

Information Writing: The Sitar

Sadly, the most effective way to educate a citizen of the Western hemisphere about the sitar is either to state reluctantly, "It's kind of like the Indian guitar," or to ask snidely, "Have you ever heard of a band called The Beatles?" After playing the instrument for four years, I have yet to find an explanation method that doesn't make me cringe. Comparing the sitar to a symbol of pop culture is considered taboo within the Indian classical music community, but let's bet that Ravi Shankar has better things to do than to read this. Just remember that truly, the sitar, a historically ubiquitous musical instrument, has no proportional frame of reference from East to West.

Prior to the Middle Ages, all stringed instruments in India were called veenas. The veena still exists as an instrument nowadays, but the form has since evolved into its own specific subset. The sitar, meaning "three strings," redefined itself from the veena family in the 1400s. Pretty funny, because sitars had no fewer than seven strings once the 1900s hit. Now sitars can have up to 23 strings. How and why this changed is unknown, but I theorize someone wanted to just keep making life more difficult.

There are three kinds of sitars, which also remains unexplained by history. The characteristics that all three types share are essential mechanics: a resonating chamber at the base (called a "gourd"), a neck, frets (metal strips that divide the neck of the instrument into sections), tuning pegs, strings, two bridges (which resonate the strings' sound), and naturally, décor. Keep in mind that terms like these (guitar terms) heavily employ the 'ol disproportionate East-to-West teaching method, but a Hindi expert I am not.

Type 1: The "simple sitar"

The "simple sitar" is intended for beginning sitar players. It only has seven strings, 19 frets, is made of cheap wood, and honestly, usually sounds and looks pretty terrible. Occasionally simple sitars are used for decoration or for dust collecting. They cost about \$300 but are worth about 300 cents. Comparison: buying an acoustic guitar from Walmart.

Type 2: The "double sitar"

The "double sitar" is intended for the general Western sitar player (bohemian college dude living in a co-op, not bothered by tie-dye). Compare this type of sitar to an acoustic guitar from the pawnshop. The double sitar acquired its name from having two sets of strings. It has the main seven (just like the simple) but also has a set of 11 to 13 sympathetic strings, which lie beneath the main set. Sympathetic strings are typically not played, and the number depends on how each individual sitar is crafted; they exist to create a resonant tone from striking the top set of strings, kind of making a faint tonal echo. A double sitar can have up to 20 frets and costs around \$500.

Type 3: The “double gourd sitar”

A double gourd sitar is a double sitar with an extra gourd situated at the back of the manka (the head). The extra gourd allows the sitar to *really* bellow. A sitar guru will tell you it's the only type to buy. Additionally, sitar craftsman put extra ornate detail into the styling of double gourd sitars, usually embedding various materials like onyx and camel bone for aesthetics and fully decorating the instrument body with wood carvings—These kinds of sitars are always highest quality in sound and beauty ... But, I guess they should be for an average cost of \$700. Jimi Hendrix would buy this kind (then break it on stage and light it on fire).

Once purchased, learning how to deal with the physicality of the instrument takes as long as learning to play it. Where the guitar uses pegs for fine-tuning, the sitar uses *frets* for fine-tuning—That's because the sitar's curved frets (which are brass and raised above the neck) are moveable. To get the right sound, a player must balance the perfect combination of peg tuning and fret-tuning. Even with an electronic tuner, the tuning process takes about 20 minutes. Regard this as frustration #1.

Frustration #2 is sitting properly. The player must cross her left leg over the right while seated on the floor. The gourd base of the sitar is situated on the player's upturned right foot, creating a 45-degree angle across the player's chest from right to left. The left hand lightly does the neck work, ensuring that the weight of the instrument rests on the right side. The right hand does the string work. Here is some essential terminology to further elaborate:

Mizrab

A mizrab is a tool used by the right hand to pluck strings. It is a little metal fitting of the pointer finger—It's kind of like a musical thimble. Its ease of usability puts a dunce cap on the guitar pick.

Notes (“Swaras”)

Surprise! Eastern music has a different notation system, so you will need to unlearn previous music knowledge. Where we have notes A-G, Eastern music has the following: Sa (C), Re (D), Ga (E), Ma (F), Pa (G), Dha (A) and Ni (B). *Fact: George Harrison's son, Dhani, is named after the combination of notes Dha and Ni.

Songs (“Ragas”)

One raga typically takes about 6 months to master, because each raga lasts an average time of 45 minutes. Not only is it the bulkiness of ragas that prevents quick learning, it's also the teaching style.

The instrument requires much discipline to learn, so sitar masters will only take two students at a time (for a period of five years or more) to mentor. Learners are expected to meet with their teacher once a week for a few hours. Teaching sitar traditionally means using no sheet music. That's right--None. Ever. The student must use max concentration in watching her teacher play, playing in sync, and then later remembering the beat (“matra”) and finger movements for practice. Teachers in the United States have started to become more lenient about the teaching style by intermittently handing out sheet music, but the highly revered will refuse to cut anyone a break.

Learning sitar sounds insane because it is. You might be wondering why any Westerner would voluntarily expose herself to such culturally irrelevant torture. For the White bohemian, it usually begins with a tab of acid and a Beatles record. The best of us start this way (points to self), but the best of us eventually grasp an entirely different reality. The player learns of the significant traditions towering above the instrument and comes to a spiritual crossroads—One that is real and surprisingly not drug-induced. Growing with the instrument means slight eye-rolls when it comes to the use of guitar term comparison or when songs like “Paint it Black” or “Norwegian Wood” are mentioned as revolutionary. But as you might notice, it is only in making these comparisons that we can sincerely respect the distinctions.