

Musical Instruments as depicted in Reliefs of Gandhara Art

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Introduction

In Indian subcontinent or South Asia music reflects diverse elements representing racial, linguistic and cultural groups of heterogeneous populations. As a variety of these musical instruments or types do not have parallels even in any other part of the world. It seems certain that music played a very vital role in the religious, social and artistic lives of the people of South Asia as well as it is still an integral part of their cultural and ritual life. The events such as birth, initiation, marriage and death are accompanied by songs which are played on different musical instruments. The melody, rhythm, harmony and polyphony are regarded as basis of South Asian music. Such a great variety of melodic and rhythmic forms of South Asian music, obviously, may not be generalized. However, Indian classical music mainly consisted of two elements namely raaga and taal.

Regarding the origin of this diversity of musical elements, literary evidence does not go beyond the Vedic literature. As, discovery of Harappan cities and their material culture do not provide any evidence namely, music instruments; If any ever musical instruments developed or enjoyed by Harappans could not have survived to us. Thus, history of Indian music and musical instruments seems to have apparently taken its start with the arrival of Aryans. However, indigenous or Pre-Aryan, whatsoever the musical traditions existed could have incorporated in the course of time in the Aryan musical traditions

So far as the Aryan music is concerned, literary, evidence shows that “hepta tonic scale” was known to them, which, obviously, would have survived to modern time. North Indian music which consisted of hepta tonic and its seven notes is known as Sadj, rsabha, gandhara, madhyama, pancama, dhaivata and misad, abbreviated as sa, ri, ga, ma, pa, dha and ni. (Basham 2004: 388-4). Similarly, these music elements such as hepta tonic scale, melody, rhythm, raaga and tala, were played at a variety of musical instruments which are depicted with their musicians in the reliefs of Gandhara Art.

Musical instruments as depicted in the reliefs fall under the following three categories:

(1) Percussion Instruments

(2) Stringed Instruments

(3) Wind Instruments

1. Percussion instruments

Musical instruments played by striking with the hand or with a hand-held stick or beater, or by shaking such as drums, cymbals, gongs, bells, and rattles are placed under this category. Chief amongst there is the drum.

a: Drum

The frequency with which it found a place in the reliefs clearly shows that the drum held a very important place amongst at least the percussion instruments. It has not changed much over the years, as its comparison with the modern counterpart would leave us in no doubt. Typically, it is barrel-shaped with a wooden hollow body and a taught membrane over one or both ends. The membrane is tied to the body with strings that can be pulled further to keep it taught. In a few cases the strings joining the membrane at both ends are straight, but in others they make interesting patterns as they pass over the wooden frame of the barrel.

The drum is sounded by being struck with the hands (see below) or with sticks (Fig. 1). In the former case it is smaller in size and is now called *dholak* (literally small drum). An even smaller form is called *Tabla*—a percussion instrument which has become an essential element in all kinds of musical concerts. It is the *dholak* or the *Tabla* which seems to have been depicted in all palace scenes, although its size is incorrectly exaggerated. The drum in general is played in comparatively larger gatherings such as festivals, sports, harvests etc. and very often serves as an item of mass communication. In the reliefs it has three main varieties; (I) Cylindrical, (II) barrel-shaped and (III) bowl-shaped. In variety I, it has straight parallel sides and a circular section (Fig. 2). In variety

II, the body bulges out in the middle (Fig.3). Variety III has membrane only on one side and looks more like a large size carinated bowl held between the thighs while playing (Fig.. 4).

The drum is hung with a strap in front of the body of the player. The same is also the case with the *dholak*, but the *Tabla* always appears in sets of two, like a pair, one of which stands almost vertically while the other is shown lying horizontally on the ground or in the lap of the player.

A small hand-drum, now called *Duff*, is very rare. The only example known to the present writer comes from a family drinking scene (Fig. 5).

b. Cymbal

The cymbal consists of a slightly concave round brass plate which is either struck against another or struck with a stick to make a ringing or clashing sound. A good example of the instrument is found in Fig.6 which illustrates a dance scene accompanied by musicians. The figure standing second from right is a cymbalist.

c. Gong

It is a metal disc with turned rim, giving a resonant note when struck. No clear example of this instrument exists in our reliefs. For a doubtful example see Fig. 6. The man standing at the extreme right holds a disc in both hands which may represent a gong.

d. Bell

Typically made of copper, it looks like a deep inverted cup widening at the lip. Inside the cup is a metal clapper. Only one example is known to the present writer (Fig.1). In the illustration of Mara's attack, the figure standing in the right upper corner holds a bell.

2. Stringed Instruments

Stringed musical instruments are in general associated with scenes depicting Indra's visit to the Indrasala cave and with merry-making scenes such as wine drinking and dancing

parties. Some solo examples also exist but these must have had been originally part of some bigger compositions. Morphologically the stringed instruments may roughly be grouped under three heads: (a) harp, (b) lyre and (c) lute. A stringed musical instrument was called *veena* (presently *been*) in South Asia.

a. Harp

Nearly bow-shaped it consists of a frame supporting a graduated series of parallel strings played by plucking with the fingers or plectrum. The number of strings varies from three to five (Figs. 7-9). In one case it has ten strings (Fig..10), but, in this case, the bow is changed into an L-shaped instrument. This necessitated a change in the position of the instrument as well. Thus, while the bow-shaped harp has its strings towards the harpist, the L-shaped harp has its strings towards the audience.

Fig.9 shows a good example of the bow-shaped harp here carried by Pancasikh ('literally 5-crested')—the harpist who accompanied the god Indra at the occasion of his visit to the Indrasala cave. It consists of a slightly curved board having an upstanding curved arm marked at regular intervals by keys meant for tightening the strings which join them separately. From the board hangs a leather strap apparently for suspending the instrument on a wall. Fig. 8 shows that the curved arm terminates into a round thickened head. The board in this case looks more like a gourd of abnormal size. In both examples, Pancasikha holds the harp with left hand; in the right hand, he has the plectrum.

b. Lyre

Typically, it is a stringed instrument like a small U-shaped harp with strings fixed to a crossbar. A good but rare example may be seen in Fig.11. It is perhaps the only example in Gandhara art that closely corresponds to the description given above. Fig.12 seems to be a variant form, unless of course it does not represent something that in the ancient past went under a totally different name. Similar is the case with another instrument (Figs. 6- 10) which occurs twice in panel reliefs of distinctively Hellenistic style. Francine Tissot (1985: 234, No. 4), with a question mark, calls it "psalterion" (psaltery, according to the New Oxford Dictionary (2001: 1495) was an ancient and medieval instrument like a dulcimer but played by plucking the strings with the fingers or a

plectrum). We have already referred to a woman playing on a triangular instrument in our description of Fig. 13. Sir John Marshall names this instrument as lyre.

According to K. K. Murthy (1977: 84) “the lyre is twice represented in Gandhara reliefs”. In support of this view he has cited two examples from Ingholt (XVII, 1-2). In both the cases Orpheus is charming the animals with music. Apparently these examples do not belong to Gandhara art. Ingholt (1957: 34) refers to them as “two early Byzantine versions of this theme”, viz, charming the animals with music.

C. Lute or Guitar

The word lute, derived from the Arabic al-‘ud (*Oxford Dict.*: 1102) is a stringed instrument with a pear-shaped (Fig. 14) or scalloped resonator (Fig15). , a long straight neck having pegs and two to three strings. The pegs are meant for fine tuning the instrument by loosening or tightening the strings to produce the required tunes. The guitar like the harp is amply attested in our reliefs but, quite interestingly, while the harp has totally disappeared, the guitar, in a simple form locally called *ektara* when it is one-stringed and *dotara* when two-stringed, has survived the ravages of time and is still popular on the countryside where remnants of the ancient culture are presently fighting a losing battle against the onslaught of modernism. The *dotara* or two-stringed lute is referred to by Sir John Marshall (1973: 38) as mandoline.

The piriformed (or pear-shaped) and the scalloped (or shouldered) varieties are almost identical except for a small difference in the shape of the resonator. The evidence of the reliefs shows that the lute was played mostly by female musicians.

3. Wind Instruments

The wind instruments are very simple devices and mainly comprise conch-shell, flute and trumpet or shawn. The conch, now called *nad*, is the most simple of all and is used by ascetics (faqirs) alone for giving a deep penetrating call to show their presence. The conch is picked up from nature and is played without changing its shape. The shrill noise it produces makes it unfit for use in musical concerts or entertainment parties. Its depiction in Gandhara art seems to be confined to reliefs showing Mara’s attack and his

host (Fig. 1). In the upper right hand corner of this relief in the second row, just in front of the upraised trunk of an elephant, stands a young man with curly hair holding a conch in both hands ready to blow. Fig. 16 shows a fragment of a similar relief depicting two men standing in two rows, one behind the other. The young man standing in the upper row holds a conch in both hands ready to produce a frightening noise. With this evidence at hand it can be seen that K. K. Murthy's statement (1977: 88) that "the conch is conspicuously absent" from Gandhara art is unfortunate.

The flute has two main varieties: (1) transverse or horizontal and (2) vertical or slanting. In both the cases it is made from a bamboo tube having holes that are stopped by finger tips. Bamboo is locally known as *bans*. The transverse fact we have many more examples.

Variety (2) is represented by several specimens. The real difference between this and variety 1 is the position of the sound-hole. In variety 1 the sound-hole is placed upon the lower tip, in variety 2 the entire end of the bamboo tube is turned into a kind of mouthpiece which is placed between both the lips (Fig. 17). Variety 2 may be divided into two sub-varieties: (i) small sized and (ii) large sized. Sub-variety i, in some cases, consist of only one tube (Fig. 18). In this form it is now known as *Murli*. In some other cases it has two tubes (Fig. 19), presently called *Jori* which literally means "a pair". In sub-variety ii, the tube is elongated and widened at the extreme end (Fig. 12). In this form it looks more like a trumpet or shawn.

References

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Figures

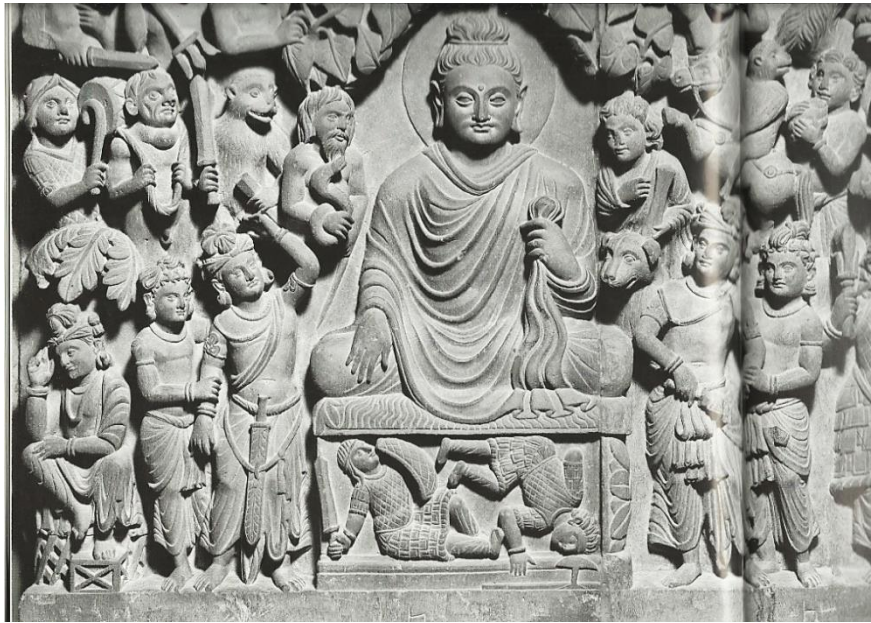


Fig. 1 Attack by Mara and his Host



Fig. 2 Panel showing musical instruments



Fig. 3 Panel showing a musician and dancer



Fig. 4. Drinking scene



Fig 5 Drinking scene



Fig. 6 Dancing scene



Fig. 7 Indra and his Harpist visit the Buddha in the Indrasala Cave



Fig. 8 Indra and his Harpist visit the Buddha in the Indrasala Cave

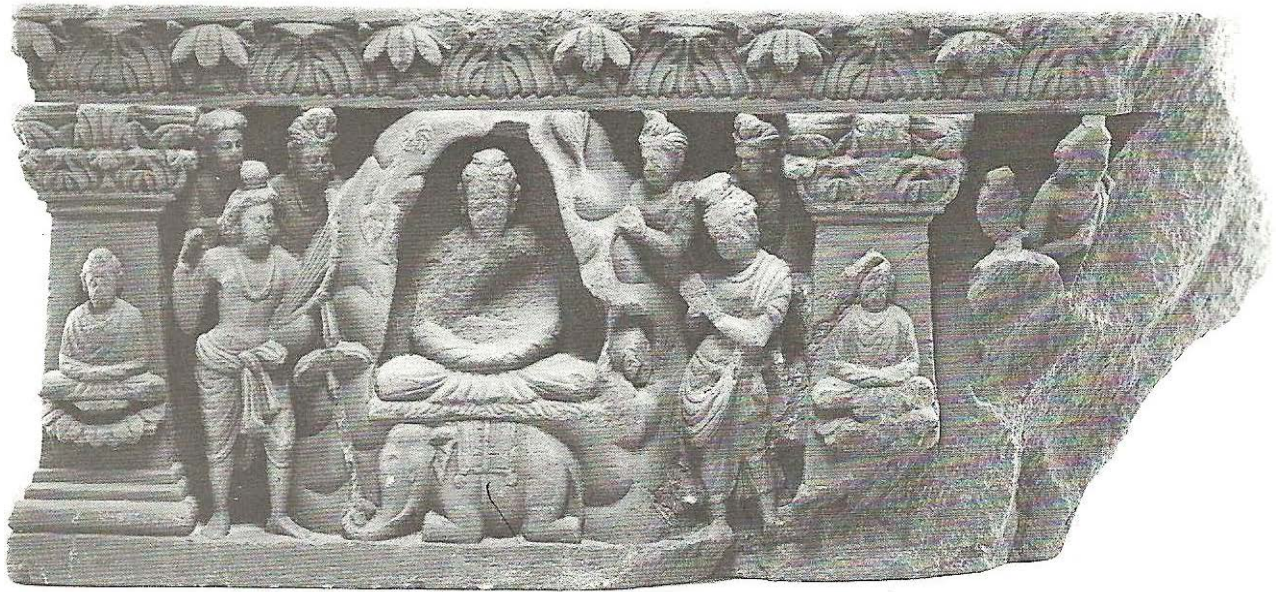


Fig. 9 Visit of Indra



Fig. 10 Dancing scene



Fig. 11 Fragment of a relief showing dancing scene



Fig. 12 Fragment of a relief showing music scene



Fig. 13 Drinking, Dancing and Music



Fig. 14 Toilet Tray with crowded drinking scene

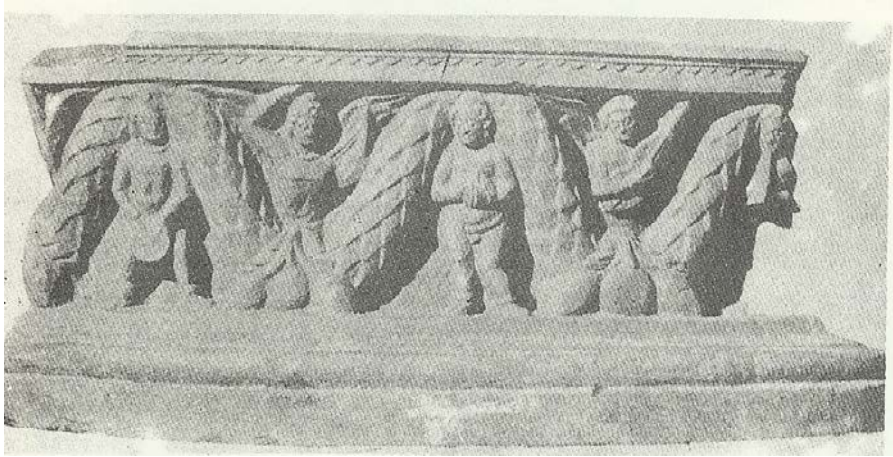


Fig. 15 Base ornamental with garland and Erotes



Fig. 16 Fragment of a panel relief depicting “Mra’s Attack”



Fig. 17 Fragment of a relief depicting a drummer and flautist



Fig. 18 Animal faced figure



Fig. 19 Stair-riser length showing musicians