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Alaap in C minor

A look at the difficult encounters between Indian and Western classical music

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In 1971, at The Concert for Bangladesh at Madison Square Garden in New York, Pandit Ravi Shankar took the stage with Ustad Alla Rakha Khan. Minutes after they started playing, applause broke out. There was just one problem. Shankar and Alla Rakha had not yet begun their set; they were still tuning their instruments. “If you like our tuning so much,” Shankar told the crowd, “I hope you’ll enjoy the playing more.”

He was already a household name in the West by then, thanks in large part to his friendship with the Beatle George Harrison. But while the audience might have known who he was, it was clearly having trouble comprehending his music.

That incident certainly did not impede Shankar’s quest to blend Indian classical music with Western styles, nor did it prevent a slew of collaborations between Indian classical musicians and Western jazz, blues and pop musicians. However, it stands as a poignant, if slightly humorous, reminder that people listen to music differently, and it is challenging to introduce new sounds to ears that are not trained to hear them.

This challenge is most prominent when trying to blend Western classical with Indian classical music, for the two systems have fundamental differences. In Western classical music, the focus is on harmony and counterpoint, and on a structure that produces synergy between several instruments. Indian classical music (both Hindustani and Carnatic) is built on melody and rhythm, and much of the music is improvised—a soloist almost always carries the concert from beginning to end, as other instruments provide the backdrop.

Beyond this basic distinction, there are several other technical differences, including the dissimilar methods of tuning instruments. No wonder then that meetings between Indian and Western classical music are rare.

So, when you read that Zakir Hussain is composing a piece that he will play with the Symphony Orchestra of India (SOI), the news leaps off the page. Hussain's new composition, *Peshkar*, commissioned by the SOI, will premiere in September at the National Centre for the Performing Arts (NCPA) in Mumbai. It is a single-movement work, divided into five sections.

Blending two distinct formal structures of music which have developed and formed over hundreds of years is never as easy as Qureshi makes it out to be. Imagine trying to fit the steps of a waltz into a Bharatanatyam performance. Another formal distinction: Western music's base is formed of scales made up of notes with distinct intervals (the difference between two notes in a scale)—imagine cro ssing a river on steps of stone, with each step a note. Indian classical music treats note intervals in a far more slippery manner, gliding over them, like water flowing under the stones.

To collaborate, it is essential to have a deep knowledge of both Indian and Western classical music, says L. Subramaniam, the acclaimed violinist and composer. Subramaniam learnt Carnatic music from his father, V. Lakshminarayana, but also studied Western classical as his parents wanted him to have an open mind.

In 1986, Yehudi Menuhin, the famous American violonist and conductor—who was a pioneer in making the two traditions meet when Shankar and he first collaborated in 1966—heard Subramaniam play and invited him to perform at his 70th birthday, in Germany. "Menuhin told the audience that he had never heard such power from the violin as he had in my performance," Subramaniam recalls.

He began collaborating with Menuhin and other Western classical musicians, including the American violinist Ruggiero Ricci—"one of the greatest violinists of the time"—and Jean-Pierre Louis Rampal, the Frenchman credited with making the flute popular again as a solo classical instrument in the 20th century. After writing pieces for smaller ensembles, Subramaniam ventured into writing orchestral pieces with Indian influences and has emerged as one of the most important figures in global fusion music.

"I use raga-based harmonies," Subramaniam explains. "I use the notes in a raga to create harmony. Ragas use intervals that are not used often in Western classical music. So when you create harmony using ragas, the combination of notes is surprising and pleasant, which is what attracts even Western listeners to my compositions."

As with any kind of collaboration, opinions abound on whether it is meaningful or merely a cosmetic superimposition of one form over the other. Subramaniam is wary of Indian musicians who have not studied Western music composing for orchestras

"When I compose for Western musicians, I study their range and consider how I can create new tonalities. Then I write the music for each instrument in the orchestra. I can tell them I want them to play the B sharp note instead of the B natural one. You can't do that if you don't know Western music," he says. Subramaniam will introduce four new orchestral pieces in the next six months, in different parts of the world.

His compositions have been a source of inspiration for Chitravina N. Ravikiran, the celebrated chitravina player. In 2000, Ravikiran was asked to perform with an orchestra at the Millennium Festival in the UK. "I thought the Western musicians would be quite rigid in their way of thinking. But they were surprisingly open to my ideas, and I made them play a raga."

Since then, Ravikiran has been working on a concept he calls "melharmony", which blends harmony with highly evolved melodic systems, such as ragas. It has become popular in the US, where it is even being taught in schools and colleges. "I take traditional Carnatic compositions and incorporate melharmony. Indian listeners can hear the raga, so it appeals to them, and at the same time Western listeners are introduced to a new sound but can relate to it because it has harmony," he says.

More than the technical differences in the way Indian and Western classical is played, Ravikiran says it is the tradition of listening that creates a divide. "When an Indian listener hears a short bit of a Beethoven or Mozart composition, they start relating it to a melodic tune. It gets reduced to this," he says, humming what sounds like the theme tune of a video game. "Similarly, Western listeners will find some of the combinations of notes in Indian music not to their liking."

There are others like Ravikiran who are experimenting.

There is more, however, than simply status and ticket sales at stake while bridging the chasm between Indian and Western classical. There is also a lot the two traditions can learn from each other. "The rigour required to actually write a Western composition definitely helps build character," says Ravikiran. "Also, the teamwork required in their tradition is something to admire." Western music in turn, he says, is attracted to many elements of Indian music. Most recently, some of the offbeat rhythms popular in Indian classical have become popular with Western composers.