eight beats while the singer fits two, four or more notes into each beat, so the music can feel faster or slower even when the beat itself stays steady.

Listen for the wave



When you're lost in Teentaal, listen for the stretch where the deep bass goes quiet. It starts at khali, beat 9, and sam is eight beats from khali. Count "9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16" and you'll land on one with everyone else.

9.5 Two Classical Systems: Hindustani and Carnatic

South Asia has two great classical traditions. They share raga, tala and sargam, and grow from the same old music theory, but by about the 1500s they were treated as separate systems with their own repertoires, styles and vocabularies.

Hindustani music

Hindustani Music is the classical music of the northern part of the subcontinent: northern and central India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal. It took shape over centuries in temples and in the courts of the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire, where musicians blended older Indian traditions with ideas from Persian music. The poet and musician Amir Khusrau (1253–1325) is a major figure from this time, and Tansen, a singer at the court of the Mughal

emperor Akbar, is remembered as one of the greatest musicians in the tradition.

Hindustani performances often give a lot of time to improvisation. A typical performance opens with a slow, unaccompanied exploration of the raga (the alap), followed by a composition set to a tala, with the tabla keeping time. The main vocal styles include the older, solemn dhrupad and the more flexible khyal. In the 20th century, state radio stations, including All India Radio, Radio Pakistan and Bangladesh Betar, helped classical musicians reach huge new audiences after the royal courts that once paid them disappeared.

Carnatic music

Carnatic Music is the classical music of southern India, especially Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Kerala, and of Tamil communities in Sri Lanka and around the world. It centers on composed songs, many of them devotional, in languages such as Telugu, Tamil, Kannada, Sanskrit and Malayalam. The composer Purandara Dasa (1484–1564) is called the "father" of Carnatic music because he set out the basic lessons students still learn. Three composers who lived around the same time, Tyagaraja, Muthuswami Dikshitar and Syama Sastri, are known as the Trinity of Carnatic music, and their songs are still the core of concerts today.

A typical Carnatic concert has a singer, a violinist who follows and answers the singer, a mridangam (a double-headed drum made of jackfruit wood) and a drone. Improvisation happens too, inside and around the compositions. Chennai's December music season, which grew out of a music conference held in Madras in December 1927 (the Music Academy that runs it opened in 1928), now fills the city with hundreds of concerts every winter.

The violin Zara saw came from Europe. Balaswami Dikshitar, a brother of the composer Muthuswami Dikshitar, heard Western orchestral music at Fort St.

George in Madras (now Chennai) and pioneered the violin in Carnatic music. Players sit on the floor, rest the scroll on the foot, and tune the strings to sa and pa. Today the violin is so central to Carnatic music that most people there never think of it as a foreign instrument.

	Hindustani Music	Carnatic Music
Where	Northern and central India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal	Southern India, Tamil communities in Sri Lanka and worldwide
Main drum	Tabla (also pakhawaj)	Mridangam (also ghatam, kanjira)
Common instruments	Sitar, sarod, bansuri (flute), sarangi, harmonium	Veena, violin, flute, nadaswaram
Emphasis	Long improvisation on the raga	Composed songs, with improvisation around them
Common languages	Hindi, Urdu, Braj, Punjabi, Bangla	Telugu, Tamil, Kannada, Sanskrit, Malayalam
Counting the tala	Claps and waves (tali and khali)	Palm beats, finger counts and hand flips
Famous tala	Teentaal (16 beats)	Adi tala (8 beats)

9.6 Instruments: Sitar, Tabla and Veena

Hundreds of instruments are played across South Asia. Three of them have become symbols of its classical music.

Sitar

The **Sitar** (सितार, *si-TAAR*) is a long-necked plucked string instrument with a round gourd body. Its name comes from the Persian *sehtar*, "three strings," after a small Persian lute. A modern sitar has 18 to 21 strings: six or seven are played, and the rest are **sympathetic strings** that run under the frets and ring by themselves when the played strings sound the same notes. That's what gives the sitar its shimmering, buzzing sound. Its curved metal frets can be moved, and players pull the string sideways across them to bend a note smoothly, a technique called meend.

The sitar is most closely linked with Ravi Shankar (1920–2012), a Bengali musician born in Benares (now Varanasi). In the 1960s he performed at the Monterey Pop Festival and Woodstock and taught George Harrison of the Beatles, who put the sitar on Beatles records. In early 1971 Shankar told Harrison about the millions of refugees who had fled the war in what is now Bangladesh, and together they organized the Concert for Bangladesh, held on 1 August 1971 at Madison Square Garden in New York, to raise money for them. Shankar received India's highest civilian honor, the Bharat Ratna, in 1999.

Tabla

The **Tabla** (तबला, *TUB-la*) is a pair of hand drums and the main drum of Hindustani music. The smaller, wooden drum, played with the dominant hand, is called the dayan (right) and produces clear, tuned tones. The larger drum, often made of metal or clay, is the bayan (left) and produces deep

bass sounds that the player can bend by pressing the heel of the hand. Each drumhead has a black circle of paste that gives it its ringing tone.

Tabla players learn every stroke as a spoken syllable, called a *bol*, like *dha*, *dhin*, *na* and *tin*. A *tala*'s basic pattern of bols, called its *theka*, is recited and played over and over. That makes the tabla an instrument you can practice with your voice on a school bus.

Veena

The **Veena** (वीणा, Tamil வீணை, *VEE-nah*) is an ancient name for stringed instruments, used in Indian texts for about 3,000 years, and today it means several instruments. In Carnatic music, the Saraswati veena is a large plucked lute carved from jackfruit wood, with 24 fixed frets, four playing strings and three drone strings. It's named after Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of learning and the arts, who is usually shown holding one. Muthuswami Dikshitar was himself a veena player. In the north, older forms like the rudra veena belong to the dhrupad tradition.

Other instruments you'll hear: the sarod (a fretless lute), bansuri (bamboo flute), shehnai and nadaswaram (double-reed wind instruments for weddings and temples), sarangi (a bowed instrument that imitates the voice), and the harmonium, a small hand-pumped keyboard that arrived from Europe in the mid-1800s. Indian craftsmen redesigned it to be played sitting on the floor, and it is now everywhere, even though All India Radio banned it from broadcasts from 1940 to 1971 because it can't slide between notes the way a voice can.

9.7 How Music Is Passed On: Gharana and Guru-Shishya

For most of history, nobody learned South Asian classical music from a book. They learned it from a person.

The **Guru-Shishya Tradition** (गुरु-शिष्य, *GOO-roo SHISH-ya*, "teacher-disciple") is the practice of learning an art through a long, close relationship with a teacher. A student might live with or near the guru for years, listening, copying and practicing for hours a day, and serving the teacher's household in return. Lessons were given orally, phrase by phrase, so the music lived in memory rather than on paper. Muslim musicians often call a master teacher *ustad*, and *pandit* is a common title for Hindu masters. Today many students learn in music schools, colleges and online lessons, but the respect for the teacher remains: many students touch their teacher's feet or bow before a lesson or a concert.

In Hindustani music, these teaching lines grew into the **Gharana** (घराना, *gha-RAA-na*), from *ghar*, "house." A gharana is a "musical household": a lineage of musicians connected by family or by teacher and student, sharing a recognizable style. Most gharanas are named after a place, often the court where their founders worked: Gwalior, Agra, Kirana, Jaipur-Atrauli and Patiala are well-known singing gharanas, and Delhi, Lucknow, Benares and Punjab are known tabla gharanas. Many gharana families are Muslim, many are Hindu, and students from one faith have often learned from masters of another. After 1947, some gharana families found their members living in two different countries. The Patiala gharana, for example, has well-known singers on both sides of the India-Pakistan border.

You're part of a lineage too



If you learned a song from a grandparent, a dance from an auntie or a tabla rhythm from a teacher at your temple, mosque or gurdwara, you're already part of a guru-shishya chain. Ask who taught *them*, and you might trace your music back several generations.

9.8 Songs of Devotion and Poetry

Some of the most loved music in South Asia was made to express faith, longing and love, and to set great poems to melody.

Qawwali

Qawwali (Urdu *قوالی*, *kuh-WAH-lee*) is a form of Sufi Muslim devotional music. Sufism is a tradition within Islam that focuses on inner devotion and the love of God (see [Chapter 5](#)), and qawwali is sung at Sufi shrines, called dargahs, to help listeners feel closer to God. Its development is credited to Amir Khusrau, a follower of the Sufi saint Nizamuddin Auliya of Delhi, who blended Persian poetry with Indian ragas in the 1200s and 1300s.

A qawwali group, called a party, usually has a lead singer, side singers, harmoniums, tabla or dholak, and a chorus that claps hard on the beat. A song often starts slowly and quietly, then repeats key lines, faster and louder, building toward a feeling of spiritual ecstasy. Performances can last a very long time. Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan (1948–1997), from Faisalabad in Pakistan, brought qawwali to audiences around the world and recorded over 125 qawwali albums. The Sabri Brothers of Pakistan are another famous qawwali group, and the Wadali Brothers of India sing closely related Sufi music. Qawwali is entertainment for many listeners, but at its root it is prayer.

Ghazal

A **Ghazal** (Urdu غزل, *GUZ-ul*) is a form of love poetry, and the music made from it. The form began in Arabic poetry, flourished in Persian, and from the 1700s became the leading poetic form in Urdu. A ghazal is built from at least five rhyming couplets, each called a sher. Each couplet can stand alone, like a tiny complete poem, but the second line of every couplet (and both lines of the first) ends with the same refrain word or phrase, called the radif. The "beloved" in a ghazal can be a human love, God, or both at once, and that double meaning is part of what readers love about the form. Great Urdu ghazal poets include Mir Taqi Mir and Mirza Ghalib (1797–1869), and Kazi Nazrul Islam, the national poet of Bangladesh, wrote ghazals in Bangla.

Sung ghazals became hugely popular in the 20th century through singers like Begum Akhtar and Jagjit Singh in India and Mehdi Hassan (1927–2012) in Pakistan, who was called the "Emperor of Ghazal." Ghazal singing is quieter and more intimate than qawwali: the poem is the star.

Baul music

Baul Music is the music of the Bauls (বাউল, *BAH-ool*), wandering singers of Bangladesh and India's West Bengal. The word can mean "mad" in Bangla, in the sense of being mad with love for God. Bauls draw on both Sufi Islam and Vaishnava Hindu devotion, and many reject divisions of caste and religion. Many play the ektara, a one-stringed instrument made from a gourd and bamboo, while singing and dancing.

The most famous Baul, Lalon (c. 1774–1890), lived near Kushtia in present-day Bangladesh. His songs ask why people divide themselves by religion and caste, and they are still sung at a large festival at his shrine. Baul songs also influenced Rabindranath Tagore. UNESCO proclaimed the Baul songs of Bangladesh a masterpiece of humanity's intangible heritage in 2005 and placed them on its Representative List in 2008.

Whose Story?

Ask who invented the sitar and the tabla, and you'll get several answers. A popular story, repeated in many books and websites, credits Amir Khusrau in the 1300s with both. Many historians now doubt this: there is no record of either instrument from his time, and they suggest the sitar was developed from the small Persian setar in the 1700s, possibly by a later musician also named Khusrau, and reached its modern form in the 1800s. Others point to old Indian stringed instruments and to temple carvings of paired drums as the deeper roots of the sitar and tabla. Each account emphasizes a different strand, Persian, Indian or both, and the instruments themselves are probably the product of all of them meeting over centuries.

9.9 Folk Music Across Eight Countries

Classical music has stars and concert halls, but most South Asians grew up with **Folk Music**: songs and rhythms passed down in villages and communities, tied to work, seasons, weddings, festivals and faith, usually learned by ear and performed by ordinary people. Every region has its own, and folk music often feeds classical and film music too.

Country	Folk tradition	What to listen for
Afghanistan	Rubab music	A short-necked lute of mulberry wood, called the national instrument; UNESCO listed the art of making and playing it in 2024, jointly with Iran, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan

Country	Folk tradition	What to listen for
Bangladesh	Baul songs, boat songs (bhatiyali)	Ektara and voice; songs of rivers and longing
Bhutan	Zhungdra and boedra	Two main folk styles; zhungdra comes from the central valleys and dates to the 1600s
India	Rajasthani folk songs, Bihu (Assam), lavani (Maharashtra) and many more	Regional drums and fiddles, often for festivals and harvests
Maldives	Boduberu ("big drum")	Groups of about 20 performers with three drummers and a lead singer; the drums are made from coconut trunks
Nepal	Songs with the madal	The madal, a two-headed hand drum, is Nepal's national instrument and the backbone of its folk music
Pakistan	Sindhi Sufi songs, Pashto folk, Punjabi folk	Sufi poetry sung at shrines; dhol and tumbi in Punjab
Sri Lanka	Kandyan drumming, baila	The geta bera drum of Kandyan dance; baila, a dance music shaped by Portuguese and Afro-

Country	Folk tradition	What to listen for
		Sri Lankan communities from the 1500s onward

In some places, music is under real pressure. In Afghanistan, since the Taliban returned to power in 2021, the authorities have imposed what AFP described in December 2024 as a near-total ban on music, and musicians who make or play the rubab have been forced to work quietly or leave the country. UNESCO's 2024 listing recognized the instrument's long history across the region at a time when that history is under threat.

Bhangra

Bhangra (ਭੰਗੜਾ, *BHUNG-ra*) began as a folk dance and music of Punjab, a region split between Pakistan and India, traditionally linked with the harvest and with festivals like Vaisakhi. Its main drum is the dhol, a big two-sided drum played with two sticks, often joined by the tumbi, a high, twangy one-string instrument.

Bhangra changed when it traveled. In the 1970s and 1980s, young Punjabis in Britain, in cities like Birmingham and Southall in London, mixed folk bhangra with synthesizers, drum kits and rock and dance beats. Bands like Alaap, formed in 1977, sold huge numbers of cassettes in local shops. "British bhangra" became a sound of British Asian identity, and it later blended with hip-hop and reggae. Today Punjabi pop is a global industry. In April 2023, singer Diljit Dosanjh became the first Indian Punjabi artist to perform at the Coachella festival in California. You'll read more about bhangra as dance in [Chapter 10](#).

9.10 Film Music and Music Today

For many people in South Asia and the diaspora, "Indian music" or "Pakistani music" means film songs. **Film Music (Filmi)** (फिल्मी, *FILL-mee*) is the music written for South Asian movies, especially the song-and-dance numbers that are a key part of most films. Filmi borrows from everything: ragas, folk songs, qawwali, ghazal, Western pop, jazz, disco and hip-hop.

Filmi depends on the **playback singer**, because actors rarely sing their own songs. Instead, professional singers record them in a studio, and the actors lip-sync on screen. Playback singers can become as famous as movie stars. Lata Mangeshkar (1929–2022) recorded songs in dozens of languages over about seven decades and received the Bharat Ratna in 2001. Her sister Asha Bhosle, and singers like Mohammed Rafi and Kishore Kumar, are just as loved. Film industries in Mumbai (Hindi), Chennai (Tamil), Hyderabad (Telugu), Lahore (Punjabi and Urdu), Dhaka (Bangla) and elsewhere each have their own composers and stars. You'll read more about them in [Chapter 15](#).

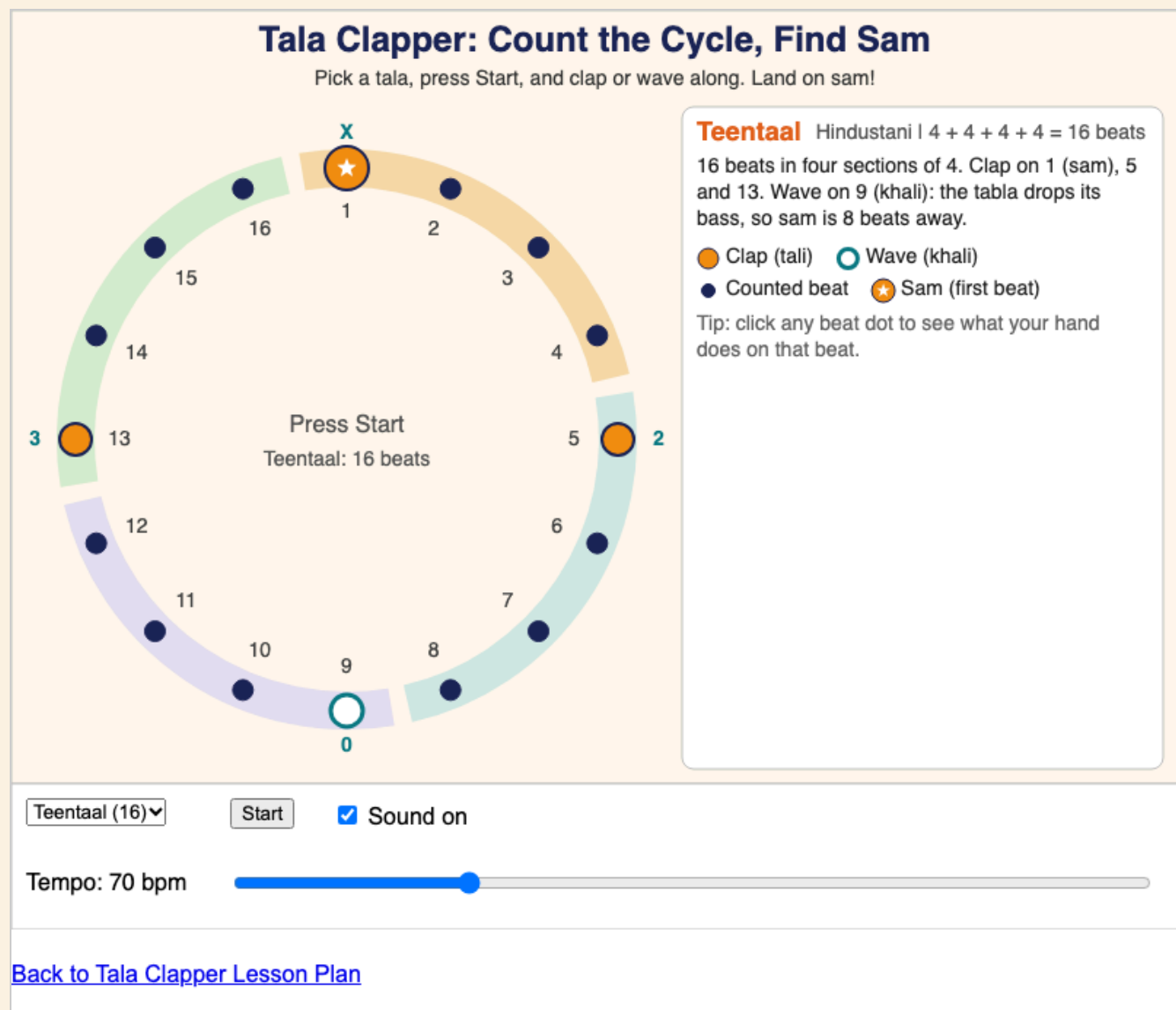
Film music has also won the world's top awards. A. R. Rahman won two Academy Awards in 2009 for the score and the song "Jai Ho" from *Slumdog Millionaire*. In 2023, "Naatu Naatu" from the Telugu film *RRR*, composed by M. M. Keeravani, became the first song from an Indian film, and the first Asian song, to win the Academy Award for Best Original Song.

Not all popular music comes from films. Pakistan's television series *Coke Studio* pairs folk and classical singers with modern bands. Its 2022 song "Pasoori," sung by Ali Sethi and Shae Gill in Punjabi, was the most-streamed Pakistani song worldwide on Spotify that year and was hugely popular in India too. Bangladeshi rock bands, Nepali pop, Sri Lankan baila-pop and diaspora artists in the United States, Britain and Canada keep remixing the old sounds in new ways.

Back in the concert hall, Zara keeps her eyes on Arjun's hand through the second half: palm, pinky, ring, middle, palm, flip, palm, flip. About ten minutes

in, the singer, violinist and drummer race through a tricky passage and slam into sam together. This time Zara lands with them. She laughs out loud. Ben, who has been counting on his fingers the whole time, whispers, "I got it on the last one. I think." On the way home Zara asks Arjun to teach her the Teentaal claps, too. "Next week," he says. "Bring your violin. We'll see if you can play a raga."

Diagram: Tala Clapper



Interactive simulation: <https://aaryavvatts-lab.github.io/south-asian-culture-textbook/sims/ch09-tala-clapper/main.html>

Open the Tala Clapper fullscreen

MicroSim specification: Tala Clapper

sim-id: ch09-tala-clapper

Library: p5.js

Status: Implemented

Bloom Level: Apply

Bloom Verb: count

Learning Objective: The learner will count through a full tala cycle for Teentaal, Rupak, Dadra and Adi tala, follow the clap, wave and finger-count gestures, and identify sam (the first beat) when the cycle returns.

Canvas: responsive width; 530 px drawing area plus 100 px control area.

Controls: Tala menu (Teentaal 16, Rupak 7, Dadra 6, Adi tala 8), Start / Pause button, tempo slider (40 to 160 beats per minute), "Sound on" checkbox. Click or tap a beat dot to read about it.

Behavior: Beat dots sit in a circle like a clock, grouped into sections. Sam is a large star-marked dot at the top, khali (wave) beats are hollow, claps are filled, and Carnatic finger counts are small. The sim starts paused; Start lights each beat in turn and shows "Clap," "Wave" or a finger name in the center, with a cycle counter. Synthesized WebAudio clicks (no recordings) sound only after the user presses Start: a low, longer tone for sam, a bright click for claps, a soft muted tick for waves and a quiet tick for finger counts.

Start with **Teentaal** at a slow tempo and press **Start**. Clap along with your hands: clap when the screen says "Clap," wave your hand sideways when it says "Wave." Count the beats out loud from 1 to 16. Notice the quiet wave on beat 9 and how the next sam feels like coming home.

Then switch to **Rupak**. Before you press Start, predict: what will you do on beat 1? Finally, try **Adi tala** and use your fingers the way Arjun did, palm, pinky, ring, middle, palm, flip, palm, flip. Speed up the tempo slider until you can't keep up, then slow it down and try to land on sam without looking at the screen.

Ask Your Elders

Your interview for this chapter

Talk with a parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, family friend or community elder about music: the songs from their childhood, the film songs they love, whether anyone in the family learned an instrument or classical singing, and the songs they sing at weddings and festivals. If you don't have a South Asian elder to ask, interview a club advisor, a local temple, mosque, gurdwara or cultural center volunteer, or a classmate's family (with permission). Ten minutes is enough.

Before you start: Have a phone ready so they can play you a song they love while you talk. Ask if it's okay to take notes.

Questions to ask

1. What songs do you remember from when you were my age? Where did you hear them: the radio, films, the temple or mosque, family gatherings?
2. Who is your favorite singer or musician, and why?
3. Did anyone in our family learn an instrument, classical singing or devotional songs? Who was their teacher?
4. What songs are sung at weddings or festivals in our family? Who leads them?

5. How has the music you listen to changed over your life, or since you moved to this country?
6. Is there one song you'd like me to learn, and what does it mean to you?

Listen for: names of forms like Qawwali, Ghazal, Baul Music, Folk Music, Bhangra or Film Music (Filmi), any mention of a teacher and the Guru-Shishya Tradition, and any instrument like the Tabla, Sitar or Veena.

Save it: Write down one quote or story in their words, with their permission. If they agree, you can share it with the [Roots & Rivers Story Archive](#).

Your turn: compare two answers

Compare your elder's favorite song with the forms in this chapter. Is it a film song, a ghazal, a qawwali, a folk song or something else? If a friend interviewed someone from a different country or community, compare the two songs: what language is each in, what is it about, and where would people hear it?

"Every family does it a little differently, and there is no wrong answer here."

Common Misconceptions

Myth: Indian classical music is just improvised, with no rules.

Reality: Improvisation is important, but it happens inside strict frameworks. The raga sets which notes, phrases and emphases are allowed, and the tala sets a cycle that every musician must track. Musicians train for years to improvise freely while landing exactly on sam.

Myth: A raga is just a scale.

Reality: A raga includes a set of notes, but also rules for going up and down,

notes to stress, signature phrases and ornaments. Two ragas, such as Bhoopali and Deshkar, can share the same notes and still be different ragas.

Myth: Bollywood music is all of South Asian music.

Reality: Hindi film songs are hugely popular, but South Asia also has two classical systems, qawwali, ghazal, Baul songs, folk music in every country, bhangra, and film industries in many languages, plus pop and rock scenes from Lahore to Dhaka to Kathmandu.

Myth: Qawwali is just party music.

Reality: Qawwali can be thrilling to hear, but it began as Sufi devotional music sung at shrines to bring listeners closer to God. For many performers and listeners it is still a form of prayer.

Check Yourself

? 1. What is the difference between a raga and a tala? ✓

A raga is a framework for melody: which notes to use and how to combine them. A tala is a repeating cycle of beats that organizes time.

? 2. What is sam, and what is khali? ✓

Sam is the first beat of a tala cycle, where musicians aim to land together. Khali ("empty") is a section marked with a wave instead of a clap; on the tabla it is played mostly without the deep bass.

? 3. How many beats are in Teentaal, and on which beat is the wave? ✓

Teentaal has 16 beats in four sections of four. The wave (khali) is on beat 9; claps fall on beats 1, 5 and 13.

? 4. Name one main difference between Hindustani and Carnatic music. ✓

Possible answers: Hindustani music is from the north and puts more weight on long improvisation, with tabla and sitar; Carnatic music is from the south and centers on composed songs, with mridangam, violin and veena.

? 5. What is a playback singer? ✓

A professional singer who records film songs in a studio while actors lip-sync them on screen.

Exercises

Remember

1. Name the seven sargam syllables in order.

Answer ✓

Sa, re, ga, ma, pa, dha, ni (then sa again an octave higher).

2. Which UNESCO list includes Baul songs, and in what year were they placed on it?

Answer ✓

UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, in 2008. They were first proclaimed a masterpiece in 2005.

Understand

1. Explain why Rupak tala can be tricky for beginners.

Answer

Rupak's first section is khali, so sam (beat 1) is a wave, not a clap. Listeners waiting for the loudest beat may mistake beat 4 for the start of the cycle.

2. Explain what a gharana is and why gharanas are usually named after places.

Answer

A gharana is a lineage of musicians, connected by family or by teacher and student, who share a style. Most are named after the city or court where the founders worked, such as Gwalior or Patiala.

Apply

1. Use the Tala Clapper to count three full cycles of Dadra at 80 beats per minute. Write down how many claps and how many waves you made, and how long one cycle took in seconds. *Hint: at 80 beats per minute, each beat lasts $60 \div 80$ seconds.*
2. Your club is planning a five-minute "music around South Asia" playlist for a meeting. Choose four songs or pieces from four different countries using this chapter, and write one sentence per choice naming its form (for example qawwali, Baul, boduberu or filmi). *Hint: the folk table in 9.9 covers all eight countries.*

Analyze

1. Compare qawwali and ghazal. How are they alike, and how do they differ in setting, sound and purpose? *Hint: think about shrines versus small gatherings, and chorus versus solo voice.*
2. The violin came from Europe and the harmonium from Europe too, yet both are now central to South Asian music. Analyze what this tells you about how musical traditions change. Use at least one other example from the chapter. *Hint: consider the sitar's Persian name or British bhangra.*

Evaluate

1. Some people say film music has "watered down" classical music; others say it has brought ragas to millions who would never attend a concert. Which view do you find more convincing? Support your answer with evidence from the chapter. *Hint: a strong answer considers both sides.*
2. The Whose Story? box gives several accounts of the sitar's and tabla's origins. Evaluate which kind of evidence (written records, instrument names, temple carvings) you find most convincing, and why. *Hint: ask what each kind of evidence can and cannot prove.*

Create

1. Invent your own tala of 10 or 12 beats. Decide how to divide it into sections, mark sam, claps and at least one wave, and write out how to count it with your hands. Teach it to a friend. *Hint: Jhaptaal, a real Hindustani tala, has 10 beats divided 2 + 3 + 2 + 3.*
2. Write a short "liner note" (100 to 150 words) introducing a South Asian song your family loves to a friend who has never heard it. Explain its form,

language and where people hear it, without quoting the lyrics. *Hint: use at least two concept words from this chapter.*

Key Takeaways

- A raga is a framework for melody (notes, movement, emphasis and signature phrases), not just a scale; sargam (sa re ga ma pa dha ni) names its notes.
- A tala is a repeating cycle of beats counted with claps, waves and finger taps. Sam, the first beat, is where musicians land together; khali is the "empty" wave.
- Teentaal has 16 beats (wave on 9), Rupak 7 (starting on a wave), Dadra 6 and the Carnatic Adi tala 8.
- Hindustani music (north) and Carnatic music (south) share roots but differ in instruments, emphasis and repertoire; both pass from teacher to student through the guru-shishya tradition, and in the north through gharanas.
- The sitar, tabla and veena are classical icons, and instruments like the violin and harmonium show how traditions absorb new sounds.
- Qawwali (Sufi devotion), ghazal (sung poetry) and Baul songs (Bengali mystic minstrels) express faith and love; every one of the eight countries has its own folk music, and bhangra went global from Punjab and Britain.
- Film music, sung by playback singers, is among the most widely heard music in the region, and it has won Academy Awards in 2009 and 2023.

You found beat one!



You can now count a tala, tell a raga from a scale, and name the music of all eight countries. Next, in Chapter 10, we add movement: the classical dances and theater that turn these rhythms into stories.

Quiz: Music

Test your understanding of Chapter 9. Choose the best answer, then click **Show Answer** to check.

Question 1

What is sam?

- A. The drone note held under a raga
- B. A five-note raga sung in the evening
- C. The first beat of a tala cycle, where musicians aim to land together
- D. The bass drum of the tabla

 **Show Answer**



The correct answer is **C**. Sam is the first beat of a tala cycle and its most important arrival point. The drone comes from a tanpura or similar instrument, and the tabla's bass drum is the bayan.

Concept Tested: Tala **Bloom's Level:** Remember

Question 2

Which instrument is a pair of hand drums, with a smaller tuned drum for the right hand and a larger bass drum for the left?

- A. Tabla

B. Mridangam

C. Dhol

D. Veena

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **A**. The tabla is a pair of drums: the dayan (right) and the bayan (left). The mridangam is a single drum with two heads, used in Carnatic music, and the dhol is a large two-sided drum played with sticks in bhangra.

Concept Tested: Tabla **Bloom's Level:** Remember

Question 3

Baul songs, placed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2008, come mainly from which region?

A. Punjab, in Pakistan and India

B. Kerala, in southern India

C. The Kathmandu Valley of Nepal

D. Bangladesh and India's West Bengal

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **D**. The Bauls are wandering mystic singers of Bangladesh and West Bengal, and their most famous figure, Lalou, lived near Kushtia in present-day Bangladesh. Punjab is the home of bhangra, not Baul music.

Concept Tested: Baul Music **Bloom's Level:** Remember

Question 4

Why is a raga not the same thing as a scale?

- A. A raga always uses all twelve notes
- B. A raga also sets how to move up and down, which notes to stress, and signature phrases
- C. A raga is a rhythm, not a melody
- D. A raga can only be played on the sitar

? Show Answer



The correct answer is **B**. A raga includes a set of notes but also rules for ascending and descending, emphasis, ornaments and characteristic phrases. That's why two ragas, like Bhoopali and Deshkar, can share the same notes and still be different. A rhythm cycle is a tala, not a raga.

Concept Tested: Raga **Bloom's Level:** Understand

Question 5

What does it mean that Hindustani music developed through gharanas?

- A. Musicians learned in lineages, linked by family or teacher and student, each with its own recognizable style
- B. Music was written down in printed books for each city
- C. Every musician belonged to the same national music school
- D. Musicians were only allowed to play in temples

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **A**. A gharana is a "musical household," a lineage of musicians connected by family or apprenticeship who share a style, usually named after a place such as Gwalior or Patiala. The music was traditionally passed on orally, not through printed books.

Concept Tested: Gharana **Bloom's Level:** Understand

Question 6

Which statement best describes qawwali?

- A. A Punjabi harvest dance with the dhol
- B. Love poetry in rhyming couplets, sung softly by a solo singer
- C. Sufi devotional music sung at shrines, building in energy to bring listeners closer to God
- D. A style of film song recorded by playback singers

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **C**. Qawwali is Sufi Muslim devotional music, traditionally sung at dargahs, with a lead singer, chorus, harmonium and percussion. Option B describes the ghazal, a related but quieter, more intimate form built around the poem.

Concept Tested: Qawwali **Bloom's Level:** Understand

Question 7

Zara is counting Teentaal with the Tala Clapper. She hears the deep bass go quiet and sees "Wave" on beat 9. How many more beats until sam?

- A. 4
- B. 8
- C. 9
- D. 16

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **B**. The wave (khali) in Teentaal falls on beat 9, so sam comes after beats 9 through 16, eight beats later. Answer C confuses the beat number of khali with the distance to sam.

Concept Tested: Tala **Bloom's Level:** Apply

Question 8

At a concert, Ben notices a musician playing a long-necked instrument with a round gourd body. Many extra strings ring by themselves under the frets whenever she plays. Which instrument is it most likely to be?

- A. Tabla
- B. Harmonium
- C. Ektara
- D. Sitar

? Show Answer



The correct answer is **D**. The sitar has a gourd body, movable curved frets and sympathetic strings that run under the frets and ring in sympathy with the played strings. The ektara has just one string, and the harmonium is a hand-pumped keyboard.

Concept Tested: Sitar **Bloom's Level:** Apply

Question 9

Compare Hindustani and Carnatic music. Which pairing is correct?

- A. Hindustani: mridangam and veena; Carnatic: tabla and sitar
- B. Hindustani: composed songs only; Carnatic: no compositions at all
- C. Hindustani: tabla, long raga improvisation, Teentaal; Carnatic: mridangam, composed songs at the center, Adi tala
- D. Hindustani is only from Pakistan; Carnatic is only from Sri Lanka

? Show Answer



The correct answer is **C**. Hindustani music (northern India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal) uses the tabla and gives long time to improvising on the raga, with Teentaal as a famous tala. Carnatic music (southern India and Tamil communities) centers on composed songs, with the mridangam and Adi tala. Option A swaps the two systems' instruments.

Concept Tested: Carnatic Music **Bloom's Level:** Analyze

Question 10

The violin came from Europe, yet it is now at the heart of Carnatic concerts. What does this best show about South Asian music?

- A. Traditions absorb new instruments and make them their own, as with the harmonium and the sitar's Persian roots
- B. Carnatic music was invented in Europe
- C. South Asian music has never changed over time
- D. Only Western instruments can play ragas

 Show Answer



The correct answer is **A**. Balaswami Dikshitar adapted the violin to Carnatic music, and it is now played seated with the scroll on the foot. The harmonium and the sitar's Persian-derived name show the same pattern of borrowing and adapting. Carnatic music itself grew in southern India, not Europe.

Concept Tested: Carnatic Music **Bloom's Level:** Analyze