

The Bansuri:
A Western Flutist's Beginning Guide to Performing
Hindustani Ragas
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The Bansuri Flute

The Bansuri flute is a North Indian classical instrument that may be performed:

- In many different venues
- In many different genres
- In many different ensembles

The bansuri is a cylindrical tube with a uniform bore made from a single piece of straight, smooth bamboo that is free of notches.



Krishna is a Hindu deity, worshipped as an incarnation of Vishnu. Krishna is known as the divine charmer who played flute and through his music, caused many to fall in love with him.



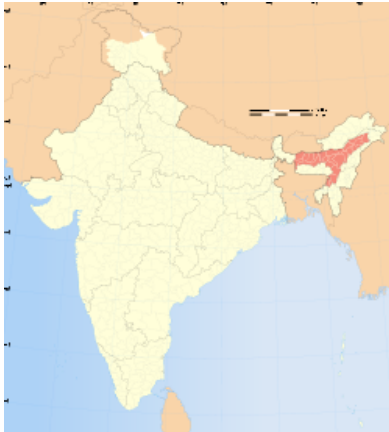
Lord Krishna is also called Murlidhar or “the flute-holder” is told of in stories about his flute playing

- The concert bansuri is usually between 60 and 90 centimeters and 25 millimeters in diameter
- The bansuri flute can be of many different lengths, especially in folk music traditions.

Making of the Bansuri

The wood that makes a bansuri flute:

- Is made from special bambo that has large cross-sections (large spaces between notches)
- It is believed that Assam, a state in north-eastern India, produces the highest quality bamboo
- One end is corked after the bamboo is cleaned and holes are pierced by a red hot iron rod
- After the mouth hole is created, the finger holes are created in relation to the pitch created from the moth hole



Instrument Makers:

- Instruments are commonly made by North Indian flutists themselves who are self taught.
- There is an American flute maker at the Ali Akbar Khan School of Indian Classical Music
 - St. Raphael, California
 - makes some of the best bansuri
 - often ordered from professional flutists in India.

Playing Position



Pandit Hariprasad Chaurasia

- Sit cross legged
- Bansuri is held horizontally, either to the left or to the right
- The first hand facing in towards the musician and the second hand (furthest away) is palm out.
 - If held to the left (pictured) right hand is first, left hand is second.
 - If held to the right (like a Boehm flute) left hand is first, right hand is second.



Hariprasad Chaurasia with Rakesh Chaurasia

Hand Position



Finger placement: Second Phalanx

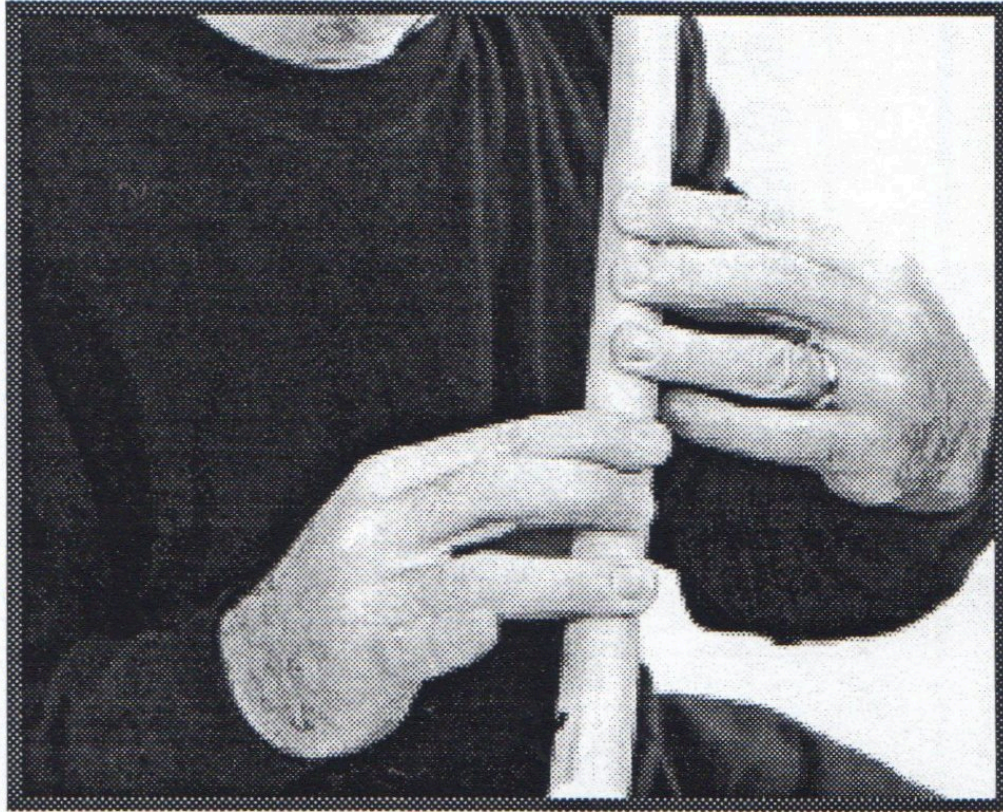
If held to the right...

- The left hand is placed on the instrument first (closest to the face)
- Palm in
- Thumb supporting the bansuri away from the palm
- Index finger straight and angled toward the tone hole
- The first three fingers of left hand are placed on the first three holes
- The right hand is placed second (furthest away from the face)
- Palm out
- Fingers flat
- Some use the tip of the fingers to cover the holes, others use the second phalanx.
- The little finger of the right hand must angle out from the hand in order to reach the seventh tone hole.
- The seventh tone hole is reached by keeping the forearm and hand in-line (wrist not flexed) and rotate them together.

If held to the left....

- Reverse the above directions

Hand Position



Finger placement: Pads of fingertips

Playing the Bansuri

- Bansuri flutes can play at least two and a half octaves
 - the upper octaves are achieved by overblowing to the harmonics.
- Bansuri flutes do not have perfect intonation
 - tuning is often done with compensation:
 - from the embouchure
 - turning of the flute in or out to push the airstream further in the hole or further across the hole.

Tone

- Begin with the embouchure that you would use on the Western Boehm flute
- As stated by Catherine Potter, Chaurasia's idea of a "good bansuri sound" is:
 - strong vibrato
 - full tone
 - use of dynamics
 - use of sustained tones

Fingers

- May cover the holes with second phalanx of the fingers
 - facilitates covering the holes that are large distances apart.
 - The holes can be partially uncovered to produce:
 - different intonation
 - slides
 - microtonal effects
- There are bansuri players who use the pads of their fingertips to cover the holes of the bansuri
 - this may be more comfortable at first for the western flutist when making the shift from the Boehm flute to the bansuri.

Fingering Charts

Below is a bansuri fingering chart from Catherine Potter's *Hariprasad Chaurasia: The Individual and the North Indian Classical Music Tradition*.

CHART II Fingering Chart

pitch (approximate)	relative pitch	interval from tonic	fingering
B-0	<i>ṛā</i>	perfect 5th	● ● ● ● ● ●
C	<i>ḍā komal</i>	minor 6th	● ● ● ● ● ●
C# (Db)	<i>ḍā</i>	major 6th	● ● ● ● ● ○
D	<i>ṛī komal</i>	minor 7th	● ● ● ● ● ○
D# (Eb)	<i>ṛī</i>	major 7th	● ● ● ● ○ ○
E-1	<i>ṣā</i>	tonic	● ● ● ○ ○ ○
F	<i>ṛē komal</i>	minor 2nd	● ● ● ○ ○ ○
F# (Gb)	<i>ṛē</i>	major 2nd	● ● ○ ○ ○ ○
G	<i>ḡā komal</i>	minor 3rd	● ● ○ ○ ○ ○
G# (A)	<i>ḡā</i>	major 3rd	● ○ ○ ○ ○ ○
A	<i>ṁā</i>	perfect 4th	● ○ ○ ○ ○ ○
A# (Bb)	<i>ṁā teevra</i>	aug. 4th	○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○
B	<i>ṛā</i>	perfect 5th	○ ● ● ● ● ●
C	<i>ḍā komal</i>	minor 6th	● ● ● ● ● ●
C# (Db)	<i>ḍā</i>	major 6th	● ● ● ● ● ○
D	<i>ṛī komal</i>	minor 7th	● ● ● ● ● ○
D# (Eb)	<i>ṛī</i>	major 7th	● ● ● ● ○ ○
E-2	<i>ṣā</i>	tonic	● ● ● ○ ○ ○
F	<i>ṛē komal</i>	minor 2nd	● ● ● ○ ○ ○
F# (Gb)	<i>ṛē</i>	major 2nd	● ● ○ ○ ○ ○
G	<i>ḡā komal</i>	minor 3rd	● ● ○ ○ ○ ○
G# (Ab)	<i>ḡā</i>	major 3rd	● ○ ○ ○ ○ ○
A	<i>ṁā</i>	perfect 4th	● ○ ○ ○ ○ ○
A# (Bb)	<i>ṁā teevra</i>	aug. 4th	○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○
B	<i>ṛā</i>	perfect 5th	○ ● ● ● ● ●
C	<i>ḍā komal</i>	minor 6th	● ● ● ● ● ●
C# (Db)	<i>ḍā</i>	major 6th	● ● ○ ○ ○ ●
D	<i>ṛī komal</i>	minor 7th	● ● ○ ○ ○ ○
D# (Eb)	<i>ṛī</i>	major 7th	● ○ ● ● ○ ○
E-3	<i>ṣā</i>	tonic	● ○ ● ○ ○ ○

Fingering Charts

The next two images are fingering charts for the bansuri from Lyon Leifer's *How to Play the Bansuri*.

Chart Five Bansuri Fingerings for the Remaining Scales

**B
i
l
a
w
a
l**

pa dha ni sa ri ga ma pa dha ni sa ri ga ma pa dha ni sa ri

**K
h
a
m
a
j**

pa dha ni sa ri ga ma pa dha ni sa ri ga ma pa dha ni sa ri

**K
a
f
i**

pa dha ni sa ri ga ma pa dha ni sa ri ga ma pa dha ni sa ri

**A
s
a
w
a
r
i**

pa dha ni sa ri ga ma pa dha ni sa ri ga ma pa dha ni sa ri

B
h
a
i
r
a
v
i

padha ni sa ri ga ma padha ni sa ri ga ma padha ni sa ri

T
h
o
d
i

ma'padha ni sa ri ga ma'ma'padha ni sa ri ga ma'ma'padha ni sa ri

P
o
o
r
v
i

ma'padha ni sa ri ga ma'ma'padha ni sa ri ga ma'ma'padha ni sa ri

B
h
a
i
r
a
v

padha ni sa ri ga ma padha ni sa ri ga ma padha ni sa ri

m
a
r
w
a

ma'padha ni sa ri ga ma'ma'padha ni sa ri ga ma'ma'padha ni sa ri

Ornamentations

There are many different types of ornamentations used in Hindustani music, and many of the instrumental ornamentations are based on vocal genres

Pitches can be ornamented by physically moving the bansuri up and down and with side to side motions to effect the embouchure placement

Mind (or meend)

- Produced by slowly rolling the finger in a circular motion to gradually open and close the hole.

Kana

- Produced by sliding the fingers over or off the hole after blowing

Gamaka

- Produced by approaching each pitch from above
 - Use the kana technique in combination with embouchure movement and air movement.
 - Gamak is an oscillation between two notes (usually a diatonic step apart)
 - Like a Western tradition tremolo.

Taan

- Improvised variations including rapid variation in accordance with the raga.

Below is a chart of simple Taans in Raga Yaman from Lyon Leifer's *How to Play the Bansuri*.

X	2				O				3						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
nṛṣ	nṛg̣	gṃ'g̣	ṃ'pṃ	ṃ'dp̣	ṃ'nḍ	pṃ'g̣	rṣṇ	Ṇ	G	R	G	S	S	Ṇ	Ḍ
nṣnḍ	nṛsṇ	gṃ'gṛ	gp̣ṃ'g̣	ṃ'dpṃ'	dnḍp̣	ṃ'pṃ'g̣	rṣnṣ	Ṇ	G	R	G	S	S	Ṇ	Ḍ
snḍṇ	rṣnṣ	gṛnṛ	ṃ'gṛg̣	pṃ'gṃ'	dp̣ṃ'ḍ	ṣnḍṇ	rṣnṣ	Ṇ	G	R	G	S	S	Ṇ	Ḍ
nṛṃrg̣	rgṛgṃ'	gṃ'gṃ'p̣	ṃ'dṃ'dṇ	ṣnṣnḍ	nḍnḍṃ'	pṃ'pṃ'g̣	gṛgṛṣ	Ṇ	G	R	G	S	S	Ṇ	Ḍ
ṣṣnḍ	nḍdṃ'	dḍpṃ'	pp̣ṃ'g̣	ṃ'ṃ'gṛ	ggṛṣ	rṣsṇ	sṣnḍ	Ṇ	G	R	G	S	S	Ṇ	Ḍ
Ṇ	-	Ḍ	P̣	Ṃ'	Ḍ	Ṇ	Ṣ	nṃ	rgṛ	gṃ'g̣	ṃ'dp̣	ṃ'dṃ'	dnḍ	nṛṣ	nḍṇ
nṛṣ	nḍṇ	dnḍ	pṃ'p̣	ṃ'pṃ	gṃ'g̣	rgṛ	rṣnṣ	Ṇ	G	R	G	S	S	Ṇ	Ḍ

Ornamentations

Double note paltas

- Patterns with a repeated note that is separated by a lower neighbor grace note.

CHART THREE
Commonly Used Double-note Paltas

notes
per
beat

3

4

5

6

7

8

From "How to Play the Bansuri: A Manual for Self-Instruction: Based on the teaching of Devendra Murdeshwar" by Lyon Leifer

Ornamentations

Register shifts

- Another important ornamentation
- considered as more of a variations
- includes performing one idea and performing it again but in a different register

Andolan

- An ornamentation where given scale degrees oscillate between a particular microtonal position of the scale and another slightly lower position
- Performed by rocking the finger
 - which produces the relevant scale degree very slightly back and forth in its normal direction of closure and opening

Articulation

- Another important aspect of not only ornamenting but of the overall performance of a raga
- commonly used articulation:
 - Legato phrasing
 - Pitches connected with mind (meend)
 - Single, double, triple tonguing
 - Slightly detached
 - Very detached (staccato)

The North Indian Raga

The word “raga” is derived from the Sanskrit root *ranj* or *raj* meaning to color or to tinge and is described as an emotional realm in which the performer takes a melody or collection of pitches and creates a theme. That theme is then generally improvised using a set of rules.

Some refer to the raga as a melody scheme.

“Technically, a raga is characterized by a definite sequence of notes, by particular melodic phrases, by relative duration or stress of notes and by particular ornamentations”

Catherine Potter,

The basic elements of performing a raga include

- melody (the rag itself)
- rhythm (the tala)
- improvisation and ornamentation.

The **tala** refers to meter and time cycle with a given number of beats. The melody of a composition is set to a tala.

Swara syllables are similar to the western tradition of solfege and include the syllable sa, re, ga, ma, pa, dha, ni, and sa.

Hindustandi Swara Syllables: (With lowered/raised pitch variations)

Sa Re Ga Ma Pa Dha Ni Sa

Western Classical Solfege Syllables: (With lowered/raised pitch variations)

Do Re Mi Fa Sol La Ti Do

Practice Techniques

From Lyon Leifer's
 "How to Play the Bansuri: A Manual for Self-Instruction"
 Based on the teaching of Devendra Murdeshwar"

CHART TWO
Common Paltas

notes per beat	3				
	4				
	5				
	6				
	7				
	8				

Raga Yaman

Raga Yaman is commonly used as a beginning raga for those students that are just beginning with North Indian classical music.

Ascent-descent

N R G M̄ D N Ṥ N R G M̄ P D N Ṥ , Ṥ N D P M̄ G R S

or

Melodic outline

S ^{NRDS} Ṅ , Ḋ Ṅ Ṙ Ġ — R S , Ṅ Ṙ Ġ M̄ P — M̄ G , G M̄ D N — D P ,

M̄ D N Ṥ , D N ^G Ṙ Ġ — Ṙ Ṥ , Ṙ Ṅ N — D P , D P — M̄ G , M̄ R G

— R S , N R G M̄ P Ṙ G — R S

Raga Yaman

The format of Raga Yaman is as follows:

- Brief alap, mukhra (which acts as a cue for tabla to get ready to play the theka at the arrival of sam (beat one))
- The rest of asthai, (any part of the asthai repeated, ornamented, varied)
- The barat (continuation of an ongoing development of the raga)
- An improvised development begins
 - General upward direction but remains in the tala
 - Each improvisation segment ends with a mukhra and enters on sam at the correct time
- Antara
 - The key arrival
 - Emotionally elevated
 - The section generally keeps going higher in register and later brought to conclusion with descent to low sa
- Final statement of the asthai or asthai's mukhra is given to end the performance

$\overset{\circ}{N} \overset{\circ}{R} \overset{\circ}{G} \overset{\circ}{M} \overset{\circ}{D} \overset{\circ}{N} \text{---} \overset{\circ}{D} \text{---} , \overset{\circ}{M} \overset{\circ}{D} \overset{\circ}{N} \overset{\circ}{S} \text{---} \overset{\circ}{N} \overset{\circ}{D} \overset{\circ}{D} \overset{\circ}{N}$

$\overset{\circ}{D} \overset{\circ}{P} \overset{\circ}{M} \overset{\circ}{G} \text{---} \overset{\circ}{R} \overset{\circ}{G} \overset{\circ}{M} \overset{\circ}{M} \overset{\circ}{M} \overset{\circ}{G} \overset{\circ}{R} \text{---} , \overset{\circ}{N} \overset{\circ}{G} \overset{\circ}{R} \overset{\circ}{G} \text{---} \overset{\circ}{R} \overset{\circ}{S} \text{---}$

Composition follows in fast *tintal* (16 counts)

Time 3.39

Song text

एरी आली पिया बिन	<i>Hey friend, without my lover</i>
सखी कल न परत मोहे	<i>I don't find peace</i>
घडी पल छिन दिन ।	<i>At any moment of the day;</i>
सखी जब ते पिया परदेस गवन कीनो	<i>Since my lover went away</i>
रतिया कटत मोरी तारे गिन गिन ॥	<i>I spend my nights counting the stars.</i>

In this famous composition we again encounter the theme of *viraha*, love-in-separation.

Tala of Raga Yama

Tala

The **tala** is a cycle of pre-determined beats that includes a pattern of strong and weak beats characterized by the **theka** or finger strokes of the drum (tabla).



Zakir Hussain, Tabla

The **tala** is also characterized by series of claps and waves.

Claps represent strong dividing point in the cycle called the tali
Waves represent strong dividing point in the cycle called the kali.

The first beat out of 16 beats is called "**sam**"

9th beat is called "**khali**" which means "empty."

To exhibit the **Tintal**, there is a **clap on the first beat**, a **clap on the 5th beat**, then **wave on the 9th beat** and lastly again a **clap on the 13th beat**.

Example 1: clap, 2, 3, 4, clap, 2, 3, 4, clap, 2, 3, 4, clap, 2, 3, 4

Example 2: clap 2, 3, 4, clap, 6, 7, 8, clap, 10, 11, 12, clap, 14, 15, 16

Below you will find lists of renowned bansuri performers, audio recordings, and videos. Use those resources to continue learning about Raga Yaman, play with a recording, and play with other recordings as well. Keep listening!

Renowned Performers of the Bansuri

Below is a list of renowned performers of the bansuri, all of whom studied with another renowned guru mentioned in this research.

- Devendra Murdeshwar
- Hariprasad Chaurasia
- Pannalal Ghosh
- Rakesh Chaurasia
- Madhur Kalkarni
- haripada chaudhury
- Pandit V.G. Karnad
- Debu Banerjee
- Steve Gorn
- David Philipson
- Anand Murdeshwar
- Nityanand Haldipur
- Ravi Nag
- Gianluigi Sanfratello
- Allaudin Khan
- Ali Akbar Khan
- Pandit Ravi Shankar
- Nikhil Banerjee
- Kesarbai Kerkar

Renowned Recordings of the Bansuri

Compact Discs

Raga Darbai Kanada

Dhun In Raga Mishra Pilu

Hariprasad Chaurasia, Bansuri

Fazal Qureshi, Tabla

England by Nimbus Records Limited 1993

Rag Kaunsi Kanhra

Hariprasad Chaurasia, Bansuri

Sabir Khan, Tabla

England by Nimbus Records Limited 1989

Rag Bhimpalasi

Hariprasad Chaurasia, Bansuri

Fazal Qureshi

England by Nimbus Records Limited 1991

Rag Ahir Bhairav

Hariprasad Chaurasia, Bansuri

Sabir Khan, Tabla

England by Nimbus Records Limited 1988

Rag Lalit

Hariprasad Chaurasia, Bansuri

Anindo Chatterjee, Tabla

England by Nimbus Records Limited 1988

Renowned Recordings of the Bansuri

Online videos:

1. Dhun in Raga Shivranjani

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7QuDEx3_Ygo>

Prasad Bhandarkar (Bansuri)

Sudarshan Siddhaye (Tabla)

Raga Shivranjani on Bansuri

Raga Shivranjani Description:

<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SKXdY7saCYA?>>

2. Raga Yaman: Performer unknown

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O6bPE_6XcH0>

Raga Yaman is an evening traditional Raga. This piece has some free form improvisation and a composition based on a 9 beat rhythmic cycle.

3. Raga Bairagi Bhairav

<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YpXffkbNOTA?>>

Flute: Venugopal S Hegde

On Tabla: Allamprabhu Kadkol

Flute Accompaniment: Vaibhav Bhat

“Bansuri Raga Bairagi Bhairav”

Renowned Recordings of the Bansuri

Recordings (audio only):

1. Hariprasad Chaurasia: Raag Hamsadhwani

<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4VloVAPloX8>>

2. [Hariprasad Chaurasia](#)--Pahadi thumri

<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HkXTJaUYIoI>>

3. Prasad Bhandarkar (Bansuri): Dhun - Vaishnav Jan To (Raga Mishra Khamaj)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OAbFVtIRnMU&feature=watch_response_rev>

4. Pandit Raghunath Seth Bansuri (Flute)
with Ustad Shaik Dawood Tabla accompaniment
Raag Ahir Bhairav
1970

“Pt. RAGHUNATH SETH-FLUTE with Ustad SHAIK DAWOOD-TABLA-AHIR
BHAIRAV”

<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mr8k8401naA&feature=related>>

5. Pandit Pannalal Ghosh (Flute)... Raag Deepavali

<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FtEdAUfoW2o&feature=related>>