

Music

Music and music makers

The Buzz of the Sitar

The sitar is an ancient stringed musical instrument that is part of the lute family. It's commonly played in classical Indian music, but it's also prominently featured in the music of Pakistan and Bangladesh. Dating back to the 16th century, it has become quite popular in the present day, even in the West. The instrument is best known for the natural reverberation (or buzz) created with sympathetic strings that resonate with the plucking of the melody strings.

Props and Preparations

- Print this copy of the complete activity for the facilitator. Check the [Additional Activities](#) section for more information to bring to the activity.
- Be prepared to play the Beatles song "[Norwegian Wood](#)" on the television and have participants listen to the sounds of the sitar throughout.
- Print [pictures](#) or display them on the television screen for participants to view during the activity.



How does it go?

1. Play the video/song "Norwegian Wood" by the Beatles at the beginning of the activity and sing along to set the mood.
2. Read the history of the sitar and then ask the Discussion Starter questions that follow to spark a conversation.
3. Read about the anatomy of the sitar and continue discussion with the Trivia Q&A.
4. Check out the songs and videos in the [Additional Activities](#) section.

The Buzz of the Sitar

History and Origin

The instrument known today as the sitar is believed to have evolved from the seventh-century Hindustani instrument called a veena. It was modified to become the more modern sitar beginning in the 16th century, when it was featured in concerts for royal audiences and in religious ceremonies during the Mughal period. The instrument's name is derived from the Persian word *sehtar*, which means "three-stringed," although the sitar usually features 19 or 20 strings.

The sitar's descendants are thought to be long-necked lutes that came to India from Central Asia. By the 18th century, the instrument had evolved into its present form and is still widely considered a marvel of musical craftsmanship. Today, the sitar is the dominant instrument in Hindustani music and northern Indian dance dramas.

While enjoying a prominent place in Indian music and culture for centuries, the sitar rode the tide of music globalization beginning in the 1950s and emerged in the West. Its global visibility took root when Indian Pandit (Master) Ravi Shankar brought the instrument on tour throughout the world. Its popularity in the West soared after Shankar taught Beatle lead guitarist George Harrison to play it. Once Harrison mastered it, the sitar was featured in several Beatles songs of the 1960s, including “Norwegian Wood,” “Within You Without You,” and “Love You To.” Another well-known British rock band, the Rolling Stones, also used a sitar in the song “Paint It Black,” and the Doors, an American rock group known for prominently featuring Indian scales in their songs, used the sitar along with other instruments to produce their psychedelic sound.

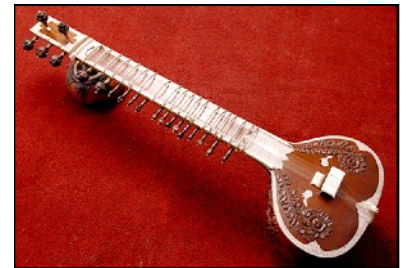
Discussion Starters

- Are you familiar with the instrument called a sitar?
- Do you like the musical sound it produces? Can you describe it?
- Where have you seen a sitar played?
- Can you describe what a sitar looks like?

Anatomy of the Sitar

The sitar is constructed with a deep pear-shaped body called the kaddu, which is a hollowed out dried pumpkin. Mounted upon the body is the jawari, a flat bridge where the strings of the instrument vibrate. The jawari controls the sitar’s tune and tone and creates its characteristic buzzing sound.

From the body, there is a long, wide, hollow wooden neck. The instrument measures about four feet in length. It has tuning pegs on both the front and side of the pegbox at the top of the neck, as well as 20 arched, movable frets spaced along the length of the neck. In one popular model, an additional dried out gourd called a tumba is mounted at the top of the neck, under the peg box. The tumba accentuates the resonating sound of the sitar and also balances the weight of the instrument.



The strings of a sitar are metal, and there are typically five melody strings, one or two drone strings (used to accentuate rhythm or pulse), and up to 13 sympathetic strings. The sympathetic strings are beneath the frets in the neck, and are tuned to the notes of the raga, which is the melodic framework of a performance. The sitar’s strings are strummed with a metal pick called a mizrab, which is worn on the right forefinger and allows the musician to play each type of string simultaneously. While playing, the musician sits on the floor in a position called Ardha Gomukhasana (with the left leg bent under the right leg—the right leg crossed over the left) and the body of the sitar resting on the insole of the left foot.

Did you know?

1. Today, two basic types of sitar are popularly played. They are named after the famous sitar musicians who played them in recent times. Who are they?

Answer: Ravi Shankar and Vilayat Kahn, the two men who introduced and popularized the instrument in the West.

2. What are the basic differences between these two sitars?

Answer: The Ravi Shankar, or RV sitar, has 12–14 sympathetic strings and a gourd resonator (tumba) at the top of the neck to produce deep, bass-rich sounds. The Vilayat Kahn, or VK sitar, is smaller and has just one gourd making up the body. It has fewer sympathetic strings and no bass strings and produces a more chord-dominated sound.

3. In addition to the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and the Doors, what are some other bands and artists that used the sitar in their songs?

Answer: The Monkees, the Turtles, the Kinks, the Lemon Pipers, Moody Blues, Jethro Tull, Metallica, Sir Elton John, Steely Dan, T. Rex, B.J. Thomas, and Stevie Wonder



4. Noted musician Niladri Kumar created a hybrid instrument that combined the characteristics of a sitar and a guitar to produce a unique sound used in Bollywood hits. What is it called?

Answer: The zitar

5. Ravi Shankar has two daughters. One is the famous sitar maestro Anoushka Shankar, a Grammy-nominated musician who regularly performs at concerts in the West. Who is the other?

Answer: Shankar fathered daughter Norah Jones at the age of 59. Jones is a very successful music artist who released an album in 2002 that won eight Grammy awards, including Album of the Year.

Additional Activities

1. Check out this short [video on Ravi Shankar](#), compiled when he died in 2012.
 2. Watch Ravi Shankar and his daughter Anoushka play sitars in this [live 1997 performance](#).
 3. This video shows to [Ravi Shankar teaching George Harrison](#) play the sitar.
 4. Take a look at the proper [sitting position for playing a sitar](#).
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