

IMPROVISATION AND FORM
INDIAN MUSIC STUDY GROUP
TAPE PROGRAM:

Side A:

1. Ramakant Paranjpe — Violin — Raga Brindabani Sarang:
Alap, medium gat in Jhaptaal, fast gat in Teental.
2. Bismillah Khan — Shehnai — Raga Brindabani Sarang:
Alap, improvisation on gat in teental.
3. Narayan Das Misra — Sarangi — Raga Brindabani Sarang
Brief alap, improvisation on gat in teental.
4. Bhimsen Joshi — voice — Raga Brindabani Sarang:
Improvisation in khyal style, first in slow Jhaptaal, then fast teental.

Side B:

1. Pannalal Ghosh — flute — Raga Brindabani Sarang:
Improvisation on instrumental gat in teental.
2. Amanat Ali Khan & Fateh Ali Khan — Voices — Raga Bhairagi:
Prefatory alap, extended khyal improvisation in teental.
3. Amir Khan — voice — Raga Bhairagi:
Improvisation in Khyal style in medium-tempo teental.
4. Ramakant Paranjpe — violin — Raga Marwa:
Short Alap, improvisation on gat in teental.

WHAT ARE THE RULES OF HINDUSTANI IMPROVISATION?

When a musician improvises, many elements combine. By its nature, improvisation is difficult to pin down, and Hindustani music is as tricky to describe as most other kinds. Still, there are some ways to get a grip on a performance of improvised music.

There are two types of rules or principles which give form to improvised music. The first set are what I call explicit rules. For example, a raga has rules of melodic motion which are taught orally but which can be formally stated in speech or writing. Similarly, a rhythmic cycle or tala consists of a consistent pattern of accents, of strong and weak beats played on the drums. When a musician improvises within the raga and/or tala, he/she is following explicitly stated rules. However, the majority of governing principles in Hindustani music are rarely stated by anyone, and almost never by the musicians themselves. Some of these are very specific, like: "Don't use a melodic phrase more than three times in a row — it sounds boring." Others are a little vaguer, like: "Maintain a balance between new and familiar material." Still others, like "Don't rush the raga development," are so tied to the nature of the material that they make little or no sense out of context. These are the implicit rules.

In order to make sense of Ramakant Paranjpe's violin solo, we'll look at some of the basic structural tools that are available to Hindustani musicians, regardless of instrument, regardless of raga. These tools can be thought of as **improvisational techniques**.

WHAT ARE THE TECHNIQUES AN IMPROVISOR USES?

Here again we can divide our answer, into performance techniques and conceptual techniques. The first refers to the things musicians do; the second to the way musicians think.

Performance Techniques:

Hindustani music is remarkable in that it has particular names for various types of improvisation (in jazz, by contrast, there are no specific words for "slow and relaxed melody," or "fast linear runs"). Here are some of the most common:

Alap: Slow, rubato melodic lines, using long slides, deep inflections, grace notes, and a "floating" relationship with the rhythm.

Layakari: rhythmic manipulation of the composition or other material — playing lines at various levels of speed, using offbeats and syncopations, anticipations, etc.

Vistar (also called Badhat): The gradual development of the raga's melodic potential, which includes many of the same techniques used in alap, but not necessarily in rubato phrasing.

Taan: Fast melodic lines or runs.

Jhala: Rapid repetitions of a few notes, over and over in various rhythmic patterns.

A composer working with Hindustani musicians could say: "Play **alap** for about a minute, then move into **layakari**. Don't do very much **vistar**, but move quickly into **taans**, then finish off with **jhala** using the notes Sa, Ni and Re." This is a very detailed set of instructions about an improvised solo; it leaves the musician free to play, yet provides the composer with a predictable resource.

Each improvisational style uses particular techniques. Alap, for example, is inextricably connected to the techniques used in singing or playing it, like "meend" (long slides), "gamak" (deep inflections), "kana swara" (light grace notes), etc. Many of these come under the heading of "ornaments," and they are essential to the Hindustani musician; exploring some of the techniques of ornamenting will help us hear the music.

Ornamentation:

There are three places where we can hear ornamentation: at the beginning, the middle and the end of a note.

AT THE BEGINNING OF THE NOTE, WE CAN:

slide up or down to the note; move rapidly up from the adjacent lower scale-tone or down from the adjacent higher tone; use two or three lower or higher tones as grace-notes; come up to the note with a deep inflection from far below it; use a rapid ascending or descending scale as an approach; circle the note using adjacent scale-tones on either side (for example, ^{MD} P—); make a "turn" using adjacent tones along with the destination tone (ex. ^{MPDPM} P—). Furthermore, any of these "approach" methods can be repeated, or combined with another.

IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NOTE, WE CAN:

Use one or more grace-notes from above or below; introduce and/or modulate vibrato; circle the note (^{MD} P—); make a "turn" (^{MPDPM} P—); re-accent the note, giving the sustain a more rhythmic quality (S—S—S—S—). Of course, any of these can be repeated or combined.

AT THE END OF THE NOTE, WE CAN:

slide up or down to the adjacent scale-tone; move rapidly up or down to the adjacent tone; use two or three lower or higher tones as departing grace-notes; use a rapid ascending or descending scale as a departure; circle the note using adjacent scale-tones on either side (for example, P— ^{MD}); make a "turn" using adjacent tones along with the destination tone (ex. P— ^{MPDPM}); strike the adjacent lower note very quickly and return with a "jerk" (P—^{MP}). Needless to say, these can often be repeated, or combined.

Ornamentation is an important aspect of improvisation in performance. Different artists use embellishments differently; the ornamentation of a master musician is appropriate, musical and beautiful. Lesser artists sometimes overuse particular ornaments, or use them at the wrong places. Playing a melodic line and changing its ornamentation is an incredibly useful exercise — a few changes in the "decoration" and the line takes on a different character, with its component notes given new weight and proportion.

To a large extent, improvisation in Hindustani music (except for the formal sections of alap) is based around a set composition in a particular rhythm. This melody is heard over and over, resolving each set of variations. One way to avoid boredom from the inevitable repetition is to ornament the basic tune differently each time around, and some artists may vary the original composition so heavily that it's all but unrecognizable by the end of the performance. Even in sections which sound totally improvised, the artist may have fixed a line as a basis for elaboration, playing it with different inflections and embellishments before returning to the original composition. (Note, by the way, that jazz musicians may also prepare improvisation on a particular piece by pre-composing a new melody which is varied to build a complex solo.)

Conceptual Techniques:

In reading music history, I've found phrases like "so-and-so taught his student such-and-such a technique of variation, which was his specialty." This suggests that conceptual organization is a very personal area, one specific to particular artists. Musicians develop their own ways to think about the material, making improvisation easier or more interesting. Some conceptual techniques offer ways to manipulate a few notes, a motif or phrase. Others focus on longer lines, others on the composition, others on the structure of the entire performance. Here are some of the most common:

Composition-based improvisation: playing or singing the composition but with constant changes in phrasing, stress or ornamentation;

Paltas: taking a melodic contour and starting it on different scale tones, creating a repetitive ascending or descending contour (SRS, RGR, GMG, etc.).

Merukhand: a system of deriving all the permutations of a given set of notes. For example, the notes SRGM can be played in the following combinations: SRGM, SRMG, RSGM, RSMG | GMSR, GMRS, MGRS, MGRS | SGRM, SGMR, GSRM, GSMR | RMSG, RMGS, MRSG, MRGS | SMRG, SMGR, MSRG, MSGR | RGSM, RGMS, GRSM, GRMS, a total of twenty-four groups. A set of five notes gives us 120 combinations! Not all of these may be admissible in a given raga, but with variations in phrasing and note length even a few combinations can be made into many minutes of music.

Expansion/Contraction: Repeating a line, and each time either adding or subtracting a note or note combination from the beginning or end. Even a simple scale can yield compelling music (SRGMPDNS, SRGMPDN, SRGMPD, SRGMP, SRGM, SRG...). Furthermore these can be combined to create lines that first expand and then contract, or vice versa.

Inversion: If a given melodic contour is reversed, we can call it an "inversion." Thus SRS can be inverted, creating RSR. If the inversion is started at a more distant scale tone, patterns like SRS MGM can emerge. If we alternate the original contour with different inversions from other scale tones we could get a line like SRS SNS SRS RSR SRS GRG SRS MGM, and if we follow that long sequence with its inversion we get SRS-SNS-SRS-RSR-SRS-GRG-SRS-MGM—MGM-MPM-MGM-GMG-MGM-RGR-MGM-SRS!

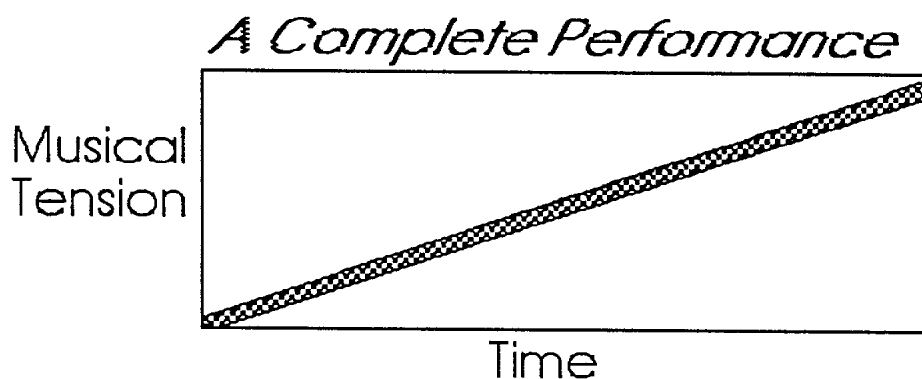
Insertion: Putting a new note or combination in the middle of a phrase, then doing the same with the resulting sequence: SRS, SRGRS, SRGMGRS, etc.

Tihai: Any melodic or rhythmic sequence can be repeated three times for emphasis; if you're well-prepared it will help you arrive at an important beat with a flourish.

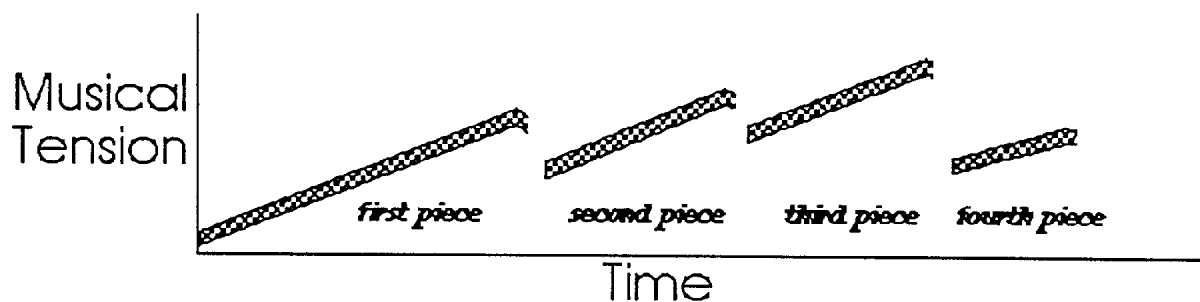
There are many more such processes; all of them can be used to generate new material during the course of improvisation. It's important to remember, though, that the most important place a musician uses these techniques consciously is during his or her practice. When it's time to perform, trying to be too methodical about any of them is a quick route to a boring concert.

THE BASIC SHAPE OF A PERFORMANCE

Virtually all performances of Hindustani music have the same basic "shape." They start slower and end faster, start lower and end higher, start with a restricted range and end with a wide range, start with introspection and end with extroversion. Musical tension and interest increase as the piece goes on.



In a concert, there might be several pieces, each with the same fundamental shape. The shape of an entire concert might be:



Note that each piece ends with a brief release of tension, and that the final item is short and comparatively relaxed. Such a piece would be a thumri or light melody which makes comparatively few demands on the listeners, allowing them to "sit back and take it easy."

Each musician strives to develop a personal style, based on individual preferences of techniques, concepts and aesthetic orientations. An artist looks for a teacher who embodies some of the same musical virtues: for example, Bhimsen Joshi was drawn to alap as a young man, and found his musical "source" in a vocalist from the Kirana style, an alap-based tradition. Of course, he heard and learned from others as well, which added to his training. Now the vocalists who have been influenced by Bhimsen combine elements of his style with those of their other influences. Knowledgeable listeners can spot a musician's influences easily.

The renowned singer Miya Ali Baksh Khan is quoted as making these comments during a vocal performance by the great artist Pandit Bhaskarbuwa Bakhale: "This is the gamak taan of Haddu Khan; this is reminiscent of Faiz Mohammad Khan's elaborative skill...; this is Rahimat Khan's phirat (virtuoso passages); this intricate taan reminds me of Mubarak Ali...Bhaskarbuwa's music is excellently developed in all respects!"

For young musicians, the goal is to develop a style of improvisation that both establishes them as individuals and re-affirms the link to their teachers and traditions.

RAMAKANT PARANJPE'S VERSION OF RAGA BRINDABANI SARANG.



This recording was made in a studio in Pune, India, by the Pune-based violinist Ramakant Paranjpe. He learned violin from his father and also with the sarangi player Mohammed Hussein Khan. The recording is intended specifically for this class; I asked Ramakant to play a "simple and mechanical version of the raga and the compositions." In other words, a formally correct performance without much inspiration — something that won't strike listeners with awe and amazement! Ramakant was amazed; nobody had ever made such a request of him before, and as he said later, "it is difficult to play this way."

Raga Brindabani Sarang is meant for performance in the middle of the day. It uses the notes S R M P N s in ascent, and s N P M R S in descent — thus there are six available scale tones, but the melody's flavor is pentatonic.

Ramakant begins with **alap**, then moves into the first composition or **gat**, in a ten-beat rhythm called **jhaptal**. The **gat** starts three beats before **sum**, and takes one cycle of the **tala**. He plays the **gat** several times before doing an improvisation in **alap** style over three cycles of the rhythm (**B**), then returning to the phrase of the **gat** which comes to **sum**; this is called the **mukhra** (literally, the "face" of the composition) (**A2**). From the **sum** he plays another **alap** style sequence (**C**), hinting at the flattened seventh before resolving and playing the **gat** all the way through. A third **alap** style passage (**D**) concludes on a shortened **mukhra** (**A5**) which leads back into the composition, and into a more rhythmic set of phrases going up to the octave (**E**) before coming to the **gat** in a variation (**A6**). We hear a series of **taan** passages at first resolving in the **mukhra**, then simply coming to **sum**. At (**I**) we hear another **taan** which leads to a short **mukhra** (**A10**), then a final sequence of improvisation: a **taan** coming to **sum** and a brief passage of slower melody (**J**). This brings us to the final **mukhra**, a **tihai** with minor variations, coming to **sum** with a relaxation of tension.

Then we move to a **gat** in the popular 16-beat rhythm called **teental**. Here the **mukhra** starts ten beats before the **sum**. Ramakant plays the **gat** several times, introduces a second line which briefly shows the lower register, comes back to the **gat**, and then plays a piece of composed material leading to the upper octave (this section, common in vocal and instrumental music, is called **antara**). This section has a closing line bringing us back to the first section (called **asthai**). The **gat** is repeated several times before we hear a **taan** 6 beats long (12 8th notes), then the **mukhra** leading up to **sum**, where another short **taan** begins. Gradually the **taans** grow longer until at letter **J** we hear a long **taan** of 24 beats (48 8th notes), leading to another repetition of the **gat**. We move to a restatement of the **antara**, with a rapid **taan** in triple time that brings us to an **alap**-like set of improvisations in the higher register, flowing evenly over almost 4 cycles before restating the **antara** again. We hear this melody interspersed with **taans**, gradually building tension before returning at **A16**.

A set of held notes prepares us for a long **taan** (at **O**), the **gat** again, and the beginning of **jhala** - type **taan** sequences, with reiterated pitches, at **P**. These lines continue through **A21** (where the **gat** returns) and then again return at **Q**, with a **palta** - based **jhala** structure returning to the **gat** at **a24**. Finally we hear another set of **taans** before the original theme, phrased as a **tihai**, climaxes on the **sum** and fades out with a few phrases of **alap**.

PARANSTPE: VIOLIN ALAP IN RAGA BRINDABANI SARANG

A Tonic & seventh - introductory statement; descent to the lower
 fifth, return to the tonic; **B** introducing the second, hinting at the fourth;
 heavy hinting at the fourth, but never staying too long;
 finally moving to the fifth and flattened seventh (C#); heavy hinting at the flattened seventh;
 return to the tonic; **E** emphasizing the ascending seventh
 (C#) and upper tonic; dropping to the fifth; moving upwards to the second, hinting
 at high fourth, drop to the fifth; re-emphasizing the middle register; ascending & descending
 line to the second; final re-emphasis of the tonic & seventh
 TO SHAPTAAL

PARANSTPE: VIOLIN GAT IN SHAPTAAL

A MEDIUM-TEMPO COMPOSITION
B COMPOSITION
C "MUKHRA"
A2 "MUKHRA"
A3 "MUKHRA"
A4 "MUKHRA"
D "MUKHRA"
A5 "MUKHRA"
E SHORT "MUKHRA" COMPOSITION "MUKHRA"

PARANJPE: VIOLIN GAT IN TINTAAL

Musical score for Paranpe: Violin Gat in Tintaal, measures 1-18. The score is written on a single staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The tempo is marked 'TANTAAL'. The score is divided into sections by dashed lines:

- Measures 1-2: Section A1, marked 'COMPOSITION - "ASTHAI"'. Measure 1 starts with a circled '0'.
- Measures 3-4: Section B, marked 'COMPOSITION - "ASTHAI"'. Measure 3 starts with a circled '1'.
- Measures 5-6: Section A1, marked 'COMPOSITION - "ASTHAI"'. Measure 5 starts with a circled '2'.
- Measures 7-8: Section C, marked 'COMPOSITION - "ASTHAI"'. Measure 7 starts with a circled '3'.
- Measures 9-10: Section D, marked 'COMPOSITION - "ASTHAI"'. Measure 9 starts with a circled '4'.
- Measures 11-12: Section A1, marked 'COMPOSITION - "ASTHAI"'. Measure 11 starts with a circled '5'.
- Measures 13-14: Section A1, marked 'COMPOSITION - "ASTHAI"'. Measure 13 starts with a circled '6'.
- Measures 15-16: Section A1, marked 'COMPOSITION - "ASTHAI"'. Measure 15 starts with a circled '7'.
- Measures 17-18: Section A1, marked 'COMPOSITION - "ASTHAI"'. Measure 17 starts with a circled '8'.

Musical score for Paranpe: Violin Gat in Tintaal, measures 19-43. The score continues on a single staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The tempo is marked 'TANTAAL'. The score is divided into sections by dashed lines:

- Measures 19-20: Section A6, marked 'MUKHRA'. Measure 19 starts with a circled '9'.
- Measures 21-22: Section F, marked 'MUKHRA'. Measure 21 starts with a circled '10'.
- Measures 23-24: Section G, marked 'MUKHRA'. Measure 23 starts with a circled '11'.
- Measures 25-26: Section H, marked 'MUKHRA'. Measure 25 starts with a circled '12'.
- Measures 27-28: Section A9, marked 'MUKHRA'. Measure 27 starts with a circled '13'.
- Measures 29-30: Section I, marked 'MUKHRA'. Measure 29 starts with a circled '14'.
- Measures 31-32: Section I, marked 'MUKHRA'. Measure 31 starts with a circled '15'.
- Measures 33-34: Section A10, marked 'MUKHRA'. Measure 33 starts with a circled '16'.
- Measures 35-36: Section I, marked 'MUKHRA'. Measure 35 starts with a circled '17'.
- Measures 37-38: Section A11, marked 'MUKHRA'. Measure 37 starts with a circled '18'.
- Measures 39-40: Section A12, marked 'MUKHRA'. Measure 39 starts with a circled '19'.
- Measures 41-42: Section A13, marked 'MUKHRA'. Measure 41 starts with a circled '20'.
- Measure 43: Section A13, marked 'MUKHRA'. Measure 43 starts with a circled '21'.

ALAP

A

S — sN — i — sN — sN — n — s;
 NS — N — P — P — NP — sN — N — S — iS;

B

iS — iR — R — iR — iS — N — sN — S — iS;
 NS — iR — MR — MR — MR — iS — N — sN — sR — S — i;

C

NS — iR — NP — NP —, MN — P —,

D

MP — NP — NP — N — R — R — R — MP — NP — NP — MR — sR — sN — sN — sR — S —

E

NS — NP — N — sN — N — S — sS —, sS — N — NP —,
 MP — SR — R — iR — iS — N — sN — S — NP —

F

MP — NS — sN — NP —, MP — MR —, RMP — NP — MR — sN — sN — sR — iR — S —

Mukhra in Jhaptal: **A** | P — MR — RS |

1. | NR — — | M — R — R — | MM — MP — | P — MR — RS |

2. | sNR — — | M — R — R — | MM — MP — | P — MR — RS |

A1

3. | NR — — | M — R — R — | MM — MP — | P — MR — RS |

B

4. | MR — — | sN — — — | sN — S — | NS — — — |

5. | PN — SR — | — R — — | NS — RM — | MR — — — |

A2

6. | M — R — | N — N — SN — | R — S — | P — MR — RS — |

C

7. | MR — — | MR — S — — | NSRM — R — | M — P — — |

8. | M — N — P — | — M — P — MPNP — | MR — — — | RMPN — M — N — P — |

A3

9. | M — P — MR — | MR — M — P — MR — | MR — NS — | P — MR — RS — |

A4

10. | MR — — | M — R — R — | MM — MP — | P — MR — RS — |

D

11. | NR — — | N — S — — | NSRM — P — | — — M — N — |

12. | P — — | — P — — | — MP — N — | — S — NS — |

13. | PN — P — | MR — MPNP — MR — | — RMPN — M — N — NP — MR — |

Composition in Teental:

A6

14. | MR- R- | M- R- MP- | MR- R- | NS- PM- RS- |

15. | R- R- | M- R- R- | MM- MP- | P- MR- RS- |

B

16. | MR- - | - RS- S- | -RM PN- | - SN- SN- |

17. | S- - | S- NR- S- | NSRM R- | RR- RR- MR- NSNSN- |

A6

18. | SR- S- | NS- NP- MPNS | NP- MR- | P- MR- RS- |

19. | MR- R- | M- RR- R- M- | PN- MP- | P- MR- RS- |

A7

20. | MR- - | NSRS RMRM PMPN | PNSN PMRS | P- MR- RS- |

A8

21. | MR- - | PNSN SRSN SRMR | MPNP MRSR | P- MR- RS- |

H

22. | MR- - | NSRMRMRS RMPN | PNPMPNSR | SNPM RSNS RSNS |

A9

23. | MR- MR- | M- R- R- | MM- MP- | P- MR- RS- |

A10

24. | MR- - | RMPN PNPMP RSNS | RMPN SRSN | PMRS PM- RS- |

J

25. | MR- R- | - RMPN SRSN | SRMR SNR | SNP MRS- MRSN |

A11

26. | MR- - | M- MM- P- | MPNP MRS- | P- MR- RS- |

A13

27. | MR- R- | P- MR- RS- | MR- RM- | P- MR- RS- || MR- - S- -

A

| - - - - | - - - - | NS | RMRRS | NSRRM |

A1

1. | P- - - | MR | S- - - | NS | RMRRS | NSRRM |

A2

2. | P- - - | MR | S- - - | NS | RMRRS | NSRRM |

B

3. | P- - - | MR | S- - - | NS | NP- - | NSR - - |

A3

4. | RM PN PM RS | NS RS NS | RMRRS | NSRRM |

A4

5. | P- - - | MR | S- - - | NS | RMRRS | NSRRM |

A5

6. | P- - - | M | RS - - - | NS | RMRRS | NSRRM |

C

7. | P- - - | P | M NP - - - | - MM- MM | PPNN |

C1

8. | S- - - | S | NRS - - - | - MM- MM | PPNN |

D

9. | S- - - | S | NRS - - - | NSRMRS | NSNP |

A6

10. | MP NP MP MR | S- - - | NS | RMRRS | NSRRM |

A7

11. | P- - - | MR | S- - - | NS | RMRRS | NSRRM |

A8

12. | P- - - | MR | S- - - | NS | RMRRS | NSRRM |

B

A9

13. | NS RM PN SN | PM RS N | RMRRS | NSRRM |

A22

46. | P — M R | S — N S | R M R S | N S R M |

A23

47. | P — M R | S — N S | R M R S | N S R M |

Q

48. | P — P — | P — P — | R M P P P P | M P N N N N N N |

A24

49. | P N N N | P N N N | M P P M R S S | R M R S | N S R M |

R

A25

50. | S R M P N N | P N | P M R M R S N S | R M R S | N S R M |

S

51. | N S R M R M R S | R M P N P N | P N S R S R N S | R R M M R M R S |

A26

52. | N S R M R S P N | P N P M R S N S | R M R S | N S R M |

A27

53. | P — M R | S — N S | R M R S | N S R M |

T

54. | P — M R | S — S — | S S N P M P N N | P M R S N S R M |

A28

55. | R M P N S N P | M R S N S | R M R S | N S R M |

A29

56. | P — M R | S — N S | R M R S | N S N S |

57. | R M R S | N S N S | R M R S | N S R M |

P — , MR, RMR, SN, NS, PNP, PN, NS.