

A taste of India



Sa- a deer, a female deer
Re- a drop of golden sun
Ga- a name I call myself
Ma- a long, long way to run
Pa- a needle pulling thread
Dha- a note to follow pa
Ni- a drink with jam and bread

Hmm. Something doesn't seem quite right there. On Friday, I, along with the 6th grade body of the school I was at, got a little lesson in playing the [sitar](#). A college student who used to attend that middle school came in to give a demonstration. The teacher I subbed for had "concert" written on the schedule, but it really wasn't a concert though he did play a couple of short tunes. I hesitate to use the word "song" here, because apparently classical Indian songs are over 15 minutes long, but what he played for us were tunes about half a minute in length. The reason? He is just a sitar student himself, but that was good enough to bring him in for a demonstration for students who are in the middle of learning different world cultures in social studies. As far as being a student, in fact, he told us that it takes about 20 years before one can be considered a good enough sitar player to play professionally in India, and another ten before one can teach. Wow.

He started off with a little lesson on musical notation. Remember the song above? Well, the form of musical notation he has learned for Indian music involves a musical scale similar to that referenced to in the [Solfège](#) technique, from which we get the syllables do, re, mi, fa, so, la, and ti. For Indian music, the syllables used are sa, re, ga, ma, pa, dha, and ni. The music also doesn't use the staff Western

musicians are familiar with. Instead, they use |, ^, and -. These symbols tell them how to pluck the playing string (the one of 17 strings used most of the time) and a letter above the symbol tells them which note- the first letter of the aforementioned syllables. A dot above or below the letter, if present, tells the octave. The sitar is capable of playing three octaves.

Along with the lesson, he played a little bit of a CD which included a type of percussion instrument that typically accompanies the sitar and is capable of 30 different sounds on two drums. I forget what he said the name of this instrument is. Again, he also played a little bit himself. During one of the class periods, a teacher, my former junior high band teacher in fact, came in halfway through with his "Beatles" class (seems the one school with its African drumming course- see post archives from about a couple months ago- isn't the only one to have such specialized music classes ☐) and asked Bob (the sitar player- what do you mean you thought he was Indian? ☐) to play some bits from the few Beatles songs featuring [George Harrison](#) on the sitar ([Youtube link](#)). He wasn't very proficient on this though as his studies were primarily Indian music.

All in all it was a very interesting lesson I thought, even though I learned it five times. ☐ This turned out to be a far better day than the day before. I was definitely pleased that I did not get that second day in that ELL class.