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Sitar: The Instrument That Took Indian Classical Music to the World

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The sitar is a plucked string instrument of Hindustani classical music. It took its present form in the late-Mughal courts and reached the world through Ravi Shankar. This article covers its parts, its origin, its gharanas and its global journey.

At a glance

Four key facts on this topic

01 **7 plucked strings** Plus sympathetic strings.

02 **Khusrau legend** No evidence for it.

03 **Two gharanas** Imdadkhani and Maihar.

04 **Ravi Shankar** Bharat Ratna.

What is the sitar?

1 The sitar in brief

1.1 What is the sitar?

The sitar is a plucked string instrument. It is the best-known instrument of Hindustani classical music, the classical music of North India.

It took its present form in the late-Mughal courts, between 1707 and 1858.



A sitar performance with tabla accompaniment. Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0.

1.2 What are its main parts?

- The **tumba** is the big round resonator. It is made from a dried gourd or pumpkin.
- A second, smaller gourd sits at the top of the neck. It adds balance and some volume.
- The **frets** are curved and movable. They let the player tune finely.
- The strings run along a long neck, over a large bridge.

1.3 Does the sitar really have three strings?

Early sitars were long-necked lutes with three strings. A modern sitar has many more, so the old count is only history.

Quick check 1. True or false: The tumba is the resonator of the sitar. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Quick check 2. True or false: A modern sitar has only three strings. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: omeka-s.grinnell.edu; panditarvindparikh.org; darbar.org

2 Strings and sound

2.1 Which strings does the player pluck?

A sitar has 7 plucked strings. Three are **chikari** strings. They give a drone and a rhythm. The other four carry the melody.

2.2 What are sympathetic strings?

Under the main strings runs a second set, called **taraf** or sympathetic strings. The player does not pluck them.

They ring by themselves, through resonance, when the main strings sound. They are tuned to the notes of the raga. That gives the sitar its shimmery sound.

Sources count about 11 taraf strings, and some say 11 to 13. They were added late, around the end of the 19th century.

2.3 How many strings are there in all?

Sources disagree. Counts range from 18 to 23. So an exam answer should not depend on one total.

11. **Think it through:** Why is “the sitar has exactly 20 strings” a risky answer? See answer ↓

Quick check 3. True or false: The player plucks the sympathetic strings. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: horniman.ac.uk

3 Name and origin

3.1 Did Amir Khusrau invent the sitar?

A popular story says the poet Amir Khusrau invented the sitar in the 13th century. The evidence does not support it.

His own writings name the barbat, rubab and tambur. They do not name the sitar. One scholar searched them and could not find the word.

3.2 Where is the sitar first recorded?

The first written mention is in a diary by Dargah Quli Khan. He lived in Delhi from 1737 to 1741.

The name is not firmly in use before the early 1700s.

3.3 Why did the legend spread?

Guidebooks and textbooks helped spread the story. A popular tale is not the same as a record.

12. **Think it through:** Which is the better exam answer: “Amir Khusrau invented it” or “the first record is from Delhi in the 1730s”?

See answer ↓

Quick check 4. True or false: Amir Khusrau’s own writings mention the sitar. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: shahjahanabad.eheritageproject.in; pragyata.com

Who played it and how?

4 Gats and gharanas

4.1 What are gats?

A **gat** is a fixed composition played on the sitar. Two kinds are named after the musicians behind them.

- **Masitkhani** gats are slow (vilambit) and set in Teental. Masit Khan created this framework.
- **Razakhani** gats are fast (drut). Ghulam Raza Khan, a leading student of Masit Khan, is credited with them.

4.2 What is a gharana?

A gharana is a school or lineage of playing. Two matter most for the sitar.

Two sitar gharanas

Gharana	Key names

Gharana	Key names
Imdadkhani (also called Etawah)	Imdad Khan, his sons Enayat and Waheed, Vilayat Khan, Imrat Khan
Maihar (Maihar-Senia)	Allauddin Khan, Ravi Shankar, Nikhil Banerjee

Imdadkhani and Etawah are two names for one gharana.

4.3 Who were the Imdadkhani masters?

Imdad Khan played for Queen Victoria. He was the first sitarist to be recorded. He taught the sitar and surbahar to his sons.

Vilayat Khan was born on 28 August 1927 in Gauripur, now in Bangladesh. He brought **gayaki ang**, the singing style, to the sitar.

4.4 Who were the Maihar masters?

Allauddin Khan founded the Maihar gharana. He received the Padma Bhushan in 1958.

His pupil Nikhil Banerjee (1931 to 1986) won the Padma Shri in 1968 and the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in 1974. He received the Padma Bhushan after his death.

4.5 What is the surbahar?

The surbahar is a bass sitar with a much deeper sound. Imrat Khan, son of Enayat Khan, was its best-known master.

> **Quick check 5.** True or false: Masitkhani gats are fast. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Quick check 6. True or false: Vilayat Khan belonged to the Imdadkhani gharana. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: panditarvindparikh.org; raga.hu; thequint.com; darbar.org; scroll.in; mha.gov.in

5 Ravi Shankar and the world

5.1 Who was Ravi Shankar?

Ravi Shankar began as a dancer in his brother Uday Shankar's troupe. He then took up the sitar, in the Maihar school of Allauddin Khan.

He received the Padma Bhushan in 1967 and the Bharat Ratna, India's highest civilian honour. He won several Grammy awards. Sources give different counts, so avoid "five Grammys".

5.2 How did the sitar reach the West?

George Harrison of the Beatles flew to Bombay on 14 September 1966 for lessons with Ravi Shankar. Shankar is credited with popularising the sitar in America.

He played at the Monterey Pop Festival, held from 16 to 18 June 1967.

5.3 What was the Concert for Bangladesh?

It was held on 1 August 1971 at Madison Square Garden in New York. It was Ravi Shankar's idea. That weekend raised about $240,000, for UNICEF.

It pioneered the all-star charity concert.

Sitar timeline

Year	Event
1737 to 1741	Dargah Quli Khan’s diary, the first written mention
1966	George Harrison starts sitar lessons
1967	Ravi Shankar at the Monterey Pop Festival
1971	Concert for Bangladesh, New York

His daughter Anoushka Shankar is also a Grammy-nominated sitarist.

> **Quick check 7.** True or false: George Harrison’s sitar lessons began in 1966. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

> **Quick check 8.** True or false: The Concert for Bangladesh was held at Monterey. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: sangeetnatak.gov.in; mha.gov.in; grammy.com; beatlesbible.com; npr.org; ebsco.com; thebeatles.com

What are the exam traps?

6 Exam traps

6.1 Which facts do students mix up?

- The sitar has 7 plucked strings. The sympathetic strings are extra, and the total count varies.
- Masitkhani is slow. Razakhani is fast.
- Imdadkhani (Vilayat Khan) and Maihar (Ravi Shankar) are different gharanas.
- Harrison's lessons began in 1966.

6.2 Which claims should you avoid?

Do not state that Amir Khusrau invented the sitar. Do not say Ravi Shankar won five Grammys. Do not call the Monterey Pop Festival a July event.

> **Quick check 9.** True or false: The Amir Khusrau story is a legend, not a record. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

> **Quick check 10.** True or false: Ravi Shankar is reliably credited with five Grammy awards. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Remember this

- **Strings:** 7 plucked (3 chikari, 4 melody) plus sympathetic taraf strings.
- **Origin:** late-Mughal; Amir Khusrau story is a legend.
- **Gats:** Masitkhani slow, Razakhani fast.
- **Gharanas:** Imdadkhani (Etawah) and Maihar.
- **Ravi Shankar:** Bharat Ratna; Harrison lessons 1966.

Explain it back: Why is the Amir Khusrau story weak evidence, and what is the first written record of the sitar?

Practice MCQs

1. Which gharana of sitar playing is also called the Etawah gharana?

A. Patiala

B. Maihar-Senia

C. Gwalior

D. Imdadkhani

See answer ↓

2. In which taal are Masitkhani gats set?

A. Rupak

B. Teental

C. Jhaptal

D. Ektaal

See answer ↓

3. Which sitarist is credited with bringing the gayaki ang, the singing style, to the sitar?

A. Vilayat Khan

B. Nikhil Banerjee

C. Allauddin Khan

D. Ravi Shankar

See answer ↓

4. How many plucked strings does a sitar have?

A. Four

B. Eleven

C. Thirteen

D. Seven

See answer ↓

5. Where was the Concert for Bangladesh held in 1971?

A. Wembley Stadium

B. Monterey fairgrounds

C. Madison Square Garden

D. Royal Albert Hall

See answer ↓

6. In which year did George Harrison begin sitar lessons with Ravi Shankar?

A. 1971

B. 1966

C. 1965

D. 1967

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **D.** The answer is **Imdadkhani**. Imdadkhani and Etawah are two names for one gharana. Imdad Khan, Enayat Khan and Vilayat Khan belong to it. Why the others fail: Maihar-Senia is the school of Allauddin Khan and Ravi Shankar. Patiala is mainly known as a vocal gharana. Memory hook: Imdad, Etawah, Vilayat. ↑ Q1
2. **B.** The answer is **Teental**. Masitkhani gats are slow (vilambit). Masit Khan created this framework. Why the others fail: Jhaptal, Ektaal and Rupak are other taals, not the ones named for Masitkhani gats. Memory hook: Masit, slow, Teental. ↑ Q2
3. **A.** The answer is **Vilayat Khan**. He belonged to the Imdadkhani gharana and brought the singing style to the sitar. Why the others fail: Ravi Shankar, Allauddin Khan and Nikhil Banerjee belong to the Maihar school. Memory hook: Vilayat sings on the sitar. ↑ Q3
4. **D.** The answer is **seven**. Three are chikari strings and four carry the melody. Why the others fail: eleven to thirteen is the range given for the sympathetic taraf strings, which the player does not pluck. Memory hook: 3 plus 4 make 7. ↑ Q4
5. **C.** The answer is **Madison Square Garden**, New York, on 1 August 1971. It was Ravi Shankar's idea. Why the others fail: the Royal Albert Hall and Wembley are in London. Monterey hosted the 1967 pop festival. Memory hook: Bangladesh 1971, New York. ↑ Q5
6. **B.** The answer is **1966**. Harrison flew to Bombay on 14 September 1966 for lessons. Why the others fail: 1967 is the Monterey Pop Festival year and 1971 is the Concert for Bangladesh. 1965 is a wrong year. Memory hook: 1966 lessons, 1967 Monterey. ↑ Q6

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** It is a big round resonator made from a dried gourd or pumpkin. ↑ 1
2. **False.** Early sitars had three strings. A modern sitar has many more. ↑ 2
3. **False.** They ring by resonance when the main strings sound. ↑ 3
4. **False.** He names other instruments, such as the rubab and tambur, but not the sitar. ↑ 4

5. **False.** Masitkhani gats are slow. Razakhani gats are fast. ↑ 5
6. **True.** Imdadkhani is also called the Etawah gharana. ↑ 6
7. **True.** He flew to Bombay on 14 September 1966. ↑ 7
8. **False.** It was held at Madison Square Garden, New York, in 1971. ↑ 8
9. **True.** His writings never name the sitar. ↑ 9
10. **False.** Sources give three or four competitive wins plus a Lifetime Achievement award. ↑ 10
11. **Think it through.** Because reliable sources give different totals. The safe facts are 7 plucked strings and a separate set of sympathetic strings. ↑ 11
12. **Think it through.** The second. It rests on a written source. The first is a legend. ↑ 12

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