

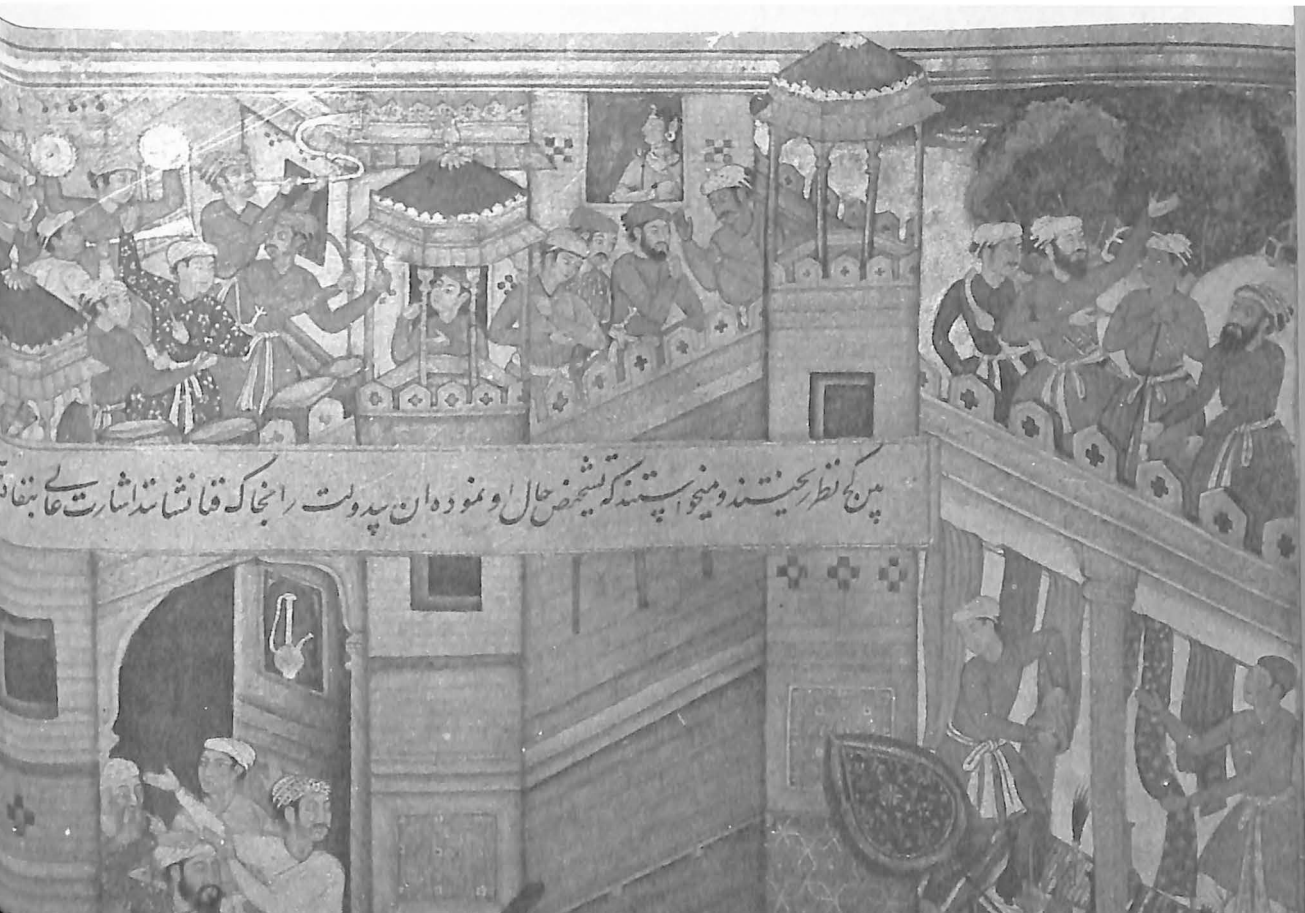
Music and Musical Instruments in the Paintings of the *Akbar Nama*

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From contemporary sources of the time it is evident that music played an essential part in Mughal court life. A rich source of information here is the *A'in-i-Akbari*, written by Abu'l Fazl, wherein the court biographer has pioneered a new kind of documentation. As a sequel to his historical chronicle of the *Akbar Nama*, the *A'in* describes the etiquette and ranks at the court, the regal ensigns of royalty, details of the arsenal, onwards down to the stables.¹ He also devotes a section of *A'in* 19 to musical instruments, which thus form an integral part of the ensigns of royalty.²

In this chapter, Abu'l Fazl describes, in considerable detail, the hours of performance at the *naqqarakhana*, or the music gallery. This would stress the heraldic purpose of music, to indicate the ritual progression of time through the hours of a day. He commences his commentary thus:

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"Formerly the band played four *ghari-s* before the commencement of the night, and likewise, four *ghari-s* before daybreak. Now they play first at midnight when the sun commences his ascent, and the second time at dawn. One *ghari* before sunrise, the musicians commence to blow the *surna*, and wake up those that are asleep; and one *ghari* before sunrise they play a short prelude, when they beat the *kuwarga* a little, whereupon they play upon the *karna*, the *nafir* and other instruments, without however making use of the *naqqara*...After a little pause, the *surna-s* are blown again, the time of the music being indicated by the *nafir-s*. One hour later, the *naqqara-s* commence when all musicians raise the auspicious strain..."

The passage above suggests that this music of the *naqqarakhana* performed a ritualistic role, and was considered as such by the court historian. He describes and classifies the instruments used:

"Of musical instruments used in the *naqqarakhana* I may mention:

1. The *kuwarga*, commonly called *damama*; there are eighteen pairs of them, more or less, and they give a deep sound;
2. The *naqqara*, twenty pairs, more or less;
3. The *duhul*, of which four are used;
4. The *karna*, made of gold, silver, brass and other metals, and they never blow fewer than four;
5. The *surna*, of the Persian, and Indian kinds, they blow nine together;
6. The *nafir*, of the Persian, European, and Indian kinds, they blow some of each kind;
7. The *sing* is of brass, and made in the form of a cow's horn; they blow two together;
8. The *sanj* or cymbal, of which three pairs are used."

It may be noted here that these instruments are different from those used by the vocalists for accompaniment, which have also been listed in the *A'in-i-Akbari*. These include the *sarmandal*, the flute, the *tambura*, the *rubab*, the *qichak* and the *surna*.³ One may presume that these musical performances tended towards a greater degree of improvisation than was permitted in the *naqqarakhana*. However, pictorial representation of these *ustad-s* or singers is rare in compositions of the sixteenth century.

The passages quoted above would serve only to precipitate the reader's interest in music. An additional source of information to the reader, and one that is relatively unexplored for musical instruments, are the paintings of the *Akbar Nama*.⁴ These paintings, which were commissioned from the leading painters of the imperial studio, provide a visual complement to the written narrative of the court chronicle. It is significant for our purposes to note here that they were painted within the same decade of the 1590's in which the *Akbar Nama* was researched and written by Abu'l Fazl. They thus become a contemporary 'reading' and recording of events, through the eyes of painters who on certain occasions may have been eye-witnesses to these events.

These paintings have been acknowledged in every monograph on Mughal painting, in terms of their superb quality. That apart, they provide a good deal of information about the day and the age, about customs at the court and etiquette. The details of music and of musicians which appear in these paintings in an anecdotal fashion are proved to be authentic, by the very fact that several compositions repeat the same details. Among the one hundred and sixteen paintings preserved today at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, nine compositions provide details on the nature of music and of musical instruments used at Akbar's court. These are listed below with the subject of reference being usually a *darbar*, a marriage or a birth celebration.

1. Acc. No. 7/117: Akbar receives the child Abdu'r Rahim at the court, Agra, in 1561 A.D.
2. & 3. Acc. Nos. 8 and 9/117: Musical entertainment at the marriage of Baqi Muhammed Khan, in 1561 A.D.
4. Acc. No. 16/117: Dancing girls taken from Baz Bahadur's court at Mandu to perform before Akbar.
5. Acc. No. 33/117: The attempt to assassinate Akbar at Delhi in 1563 A.D.
6. Acc. No. 78/117: Rejoicings on the birth of Prince Salim at Fatehpur Sikri, 1569 A.D.
7. Acc. No. 79/117: Akbar receives the news of Salim's birth at Agra and festivities.
8. Acc. No. 80/117: Rejoicings at Fatehpur Sikri on the birth of Prince Murad, 1570 A.D.
9. Acc. No. 113/117: Husain Quli Khan pays his respects to Akbar in 1573 A.D.

A few of these illustrations confirm the fact that the *naqqarakhana* was intended to refer to a musicians' gallery, assigned to a specific place in Mughal architecture. In the dramatic composition of the attempt to assassinate Akbar as he passed through Delhi (33/117), the musicians appear above the entrance gateway to the city. They play vigorously upon the drums (*naqqara-s*) and trumpets (*surna-s*) to announce the immediate arrival of the emperor and of the royal cavalcade. The instruments used here include two pairs of *naqqara-s* (drums), a pair of *sanj* or flat cymbals, the curved trumpet or *surna*, the short trumpet or *nafir*, two straight and long trumpets (*surna-s*), as well as the curved horn trumpet of the *sing*, which appears rarely in these paintings.

Other illustrations would suggest that these same instruments of royalty were carried into the battlefield, to sound the battle-cry with the large kettle drums (*naqqara-s*) strapped across the backs of camels, and with the flamboyant curved necks of the trumpets (*surna-s*) glinting in the sun. When the imperial forces advanced, with the elephants, arrayed in battle armour, the sight and resonance of these huge drums were intended to inspire the ranks of the enemy with terror (Acc. No. 63/117). The capture of enemy booty invariably included the prized capture of the insignias and war drums, which were brought and laid before the emperor or his representative (Acc. No. 41/117). It is not surprising that the same use of martial music, employing the same drums and trumpets, appears in Persian paint-



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ings of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. These illustrations would serve to confirm the origins of these musical instruments, and indeed of this genre of music, as derived from beyond the borders of India.

A third category of subjects introduce these musical instruments of the *naqqarakhana* in scenes of court festivity. Rites of births and marriage are invariably accompanied with a specific role assigned to the musicians of the *naqqarakhana*. In the scene of Baqi Muhammed Khan's marriage, the royal guests are shown entertained by musicians on a splendid double-paged painting. These musicians are relegated to a separate dais at the far end of the courtyard, and are accompanied by the whirling dance of two ladies in the Turkish Chaghtai costume and head-dress (Acc. Nos. 8 and 9/117).

Again, the birth of the princes (*shaikzada-s*) at Fatehpur Sikri is announced through music and dance. Descriptions of these events in sources such as the *Akbar Nama*, the *Tabaqat-i-Akbari* and the *Muntakhabu-t-Tawarikh* mention that they were celebrated with great feasts and revelry, by the casting of horoscopes and the release of prisoners,⁵ but not much is made of the music performances. It becomes the contribution of the painters of these events (Acc. Nos. 78, 79 and 80/117) to have included these as an essential component of birth festivities. The same conclusion is drawn from the portrayal of other birth scenes, such as the birth of Timur and the birth of Akbar in the second set of the *Akbar Nama* illustrations, today at the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin (Ms. No. 3).

The last of these subjects from the *Akbar Nama*, of the birth of Prince Murad (Acc. No. 80/117), affords the most animated recording on the occasion of the birth of a prince in the royal household. It is conceived by the artists Basawan and Bhurah, with different events happening simultaneously in different chambers. Even while the child is being nursed in the royal bed-chamber, astrologers prepare the horoscope, women rejoice with stringing up mango leaves, and musicians announce the joyous event. According to the description given by Abu'l Fazl in the *A'in*, two men beat upon a small pair of *naqqara* drums and a pair of giant drums of *damama*. Besides them, keeping the tempo, a young musician plays upon the *sanj* or cymbals. Three more men are depicted as playing upon the trumpets, which include the *surna* or the curved trumpet, the long trumpet, and the short trumpet or *karna*. The *sing* is not to be found here, although it does appear elsewhere, and also on the battlefield in certain illustrations. Accompanying the musicians, the male dancer performs a typical stance of *Kathak*, and attendants arrive with a cradle.

The birth of Akbar in the *Tarikh-i-Khandan-i-Timuriya* at the Bankipore Library (Patna) is presented in similar terms, with mango leaves strung along doorways, and royal musicians performing on drums and trumpets. The *Akbar Nama* at the British Museum (Or. 12988, folios 20b and 21a) opens with two pages, both composed by Sanwala, where the birth of Akbar is presented under identical circumstances. Musicians and astrologers appear before Humayun on the second page. When the same ceremonies are observed for the birth of Timur two centuries earlier in 1376 A.D. (Br. Mus. Or. 12988, folio 34b), then these would appear as anachronisms, referring specifically to customs of the sixteenth century. The repetition of the musicians authenticates, in a sense, their appearance at birth festivities during Akbar's reign.

It has been mentioned above that the appearance of the indigenous tradition of music is rare among illustrations of the *Akbar Nama*. However, two pages towards the beginning and the close of the present manuscript of illuminations introduce a vina player into the court or *darbar* scene (Acc. Nos. 7/117 and 113/117). Dark-skinned and attired suitably in a luminous white *jama*, his appearance is more as one of the great luminaries at the court, rather than as one of the performing musicians. He has been identified by certain authorities as Naubat Khan, who was the *Darogah* (Keeper) of the *naqqarakhana* in the 1590's, by comparison with a portrait of his which appears elsewhere.⁶ At any rate, his presence at a *darbar* is greatly significant since it confirms the importance attached at this time to the indigenous modes of music and of musical instruments.

Again, it must be stressed that these two traditions of music at the Mughal court seem to have been quite divergent during the reign of Akbar, and to have served specific and different purposes. This distribution is confirmed once more in a later painting which could be a celebration of the coronation of Emperor Jehangir. Today at the Rampur library, this animated composition includes the musicians of the *naqqarakhana*, all heroically astride horses, and flanking the elephants (*nishan kehathi*). The description of this sumptuous page by Percy Brown comments on the two divergent traditions:



"Flanking the elephants are two groups of mounted musicians, energetically blowing on their trumpets, *turhi* and *nafir*, or beating on the drum, *naqqara*...In the upper group, called *Kalavat* or *gavayya* which is a mixed assembly of Hindus and Muhammedans, two men will be observed with stringed instruments like large mandolins, known as *sarod*. The elder of these two performers has been identified as Tansen ...the younger performer is Shauqi, who afterwards took the place of Tansen, and of whom Jehangir writes that he is the wonder of the age and sings 'in a manner that clears the rust from all hearts'."⁷

A study of these paintings would suggest and stress the contribution of musical performances, during specific occasions. At the same time, the occasional appearance of a musician with a *vina*, or of the *Kathak* dancer, might suggest the indigenous tradition at the court. These details enliven the events of the court and enrich our appreciation of this period of the sixteenth century.

References

1. Abu'l Fazl, *A'in-i-Akbari*, V. I, transl. Blochmann, and V. II transl. Jarrett.
2. Abu'l Fazl, *A'in-i-Akbari*, V. I, transl. Blochmann, pp. 52-54.
3. Abu'l Fazl, *op. cit.*
4. Victoria and Albert Museum No. I.S. 2/1896/117.
5. Abu'l Fazl, *Akbar Nama*, transl. Beveridge, II, p. 503.
6. See Pinder Wilson, ed., *Paintings at the Muslim Courts of India*, 1976.
7. Percy Brown, *Indian Paintings under the Mughals*, p. 130.

Illustrations

1. The *Naqqarakhana* or music gallery in the scene of the attempt to assassinate Akbar at Delhi, 1563.
2. The royal musicians celebrating the birth of Prince Murad at Fatehpur Sikri, 1569.
3. The vina player. Perhaps a portrait of Naubat Khan, *Darogah* of the *Naqqarakhana*, in the scene where Husain Quli Khan pays his respects to Akbar on his return from the Gujerat campaign, 1573.