

# About the Bansuri

by Lyon Leifer



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The *bansuri* is a keyless, bamboo, transverse flute used for Hindustani (north Indic classical *raga*) music. It is here defined as the instrument used in the Hindustani type of classical, light-classical, and folk styles, prevalent in north India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, with practitioners found now in many parts of the world. Carnatic (south Indian) classical music also has keyless, transverse flutes, generally known as *venu*. These are predominantly high pitched, are made to rather different acoustical specifications, and have their own techniques, prominent exponents, repertoire, makers, and fans.

Ragas are highly developed melodies. Each is characterized by a particular mood. Renditions may range widely in expression from deeply meditative to blisteringly virtuosic. In Hindustani music, performances are largely improvised, based on pre-composed songs embodying the melodic characteristics of a given raga. They usually take place with accompaniment from tabla drums in the context of the highly developed *tala* system of organizing rhythm and meter. The bansuri could well be called the “deceptively simple” instrument. It consists of a bamboo tube with a cork in one end, a blowhole, and six, seven or (rarely) eight finger holes. The absence of keys and the presence of large tone holes enable the bansuri to produce all kinds of glissandi and other specific, microtonal devices that give the music much of its expressive power.

There has always been a strong cultural association throughout the Indian subcontinent with the depiction of Krishna as a flute player. It is reported that Pannalal Ghosh (1911-1960) found this an inspiration to both develop and popularize the bansuri as a classical instrument during the period of the 1930s through the 1950s. He enlarged the instrument to nearly alto flute size and developed a suitable technique for rendering every kind of detail, while projecting the deep sonorities preferred for Hindustani classical music. This proved immensely successful and took the Indian audience by storm. His tragic, early death could not prevent the instrument from gaining a lasting place on the concert stage. Fortunately, much of his music was recorded and can be heard on YouTube. Subsequently, many fine players have achieved careers, including those in a direct line of instruction from “Pannababu” and his disciples.

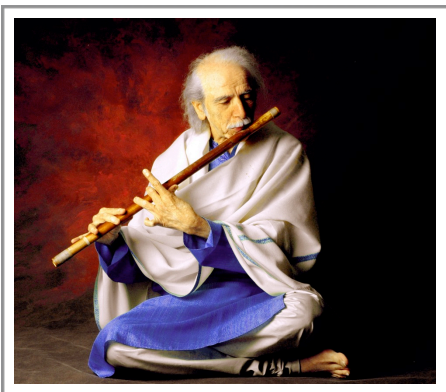
My Guruji, Devendra Murdeshwar (1926-2000), in my opinion Pannalal Ghosh’s most accomplished disciple, carried forward this approach, creatively adding significantly to the bansuri’s repertory. He adapted vocal compositions, composed lilting pieces of his own, and developed an individual style of improvisation drawing on deep acquaintance with the work of numerous leading musicians. Devendra Murdeshwar also made bansuris of the highest quality. His pattern regarding bore/length ratios, tone hole positioning, and embouchure design has become the model for many current makers/players.

The highly successful, influential, and much-recorded bansuri player, Hariprasad Chaurasia (1938-), while honoring Pannalal Ghosh’s contributions, has established a distinct esthetic and technical approach and trained many followers, establishing a reputed school for that purpose, Vrindavan Gurukul, with branches in Mumbai and Bhubaneswar.

The master flutist, Rajendra Prasanna (1956-), coming out of a school of shehnai/bansuri players originating in Varanasi, has also developed a significant approach and fanbase and trained several younger players. Another highly popular player with a distinct approach is Praveen Godkhindi (1973-).



**Hariprasad Chaurasia**



**G.S. Sachdev**

Other significant bansuri players, now dearly departed, have included Venkatesh Godkhindi (1940-2015), Raghunath Seth (1931-2014), and Vijay Raghav Rao (1925-2011), all of whom trained successors. A further branch of bansuri players centered around Kolkata developed from the teaching of another disciple of Pannalal Ghosh, Gaur Goswami (1922-1976). Another important player of classical bansuri was G.S. Sachdev (1935-2018), Rao’s student, who settled, performed, recorded, and taught in the United States. [Note: G.S. Sachdev was an advisory board member of the World Flute Society.]

There are now quite a few professional bansuri players representing all of these schools with established and/or developing careers, performing on the classical stage, working in film studios, accompanying dance recitals, etc. Serious bansuri players at high levels of accomplishment can also be found in numerous countries around the world. The instrument

has become extremely popular as an amateur pastime, as well. The number of makers marketing instruments online has grown significantly as a result.

Bansuri players of all schools, like most classical musicians of the Indian subcontinent, consider intense practice and long training essential to develop the accuracy, facility, esthetic judgement, and endurance necessary to perform lengthy, effective recitals of raga music. A top bansuri player may be expected to present full-length recitals of up to three hours in length, with only the accompaniment of tabla drums and drone tambura. In recital, one renders items that may range from only a few minutes in length to upwards of an hour each, hoping to maintain audience interest throughout.

Blowing and embouchure on bansuri are quite like other transverse flutes. The fingering system may be unique and methods of covering the holes vary. Players generally take the note produced with the top three holes covered as tonic (*sa*). The *sa* in the low octave is “home” for any raga rendition. This provides range extending from a fourth or more below the home *sa* to two octaves over home *sa*, and higher. The seven-hole instrument provides an extra half-step of low range and additional means for managing register breaks, alternative fingerings, etc. Players also may extend the low range by another half- or even a whole-step by turning the bansuri inward. Top players can cover a range of roughly three octaves. The open scale of the instrument, starting with three holes closed, produces the Lydian mode, known in India as *Kaalyaan Thaata*.



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With three holes closed, the typical, concert-size bansuri produces the *E*-natural above middle *C*. That makes it basically a step higher than an alto flute. To be in tune, the holes must be spaced rather far apart. The large tone holes and their spread make the instrument physically demanding. Players generally start with a smaller instrument and proceed to larger sizes as they gain mastery. The ways that players of the different schools manage fingerings and the ways we grip the instrument vary. Various makers’ designs also offer choices over what may best suit one’s hands and method. The six-hole instrument may be somewhat easier to play. Adherents of the Ghosh approach consider the seven holes essential and find it entirely feasible, with proper training and practice.

Whether the player uses a six- or seven- or eight-hole instrument, the fundamental problem in fingering is to produce melodies in the ten modes covering the bulk of Hindustani raga repertory. (See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raga>) The basic method is to use both half-hole and open-hole fingerings. Fork fingerings come into play primarily in the third octave. A further requirement is that the partial opening and closing of the holes must produce the immense flexibility of pitch inflection required by the music. Ideally, the entire pitch spectrum reachable by the instrument can be utilized expressively.

Traditionally, music is taught one-on-one from *guru* to disciple. A great guru provides a consistent approach to 1) technique, 2), raga structure, 3) repertory, 4) improvisational approaches, 5) understanding the music’s history, and ultimately 6) raga esthetics. A fine disciple maintains, develops, and shares all of this while realizing it as an ongoing personal discovery. For someone with serious interest, finding the right guru is extremely important and can be difficult. While it is feasible to study online, the numerous advantages of learning in person should also be considered, especially if a competent teacher is available in person by one means or another. A reasonable course in seeking a guru currently might well start with extensive listening to exponents of the various schools, feasible via YouTube. As with any other form of music, a student is well-advised to seek instruction from the player whose music speaks to him/her most powerfully.

Through diligent practice and study, players learn to project ragas’ deeply emotional meanings and highly-developed structures while improvising. There are about a hundred ragas in common use and countless compositions, new and old. We learn ragas in each of the ten modes, as well as “mixed” ragas drawn from more than one. Core repertory for accomplished performers may amount to roughly twenty ragas and some number of light melodies.

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Lyon Leifer is recognized in Europe, the Americas, China, and India as a master flutist who performs both on western flutes and on the bansuri. After early studies in Chicago with Emil Eck and Walfrid Kujala, Lyon Leifer attended the Juilliard School of Music where he studied with Julius Baker. After graduating, he became a member of the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra. Pursuing an interest in improvised raga music and flute playing in India, he then accepted a Fulbright Grant to study there with Devendra Murdeshwar, the inheritor of the legacy of the great Pannalal Ghosh. Remaining in India for five years, Lyon Leifer won the praise of Indian audiences and critics for his authentic renditions of raga melodies. In 2019, he won another Fulbright Grant to study the current state of bansuri playing and making in India, spending two months in country and taking part in a number of seminars organized in different parts of the country for that purpose