

A NORTH INDIAN KHYAL PERFORMANCE LAURA LEANTE



ISTITUTO INTERCULTURALE
DI STUDI MUSICALI
COMPARATI

fondazione ONLUS
GIORGIO CINI

**WORLD MUSIC
LISTENING GUIDES**

INTERCULTURAL MUSIC
EDUCATION COURSES

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**World Music Listening Guides.
Intercultural Music Education Courses**

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Cover image

Manjiri Asanare Kelkar performing in Venice,
7 July 2023. Photo by Simone Tarsitani.

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The World Music Listening Guides. Intercultural Music Education Courses aim to provide critical tools for understanding musical diversity. By analysing the dance and music characteristics of pieces belonging to different world music traditions, the guides explore the close relationship between music, culture and society, integrating textual descriptions, images, and multimedia animations created from audiovisual materials held in the IISMC archive. The multimedia animations form the core of the guides and represent their most innovative feature. Designed to function independently of the text, they aim to make the distinctive elements of the musical traditions under study immediately accessible. Each guide concludes with a set of simple exercises intended to assess the knowledge acquired through the texts and animations, which can easily be used as teaching resources by educators.

Starting from significant pieces of a given musical tradition, the guides explore the general aspects of the performance, such as the cultural context, performance practices, instrumental ensemble, song texts, and symbolic elements. The guides also offer the analytical elements needed to understand the formal and syntactic procedures peculiar to each music tradition: metric-rhythmic structures, processes of melodic variation in instrumental and vocal parts, the relationship between music and sung verse, tuning systems, methods of combining parts, and the interaction between music and dance movements. Organised according to progressive levels of complexity, the educational materials presented in the various guides are intended to provide students and teachers with a support for intercultural music education, and address a wide audience, including those with no prior expertise.

This listening guide, *A North Indian Khyal Performance*, created by Laura Leante, is dedicated to Hindustani *khyal* singing and to the music that accompanies its performance. The audiovisual materials presented here were recorded during the event *Indian Music with Manjiri Asanare Kelkar: Khyal Singing*, organised by the IISMC in 2023. The event featured the internationally renowned *khyal* singer Manjiri Asanare Kelkar, accompanied by two highly experienced musicians: Nitin Ware on *tabla* and Dnyaneshwar Sonawane on *harmonium*. The performance was documented by Simone Tarsitani using a multi-camera setup, synchronised audio recordings, and photographic footage. These materials were later reworked into multimedia animations, forming the core of this guide.

Trained by her father, the distinguished *tabla* player Anand Asanare, by the refined Jaipur *gharana* exponent Madhusudan Kanetkar, and finally by the celebrated vocalist Kishori Amonkar, Manjiri combines a profound knowledge of the *khyal* repertoire with rare musical sensitivity and remarkable technical precision. Her melodious voice and creative originality make her one of today's foremost interpreters of *khyal*.

In order to illustrate the complexity of a *khyal* performance, the materials are organised to present, step by step, the main features of Hindustani *khyal* music and singing, starting from its theoretical foundations. After an overview of the historical development of this courtly genre and an introduction to the instruments that make up the ensemble, a series of graphic animations introduces some of the key elements of Hindustani musical theory: scale degrees (*svara*), melodic structures (*raga*), and rhythmic cycles (*tala*). Understanding these concepts is essential to grasp the choices made by musicians as they organise and shape the musical material during performance. Using the rendition of a particular *raga* as reference, the video animations show how the different members of the ensemble contribute collectively to the unfolding of the piece, highlighting the interdependence between the voice, melodic instruments, and rhythmic parts. Particular attention is devoted to the essential dimension of *khyal* – the vocal one. Through a series of animations, the melodic development is illustrated, along with the crucial role played by the relationship between text and music in shaping the interpretative decisions that give form to the performance.

Finally, a set of multiple-choice questions, organised into sections corresponding to the various parts of the guide, allows users to review the contents presented through texts, images, and multimedia animations, while also suggesting possible ways to integrate these materials into educational activities.

Lorenzo Chiarofonte

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1. Introduction: *khyal* as a musical genre

The term *khyal* refers to a vocal genre of art (or ‘classical’) music, which belongs to the North Indian (or Hindustani) tradition.

The name derives from Persian and can be translated as ‘imagination’: its etymology immediately reflects the emphasis put on the singer’s creative ability to improvise on the modes, i.e. the melodic frameworks on which the music is based (the *ragas*) (Fig. 1.1 e 1.2).



Fig. 1.1. Manjiri Asanare Kelkar (Venice, 7 July 2023).



Fig. 1.2. A *khyal* ensemble.

Khyal established itself under aristocratic patronage at the court of Mughal emperor Muhammad Shah in the 18th century. Having originally emerged as a livelier genre than the older and more serious *dhrupad*, since the XIX century *khyal* has become the most commonly performed North Indian classical vocal genre.

After the dissolution of the court system in the XX century, *khyal* – like other Indian classical music genres – ceased to be the prerogative of few privileged patrons and became increasingly accessible to the growing urban middle classes.

Nowadays *khyal* is performed in a variety of contexts, which range from small gatherings, such as those in private homes, where listeners sit in close proximity to the musicians, to public events in large concert halls.

Performances can feature just one *khyal* singer, or more acts – also from other vocal or instrumental genres – especially in the case of festivals programmed over several days.

Traditionally *khyal* used to be taught by a teacher (the *guru* or *ustad*) with whom the student (the *shishya* or *shagird*) developed a life-long bond of trust and loyalty and into whose household he/she often moved. This close relationship is referred to as *guru-shishya parampara*, where the term *parampara* (broadly intended as ‘tradition’) refers to the transmission of knowledge through a teaching lineage. Nowadays *khyal* is widely taught, both at professional and amateur level, also being considered

a good complement to a solid education. Learning opportunities are available in a variety of settings, including, for example, music schools, research and cultural institutions, and universities, both in India and abroad. However, the *guru-shishya parampara* is still considered the best way to learn and the path of choice for a professional career.

The transmission of musical knowledge is essentially oral. The Indian notation system is normally used to keep a record of exercises, lyrics, and also melodic and rhythmic framework of compositions: this notation is broadly descriptive and is not meant to render the actual flow and nuances of the music, which can only be learned by listening closely to and imitating the teacher, through commitment and extensive practice. Within the genre of *khyal* there are various stylistic schools (the *gharanas*), whose names are toponyms of the place of origin of the lineages. *Gharanas* can differ both in approaches to the music (including, for example, emphasis on certain techniques or treatment of melodic and rhythmic materials) and in repertoires.

A deep understanding of *khyal*, its stylistic lineages, and its musical *corpus* is the result of a life-long journey of learning and dedication, both for the musicians and for the most knowledgeable listeners: a performance by an expert artist offers an unlimited source of creative inspiration and aesthetic appreciation.

2. A *khyal* ensemble

A typical *khyal* ensemble comprises a singer (rarely a duo), a drum player on *tabla*, a melodic accompanist (usually on *harmonium* or – more rarely – on the *sarangi* fiddle), and one or more musicians providing the drone on the *tanpura* lute. Nowadays, singers and *harmonium* players can be either male or female, while *tabla* players are still mostly male. *Khyal* is not tied to a specific creed, and musicians can belong to any religion.

The singer, also referred to as the ‘main artist’ or ‘soloist’, is the figure who leads the performance. He/she selects the melodic and rhythmic materials and makes decisions on the unfolding and length of the various stages of the performance. The other musicians are accompanists

and – as the name itself suggests – are musically subordinate to the soloist. The *tabla* player provides rhythmic support, while the melodic accompanist is expected to shadow the melody performed by the singer a split second behind (see [Video 5.1](#)). The *tanpura* players, when present, are often students of the singer and, in addition to plucking the drone, can provide vocal support; in addition to these accompanists or when they are not present, the singer can also choose to play a tanpura while performing.

In performance, the physical layout of a *khyal* ensemble is fixed: the singer sits at the centre of the stage, the *tabla* and *harmonium* players at the right and left of the soloist respectively. The *tanpura* players sit at the back (Fig. 2.1).



Fig. 2.1. A *khyal* ensemble. Singer Chiranjib Chakraborty is accompanied by Vishwanath Shirodkar on *tabla*, Seema Shirodkar on the *harmonium*, and Budhaditya Bhattacharyya on *tanpura*. Chiranjib Chackraborty plays a *surmandal*. (Durham, 1 March 2020).

***Tabla* (drums)**

The *tabla* is a set of two drums. The right one (*dhayan*) is a cylindrical wooden drum and is tuned to the first degree of the scale. The left one (*bayan*) is larger and rounder in shape; it has a deeper resonating sound and is not precisely tuned.

The heads are covered with goat skins which are double layered around the edge. A concentric-layered black paste (*siyahi*) is applied at the centre of the right drum and off centre on the left drum (Fig. 2.2).

The skins are held with leather straps; additional wooden dowels are added between these straps and the body in the *dhayan*, in order to allow adjustment of the tuning.



Fig. 2.2. Vishwanath Shirodkar on *tabla* (Durham, 1 March 2020).

***Harmonium* (free-reed organ)**

The North Indian *harmonium* is a portable free reed organ, which is activated by one hand pumping a bellows, while the other hand performs the melody. The *harmonium's* keyboard covers approximately three octaves (Fig. 2.3).

Having originally arrived in India from Europe in the 19th century, the *harmonium* soon became established in the accompaniment of vocal music.



Fig. 2.3. Dnyaneshwar Sonawane playing *harmonium* (Venice, 7 July 2023).

***Sarangi* (bowed lute)**

Although less common than the *harmonium*, other melodic instruments can be found in *khyal* accompaniment. The *sarangi*, a bowed lute, used to be a very common one. While shape and number of strings are not standardised, *sarangis* have a body carved out of a single piece of wood covered with skin, and a large and short fretless neck. The strings comprise both sympathetic and playing strings (the latter being made of gut) (Fig. 2.4).



Fig. 2.4. Murad Ali playing the *sarangi* (Newcastle, 24 September 2012). Photo by Simone Tarsitani.

***Tanpura* (plucked lute)**

The *tanpura* is a plucked lute, whose resonating body is made up of a large gourd and a long hollow wooden neck. It has four (or less commonly five) strings, which are usually tuned to the first and fourth or fifth degrees of the scale. The open strings are plucked one after the other, in order to produce a single drone sound rather than a series of distinct pitches: this sound has an important aesthetic value as it provides a constant background to the performance, and the voice of the singer is expected to emerge from and merge with it.

For the past decades, the use of electronic substitutes (including, recently, smartphone and tablet applications) has become common; however, whenever possible, singers cherish the presence of real *tanpuras* on stage alongside electronic devices (Fig. 2.5).



Fig. 2.5. Manjiri Asanare Kelkar singing while plucking a *tanpura*. The white box on the floor is an electronic *tanpura* (Pune, 10 February 2010).

Surmandal (zither)

Some singers play a *surmandal*, a zither, which is tuned to the scale of the *raga* being played on that particular occasion, and provides a reference to the soloist who strums the open strings (Fig. 2.1).

3. The music of *khyal*

Raga and tala

Khyal shares much of its theory and musical grammar with other Hindustani classical genres.

As illustrated in **Video 3.1**, North Indian art music is conceived to be performed over three octaves. The octave is divided into seven degrees (*svaras*), whose abbreviated names (Sa, Re, Ga, Ma, Pa, Dha, Ni) are used as solmisation both in learning and performance. The first and fifth degrees are always natural, while the second, third, sixth and seventh can also be flat (*komal*), and the fourth can be sharp (*tivra*).

Svaras do not have a fixed pitch: singers set their own Sa according to their vocal range.

A keen attention to intonation is accompanied by a microtonal sensitivity, as – depending on the mode performed – individual *svaras* can be more or less sharp or flat.

3.1 SVARAS

https://youtu.be/ZEyOcJN_OPM



The two main theoretical pillars which guide the composition and performance of North Indian classical music are the concepts of *raga* and *tala*.

Hindustani classical music's melodic development is regulated by modes (melodic frameworks), called *ragas*, characterised by musical as well as extra-musical features. For example, each *raga* is based on a scale profile (where scales can be pentatonic, hexatonic, or heptatonic, and can differ in ascent and descent), has two pivotal pitches (*vadis*) and presents distinctive melodic movements. Moreover, *ragas* can be associated with times of day or seasons (during which they are expected to be performed), or with the emotions they elicit.

The number of *ragas* is not fixed; some have been known and performed for centuries, while others are more recent, and new ones can derive from the combination of existing ones. Singers' performing repertoires usually include a wide range of both well-known as well as rarer

ragas, whose selection and possible variants depend in good part on the *gharana* a musician belongs to.

Video 3.2 summarises the main principles of *raga* theory, using as an example Raga Bhimpalasi, which will be looked at in more detail in §4 of this listening guide.

3.2 RAGA BHIMPALASI
<https://youtu.be/KIDtJy4bp10>



The North Indian metrical system is based on rhythmic cycles called *talas*, which can be performed at slow (*vilambit*), medium (*madhyam*) or fast (*drut*) tempi.

Each *tala* cycle is characterised by a certain number of metrical units (*matras*) which are organised in groups (*vibhags*). *Vibhags* regulate accentuation, as the first *matra* of each group has a strong or weak stress.

Each *tala* also has a distinctive *theke*, i.e. a sequence of onomatopoeic syllables (*bols*) corresponding to percussive strokes: the *theke* represents a sort of skeletal reference structure on which the drum player improvises in performance.

Video 3.3 illustrates how this theory is applied to a specific case, i.e., *tintal*, a very common *tala* which will be analysed in §5.

3.3 TINTAL
<https://youtu.be/g4kw9iV-wDA>



A *khyal* performance

A *khyal* performance typically lasts between one and a half and two and a half hours, depending on whether the singer is the only performer, or the programme includes several artists. Most concerts take place in the evening, although some events are scheduled at other times to offer the opportunity to perform late night, morning or afternoon *ragas*.

Khyal singers, as is customary also in other Hindustani art music genres, select the *ragas* for their concerts taking into account several factors, including the time of day, the season, or their own mood in that moment: any decision made in advance of the performance can be changed until the last minute.

On stage, singers can introduce the name of the *raga* they are about

to perform; some can briefly recite the text of the compositions they are going to present, possibly indicating also the *tala* and, if known, the name of the composition's author.

In *khyal*, the performance of a *raga* typically starts with a brief introduction (*alap*) which does not have lyrics or rhythmic accompaniment. In the *alap*, the singer introduces the identity of the *raga*, exploring its musical features and thus bringing out its emotions.

In this stage of the performance the singer is only accompanied by the drone and by the *harmonium* player, while the *tabla* player sits in a composed fashion.

The *alap* is followed without interruption by a section characterised by the entrance of *tabla* and, therefore, the presence of metrical structures (*tala*). In this part of the performance the singer presents and improvises on compositions (*bandishes*). These are usually two: the first one is longer and set to a slower tempo (the *bara khyal*, 'big' *khyal*), while the second one is shorter and faster (the *chota khyal*, 'small' *khyal*). The noun *khyal* therefore does not only refer to a vocal genre, but also to a composition in that genre.

All the compositions are set in the same *raga* as the *alap*, while *talas* can differ.

The *chota khyal* can be followed by another *chota khyal* or another short musical form performed in *khyal* style, such as a *tarana* (a composition emphasizing rhythmic dexterity) or a *ragamala* (a 'garland of *ragas*', which briefly explores several *ragas* linked to one another).

Overall, the performance of a *raga* moves towards an increase in tempo, where the *alap* is the slowest section and the last *bandish* the fastest, and an increase in melodic and rhythmic density. This trajectory is reflected within the *bandishes*, especially the longer *bara khyal* (Fig. 3.1).

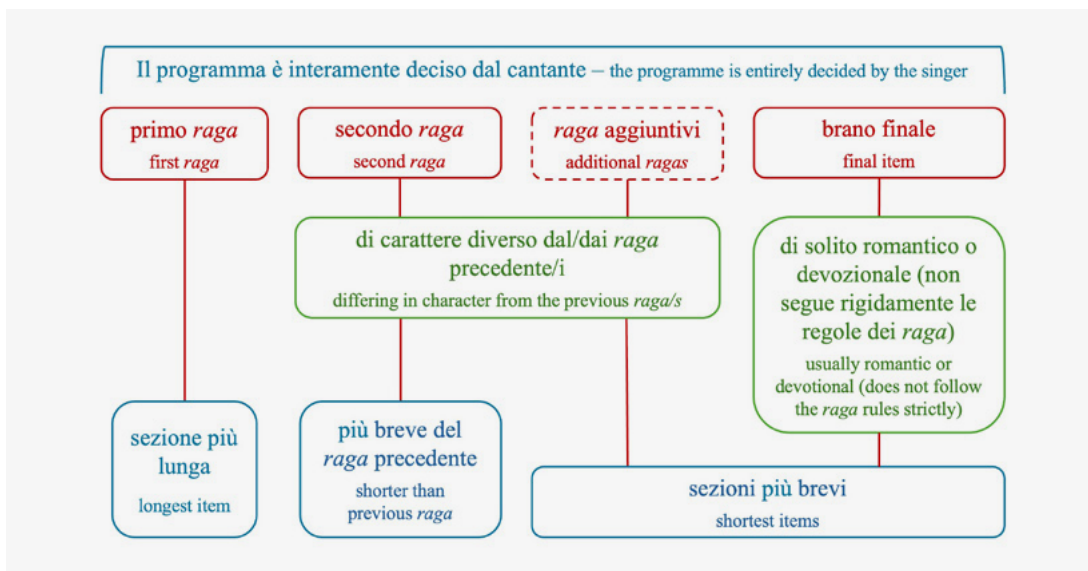


Fig. 3.1. The structure of typical *khyal* concert.

Video 3.4 summarises the structure of a *raga* performance featuring brief excerpts from Manjiri Asanare Kelkar’s rendition of Raga Bhimpalasi.

Most *khyal* concerts include the performance of at least two *ragas* of contrasting character, of which the first one represents the longest item of the programme. Performances usually end with a lighter or ‘semi-classical’ piece – such as a devotional or romantic song – in a genre other than *khyal*.

3.4 RAGA STRUCTURE

<https://youtu.be/Jt2XJsNp5zI>



4. An *alap* in Raga Bhimpalasi

Bhimpalasi is an afternoon *raga*. Its scale is characterised by the flat third (Ga) and flat seventh degrees (Ni); it is pentatonic in ascent (avoiding the second and sixth degrees – Re and Dha) and heptatonic in descent. Its pivotal pitches (*vadis*) are the first (Sa) and fourth (Ma) degrees, although the fifth (Pa) is also prominent as a resting place.

In ascent, phrases often start on Ni (less often on Pa). The phrase Ma Pa Ga, with a sliding movement from Pa to Ga and an oscillation on the latter is typical of this *raga* (Fig. 4.1).

Fig. 4.1. Scale and melodic movement of Raga Bhimpalasi.

As previously indicated in [Video 3.4](#), the performance of a *raga* in *khyal* starts with an *alap*, an unmetred section in which the singer introduces the musical and emotional identity of the *raga*. In the *alap*, therefore, the soloist sings over the drone of the *tanpura* and is accompanied only by the *harmonium* player, who shadows the melody a split second behind.

[Video 4.1](#) features the voice of the singer (on the left channel) and the *harmonium* (on the right channel): this mix allows the listener to appreciate better the brief time lag between the two melodic lines. Please note that this mix was prepared for demonstration and analytical purposes. Please also ensure that your device's audio output allows for stereo listening.

4.1 RAGA BHIMPALASI, ALAP, VOICE AND HARMONIUM
https://youtu.be/_koeQihWezc



[Video 4.2](#) illustrates the melodic development of the *alap*. As is normal in *khyal*, the performance follows a trajectory of progressive melodic intensification. It starts from the establishment of the main pitches (including the Sa and the *vadis*), first exploring the lower octave and then moving upwards, before introducing the characteristic phrases of the *raga*.



Manjiri Asanare Kelkar's *alap*'s length is just under two minutes and develops within the range of a ninth, from the Ma in the lower octave to the Pa in the middle octave.

The singer starts by establishing the Sa and then gradually descends towards the lower Ma (which is reached at approximately 00'50"), before moving upwards towards the middle octave. Bhimpalasi's distinctive Ma Pa Ga phrase is brought out at around 01'30", towards the end: it is introduced by a quick movement starting from the lower octave leading to the Ma (the fourth degree) and then to the slide between the Pa (the fifth degree) and the Ga (the third degree), and an oscillation on the latter. At this point in the performance the melodic density increases. The *alap* concludes on the Sa.

The *alap* moves seamlessly on to the *bara khyal*, which is in turn followed by the *chota khyal* (Video 3.4). The analysis in this listening guide will focus on the *chota khyal*, whose contained length facilitates consideration of the whole piece.

5. *A chota khyal* composition in Raga Bhimpalasi

Khyal compositions are bi-partite: the first section (called *sthayi*) is usually shorter and focuses on the lower half of the octave; the second and longer section (the *antara*) focuses on the upper half, with a strong emphasis on the upper Sa. The lyrics are not expected to follow particular metrical or rhyming structures; the first words of the *sthayi* provide the title of the composition.

The beginning of the *sthayi* is usually an important point of return in the improvisation, often functioning as a cadence (the *mukhra*): this can include few words (as in a *bara khyal*) or as many as the first line of the text (in *chota khyals*).

The content of *khyal* lyrics varies and ranges from praise to kings or gods, to music, nature and love (with romantic longing sometimes seen as a metaphor for longing for god).

This section analyses ‘Sakhi manat nahi’, the *chota khyal* in Raga Bhimpalasi performed by Manjiri Asanare Kelkar in Venice, with particular emphasis on the formal structure and the meter of the music.

The lyrics of ‘Sakhi manat nahi’ depict romantic tension: the protagonist is a girl who complains to her friend (the *sakhi*) about her lover, but as the singer herself put it, ‘still wants to be bothered by him’:

Sthayi

Sakhi manat nahi langarva dhith

Mope barajori karat mein kari karun

Antara

Hun toh nir bharan jat thi Jamuna tir

Mohi pakri gail mein jhatki chir

Ab mein kari karun

Sthayi

O my friend, he won't listen. How naughty!

He forces me: what do I do?

Antara

To the Yamuna bank I had gone to fetch water

Clasping, he took me - shaken was I!

Now, what do I do? ¹

‘Sakhi manat nahi’ offers an insight into how the singer improvises on the composed material in a *chota khyal*.

The tempo of the composition is fast (*drut*) and the meter is *tintal*, a very common 16-beat *tala*.

1 Translation by Budhaditya Bhattacharyya and Laura Leante.

Figure 5.1 illustrates the overall structure of *tintal*, including its *matras* (metrical units), *vibhags* (the subgroupings of *matras*) and *theka* (the sequence of drum strokes associated with a *tala*).

accento stress	X				2					0					3	
vibhag	┌───────────┐				┌───────────┐				┌───────────┐				┌───────────┐			
matra	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
theka	dha	dhin	dhin	dha	dha	dhin	dhin	dha	dha	tin	tin	ta	ta	dhin	dhin	dha

Fig. 5.1. Structure and *theka* of *tintal*.

At the beginning of the piece, as is often the case in *khyal*, the *tabla* player’s performance is close to the *theka* before departing from it to improvise. However, Manjiri Asanare Kelkar soon asks him to shift to *addha tintal* (or *addha tal*), a variant of *tintal*. There is no single standardised *theka* for this *tala*, which is characterised by syncopation within the *vibhags*.

Video 5.1 focuses on the *tala* and in particular on the beginning of the piece and the transition between *tintal* and its variant *addha tal*.

5.1 RAGA BHIMPALASI, CHOTA KHYAL METER
https://youtu.be/3ZmKToE0e_E



Video 5.2 takes a broader view of the *chota khyal* and illustrates its overall structure. It highlights when the singer performs the *sthayi* (especially when she returns to the *sam* and to the main line *Sakhi manat nahi langarva dhith*), when she moves on to the *antara*, when she develops her variations of the melody and improvisation, and when the accompanists lead brief instrumental passages. Two vocal techniques stand out in this performance: 1) *akar tans*, fast vocalisations (*tans*) on the vowel *a* (*a karna* meaning ‘to do *a*’); 2) *bol bant*, a rhythmic improvisation using the lyrics.

To be noted is the acceleration of the tempo, after the second section of *akar tans*, which also coincides with a brief return to *tintal* before the end of the piece. The *chota khyal* concludes with a *tihai*, a threefold cadential formula often used to mark the end of a section or a piece of music.

5.2 RAGA BHIMPALASI, CHOTA KHYAL STRUCTURE
<https://youtu.be/FZMqxlwvBvQ>



Further readings

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Test your skills → in this part you can test what you have learned in the listening guide:

A NORTH INDIAN KHYAL PERFORMANCE

The following sets of quizzes present 10 multiple-choice questions each. The sets refer to the corresponding chapters:

1.-2. INTRODUCTION: KHYAL MUSIC AND ENSEMBLE
<https://forms.gle/9QpwroflRhLT53zY9>

> VAI AL QUIZ

3. THE MUSIC OF KHYAL: RAGA AND TALA
<https://forms.gle/vqScpPBjgwKePr7q6>

> VAI AL QUIZ

4.-5. ALAP AND CHOTA KHYAL IN RAGA BHIMPALASI
<https://forms.gle/qWsaVSbqHwu37j8m9>

> VAI AL QUIZ

ANSWER THE QUESTIONS, COMPLETE THE SERIES BY SUBMITTING YOUR ANSWERS, AND YOU WILL RECEIVE FEEDBACK FOR EACH ANSWER!

Originally established in the in the 18th century, *khyal* is nowadays' most commonly performed vocal art music in the North Indian (or Hindustani) tradition. In a typical *khyal* ensemble, a soloist singer (rarely a duo) leads a percussionist, a melodic accompanist, and possibly one or more musicians providing the drone and vocal support. A *khyal* concert includes the performance of one or more *ragas*, i.e. 'modes', melodic frameworks which regulate composition and improvisation. The success of the event indeed depends on the musicians' ability to present the *raga* and to improvise with technical dexterity and aesthetic sensitivity.

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Laura Leante is Professor of Ethnomusicology at Durham University (UK). She studied ethnomusicology at the 'La Sapienza' University of Rome, where she was awarded both her first degree (1999) and her PhD (2003). Her research interests range over Indian classical and folk music, music of the South Asian diaspora, performance analysis, music and globalisation, and popular music. She has been researching gesture and embodiment in music performance for a number of years, including through projects funded by the British Academy and the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council. Laura Leante is a long-standing member of the European Seminar in Ethnomusicology (ESEM), for which she has served as Secretary General (2014-2021) and is currently President.