

Instruments, Timbres and Sonorities

Indian classical music ensembles have only a handful of players. Most instruments are played while seated on the floor. There are usually the same three elements:

- **SOLOIST** - either a singer or an instrumentalist playing the melody, usually the Sitar but sometimes Sarod, Sarangi or Esraj.
- **PERCUSSION** - usually only the Tabla.
- **DRONE** - usually a Tanpura or Harmonium .



The **SITAR** has a long neck and has between four and seven metal strings. Most of the strings are plucked with a metal plectrum for the melody and others create the drone. The Sitar has sympathetic strings underneath that vibrate and create a thick "shimmery" timbre/sonority. The tuning of the strings can be adjusted for different pieces and the Sitar has movable frets and a gourd resonator. A Sitar player can pull strings to make notes "bend" or "distort". Sliding a finger along a string as it is plucked gives a sliding glissando sound called a "mind". The Sitar player plays the melody as well as some of the drone notes based on a *raga* which is often improvised. The Sitar is played in a sitting position with crossed legs.



The **TANPURA** is a stringed instrument similar to the Sitar, but it has fewer strings (usually four) and no frets. Unlike the Sitar, it plays very simple and repetitive music – frequently performing the drone part within a *raga* as a form of musical accompaniment.



The **SAROD** is a plucked string instrument, shorter than the Sitar and has no frets. The Sarod is played by plucking the strings with a large wooden plectrum. It has main strings and sympathetic strings and plays ornaments by sliding up and down the strings.

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The **SARANGI** is a fretless bowed instrument held in the lap. It has three main strings and as many as 36 sympathetic strings.





The **ESRAJ** is a bowed string instrument played sitting on the floor, like the Sarangi, but with frets like the Sitar. The Esraj has a number of sympathetic and drone strings.



The **HARMONIUM** is a reed organ operated by **bellows** which open at the back. The **keyboard** is on top and has a range of two to three octaves. The Harmonium often plays the drone accompaniment in Indian classical music.





The **BANSURI** is a bamboo flute with no keys.

The melody of Indian classical music is sometimes performed by singers both male and female. The lyrics are normally in Punjabi or another Indian language.



TABLA are a pair of small drums placed side by side on the floor in front of the player. Their main role is to keep the time, but they sometimes interact with the soloist and have short solos. The heads are made out of goatskin with a central area which has a coating made from iron filings and rice flour.

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The smaller drum is known as the **dayan** (meaning right). It is tuned to "Sa" and played with the fingertips of the right hand. The larger drum is known as **bayan** (meaning left). It is played with the left hand, played with the heel of the hand, which is pressed into the drum to change the pitch, providing a distinctive sound, deeper in pitch (bass sound) to the dayan.

Tabla playing is very difficult and it can take years to master the different stokes **(BOLS)**. Some strokes are **OPEN** (allowed to ring) and others are **CLOSED** (dampened).



*Note the playing technique of the **TABLA** player (shown right) – playing the **dayan** with his fingertips and the larger **bayan** with the heel of the hand, pressing into the skin of the drumhead to change the pitch.*

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PIT STOP

1. For each of the instruments used in **Indian Classical Music** shown below, identify (name) the instrument, say **HOW** it is played and **WHAT** it plays i.e., the role within a traditional Indian music ensemble.

			
			

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