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The triumph of classicism in 2015

- [Chitra Swaminathan](#)



Agam



Agan



Shafqat



: Members of FILTER COFFEE BAND



Chitravina Ravikiran



Tabla maestro Ustad Zakir Hussain

In the Twitter age of instant gratification and selfie moments, classical music has held its own and strides gracefully yet robustly into the New Year, says Chitra Swaminathan

When we asked the classical musician with rock-star appeal, Ustad Zakir Hussain, how he makes his music so provocative and thrilling, he laughed as he ran his fingers through his thinning but famous mop of curls. Picking up the tabla, he said, "This looks small but it has enough space to hold rhythm ideas that can last another century."

He was in Chennai recently for a concert, and was trying to make himself heard over the buzz of selfie-obsessed fans and autograph-hunters forming an impenetrable ring around him. In his characteristic nonchalant manner he said, “Call me what you want to, showman, global collaborator, modernist, cross-genre musician. But I know for sure I am a hard-core classicist. This ancient genre is so adaptable, flexible that composers and musicians are constantly inspired to either rework their music along its rules or simply walk down its well-treaded path.”

If you had even remotely begun to believe the doomsday prophets about the death of the classical, you should have been at The Music Academy last Sunday to dust your clapometer and prove them wrong. ‘Houseful’ boards seen usually at theatres playing Rajanikanth films would not have been out of place outside the auditorium. Inside, Sangita Kalanidhi Sanjay Subrahmanyam was not just flanked by his accompanists on stage but a crowd of rasikas who wanted to get up close and personal with their idol and his music.

The hall seemed to struggle for breath as extra chairs were laid out in every available nook and cranny for the huge turn-out that evening. Listeners queued up more than an hour before the concert. Whether eight or 80, everyone sat in rapt attention, even through the *thani*, till the last note was rendered.

Classical music now thrives in an eclectic and pluralist culture. It has taken its place gracefully in these times and is a significant part of the current choice. It has drawn liberally from varied reservoirs that reach far beyond sniffy cultural snobs. In fact, this shift has seen some classical musicians, including veterans such as mridangam ace Guru Karaikudi Mani and Umayalpuram Sivaraman, forming bands whose intent is to find unique resonances to *swaras* and *talas*. The latest entrant being, the Kanjira Quartet, who featured prominently in 2015’s Margazhi line-up.

The strength of the classical has ensured that progressive bands such as Agam and Filter Coffee work their repertoires around ragas and traditional compositions. In its October show in the city, Agam even shared stage with senior Carnatic vocalist Aruna Sairam and had the audience of appreciative elders and swinging youngsters literally eating out of its hand. Lead vocalist Harish casually walked around the stage, sometimes shaking a leg to intense *alapanas* and *swaraprastharas*. Agam’s playlist includes ‘Swans of Saraswati’, a contemporary rendition of a Thyagaraja composition in raga Hamsanadham and a Dhanashree tillana.

“Classical music is no longer the pompous art of the past,” says flautist Shriram Sampath of Filter Coffee, whose speciality is a thick brew of Hindustani and Carnatic notes. “Actually, classical is more progressive because rock and pop remain in status quo with their templated sound,” says Shriram, a *sishya* of Ronu Majumdar, who left the listeners asking for more at his Goethe-Institut gig last August.

Bollywood tunes may have been an easy way to scale up the musical charts but it is in *bandhish*, *tarana* and *thumri* that Shafqat Amanat Ali finds *sukoon* or solace. His live acts around the world, including the one in Chennai in November, and sell-out independent numbers have a rich classical flavour. “Though I have moved into an unfettered and innovative soundscape, my Patiala gharana roots will make its presence felt in whatever I do,” says the Lahore-born singer. He received the loudest cheers at his performance here, when he went on *swara* trips, embellishing even the Farida Khanum ghazal, ‘Aaj jaane ki zid na karo’ with *alaap* and *taans*.

When it was time to don his family’s famed musical mantle, Hidayat Khan, son of sitar maestro Ustad Vilayat Khan, felt stifled and protested vehemently. “I almost cut myself off from the world of classical music to find my identity,” says the sitarist, “but after straying for a while into unknown territories, I realised it’s classical that can lend credibility to my creative exercises. And I decided to get behind the sitar, as my late father would have wished.” At a concert in the Grand Chola last year, he came up with a repertoire that beautifully meshed with Utsav Lal’s inventive piano.

N. Ravikiran’s *chitravina*, which has consistently wowed world audiences, is a repository of chaste Carnatic notes. But in an unusual concert on November 8, Ravikiran teamed with the Wisconsin Chamber Orchestra to perform Muthuswami Dikshitar and Beethoven compositions. In fact, the city of Madison even declared a Melharmony (a term coined by Ravikiran) Day to celebrate the combination of the Carnatic and Western melodic structures.

The demise of classical music has been predicted for many years now, but if last year was any indication, we can confidently say that 2016 will continue to see classical musicians firmly cement their place in audience hearts.