



SACRED MUSIC

Dhrupad Yoga — Singing to God

The Gundecha brothers carry forward an ancient musical yoga tradition of sacred song rooted in the Vedas that invokes God as Nada Brahma and awakens the soul

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THERE IS LITTLE THAT CAN PREPARE ONE for the musical genius of the Gundecha brothers. They sit cross-legged on the stage in elegant, matching Indian outfits, framed by a pair of tamburas that rise from behind, their drummer by the side. The experience starts with quiet vocal ornaments, first from one and then the other, gentle liltings passed back and forth with exquisite subtlety. They are two, yet one, so attuned, so aware of the other. Hand and arm gestures, like graceful mudras, seem to summon the sounds from impossibly deep, athletically trained inner chambers. The opening complete, they take flight, soaring into a spiritual space that has them singing, now together, now alone, back and forth, carrying us on wings of astounding synchronicity and soul-stirring devotion. If that seems hyperbolic, simply sit in the presence of the Gundecha brothers (or hear them sing to God Siva on YouTube (bit.ly/shivashiva)). If this be not sacred sound, it's as close as embodied beings will ever get. Where does this melodic magic have its source? In the ancient tradition called *dhrupad*.

Until about two centuries ago, dhrupad

was the main form of North Indian classical music. It was sung in temples from early times and later in royal courts. Some consider it India's oldest musical form. Its patrons were the kings of the Indian princely states; the name Raja Man Singh Tomar of Gwalior stands out as one such regal patrons.

In the first half of the 20th century, dhrupad was in danger of extinction. With the loss of royal patronage, it gradually gave way to a more free-form style called khayal. Around the 1940s, Hindu music shifted paradigms from being a form of worship and yoga to a performance/entertainment art. Few recordings of religious artists were made. By the late 90s most great geniuses of dhrupad and other schools of sacred music had passed on. A vast repertoire of Hindu music and the knowledge of the intricacies of the art went with them to their funeral pyres.

Saving an Ancient Tradition

Fortunately, efforts by a few proponents from the Dagar family have led to the revival and popularization of dhrupad in India and in the West. The Dagers trace their brahminical lineage back twenty generations to the 16th century, to one Brij Chand of Dagar

village near Delhi (hence the name Dagar). But the grandsire of them all, everybody seems to agree, was Baba Gopal Das Pandey of Jaipur, who broke caste rules by accepting paan from Mohammad Shah Rangeel. Ostracized by his community, he converted to Islam. Thus, all the Dagers are the progeny of Pandey Brahmins.

The Dagers are credited with reviving dhrupad music with distinction. They are known for the deeply spiritual and meditative quality of their music. In particular, they have sparked a revival of the Dagarvaani (sometimes spelled as Dagarbani) style of dhrupad. Their disciples, though few, are continuing the tradition. Today's leading exponents are the three Gundecha brothers, who are direct disciples of Ustad Zia Fariduddin Dagar and Ustad Zia Mohiuddin Dagar. Umakant and Ramakant Gundecha are the two vocalists; the third brother, Akhilesh, plays pakhawaj, the long drum.

A performance of two musicians together is called a jugalbandi. This art form was perfected by Moinuddin and Aminuddin Dagar, two brothers who changed the technique from a counterpoint to a harmonious blend of both voices. The Gundecha broth-



COURTESY GUNDECHA BROTHERS

Musical yogis and teachers: (left) in a performance, the Gundecha brothers' minds are on God; (above) the Gundecha brothers committed to passing the tradition of sacred music on to the next generation. Here Umakant teaches at the Sansthan in Bhopal where students come from many nations.

ers are masters of jugalbandi. They sing with eyes usually closed, their voices exquisitely matched in tone and range. A listener cannot tell where one starts and the other leaves. The result is an incredibly spiritual and satisfying experience.

Continuing the age-old tradition of gurusishya parampara, the brothers have set up a residential gurukul-type institution called Dhrupad Sansthan (Institute) in Bhopal, India. The basic philosophy is that true teaching cannot be achieved just through formal lectures, books, distance or online learning. Teaching has an important nonverbal component, learning by osmosis, transmission from the guru to the student when both live under the same roof. I visited the gurukul in December, 2011, met with the brothers and witnessed a public performance by them and their students. These students, some from overseas, undergo a rigorous and intensive training. They observe a vegetarian diet, get up at 5am every morning and go through a strict regimen throughout the day. It is an arduous, total immersion in dhrupad virtuosity.

Rooted in the Vedas

Indian classical music traces its roots to the chanting of the Vedic hymns. The earliest Vedic

chanting used only three notes. Eventually this evolved into the present system of seven notes, points on a continuum of microtonal variations. The term used for classical music in Sanskrit is *shastriya sangeet*—music that is based on fundamental traditional principles found in the shastras. It is rooted in the spiritual concept of Nada Brahma, God (the Absolute) in the form of sound. The primordial sound, Pranava, is Om. So, dhrupad is a form of yoga—namely nada yoga, merging with the Divine through sound.

The word *dhrupad* is derived from *dhruva* and *pada*. *Dhruva* means “fixed.” For example, the pole star is called *dhruva tara*; its position in the night sky is fixed, while other stars move across the sky. *Pada* means a part, composition or a stanza. Thus, *dhrupad* translates as a fixed musical composition.

Many dhrupad performers make the point that they do not perform to entertain the audience; their singing is more a never-ending quest toward the Godhead.



COURTESY GUNDECHA BROTHERS

Rescuers of an ancient Hindu art: The Dagar brothers, Moinuddin and Aminuddin, singing in Bombay in the 50s or early 60s. Dhrupad is a Hindu tradition, and most songs praise Hindu Deities. Many singers' families, patronized by Mogul rulers, were assimilated into Islam over time.

Understanding Dhrupad

The Dagar school teaches that the artist must master nada yoga, which includes unfolding through the chakras, our spiritual force centers. In the *alap* (or improvisational, part of the singing), the attentive listener will notice that the sound, or nada, starts from the navel region and moves upward through the throat to the palate. Dhrupad singing requires intense practice and a mastery of nada yoga to produce a palette of sounds, like the palette of colors a painter uses to produce a painting.

Proficiency in nada yoga enables singers to produce vast combinations of notes and tones, by flowing the sound freely along the navel-to-head axis (the navel, heart, throat, lips, tongue, teeth and the head). This art comprises both *aadhar nada* (sound produced by vibration of vocal chords) and *niradhaar nada* (inner sound of the body developed by breathing). These two sub-sounds are produced in union. This elaborate cultivation of the *niradhaar nada* makes dhrupad unique among all of India's musical forms. The master of nada yoga uses these energy channels and plays his entire navel-to-head vocal instrument, called *gayatri veena*, to produce divine sound.

A person accustomed to Western classical music, where rhythm and harmonics are the main characteristics, should leave that baggage behind when listening to Indian classical music, especially dhrupad. Here the notes are not treated as fixed, discrete points, but as fluid entities with infinite microtonal shades, resulting in deep melodic nuances. My suggestion for anyone wanting to really experience dhrupad music is to sit



COURTESY GUNDECHA BROTHERS

Taking dhruwad to the world: the Gundecha brothers (left to right) Akhilesh, Ramakant and Umakant perform in Toronto, Canada

comfortably in a quiet place with eyes closed, paying attention to the subtle variations. I listen to it when I do hatha yoga. Dhruwad should not be played as mere background music.

A typical performance of dhruwad, like other forms of Indian classical music, starts with the alap, a slow, non-rhythmic, contemplative development of the raga, the basic modal form or scale. Gradually the tempo increases, and faster passages often include playful and vigorous ornamentation. In the Dagarbani style of dhruwad, compositions begin with a relatively long and cyclic alap, where syllables *ti, ta, ri, ra, na, na*, and *nom* are used to improvise. These syllables are derived from "Om taran taarani ananta hari narayan om."

Trained dhruwad singers and instrumentalists can express a wide range and variety of emotions in the alap by linking notes in different ways. These ornamentations are called *alankars*. Some of the alankar names used in the Dagarbani school are *dagar* (path, like a meandering road on a hill), *dhuran* (pulling), *muran* (turning), *kampit* (a kind of vibrato), *kampan* (shivering), and *andolan* (swinging). These also appear in other forms of Indian classical music, both vocal and instrumental.

The alap may occupy as much 50 minutes of an 80-minute dhruwad recording. After gradually unfolding into its more rhythmic *jod* and *jhala* sections, it is followed by a formal composition, usually verses in praise of particular Deities. At this stage the *pakhawaj*, a one-piece, barrel-shaped drum, tra-

ditionally enters to accompany the singing. The split-second understanding between the vocalist(s) and the *pakhawaj* player is unbelievable.

Variations on a Theme

Besides Dagarbani, there are other styles of dhruwad singing, such as *ashta chhap sangeet* or *haveli sangeet*. These devotional

been made by Nancy Kulkarni (née Lesh), a Canadian and erstwhile professional cellist who now lives and performs in India. Another instrument that I find very moving is *surbahar*, a bass sitar of which Pushpraj Koshti is a great exponent. The Gundecha Brothers have recorded with him.

A Satsang of Devotion

Though they are rising stars in the field of music, the Gundecha brothers maintain the Hindu artists' tradition of being humble devotees of God. At a big function in India, while VIPs were droning on the stage before the music performance, the brothers invited me and my wife backstage to sit with them and their students as they practiced for their performance: "We were sorry you had to wait to hear the music, so we thought you could come and listen while we practice." On a recent US tour, on their way from Houston to Washington, D. C., they took time out to visit me and my wife. I got a call out of the blue and they came over for breakfast with

us at our home in Alabama, before continuing on their way to their performances.

I encourage each of you to search the web for "dhruwad," "Dagar" and "Gundecha Brothers," and incorporate this music into your life and spiritual practice. 🍽️



DR. N. SHAH

Ramakant (left) and Umakant (right) Gundecha: with author Dr. Chawla and his wife. The brothers are easily approachable, regarding their fans as a *satsang* of devotees.

songs in praise of Lord Krishna are also known as *Pushtamargiya kirtans*. In this style, the Gundecha brothers recently released a two-volume CD set called *Krishna Rasamrit*. They have also recorded some modern Hindi poetry by Nirala, Mahadevi Verma and others.

Dhruwad music does not require a vocalist; it can be purely instrumental. The *rudra veena* is renowned for its deep and profound tones. Some excellent *rudra veena* recordings of Z. M. Dagar are available on YouTube. Dhruwad recordings on violin and cello have