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The Laya-Taal Aspect Of Khayal: In The Perspective Of Agra Gharana

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Abstract:

The article delves into the rhythmic intricacies of the Khayal style of Agra Gharana. It explores how the Gharana's unique approach to Laya and Taal contributes to the aesthetic experience of its vocal performances. Emphasizing the significance of rhythm in Hindustani classical music, the article highlights the role of rhythmic structures, Tabla accompaniment, and improvisational techniques in shaping the distinctive style of the Agra Gharana. Drawing insights from renowned musicians and scholars, it underscores the importance of understanding Laya, Bols, and Taal in appreciating the beauty and depth of Agra Gharana's musical repertoire.

Keywords:

Agra Gharana, Khayal, Laya, Taal, Theka, Aesthetics, Style, Pedagogy, Analysis

Objectives:

1. Analyze the role of rhythmic structures in enhancing the emotional expression and aesthetic appeal of Agra Gharana compositions, with a focus on the integration of Layakari and poetic meter.
2. Examine the pedagogical approaches used in training vocalists of the Agra Gharana, particularly the methods for teaching rhythmic intricacies and the incorporation of Tabla playing skills.
3. Investigate the impact of tempo variations on the presentation and interpretation of Agra Gharana compositions, analyzing the aesthetic preferences and historical contexts influencing tempo selection.
4. Assess the significance of rhythmic precision and improvisation in Tabla accompaniment for Agra Gharana vocal performances, exploring the interplay between vocal Bols and Tabla patterns.
5. Explore the psychological and physiological effects of rhythmic structures in Agra Gharana music on performers and audiences, considering factors such as emotional resonance, attentional focus, and perceived musicality.
6. Investigate the contemporary practices and adaptations of rhythmic elements in Agra Gharana music, including the incorporation of modern technologies and influences from other musical genres.
7. Propose recommendations for preserving and promoting the rhythmic heritage of the Agra Gharana, including strategies for curriculum development, performance training, and cultural preservation initiatives.

Introduction:

Listening to the presentation of Agra Gharana's singing naturally draws attention to its many rhythmic and temporal nuances. The influence of its Dhrupad-Dhamar origins is evident in Agra Gharana's approach to Taal and Laya. Traditionally, almost all Gharanas included training in Dhrupad-Dhamar alongside Khayal. However, the singers of Agra Gharana integrated elements of Dhrupad-Dhamar into Khayal, incorporating techniques such as Nom-Tom Alap, Meend-Gamak, and rhythmic intricacies. Additionally, they continued to perform Dhrupad-Dhamar alongside Khayal. According to Dr. R. C. Mehta, "Even in the Dhrupad-Dhamar performances of Agra Gharana singers, elements of Khayal, such as Boltaan-based rhythmic patterns, are included."¹

In his book 'Sangeetajnon Ke Sansmaran,' Ustad Vilayat Hussain Khan mentions that the unique flavor in the Agra Gharana's Khayal singing style emerged from adopting the attractive rhythmic patterns and gait of Dhrupad-Dhamar. He credits this synthesis to his father, Ustad Natthan Khan. The incorporation of techniques such as Dugun-Tigun-Chaugun-Aad rhythmic patterns, along with Bol-ang, Bol-Banav, Bol-Lapet, Boltaan, Tihais, and the graceful pronunciation of words reflecting the elements of Atee-Anagat, as well as the proportionate and dynamic enunciation of the words of the Taal's Theka, were adopted by Ustad Natthan Khan from traditional Dhrupad-Dhamar and presented through Khayal.²

Pandit Yashwant Mahale says, "Incorporating the intricacies of Dhrupad-Dhamar elements, such as the rhythmic plan of the Bandish, the rhythm and weight of the Theka, and the distinctive rhythm created by the interspersed words, into the Khayal style is not an easy task. Adorning one's style with these ornaments while maintaining the fundamental foundation of the Khayal style is not just a penchant for novelty; it reflects high creativity and talent behind it."³

Similar to the styles of Dhrupad and instrumental music, the rhythmic, metrical, and free-form alaps of Nom-Tom are a distinctive feature of this Gharana's Raga expansion. Displaying clear rhythmic cuts and creating meter using linguistic single-syllable sounds, such as long 'aa' or 'ee,' is considered unappealing. Therefore, Nom-Tom alaps are given prominence in this style. The phrases like 'Tan-reenan-tanan-reetanan' in Nom-Tom provide a rhythmic structure to the alaps. Before understanding the use of Taal in Agra Gharana's singing, I find it necessary to shed light on the concepts of Taal and Theka.

Implementation of Taal as 'Theka':

In ancient Jati Gayan methods, Prabandha, and the currently practiced South Bharat (Carnatic) music tradition, only the action of keeping Taal (like hand gestures) holds importance. For instance, Dhrupad and Carnatic music vocalists can deliver their entire musical performance merely by marking Taal with their hands. This means that even without the accompaniment of a percussion instrument, the singing performance is feasible. Accompanying percussion instruments like Mridangam or Pakhawaj do not have prescribed syllables to be played for each beat. The accompaniment by these instruments is based on maintaining the cycle of beats while improvising freely or playing in the 'Chhoot Ang' style. The percussionist has the flexibility to choose any set of syllables. The purpose of this accompaniment is to enhance the vitality inherent in the singing, break the monotony of the evenly flowing cycle of beats, and increase the appeal of the Sam (the first beat of the cycle). Therefore, Dhrupad and Carnatic music are considered 'Taal or Rhythm based' music traditions.

In Hindustani music, genres such as Khayal, Tarana, Tappa, and Thumri-Dadra, which are accompanied by the Tabla, are referred to as 'Theka-based' music. The singing of these genres is not possible without the Theka (the syllable-based pattern) played on the Tabla. These genres are not solely based on the mathematical calculation of beats; they also utilize the language-derived beauty of the Tabla's syllables (like Dha, Dhin, Tin, Tirkit, etc.). When accompanying these genres, each beat within the rhythm cycles is sequentially marked with specific syllable groups based on the language of the Tabla.

These syllable groups are broadly divided into two main types: 'Khali' syllables and 'Bhari' syllables. 'Bhari' syllables are produced either by the combined use of both the right (Tabla) and left (Dagga) drums or by the

¹ Mehta, Ramanlal, Agra Gharana: Tradition, Musical Philosophy, and Repertoire, CreateSpace Independent Publishing, Oct 2017, ISBN 9781979096034

² Khan, Ustad Vilayat Hussain, Aakanksha Publishing House, New Delhi, 2017, ISBN 9788183704984

³ Mahale, Pandit Yashwantbuva, Agra Gharana: Parampara Aur Bandishein, Sanskar Prakashan, Mumbai, 2019, page-27, ISBN 9788193970256

left drum alone, resulting in open, resonant, and weighty sounds. Examples of ‘Bhari’ syllables include ‘Dha, Dhi, Dhin, Dhee’, Dhage, Dhit, and Ge/Ghe’. On the other hand, ‘Khali’ syllables are generated either solely by the Tabla, solely by the dagga, or by a combination of both, where the sound from the Dagga is closed and non-resonant. Examples of ‘Khali’ syllables include ‘Tin, Tee, Tita, Ke, Kat, Tirkait, and Na/Ta’.

The combined sequence of ‘Khali’ and ‘Bhari’ syllables creates a distinctive rhythmic pattern. When this pattern is repeated across several cycles of the Taal’s beats, it forms a special structure known as the basic ‘Theka’ of the Taal. Just as the mere direct (straight) placement of notes does not establish a Raga in singing, the plain and monotonous playing of the basic syllables on the Tabla does not make the Theka beautiful. Much like the Meend, Aans, and Kan embellishments in singing, beauty is created on the Tabla and dagga through various techniques such as pressure variations, resonance, silence, and the modulation of the volume and tone of the syllables. A skilled vocalist generally prefers the flexible and aesthetically pleasing Theka of TeenTaal like ‘Naa-, Dhin---, Dhin-, Naa-- , Kda- Dhin-- --Dhin-- Dha---’ with its nuanced play over the rigid rendering of ‘Dha, Dhin, Dhin, Dha.’ The vocalist tries to shape their imagination while navigating through this sonorous structure of Theka.

Pandit Suresh Talwalkar, a rhythmic expert, has said, “Khayal music is essentially Theka Based music.”⁴ Variations can be demonstrated based on the foundation of secondary syllables filled in between beats while presenting it in all Laya categories such as Vilambit, Madhya, Drut Khayals and Tarana, etc. This means that playing EkTaal at every level, from 16 to 200 BPM, will change its basic rhythm pattern. Maestros from previous generations, considering the aesthetic beauty born from the fusion of rhythm and syllables, have defined the forms of various Thekas. The reason for the prevalence of various Thekas with the same beat but different tempos and different beats with the same tempo, is that they are generating different types of aesthetic convention. This can be made clear from examples of some Thekas. The slow tempo of TeenTaal is usually played like this –

Dha---,Ti-dTi-Ta-, (1)	Dhin-----,Tita (2)	Dhin--,KdaDhin-Dhin- (3)	Dha---,Ti-dTita- (4)	Dha---,Dha-,DhaDha (5)
Dhin-----,Tita (6)	Dhin--,KdaDhin-Dhin- (7)	Dha---,Ti-dTi-Ta- (8)	Dha---,Dha-,DhaDha (9)	
Tin-----,Tita (10)	Tin--,KdaTin-Tin- (11)	Ta---,Ti-dTi-Ta- (12)	Ta---,Tirakit (13)	
Dhin-----Tita (14)	Dhin--,KdaDhin-Dhin- (15)	Dha---Dha-DhaTid (16)	Dha (1)	

Upon reading this rhythm, readers will perceive that the tempo of slow Laya does not manifest the ‘4-4-4-4’ divisions like the fast tempo does. Its division is evident in the ‘5-4-4-3’ divisions, which gives weight to the sixth, tenth, and fourteenth Matra. The reason for this emphasis lies in the preceding filled in faster tempo Bols (such as ‘KdaDhinDhin’) of these Matras. In the first five syllables, there is no specific emphasis on any Matra. It comes first on the sixth Matra after the Sam. Due to the role of ‘dhādhā’ preceding ‘tin’ on the tenth Matra, it actually creates the true ‘khālī’ of this Laya. Seasoned artists always indicate ‘khālī’ on this tenth Matra of Slow tempo theka, and not on the ninth Matra.

Looking at the Theka (rhythmic pattern) of TriTaal in medium-fast tempo, on the tenth, eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth Matras, respectively, ‘Tin, Tin, Ta, Ta’ syllables are placed, which are all ‘khali-indicating’ syllables. It is also common to replace the ‘Ta’ on the thirteenth Matra with ‘Tita’ or ‘Traka’ several times. The ‘Dhin’ on the fourteenth Matra following this ‘Traka’ is perceived with a special emphasis. In this way, when the initial nine Bhari Matras (with Dhā and Dhin), followed by four Khali Matras (Tin, Ta, with Tit/Traka), and the final three Bhari Matras (Dhin and Dha) are played in sequence, it reveals a ‘4-5-4-3’ meter. Only if the Theka is played in fast tempo, then the emphasis of each Matra becomes equally evident, and thus the division of ‘4-4-4-4’ meter is manifested. In extremely fast tempo, only the weight of the first

⁴ Talwalkar, Pandit Suresh, Aavartan, Rajhans Prakashan, Mumbai, 2014, ISBN 978-8174347848

Matra can be perceived. Then the Theka becomes 'Dha--Dhin-Na-, Na-Dhin-Dhin-Na-, Na-Tin-Tin-Na, --Dhin-Dhin-Na-.' At the end of the extremely fast tempo, 'Na' syllable is also played on the sum. In this way, we see that the beauty of the Theka can manifest in different ways in each tempo. Similarly, in Taals like EkTaal, Ada ChauTaal, etc., differences in syllables and emphasis can be observed along with the difference in tempo. The inherent difference in the structure of rhythms in different tempos is what generates the beauty of different compositions in different tempos. This is why traditional compositions exist for every tempo in Khayal music.

Performance Elements:

If we look at the traditional compositions of the Agra Gharana, we will find that along with the Raga, the Thekas (rhythmic patterns) conform to both the rhythmic and predetermined metric structure, which enhances the unity. This unity is also reflected in the improvisational sections when the Bols (syllables) are elaborated upon. It is for this reason that a Tabla player feels that their Theka is also a significant part of the vocal music presentation.

At the initial stages of Tabla playing, the Tabla player performs the Theka with variations according to the temperament or demand of the singer or instrumentalist. During progression, based on their musical intuition, the Tabla player enjoys the freedom to experiment with various rhythmic patterns, including variations in the arrangement of empty and filled Bols (syllables) according to the language of the Tabla.

If the tempo of the Taal is in a slow state, or the singer is using various rhythmic patterns during progression, the Tabla player adds more Bols while maintaining a parallel rhythm and occasionally highlighting the designated places of the basic Theka, which helps in clarifying the Khali and Bhari beats. As the Tabla player progresses, they play more and more Bols, adjusting according to the accompaniment and the style of the Theka playing, which can vary according to the diverse traditions of singing and Tabla playing. The art of playing the Theka changes based on the level of the singer or instrumentalist, the solidity of their rhythm, their improvisational skills, and the chosen composition, rhythm, or mood and structure of the Taal or Raga.

The Khayal singers do perform according to the Theka of Khayal, not based on its mathematical divisions or every beat, but on the emphasis generated by the Khali and Bhari beats of the Theka. This is called 'Kan-Khanda' (ear and shoulder) of the Theka. Just as different person turns their neck in different directions, making an angle from the shoulder to ear, showing specific influences by raising or lowering their shoulders, similarly, the mood of the Theka is also created by varying the weight at certain Matra positions.

Grasping the rhythm with the hand (according to the gesture), or counting each beat with the fingers, or clearly demonstrating each Matra position on the instrument while singing, is a characteristic of Dhrupad style. Using it appropriately in Khayal will be a severe blow to the fundamental concept of Khayal, the name of which translates 'imaginary creation'.

Training of Laya-Taal:

Unfortunately, in today's scenario, most vocal music teachers in the country do not familiarize their students with the concept of Theka. They only teach the compositions of Khayal based on claps and beats, or based on counting Matras. One fundamental reason for this is the 'blind imitation of notation' found in books. This leads to the destruction of the beauty of the composition and the stylistic approach inherent in it. Due to the loss of the fundamental beauty of the Khayal style, singing the composition feels soulless. After a while, tired of this beauty-less teaching method, either talented students give up learning music altogether, or they divert their interest towards other interesting instruments or towards Sugam, film, or Western music styles.

If classical music is to be promoted effectively in Bharat or globally, it is essential to impart knowledge of Tabla playing to music students parallel to their vocal training. Understanding the language of Tabla, its intricacies, its nuances, pronunciation of Bols, the diversity of Thekas, and knowledge of Tabla playing, whether directly or indirectly, is crucial. Only then will the student be able to recognize the elements of self-intellectual Raga expansion and appreciate its beauty, producing interesting creations. It would not be appropriate to call the dry technique of merely recognizing the rhythm of the Bols, identifying only the first Matra position of the Taal, and mechanically bringing a word to the Sam position as 'Taal knowledge'. Finding joy in the uncertain flow of the Theka's rhythmic patterns is an essential part of Hindustani music.

While imparting training in Bandish to disciples of the Agra Gharana, the gurus not only teach the notes involved but also emphasize the creation of Laya (tempo) based on those notes. It is crucial to instill in the

student's mind a uniformity with the rhythmic cycle, hence each student is also taught how to play the Tabla to maintain the rhythm. If teaching Tabla playing from scratch is not feasible, then at least learning to play the basic beats on the Dagga (left side drum) becomes essential. Many gurus of the Agra Gharana, during teaching sessions, personally demonstrate playing the Tabla to their disciples. Playing the Tabla oneself to follow the rhythmic cycles is imperative for achieving mental uniformity.

Almost all artists of the Agra Gharana are proficient in playing the Tabla while presenting their singing. Such training has also been found in other Gharanas. The eminent vocalist and Violin player from the Gwalior-Jaipur Gharana, Pandit Gajananrao Joshi, was renowned for imparting training to his disciples in both singing and Tabla playing, considering it essential. Similarly, Pandit Ajoy Chakrabarti, a vocalist from the Patiala Gharana, is also an excellent Tabla player, and is able of spontaneous Tabla playing along-with singing.

Taal, the rhythmic cycles, are formed from beat units, while Laya, the orderly stability of rhythm, shapes these beats. In theory, Laya is accorded primary importance, being considered one of its ten vital elements (Dash Pran). In Bharatiya music, Laya holds significance akin to that in yoga, pranayama, and Ayurveda. The creation of musical notes also finds its foundation in the essence of Laya. We understand that musical notes are contingent upon the number of vibrations per second of sound. Altering the pace of these vibrations, or Laya, results in a corresponding change in pitch of the notes. Hence, the existence of notes in music is intrinsically tied to Laya. Consequently, to embark on the journey of becoming an artist, one must delve into the practice of both Swar cultivation and Laya refinement.

Proportionate importance of Swar & Laya-Taal:

Often, we observe that when an artist elongates the Shadja of the higher octave, the audience applauds enthusiastically. These applauds are not actually for the artist's Swara but rather to appreciate the artist's mastery over prolonged breath control and breath regulation mechanisms. Therefore, it cannot be considered an influence generated by the Swara itself.

The influence generated by the Swara occurs only when a structured melody, including the preceding and subsequent Swaras, along with their rhythmic roles, forms a coherent melodic sequence. If lyrics are also involved in this arrangement, then it is essential for the melodic sequence to align with the pronunciation of the lyrics (short-long syllables), observe proper pauses, and synchronize with the beats of the accompanying rhythm. In this coordination, the role of rhythm predominates. If the rhythm strikes are not appropriate in this process, then the entire framework of the program is disrupted, and the impact of the Swara is lost. Hence, what we perceive as the "impact of the Swara" in singing is, in reality, a dense and intricate process where the role of rhythm predominates.

It is never appropriate for an artist to sing out of tune or pitchy. Attaining accuracy in Swara on the correct pitch, either vocally or instrumentally, is the foremost requirement for being a musician. Attempting to sing without firmly establishing the Swara is undoubtedly futile. However, presenting Swara without any creative thought, in a disorganized manner, or without a structured framework, cannot be termed as "Swara-oriented singing." Not all artists with melodious voices become proficient until they master the art of managing and placing notes, which is based on 'kaal', a fundamental attribute. The term 'Swar-Sustained Style' doesn't imply randomly altering or sustaining any note, based on whatever comes to mind. Otherwise, it would be a misuse of the freedom provided by the 'Khayal' discipline. Such singing can never be impactful.

In the context of the importance of rhythm in music, the statement of the renowned vocalist and guru Pandit Ajay Chakrabarti holds great significance. He says - When I began learning music, I used to believe that 'the importance of Swara in music is seventy percent, and the importance of rhythm is thirty percent.' But as I progressed in my practice, my perspective changed. Today, as I stand before you as a senior musician and Guru, my belief is that 'in high-quality music, the role of rhythm is seventy percent, and the role of Swaras is only thirty percent.'⁵

Dr. Rajesh Kelkar emphasizes, "The Agra style of singing is focused on rhythm and tempo. While comparing different Gharana styles, one should also consider the skill level in rhythm and tempo, not just in Swara."⁶ The reason behind this is that in our Hindustani classical music, merely singing Swaras does not establish a

⁵ Chakrabarti, Pandit Ajay. Three-Day Music Workshop, Bandish, N.C.P.A. Mumbai, June 2015

⁶ Kelkar, Dr. Rajesh, Interviewed in Mumbai, June 2019

Raga. Even in popular Ragas like Yaman, until the Rishabh note is touched with the Gandhar note in a specific subtle timing, the essence of Yaman will not be perceived.

Selection of Laya:

The concept of time (Kaal) is also paramount for the aesthetic understanding of Swaras and melodic sequences. If a single note is played incessantly on a harmonium for an hour, the human mind will perceive it as 'noise' rather than 'music.' Such sound will not be appreciated; instead, one will anticipate its cessation. Similarly, if this sound is heard within $1/8^{\text{th}}$ of a second, it will have no impact on the listener; it will have vanished from the mind before it registers through the ears. Therefore, without studying the nuances related to subtle rhythms, such as how long to elongate or shorten a note, or the duration of improvisations like Alaap, Sargam, and Taan in a Raga, or the temporal extent of each note in a melodic sequence, it is not possible to become a proficient performer. Imagining the existence of 'Swara-oriented' music without the unrestricted and deliberate establishment of rhythm is futile.

The distinctive features of the Agra Gharana include the use of melodic ornamentation with a touch of emotion, the execution of 'Bol' while maintaining a steady tempo, and the repeated synchronization with the original rhythm during Layakari (rhythmic improvisation). Maintaining a tempo of 'Naad' is very essential in hindustani music. Be it the tempo of Tanpura strings, the 'Nadhindhinna' in Tabla or on the Chikari strings of a sitar. In Agra-style singing, the Laya is always kept alive. This vibrant rhythm brings attraction. Agra singers do not stay away from the stable rhythm for too long; by delving into the subtlety and the intangible impact, they repeatedly return towards concreteness.

A significant characteristic of the Agra Gharana is its emphasis on the lyrical aspect of compositions while presenting the Khayal form. Giving importance to the lyrical aspect of Bandish helps nourish the expected emotions of each Raga and the resulting aesthetic state generated through its rendition. When the words of poetry are interwoven with rhythm, it becomes easier for the listener to grasp their emotional essence. In the atmosphere of a Raga created by Swaras, words and their rhythmic placement hold a special place. This concept has been particularly emphasized in the Agra Gharana.

Pandit Arun Kashalkar expresses his views on rhythm, stating, "The concept of rhythm (Laya) is the fundamental principle of the Agra Gharana. Even the expression of meend and gamak occurs within a specific rhythm. Although there is provision of an 'unrestricted (Anibaddha)' style of alaap, it should be noted that 'Anibaddha' does not imply 'looseness.' Alaap can never be loose. The presentation of the initial 'Sa' also establishes a definite tempo and Kaal. Based on the Kaal of the first swara 'Sa,' the interrelated tempo of subsequent swaras is determined. The next swara of the Raga is presented proportionally to the Kaal of the first swara of the Raga. While singing taans, the tempo of each swara becomes almost equal. This is why it is said that the Raga is not visible in taans. You cannot engage in complex rhythmic activities while performing intricate dance movements. To run, you need to follow a straight line."

Pandit Arunji further states, "Agra's singers sing in such a rhythm that it does not distort the form of the Raga. Playing with rhythm, Ateet and Anagat actions etc., are merely intellectual expressions. The essence of this style is inheritance of simplicity. Maintaining the Laya and inter-relation with Theka while placing notes are its hallmarks. Every Raga presentation adheres to these basic principles while being sung. It is because of the emphasis on the principle of rhythm that every Gharana's singers prefer to sing their characteristic Ragas. It is not necessary that all Ragas fit into the styles of all Gharanas."⁷

In the selection of tempo as well, the Agra Gharana appears disciplined. In any form of music, transitioning back to a slow tempo after a fast tempo is not considered aesthetically pleasing. If, for instance, the Alap-Jod-Jhala of a string instrument or Nom-Tom aalap has progressed gradually from slow to fast tempo, then singing a Bada Khayal in a slower tempo afterward may not be suitable. Hence, many artists, after the Nom-Tom aalap, maintain the Theka tempo at approximately 28-32 beats per minute (BPM), known as "Chadhi Laya" (moderately slow). For the same reason, Ustad Faiyaz Khan, Ustad Vilayat Hussain Khan, and Ustad Khadim Hussain Khan often presented Dhamar after the Nom-Tom Aalap, not Khayals.

Some modern artists have also incorporated slower tempos of around 23 beats per minute in their singing. When concert duration is limited, some artists do not prolong the Nom-Tom phrases much and proceed directly to the composition. They begin compositions in slower tempos for serious mood Ragas. After elaborating on the composition in various ways about 4-5 times, they gradually increase the tempo before

⁷ Kashalkar, Pandit Arun, Interviewed in Mumbai, September 2018

moving on to the elaboration section. Some Khayal compositions excel in the Madhya-Vilambit Laya. Some artists also present it in a fixed kind of tempo and don't increase the Laya.

Let's also consider a scientific fact behind the selection of tempo. Generally, the human heart rate ranges from 70 to 80 beats per minute (BPM). Upon examining the audio recordings of artists from previous generations, I found that most presentations were in a proportionate tempo, ranging from 35 to 40 BPM. This tempo has been considered ideal by the artists of those times. Listening to music in this tempo feels pleasant and uplifting. Perhaps this is why artists from the Agra Gharana consider the moderately slow tempo as their main musical tempo for Bada Khayals. As an exception, Ustad Sharafat Hussain Khan sang Khayal in approximately 17 BPM tempo in Raga Rageshri, which is closer to "Ati-Vilambit" tempo.⁸

In modern times, the Agra Gharana presents Khayal in almost every prevalent Taal with nearly every possible tempo such as "Vilambit" (20-25 BPM), "Madhya-Vilambit" (26-50 BPM), "Madhya" (50-80 BPM), "Madhya-drut" (80-120 BPM), and "Drut" (exceeding 120 or 130 BPM) tempo. In Taals like TriTaal, Tilwada, Ada Chautal, Jhoomra, and EkTaal, the vocalists of the Agra Gharana render extensive Khayal compositions. These Taals are also utilized in "Madhya-vilambit" and "Madhya" Laya. Additionally, compositions in Rupak and Jhaptal are sung in "Madhya" Laya. Each Taal's structure provides a distinct framework for elaborating on Ragas, directly correlating the listener's perception and musical appreciation with its structure. Vocalists have the opportunity to explore variations in compositions, tempos, and melodic expansions in each Taal. Fast tempo compositions are predominantly found in EkTaal and TriTaal. Ada Chautal is rarely used.

Aesthetics co-related to Laya-Taal:

It has been observed that artists of the Agra Gharana sing some compositions of Bada Khayal in different Taals. For instance, the Bada Khyal 'Ab Maan Le' in Raga Bhoopali is sung in EkTaal, Tilwada, Jhoomra, and TriTaal. It is natural for a single composition to evoke various rhythmic beauties. Multiple compositions are composed for the sake of different aesthetic experiences in each Taal. If there are no significant differences in the melodic movements and pauses of the notes in the composition, and the simplicity of the diction of lyrics is maintained, then compositions sung in Taals of twelve, fourteen, or sixteen Matras can also be sung in other Taals of this group. I have also observed many popular fast-paced Khayals being sung in slow tempo, and slow-paced Khayals being transformed into fast-paced ones.

The estimation of the total duration of a composition can be determined by factors such as the rhythmic structure of the mukhda (opening lines), the total number of words, the placement of phrases within the melody, and so on. This estimation inspires the selection of which Taal would enhance a composition the most. In the context of fast-paced Khayals, there is usually less ambiguity regarding the choice of Taal. This is because there is a solid rhythmic structure and a clear placement of phrases in these compositions. Therefore, the possibility of singing a fast-paced composition in another Taal is rare. Altering the tempo of a fast-paced composition by manipulating the timing of words and notes can compromise its original beauty.

The most attractive and significant part of any slow or fast-paced composition is its Mukhda (opening line). In the compositions of the Agra Gharana, the placement of the Mukhda is demonstrated with great precision. Mukhdas that commence with various rhythmic patterns found in Drut Khayals are prevalent in the Agra Gharana. Moreover, the Mukhda is often repeated extensively during elaborations. This repetition helps listeners memorize the notes and the dynamics associated with them. Consequently, each composition's Mukhda unveils a unique beauty. The diversity in compositions arising from phrases beginning at different points within the same Taal further enhances the richness of the repertoire. It's common in the Agra Gharana to explore various improvisational techniques such as Bol-Alaap, Laya-Bol, or Bol-Taan based on these phrases.

As seen earlier, the beauty of understanding the nuances of Laya-Taal and the intricacies of Bols within the Agra Gharana also includes an appreciation for the aesthetics of its Lyrics. The rhythmic structures of the Agra Gharana do not adhere strictly to mathematical precision; instead, they incorporate Bols with a particular soft and graceful pronunciation, emphasizing Layakari. Moreover, when dividing the Bols within a line, attention is given to using all the Bols of the line, keeping in mind the rhythm. This principle is also followed in the Jaipur Gharana with different approach. The Layakari in the Agra Gharana involves connecting the beginnings and endings of each Matra and each Mukhda. It's indeed challenging to perform this task without altering or distorting any line or word of poetry, especially in Vilambit and Madhyalaya Khayals.

⁸ https://youtu.be/_h8NzhAGhGQ?si=3GlvSIVB3xY6mnLr

In fast tempo, the rhythmic construction of Laya-Taal, in conjunction with the Tabla accompaniment and the virtuosity of the Tabla player, is essential for creating the desired aesthetic. Collaborating with a Tabla player proficient in both rhythm construction and poetic meter is crucial for artists of the Agra Gharana when generating lay-Bols. The Tabla player is expected not only to maintain a steady beat but also to synchronize the Tabla's rhythmic patterns with the vocal Bols and rhythmic actions. Decorating the Tabla's rhythm with various Bols, aligning with specific beats, sections of rhythmic equivalence, and the parallel positioning of Bols within the composition, enhances the overall aesthetic presentation. For this task, the Tabla player must possess extensive experience in accompaniment and an intuitive understanding of real-time improvisation. This is not merely a technical exercise, but an artful synchronization achieved through subtle rhythmic exercises deeply rooted in the vocal tradition.

Tabla players who love rhythm and meter find great joy in accompanying the singing style of the Agra Gharana. This is because accompanying this style offers them opportunities to showcase their skill in playing rhythmic patterns with profound Bols on the Tabla. Accompanying the vibrant vocalism of the Agra Gharana through rhythmic patterns on the Tabla allows Tabla players to demonstrate the beauty of Laya, Tabla Bols, and more. Since singers of the Agra Gharana are particularly adept at understanding rhythm, beats, and cycles, Tabla players also have full confidence that their accompaniment will not affect the singer's rhythm, beat precision, or mental stability. Therefore, they can present their art freely and confidently.

The solo Tabla performance and Kathak dance also have an impact on the rhythmic activities of the Agra Gharana. My Guru Pt. Babanrao Haldankar had a personal experience to share. He had a keen interest in enjoying all types of music. He had carefully observed Ustad Ahmedjan Thirakwa's solo Tabla performances several times. It is known that Ustad Ahmedjan Thirakwa was himself a melodious and skilled singer, which gave his Tabla performances a special aesthetic sense. Babanraoji was repeatedly impressed by the unique way Thirakwa played with rhythm, including various Bols on the Tabla with a rich sense of Dynamics of Tones and Laya. He incorporated this into his singing. Similarly, he also embraced the rhythmic intricacies of Kathak dance into his vocal performance. Listening to the Bols of Ustad Vilayat Hussain Khan, one would feel as if the Bols were dividing the rhythmic patterns of Kathak's footwork, creating a rhythm. Therefore, after listening to his Layakari, the listener's heart would be filled with a desire to dance.

It can be said that in the Agra Gharana, the rhythmic aspect holds a significant place. However, the holistic beauty of this lies not only in its rhythmic elements but also in its other components such as the nature of the raag, the intricacies of Bols, and the implementation of the notes.

Conclusion:

The Agra Gharana stands out for its meticulous attention to rhythm and tempo, evident in its seamless fusion of Dhrupad-Dhamar elements with Khayal singing. Through a nuanced exploration of Laya, Taal, and rhythmic improvisation, the Gharana's vocalists create captivating musical experiences that resonate with listeners. The article underscores the crucial role of Tabla accompaniment in enhancing the rhythmic dynamics of Agra Gharana performances, highlighting the symbiotic relationship between vocalists and Tabla players. By celebrating the lyrical essence of compositions and the rhythmic nuances of Bols, the Gharana exemplifies the rich tradition of Hindustani classical music, inspiring a deeper appreciation for the interplay of rhythm and melody in musical expression.

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