



INDIAN MUSIC VS WESTERN MUSIC – ART & CULTURE

NEWS: Indian music has been deeply tied to religion, rituals, and spirituality, as evidenced by the Vedas and temple art. But what is the main difference between Indian and Western music, especially in terms of melody and harmony, and how does it reflect on their respective cultures?

WHAT'S IN THE NEWS?

Cultural and Religious Context of Music

- **Hindu Mythology and the Significance of Music:**

Hindu mythology intertwines music deeply with divinity and creation. For instance, when Shiva began to sing, it is said that Vishnu melted, and his body transformed into the waters of the Ganga, showcasing the power of music in cosmic events. Another myth highlights Ravana, who is believed to have invented the *veena* by using his bone as the beam, his nerves as the strings, and his head as the gourd, demonstrating music's connection to human ingenuity and devotion.

- **Music in Ascetic Traditions:**

Unlike Hindu mythology, the ascetic traditions of Buddhism and Jainism do not associate their spiritual figures, such as the Buddha or Jain Tirthankaras, with musical instruments. This reflects a broader aversion to sensory pleasures like music in ascetic philosophies, which focus on detachment. In contrast, Bhakti saints embraced music as a spiritual tool, using it to express their devotion and love for God.

- **Religious Restrictions on Music:**

In Christianity and Islam, music often faced religious constraints. Orthodox Christian and Muslim teachings considered music sinful unless it was explicitly used for hymns or praise songs, reflecting their emphasis on piety and worship over entertainment.



Indian VS Western Music Notes

Comparison Chart

| Indian Music | Western Music |
|--|---|
| Indian Classical music is broadly classified into two major traditions: Hindustani and Carnatic. | Western music is the genre of art music that celebrates the life of American West. |
| Indian Classical music uses a much more complex system of scales. | Western music uses major and minor scales and equal temperament notes. |
| Indian music is based on melody or single notes played in a specific order. | Western Music is based on harmony that refers to a group of notes played one after the other. |
| Indian music does not follow an equi-tempered division of notes. | There are only two sets of pitch ratios between the notes. |
| Indian music does not have a standardized written notation. | Western music has a standardized written notation. |

Indian and Western Classical Music Comparison

- **Characteristics of Indian Classical Music:**

Indian classical music is fundamentally based on melody, which is monophonic, meaning it revolves around a single series of notes. In this tradition, one person plays or sings a primary



note while other instruments and voices harmoniously support it. Improvisation is central to Indian music, as seen in *aalaps*, where the artist explores the scale freely and unstructuredly. Indian music is primarily oral, passed down through generations without reliance on written compositions.

- **Features of Western Classical Music:**

Western classical music, by contrast, is polyphonic, involving the combination of multiple sounds that interact as counterpoints to create complex harmonies. Unlike Indian classical music, Western compositions are meticulously documented, leaving little room for improvisation. However, jazz, influenced by African traditions, introduced improvisation to the Western musical landscape.

- **Role of the Audience:**

Indian classical performances are highly interactive, with the audience playing an essential role in shaping the artist's improvisation. The artist aims to evoke *rasa* (mood) and *bhava* (emotion) through their performance. Western classical music, however, prioritizes fidelity to the composition. The performance remains consistent, regardless of the audience's presence or engagement.

Historical Evolution of Indian Music

- **Music in Prehistoric and Harappan Eras:**

Music likely began in prehistoric times with humans striking stones to create rhythmic sounds. Archaeological discoveries in Odisha have unearthed such ancient musical stones. The Harappan civilization also displayed musical tendencies, as evidenced by seals showing dancers encircling a tree, suggesting the presence of accompanying music. Harappan trade with Sumerians might have involved musical instruments, as harps found in Sumerian tombs closely resemble Indian designs.

- **Sama Veda as Evidence of Music:**

The *Sama Veda*, dating to post-1000 BCE, provides the earliest definitive evidence of Indian music. It adapted the lyrical hymns of the *Rig Veda* into melodic forms, illustrating the sacred origins of Indian music. Gandharvas, or celestial musicians, are frequently mentioned in ancient texts, and Sanskrit plays often depicted musicians entertaining royalty. Sculptures of female musicians on Hindu temples and Buddhist cave walls further underline music's historical significance.

The Influence of Islam on Indian Music

- **Development of Hindustani and Carnatic Systems:**

The arrival of Islam in India brought Persian musical traditions, which influenced the evolution of the Hindustani music system in northern India. Hindustani music thrived in royal courts, elite households, and through courtesans (*tawaifs*). Meanwhile, the Carnatic system in the south retained its traditional foundations, finding support in temples and *devadasi* families.



- **Gharanas and Tawaifs:**

Gharanas, or schools of music, became centers of musical learning and performance in the north. Tawaifs were instrumental in preserving and innovating Hindustani music, ensuring its continued relevance in courts and beyond.

British Influence on Indian Music

- **Introduction of Military Bands and Orchestras:**

British colonial rule introduced orchestras and military bands to India, which significantly influenced the music traditions of southern India. Indian musicians incorporated elements of these foreign styles, leading to unique adaptations.

- **The Trinity of Carnatic Music:**

The 18th century witnessed the rise of three iconic Carnatic composers—Tyagaraja, Muthuswami Dikshitar, and Syama Sastri—who collectively enriched the tradition and are celebrated as the "Trinity of Carnatic Music."

Forgotten Contributions to Indian Music

- **Courtesans and Devadasis:**

Figures like Gauhar Jaan, one of the first Indian performers to record music, and Begum Akhtar, a renowned ghazal singer, played pivotal roles in preserving and promoting Hindustani music. In the south, devadasis like Bangalore Nagarathamma not only safeguarded Carnatic traditions but also contributed significantly to temple music and culture.

- **Marginalized Musical Instruments and Communities:**

Instruments like the *Parai*, predominantly played by Dalits, are often overlooked despite their historical importance. Mentioned in Sangam literature, the *Parai* was used for announcements and rituals, yet its players were marginalized due to caste prejudices.

The Interplay of Folk and Classical Music

- **Folk Music Traditions:**

Folk music connects deeply with everyday life, expressing themes of work, celebration, and sorrow. Examples include lullabies, wedding songs, *Biraha* from Bihar, and *Garba* from Gujarat. These traditions remain dynamic, evolving with cultural practices.

- **Kalidasa's Dual Legacy:**

The poet Kalidasa is credited with bridging folk and classical traditions. While he composed in Sanskrit for royal courts, he also created folk songs in regional languages, demonstrating his mastery of both *Nautanki* (folk theater) and *Natyashastra* (classical theater).

Music as a Vehicle for Bhakti and Popular Culture

- **Role in Bhakti Movements:**

Music became a powerful tool for spreading Bhakti (devotion) across India. Sikh *Gurbani*,



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Maharashtrian *Varkari* hymns, Manipuri Vaishnava drumming, and devotional performances like *Jagratas* and *Ramayana* recitals made spiritual ideas accessible to common people.

- **Transition to Cinema:**

Indian cinema further popularized music through playback singing and background scores. Artists like Noorjehan, Lata Mangeshkar, Ilayaraja, and AR Rahman brought Indian music to global audiences, blending classical, folk, and modern styles innovatively.

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