

Global Echoes

BBC Melharmonic!

By Rupa Huq

It's a mixed bunch of music-lovers who've turned out for tonight's Philharmonic concert at the BBC in Manchester. Amongst the regular audience one might expect for the Philharmonic, a refreshing riot of colour is provided by a preponderance of lavish sarees and silks. The modal average age is also younger than the norm as a smattering of excited children have come out too. But then again this is no ordinary concert. The crowd in all their finery are here to witness a special event: it's the culmination of Global Echoes: the BBC Philharmonic's collaboration with the Bradford-based South Asian arts organisation Kala Sangam under the auspices of the Millenium Festival Commission. The result promises to be a night of surprises.

'It's entirely different from the standard class repetition. To an extent we're playing solo pieces and thinking on our toes; making it up as we go along,' BBC Philharmonic first violinist Fran Pye tells us backstage just before the concert that marks the end of a tour that's encompassed London, Bradford and Newcastle. 'It was nerve-racking at first but then you start getting into it. I'm really enjoying it.' Tonight's big name, Ravikiran, a soloist of worldwide repute over from India for the occasion too mentions the element of unpredictability as a positive strength. 'Even I don't what I'm going to play', he reveals. 'The beauty of carnatic music is its perfect blend of composition and improvisation. The Asian tradition is to improvise whereas most western classical styles are based on improvisation. In jazz you have improvisation. Carnatic has the best of both worlds.' Not only is Ravi - as he's more commonly known - using accepted styles but he's extending them further. 'The typical Indian style is melody-based. The western style is harmony based. What I've tried to do is blend melody and harmony. I'm calling it my new term: melharmony.'

Tonight Ravi plays the chitravina; a 21 stringed fretless Indian lute which produces a haunting and strangely affecting sound not entirely unlike that of the Hawaiian guitar. It is played horizontally by plucking the strings with a teflon cylinder and has been called the instrument closest to the human voice. The players between them span various traditions. Fran, Julian Gregory, and Peter Willmott provide two violins and bass guitar this evening. They may be members of the BBC Philharmonic but the three regularly experiment with jazz on the side. Joining them are two top Indian percussionists. Sukvinder Singh Namdhari is on tabla while Subash Chandran switches between claypot and human vocal percussion which proves to be a hugely expressive medium that's difficult to describe but if you can imagine vocal gymnastics you're getting close. The resulting combination of jazz, classical and Carnatic (Indian classical) music all shoved in the musical blender at high speed is a sound that's hotter than vindaloo and cooler than lassi.

Surely there must have been various musical differences between the two 'camps'? 'Where we have 4 x 4 = 16 bars, they add odd rhythms together but the sum of those rhythms is exactly the same as the bars we use,' explains Julian. 'They have no microtones. They don't play in the cracks.'

So has this experiment been a harmonious meeting of musical minds or an uncomfortable arranged marriage? Is it really about combining cultures or just watering them down? 'It's fusing rather than imposing one on top of another', insists Julian. Certainly the sound is unlike other more vogueish musical movements such as Asian Underground which could be accused of veering towards such tendencies by co-opting

the odd tablas and flutes as exotic trimmings cut and pasted into essentially straightforward pop rhythms. "It's not the west using Indian musical instruments or vice versa. The KK Suite - the main thing we do is neither carnatic nor jazz. It is fresh," adds Julian. Ravi concurs 'With usual fusion concerts, two cultures meet and one goes 80 per cent of the way and the other 20 per cent. It may be [at best] 60/40. Here I've tried to establish a relationship where we meet 50/50. Only then will there be true fusion. Otherwise it's diffusion, confusion, transfusion.'

Among the pieces in tonight's show are new renditions of some old favourites: Fauvé's Pavane' familiar to most classical music buffs is given the chitravina and tabla treatment to stunning effect. The BBC Philharmonic meanwhile offer an interpretation of 'Shobhilu Saptaswara - Raga: Jaganmohini'. The piece is wryly introduced by Ravi as 'by Mozart - the Mozart of India that is'. This role-switching on these pieces underlines the mutual appreciation both sets of players have for each others' styles. The 'KK Suite' meanwhile, the specially composed piece around which tonight's concert revolves is the obvious highlight. Its lengthy form seems to effortlessly incorporate dreamy Indian passages with more focused tight rhythms from the western classical tradition and free-form jazz stylings in a sonic collage combined of many parts that still manages to be coherent in structure and competent in execution.

Are musical practices rubbing off then? Fran nods vigorously. What kind of stuff? 'Different rhythmic things', she elaborates. 'We've got things inbred into us. By listening to them [Kala Sangam] there's things we'll incorporate into our playing.' Ravi is also pleased with the results. 'I'm always happy to be in the UK and Europe', he tells us. 'It's the seat of western classical music'. Although this has been a one-off there is already talk of regularising the arrangement to move on to further performances and maybe even recording. It's all part of the plan for Ravi who's played extensively around the world in his crusading mission to spread the message of caranatic music. 'I want to make Indian composers as popular as Western classical composers', he says. He accepts that it'll be no mean feat. 'It's a combination of evolution and revolution', he declares.

Which brings us back to the audience. 'Normally when we look out at a classical audience they look really relaxed and peaceful whereas with this I've noticed peoples eyes very wide; rows and rows of saucer shaped eyes,' observes Julian. Fran agrees. 'I've seen bobbing heads. After a classical concert we go home whereas on this tour people have been coming up saying "fantastic"'. How does that feel? 'It's a real buzz,' she replies. Judging by the audience reaction after the end of tonight's show and the extent to which the melharmonious tones of 'KK Suite' is ringing in all of our ears for a considerable length of time afterwards, the feeling is mutual.

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