

Experiencing the Viola in Hindustani Classical Music

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Introduction

It may surprise some to know that the viola is not a rare participant in Indian classical music. From the technical standpoint, there are at least two different conditions for having a viola in a classical or light classical music ensemble: one is as a replacement of the violin; another is the functional replacement of a sarangi,¹ a bowed, short necked lute with three playing strings and 12 to 15 sympathetic strings, more precisely called “aliquot strings.”²

However, we will find that it is only the first of these options—the replacement of the violin—that provides

the occasions when the viola is employed. While it is theoretically an option, there are actually no musicians who play the viola instead of a sarangi for the simple reason that there are not many sarangi players at all compared to violin players, making the substitution of the violin more likely than that of the sarangi. The viola is in most of the cases seen as a “big violin” thus replacing the violin, which actually was first used in order to substitute the sarangi. While in Indian Carnatic music, viola playing is at times admired when played by outstanding artists such as Mangalampalli Balamuralikrishna and Chittoor Kumareshan (Kumar, 1999;⁴ Satish Kamath, 2002), the viola is rather “special” in the context of Hindustani classical music.

On various occasions from 2012 to 2015, two postgraduate students with their lecturer at the Music Department of Universiti Putra Malaysia played Hindustani classical music fusion—or at least, they tried some modified raga interpretations—for their own elevation, rather than of any specific academic purpose. The three are the authors of this article. The two postgraduate students came from Sri Lanka to Malaysia and are teachers of Hindustani classical music at the University of Visual and Performing Arts in Colombo. They were musically educated in North India, including Lucknow and Banaras. The lecturer is a European musicologist with some interest in all types of music, especially in South and Southeast Asia.

This report chronicles the experience of these three people, focusing on having a viola in their ensemble. The ensemble plays mainly instrumental music with tabla, a bansuri alternating with a free reed pipe used as an additional drone modifying the electric *raghini*, and a virtuosic violin.



*Illus. 1: Sarangi (photo: open source)*³



Illus. 2: Ruwin R. Dias on viola, Gisa Jähnichen on bansuri (with harmonium in front), and Chinthaka P. Meddegoda on tabla.

Ruwin Dias, the violin player, took the opportunity to play on the viola instead of his violin. His former teacher at Banaras Hindu University, Vankhatramanujam Balaji, an exceptional musician who plays both the violin and the viola and who may have inspired Ruwin's experiment. Vankhatramanujam Balaji's viola is equipped with a second

neck that bears aliquot strings guided through the joint bridge (see Illustration 3).

His viola rests on a special wooden stand for violin or viola, with the section of the stand that supports the scroll end of the instrument carved in the shape of a hand. The



Illus. 3: Vankhatramanujam Balaji with his viola in 2009 (photo: open source)⁵

usual playing method that allows for resting the peg box of the violin or viola on the heel of the performer is deemed by the performer to be inappropriate, as showing the bare feet into any direction of other people is considered impolite. A recording of Vankhatramanujam Balaji is accessible online.⁶

Some Background

The use of the viola is promoted through a number of reasons given in public statements. Satish Kamath writes in *The Hindu* (July

The framework of raga Desi is illustrated in Hindi scripts, called *devanagari*, as to be used in the free metric introduction, called *alap*.

The following lines in Illustration 5 have been demonstrated by Ramashreya Jha (Ramrang) in an audio recording.¹² The duration of tones is not considered because it is a piece in free metric melodic elaboration. However, the breaks of ‘breathing’ are underpinned for a better understanding of melodic phrases, which are intriguing in finding the actual mood of the raga.

The tuning of the viola in the experiment was E flat–B flat–E flat–B flat.¹³ The electric tanpura represented by the *raghini* has been set to an E–flat drone.

However, only the viola player kept to the respective raga while the other musicians, the bansuri and the reed pipe, as well as the the violin that joined later on, freely improvised with the tonal material given, though not following the typical melodic progressions of raga Desi.

According to the tradition, raga Desi is sung in the late morning, approximately from 9 a.m. to 12 noon. Raga

Desi is put in the Asawari Thata as the deriving scale (Rao et al. 1999). A Thata is an abstract scale of pitches used within a Raga. The Asawari Thata has seven ascending and seven descending tones in one octave, where Gandhar (*ga*, 3rd tone), Dhaivat (*dha*, 6th tone) and Nishad (*ni*, 7th tone) are flat and all other tones ‘full’.

The Unmodified Viola in the Context of the Experiment

Unlike the example of Balaji mentioned earlier, the viola played had no modifications to its physical appearance, meaning that there were no aliquot strings attached. Only the tuning was changed as mentioned above. Nonetheless, the sound of the instrument still differed remarkably from a violin from the aspects of loudness, timbre and range. As there was no singer present, it seemed that the viola took over a vocal part. This impression might have been caused through the fact that the viola played the raga in the most detailed and accurate manner. On the perception of different playing techniques and positions, the violist says the following:



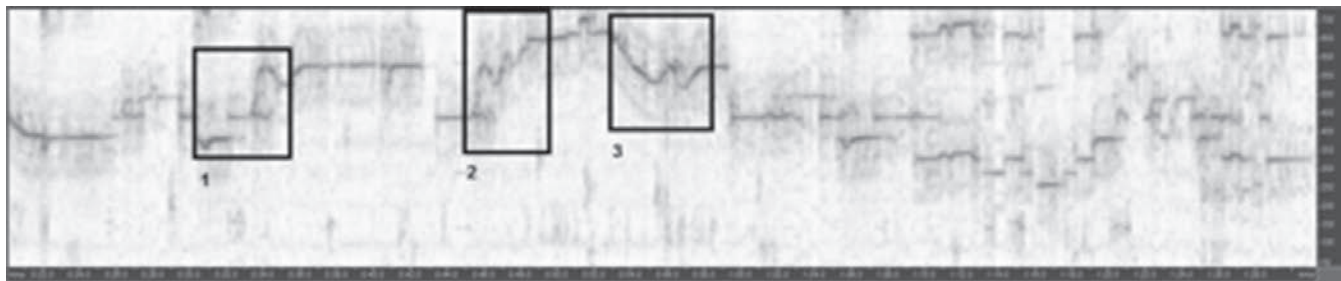
Illus. 5: Raga Desi as demonstrated by Ramashreya Jha. (Transcription by Chinthaka Prageeth Meddegoda).

Many musicians either keep the viola as in the Western tradition or use a stand so that the viola is firmly held as it is seen in the practice of teacher Vankhatramanujam Balaji. More importantly, the stand is used because of the convenience having the left hand free and not burdened by holding the instrument. The stand can release tension in the chin and the heel. So musicians prefer to use the viola on a stand. In this performance, the viola is held without a stand, which limits playing possibilities somewhat.

String instrumentalists from other musical traditions may find this an unusual statement—after all, in Western classical music, much agility and virtuosity is attained without the aid of any apparatus. A common element of Indian classical music that makes a difference is the use of *meends*, sliding tones that are remarkably fast by any standard, and particularly a different physical setup and placement of the instrument. To illustrate this, let us



examine the following spectrographic excerpt (Illustration 6). (Audio excerpt available on the AVS website: <http://www.americanviolasociety.org/Resources/Audio-Recordings.php>)



Illus. 6: Spectrographic excerpt (slowed down to 25% for better visibility) from the alap with short distance and long distance meends.

Some of these sliding tones are as short as 1/10 of a second yet they have to cover an interval up to a fourth. In area 1, a *khatka* is followed by a long distance *meend*; in area 2, the viola is “stepping up” in middle distance slides; in area 3, a long descending slide precedes a short distance up and down *meend*. The thickness of the spectrographic line shows uneven patterns in the long distance *meends* while the short *meends* are of evenly distributed strength.

Keeping these sliding tones in mind, it is a particular challenge for violin players to switch to the viola in a short period of time in ways that would be different

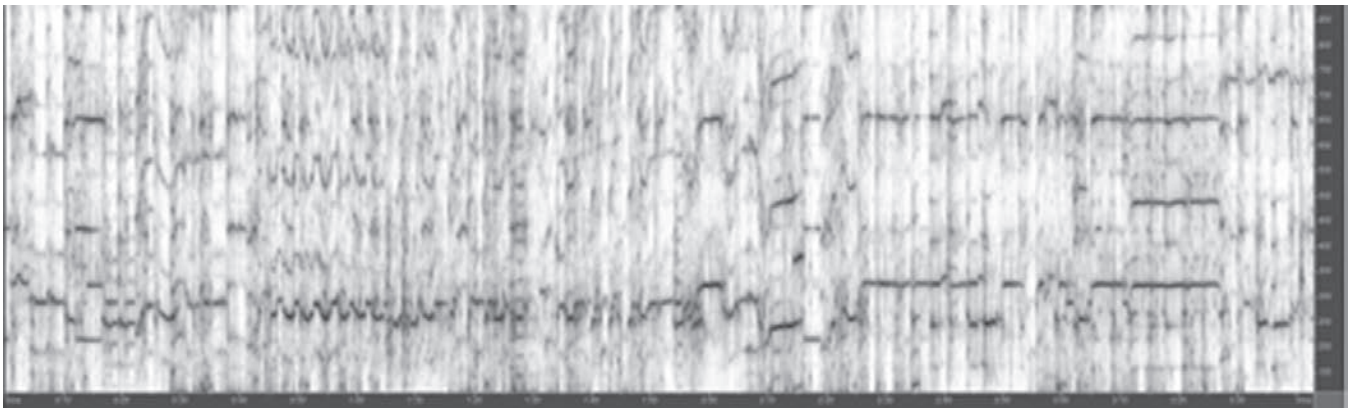
than for those in the Western classical music world. The distances between intervals are longer on the viola and therefore a violin player is unable to play in the same virtuosic way on the viola. Some fingering techniques, such as using all four fingers at a particularly fast tempo, can be difficult on viola. The gauges of viola strings are bigger and therefore it is seemingly less convenient moving the fingers over the thicker strings than on the violin.

In contrast, the use of *shrutis*—quick, minute, microtonal intervals—is more convenient on viola because of the ease in moving fingers on the fingerboard across larger distances; for example, as it would be necessary for raga Darbari.

The following spectrogram of the performance discussed shows the viola elaborating between *ni* (the seventh tone below the basic tone *sa*) and *ri* (the second tone) and descending then to *sa* (see Illustration 7). The steadiness of the *gamak* (evenly played vibrato over a wider interval), the slightly ascending tones played, the microtonal accents set over the long tone in the last third of the excerpt as well as the straight application of the lower

octave on the last long tone are possibly more precise than if played on the violin. In the spectrogram, the drone tone was removed to achieve a better clarity of the melodic line and the picture.

The Tintal—a cyclic rhythmic structure in Hindustani classical music consisting of four sets of four beats—is played in the recording and begins with Madhya Laya (medium tempo) and ends with Dhruv Laya (fast tempo). The speed depends on the negotiated preference of the musicians who play the raga. In some cases, a particular tempo needs to be maintained as inappropriate speed of rhythmic patterns may affect the intended mood of the



Illus. 7: This spectrographic excerpt from the recording shows the viola in the range between 100 and 400 Hz, depicted without drone.

raga—for example, the raga Darbari is usually not sung or played in faster tempo as the raga Darbari is a grave raga with slow vibration on Gandhar (*ga* third tone, a minor third above *sa*) most often played deep in the night. However, in raga Desi, a gradual increase of tempo is welcome. The final tempo did not influence the way to play the viola in comparison to the violin; rather, it was only more physically demanding as the larger movements require slightly more physical energy.

Experiencing the viola by other ensemble members

From the viewpoint of the bansuri player, having the viola was a different experience, as the range of the instrument allowed for more contrasting sequences. While interacting with the violin, a bansuri has to be very careful in not muting the given melodic lines while the viola offers much more space through a different timbre, loudness in the low register and more detailed shrutis (glissandi called *meend*, special trills called *khatka* or *murkhi*). Therefore, the bansuri enjoyed more freedom in choosing the register and in elaborating larger tonal spaces for melodic progressions. The freedom, on the other hand, can be also demanding in terms that the player has to be spontaneously innovative and decisive.

Today, due to various advantages, a number of Hindustani classical musicians prefer the viola over the violin in performing Hindustani classical music. The lower frequencies in comparison to that of the violin that makes it easier to accompany singers.

But there are also other views. Indrani Edirisuriya, a lecturer of violin in the University of Visual and Performing Arts expressed that she prefers the sound of

the violin more than the viola for Hindustani classical music. The reasons she has given are as follows:

The viola has a bass sound which is not the same as the sound of violin. I prefer to hear Hindustani classical violin ... but not on viola. We used to hear Hindustani classical music on violin in which violin playing techniques are employed. I find it is somehow not appropriate playing the same melodies on viola though it is played using the same playing techniques as on the violin. Tonal color ... of the viola is much different from the violin, especially the sound of the first two strings of the viola that are really very different from the sound of the first two strings of the violin. My Guru Balaji used to play a viola, but I prefer the violin sound played by N. Rajam, the Guru of Balaji.¹⁴

Nevertheless, she agreed that the resonance of viola provides the sound that is widely preferred by Hindustani musicians who depend on drones or any continuous sound which includes rich overtones. As is the case in Illustration 3, some Hindustani musicians have added some precisely-tuned aliquot strings called *tarap* to the viola so that they can hear the exact resonance for each tone they play on the viola.

From the viewpoint of the tabla player, the sound of the viola is more attractive in many ways. For one, it seems to have a larger sound than the violin; this is not only in terms of the lower register but also the overall resonance that can be heard more clearly even on an unmodified viola. The tuning of the viola is set at lower pitches compared to the violin, even when the violin is already retuned in pitches lower than commonly expected, usually in $f-c'-g'-d''$ and $f-c'-g'-c$ in order

to accommodate singers. Hindustani classical music is more appropriate in a lower register that allows for a richer timbre, which is more aesthetically pleasing to the ear. This also has a relation to the role of the voice, with the lower register enabling the voice to build up a greater level of contrast in the course of exploring the tonal space of a raga. Hindustani classical solos are played on longer bamboo flutes which may give the key tones e.g., E flat, E, and F.

Another viewpoint is that the ragas in which the *Mandra saptak* (lower octave) is used are more appropriate for viola than the violin; thus the viola can depict the mood of the raga as intended. The disadvantage of viola is that some ragas which are elaborated on *Madhya saptak* (the middle range of the performer) and *Uchcha saptak* (higher octave) will not be improved when a viola is employed instead of a violin.

Finally, the stature of a performer within his musical society may be related to the fact whether the violin or viola is considered suitable. Viola players are in many cases outstanding personalities: due to their reputation, they dare to challenge an existing image of Hindustani classical music and they are confident in doing so.

Overall, the experiment was very useful in learning more about not only the technical and physical aspects of the instrument, but also about musical perceptions and cultural biases.

An excerpt of the performance is also available on the AVS website at the link provided on page 35.

Chinthaka Prageeth Meddegoda and Ruwin Rangeeth Dias are both on the faculty of the University for Visual and Performing Arts, Colombo, Sri Lanka. They obtained their musical expertise in India, namely in North Indian classical music at the Banares Hindu University. Specializing in vocal and violin teaching respectively, they are keen explorers of various music cultures and performance practices. They were PhD candidates at Universiti Putra Malaysia until the completion of their dissertations in 2015, supervised by Professor Gisa Jähnichen.

Jähnichen is a German musicologist has worked for over 25 years in Southeast Asia at several universities and in preservation projects. Among various roles, she is an organologist and chairs an international Study Group on

Musical Instruments within the International Council of Traditional Music. She enjoys practicing music with her students.

1. A sarangi is a bowed, short-necked lute with three playing strings and 12 to 15 aliquot strings.
2. Aliquot strings represent in their length and tuning a part of the string and/or the division of the string with which they will sound in order to enrich the overtone spectrum of a musical modus. Sympathetic strings, however, can be of any length or tuning, they just enrich the overall resonance. Aliquot strings are used in some Blüthner pianos as well.
3. National Music Museum website, open source, <http://orgs.usd.edu/nmm/India/1187Sarangi/Sarangi1187.html>, (accessed May 10, 2015).
4. Kumar introduced the viola into the Indian academic discussion under the title “Introduction of Viola” at the Annual Conference of the Chembur Fine Arts Society, Mumbai, 1999: “The Viola is approximately an inch or slightly more in length than the Violin. The pitch or sruti of Viola is generally C or C sharp (1–1 1/2 kattai), or sometimes even less, which shows that the quality of tone is rather base. It does not have a shrill tone like the violin. The bow used for the viola is thicker and smaller than the bow used for violin. After the instrument has been adapted for Carnatic music, its tuning has also undergone a change.” The use of the term ‘base’ relates to the function of the base note in a raga, which, interestingly is in a bass level compared to the usual register of singers.
5. Source: International Ancient Arts Symposium Festival <http://goo.gl/HrJHbF> (accessed August 7, 2015).
6. “Vankhatramanujam Balaji is playing Brindabani Sarang—Ban Ban Dhoondan Jaon,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=599K-yjYNOY>, (uploaded by Malyada Goverdhan on February 8, 2010; accessed April 2, 2015.”
7. Satish Kamath, “It should have been the viola.” *The Hindu*, Jul. 25, 2002, <http://www.thehindujobs.com/thehindu/mp/2002/07/25/stories/2002072500340300.htm>, (accessed April 1, 2015).

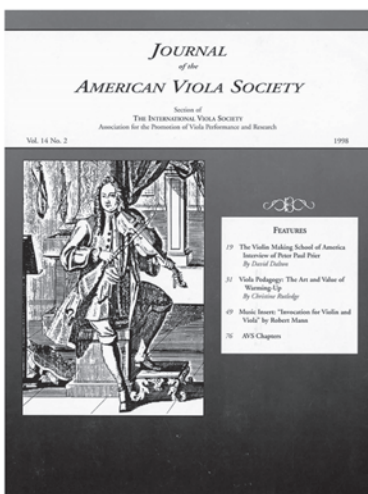
8. Ibid.
9. Ministry of Education, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan website, <http://moe.gov.af/en/jobs/violin-and-violata-teacher> (posted on February 19, 2014; accessed July 25, 2015.)
10. Listed in Teachers and Performers of Indian Music and Dance, http://chandrantha.com/teachers/teach_music_new_zealand.html (accessed August 7, 2015).
11. Website of Chintamani Rath from Tauranga, New Zealand: www.ragaculture.com (accessed April 2, 2015).
12. <http://www.parrikar.org/hindustani/desi/>, created in 2002 (accessed July 25, 2015).
13. Some violinists prefer strictly the tuning D–A–D–A.
14. Personal communication, March 31, 2015.

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30 YEARS OF JAVS



This issue included an interview by David Dalton of Peter Paul Prier, the founder of the Violin Making School of America. This explored the luthier’s family history, the adventure of “striking out on one’s own,” the school, and plans for the future. To graduate, each student presents two instruments (one unvarnished), a thesis, and the notebook that they have used over three years.

Christine Rutledge emphasized the value of warming up in a pedagogical article. She provided a 12-point system that included exercises, in both descriptions and notation, for vibrato, string crossing, shifting, and stretching one’s fingers. Robert Mann, who founded the Juilliard String Quartet, contributed a duo for violin and viola.