



Illusion to Resolution at the Overture Center for the Arts - Melharmony Blending Melody and Harmony

By Jonathan Gramling



Meenakshi Ganesan, the director of the Kalaanjali Indian Dance Company and (l-r) and Sangeet Samrat Chitravina N. Ravikiran, the creator of the Melharmony fusion of Indian and Western music.

found that I had a little bit of aptitude for that, he just continued the experiment. And the entire credit should really go to him because of the way that he would make the music so attractive. The main thing about Indian classical music is it is based on the scalar model kind of approach to music. No chords and harmony, it is more melodic. So that means lots of notes, lots of ragas. It's a combination of notes in different sequences. So not only is the scale embodied, the major and minor scale, there are actually even minor changes in the sequence that will make it a different mode altogether. So the rules are melodically very, very rigorous. So to be able to distinguish between very close cousins in terms of modes, the art is really having a fantastic teacher who can guide you on the distinctions between one and the other. And that is where my father's genius came into play. He would make such close sounding scales or modes, clearly distinct in their rendition. And he would tell me which is the key phrase to pick up, so that not only if he sang it, but also if any musician rendered it on any instrument, I would be able to recognize the particular mode and name it. That is a lot of intellectual information that he managed to communicate to me at the age of two. It's not just something accidental. He really developed a fantastic system purely on instinct and inspiration. And then it has been duplicated with varying degrees of success by so many other parents, gurus and musicians over the years from 1969 when he first developed. I was like an empty cup that he was filling up."

For most of his developmental years, through his teens, Ravikiran focused on mastering the Carnatic music of his native India. And then Ravikiran ventured off into the international musical world, secure in his own musical roots and ready to experiment with the all of the music that the world has to offer.

"My very first recording is an American pop album in 1987," Ravikiran said. "The recording took place in Switzerland. Some of the top artists of Indian music were also a part of the recording. I never saw the album. I just played and I don't know what happened to the album. The main musicians were Gary Wright [Wright hit it big in the U.S. with his Dream Weaver song in 1976.] and Rose Wright. I don't know much about them. But the Indian musicians on that album were very top level. The recording just happened and I played on it. Later on, I played on some serious recordings with people like Taj Mahal. I played with a lot of different people."

Ravikiran was in the United Kingdom in 2000 when the British sponsored 2,000 artistic events across the country to celebrate the millennium. Ravikiran was tapped to collaborate with the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra. And in an effort to blend Indian and Western classical music, he invented the concept of Melharmony, a blend of the melodies of Indian classical music with the harmonies of Western classical music.

"The idea is to take into consideration both the rules and aesthetics of both systems," Ravikiran emphasized. "It's a process. Even though when I am composing, I sometimes work with some classical conductors and composers and then we talk and we see what works. It's a continuous process. I sometimes also work with jazz musicians. Even last week, I had a big show with Glen Velez, the four-time Grammy award winner. I also work with those kinds of things. The idea of Melharmony is to create a very structured system, which can be played by not only musicians, but also by composers. Any composer in any part of the world should be able to play these notes. It's a very, very good system that tries to master these two roots and brings an aesthetic experience that is palatable to both Indian as well as Westerner."

The key to Melharmony compositions is to emphasize the similarities while reveling in their differences.

"My experience has been that if you keep the similarities between systems as your starting point rather than the differences, then you really have a very strong anchor," Ravikiran said. "And then you can actually show the divergence as a contrast, which can be appreciated better rather than focusing on the differences and then thinking it is a bad job before they really get started. And you don't know where they intersect. I have really seen as a musician my grounding in Carnatic music has given me a very broad spectrum melodically, so I am able to see far more similarities between Indian classical and Western classical than what may be apparent. And I think with these kinds of similarities, I am able to engage in serious dialogues and conversations with the Western classical musicians or with jazz artists or any musician in any part of

the world seriously speaking.”

Melharmony, this fusion of East and West, is not easy and requires the highest of talent to carry it out successfully.

“The main thing about fusion is that it has to have quality artists who invest time, energy and emotion into the collaboration,” Ravikiran said. “Only then people can meet half way. There is no point in doing a fusion where one person goes 80 percent of the way and the other person is sticking to their comfort zone in their own native system. So if you are really having good quality time — which is why I got more and more active as a composer — you can create the structure in the school of fusion to avoid confusion or defusion. You can make it more of an infusion of good ideas rather than just a profusion of mediocrity. The main thing is I like this whole concept of good collaboration.”

It is very fitting that Ravikiran composed the music for the joint production of Kalaanjali and Kanopy because as they are fusing Indian and Western dance concepts, Ravikiran is fusing Indian and Western classical music. The collaboration between Ravikiran and the dance companies started three years ago. And when Ravikiran consented to work with them, Meenakshi Ganesan was pleased.

While Ravikiran is the sole composer of the music, he is not composing in a vacuum.

“It is a huge challenge to fuse the music and the dance together,” Ravikiran said. “But it’s a very nice challenge because it’s nice to work with people like Meenakshi and the Kanopy artists. It is so nice to have a dialogue with them and then see how the spirit of the overall art can be communicated through both oral and visual experience. I was part of a spontaneous vision of the production thing and then I discussed with the dancers to see if it was fine with everyone. And then we all worked together and then see how the sequence can be what kind of storyline, how it can go and what is the logical progression from scene one to scene two. These kinds of things are discussed and then I compose the music spontaneously. Basically it is a process of several weeks. We keep contemplating and introspecting and then the inspiration flows. You have to let it cook for some time.”

When Kalaanjali and Kanopy did a joint production 10 years ago called The Balance of the Wheel, while they danced together, their styles were performed unaffected by the other. With Illusion to Resolution, Kalaanjali and Kanopy are fusing their styles together.

“Having this idea of “Illusion to Resolution” and his music, we have now explored and choreographed both of the different sides already,” Ganesan said. “So we are going to blend it all this weekend. Once we are done with blending, then we would have him watch the rehearsal whenever he is able to and then kind of shape it up from there. The main actual rehearsal is going to be on the day of the performance at the Overture Center. And then we are going to do the lighting and everything else. So the rehearsals have been going on for almost four months now. During the summer, we got the music from him. He’s been connecting from India and sending me bits and parts of music for each of the scenes and the concept as such and then we have been working individually. We’ve been getting together and choreographing together. And then we go back to our own companies and work on these similarities. And the most similar aspect of dance is the rhythm, the emotion and then the structure that Lisa, the co-director of Kanopy, and I have worked out. We meet every week. And then we are going to blend all of the 32 dancers this weekend.”

For the dancers and the audience, Illusion to Resolution will be a once-in-a-lifetime event.

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