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VOLUME 10 • ISSUE 6

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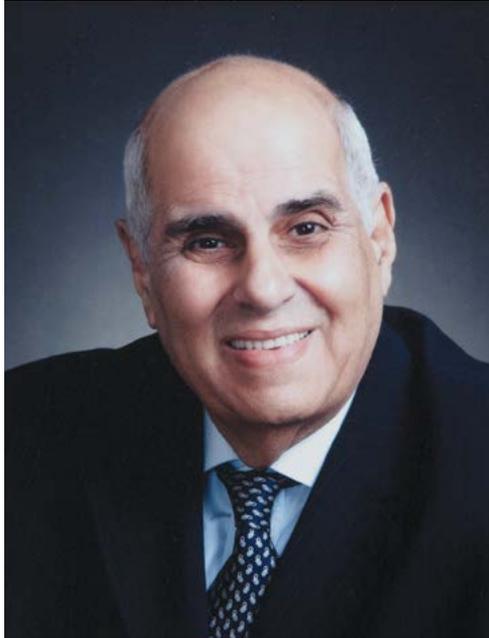


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Chairman's Note



The only certainty about the future of 2021 is that it is ambiguous. Today one hears that hospitals in Mumbai have several hundred empty beds for lack of patients. Excellent news indeed, but within the next half an hour you hear about several hundred new cases in another area. So how do we plan? And how expensive is the creation of safe places and proper protocols of health to avoid infections among artistes, technicians, the audiences, etc.? It is no better in all the advanced countries and Maharashtra, in fact, is improving faster than most states in India, as well as in the U.K.

Nevertheless, we have to plan ambitiously. We have the luxury of several fine-quality musicians in residence, and are proceeding with proper planning and conceptualising to fill our empty slots with quality fare. We are already in the process of doing so and hope to invite well-known artistes to accompany the SOI Chamber Orchestra on its steady path to enrich the music scene in Mumbai.

Our Indian music, dance and theatre departments are on an equally ambitious programme and all they need is the confidence to allow them reign in their creativity.

So please bear in mind, dear friends, that the NCPA is not standing still. It is planning to change the way people will listen to music, observe theatre, visit screened performances, and present the arts to you as soon as possible so that the clamour to return is satisfied at least a bit. And our attempts to bring our archives and future performances to your home digitally have already a dedicated team working at this important venture. One thing is for sure. Our effort will not flag nor our eternal optimism be dented.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "K. N. Suntook". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath.

Khushroo N. Suntook

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I loved the interview with Dan Brown, particularly the last question and answer. I have read practically all his books. But I was not aware of his musical talent, until I read the piece. — **M. Balachandran**

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We look forward to your feedback and suggestions. Please do drop us an email at onstage@ncpamumbai.com.



Reflections

The age of wisdom. By Anil Dharker

New Year celebrations, to borrow a phrase, are the triumph of hope over experience. We dance, we toot, we fling our arms in the air and wish each other Happy New Year overlooking in our cheerful enthusiasm one irrefutable fact: whatever the disposition of the year gone by and the one to come, you and I and everyone else is irrevocably, permanently and with one hundred per cent certainty, one year older. In a world which belongs to the young (as we are continuously told), that should be depressing, and yet we engage in boisterous festivity.

However, should those of us over 60 really mourn the passing of time? A recent study by the respected *New England Journal of Medicine* should be music to your ears if you are at the stage where people call you a senior citizen. The study found that the most productive phase for people is between 60 and 70 years of age. The second most productive is, an even bigger surprise, 70 to 80 years, and the third most is between 50 and 60 years. Apparently, we reach the peak of our potential at 60 and continue at a high level till 80. This, of course, makes a mockery of the mandated retirement age in most countries—in India, that's 60, in most European countries, it's 65, Russia makes it 60.5 (and 55.5 for women), in China it's 60 for men and 50 for women, Bulgaria and the Czech Republic, obviously following their own logic, retire people at 64.083 and 62.833 years respectively. Libya, of all countries, has the highest retirement age of 70, while Sri Lanka has the lowest at 55. In short, wherever you are, you are put to pasture just when you are rarin' to go.

Does creativity reduce as we grow older? Mozart, Chopin and Schubert all died in their 30s and yet produced masterpieces that enthrall us even today. That may be an argument for the creativity of youth, but let us remember that Mozart's best works (*The Magic Flute*, Clarinet Concerto, Symphonies 40 and 41 and *The Requiem*) were all composed towards the end of his life. The same goes for Schubert (Symphonies 8 and 9, his last three Piano Sonatas). We can say that even of



composers who lived longer: Beethoven died at 56, but it is his Ninth Symphony that is regarded as the greatest of them all. Similarly, Haydn, who lived to the ripe old age of 77, is remembered for his last few works, particularly Symphony No 92 and the Second Cello Concerto.

In 1963, British-American psychologist Raymond Cattell introduced the concept of 'fluid intelligence' and 'crystallised intelligence'. Fluid intelligence, the ability to solve new problems or make revolutionary discoveries, is highest when people are in their 20s and 30s: Einstein published four groundbreaking papers including his Theory of Relativity, at 26; Newton was 22 when he discovered Gravity and Stephen Hawking was 28 when he formulated his theory of Black Holes. Srinivasa Ramanujan lived to only 33 but made remarkable contributions to mathematical theory. The first three lived well past their 70s and continued to make substantial contributions to science till the end, but their path-breaking discoveries came at the height of their fluid intelligence. As we grow older, we move into the phase of crystallised intelligence, which includes heightened verbal reasoning and an accumulation of acquired knowledge and experience.

These concepts apply across all creative fields: the ones who come up with radical new ideas (defined as 'they don't know what they don't know') are alarmingly young: Orson Welles was just 26 when he made *Citizen Kane*, Pablo Picasso moved

to Cubism at 28 and Sylvia Plath was only 31 when she stuck her head in the oven, but had already published her two works of seminal poetry. On the other hand, Virginia Woolf, Jackson Pollock, Paul Cézanne and Alfred Hitchcock did their best work in their later years.

For some reason, which science must really investigate, conductors live really long, so they are prime 'specimens' to study how the human brain changes with age. Zubin Mehta became Music Director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic at the age of 26 when he was likened to 'Prospero at the centre of the storm, summoning forth thunder and lightning.' Would it not be odd if at 84, he continued to be just as exuberant and dynamic? Think of Lorin Maazel, child prodigy, when he debuted at eight. Would we not expect him to grow musically as he grew older, and wouldn't it be strange if a lifetime teeming with experiences changed nothing in the way he felt music? Could Toscanini, who lived to be 90, and had premiered *La bohème* and *Turandot*, not see Verdi's music differently in his old age? Of course they all did, each of them changing in their own individual ways to bring a mature vision into their later work.

So I end, happily contradicting myself. Youth is good; without its flashes of brilliance, the world would be a poorer place. But youth is only a stepping stone to the age of being slow and wise. So if we throw our hats in the air to celebrate the passing of yet another year, it's okay, it's okay.

In Conversation

The first in a series of talks with renowned artistes presented digitally by the NCPA saw Zakir Hussain and Zane Dalal discuss the convergence and divergence of Indian and Western classical music traditions, and the power of art to unify and overcome hardships.

When two artistes deeply passionate about their art forms engage in a conversation, the whole turns out to be stimulatingly greater than the sum of the parts. This has been the driving force behind such discussions regularly organised by the NCPA and enthusiastically attended by the audience. In Conversation, a series of talks with renowned artistes across genres presented on a digital platform by the NCPA, takes off from this idea. On 15th December 2020, pre-eminent tabla virtuoso Zakir Hussain and Associate Music Director of the Symphony Orchestra of India (SOI), Zane Dalal, engaged in the first discussion under the series, from their respective homes in California, speaking through a digital platform and responding to the questions of an audience based in India. The conversation was presented in association with the Julius Bär Group, the 130-year-old, prestigious Swiss bank, which is the largest foreign private wealth management firm in India.

The acclaimed musicians share a long-standing relationship with the NCPA. In fact, Hussain's association with the organisation goes back to the day of its inception when he performed with his father and tabla legend Allarakha and sitar virtuoso Ravi Shankar. In 2019, when the NCPA celebrated its golden jubilee with the multi-genre, three-day ADD ART Festival, Hussain presented a tribute concert to Allarakha as part of his birth centenary year—a fitting way to commemorate the two milestones. Dalal joined the SOI in 2006, in the year it was founded by Chairman of the NCPA, Mr. Khushroo N. Suntook, and renowned violin virtuoso Marat Bisengaliev. In 2015, Dalal conducted the world premiere of a new tabla concerto, *Peshkar*, composed by Hussain, commissioned by the SOI, in Mumbai and on tour in Switzerland. He led the London premiere of *Peshkar* with the BBC Concert Orchestra at Royal Festival Hall. Having worked together numerous times in India and across the



world—the SOI has performed three of Hussain's compositions—they spoke about diverse subjects rooted in the conditions artistes find themselves in today, in their signature candour and camaraderie.

The conversation began with Hussain paying his respects to distinguished dancer and choreographer Astad Deboo, who passed away last month. It then veered towards the pulse of Hindustani music today given what it is going through. “The Western tradition needs its audience but to a lesser extent than the Hindustani musician who during the performance is connected to the listeners in a visceral way,” Dalal pointed out. Hussain spoke of the void he felt in the initial phase of the lockdown that made way for a revelation. “I realised this is so close to *chilla*, a 40-day ritual

“The lockdown has been like *chilla*, a 40-day ritual that most Indian classical musicians go through where they go into seclusion to work out problems they may have come up against in their music”

that most Indian classical musicians go through where they go into seclusion to work out problems they may have come up against in their music. I found myself reminiscing about my time with my father when I was seven years old and he would wake me up at 3 am to teach me. I revisited those times and his words to find a new interpretation of what he was trying to tell me.” He, however, added, “I am thankful I had the time to do that. Indian musicians in India have a hard time. They live on a day-to-day basis, going out to teach or perform. Many of them don't have facilities that we have.”

Both Hussain and Dalal agreed that for the arts and organisations, such as the NCPA, to be able to emerge from this situation, support from the audience is of critical importance. Dalal underlined the history of plagues and how humanity has always emerged triumphant, going back to the way the world was. He also gave a pertinent example of the role of the arts in such trying periods of time. “When China overcame SARS in 2003, it experienced the biggest boom of opera house and symphonic hall building the world has ever seen,” he said. Hussain added, “Art and culture defines us. It announces to the world what we are all about. It is important that we support it, nurture it. Let us not forget that at some point, we will get into a concert hall. And when that happens we must buy our tickets and attend a concert. It is the only way to support and nurture the keepers of the arts.” ■

Grief, God and the Coronavirus

Funny, tragic and hopeful, *Sea Wall* in its filmed avatar speaks to our times, for at its core lies a story that teaches us to have faith, even through the worst of it all.

By Shayonnita Mallik

“The playwright isn’t telling us what to say. He is just challenging our perception and understanding. Which is what all great playwrights do—they don’t give you answers, they pose questions. And I love it!” That’s Bruce Guthrie, Head of Theatre & Film for the NCPA, and he is talking about *Sea Wall*, a play he is currently directing, featuring actor Jim Sarbh.

Written by British playwright Simon Stephens in 2008, *Sea Wall* is one of those plays that just sort of crawls into your skin and settles there. Funny, emotional, profound and brilliantly written, this 40-minute monologue reflects on grief, love, death, photography, and god.

Lights, camera, action

It is probably safe to say that 2020 has been bizarre. A year largely spent behind closed doors and windows, people around the world have struggled with grief, anxiety, isolation and faith. Faith in human connections stretched over digital threads, faith in governments and their programmes, faith in an ever-imminent vaccine, faith in a plausible end and of course, possible faith in a ‘higher power’ that shelters one through it all.

Talking to me over the phone during the rehearsals for the production, Guthrie says, “I think *Sea Wall* really speaks to these times. There are lot of things in the play that resonate very differently now given the situation we are in because the play talks about loss, how people deal with it and enduring

it.” Narrated by Alex (Jim Sarbh), most of *Sea Wall* is about the protagonist and his happy familial life with his wife, daughter and father-in-law. Enveloped in love, Alex’s narrative spans between home and holiday, sea-shores, cheese, wine and conversations till—it doesn’t. In a single, heartbreakingly beautiful sweep, *Sea Wall* drops, like the bed of the ocean, and you’re left aghast, agape, amazed. How then is this a play for our times?

Because of hope. Because in February 2020, the world descended in one fell swoop into strange times; and now as 2021 dawns, we rise together, trying to rebuild. “Even after everything that happens in the play, there is still a sense of hope in the character,” explains Guthrie. “And I love that. Because you think that ‘You know what? If people can go through this and come out the other end, then I can too.’ And there’s something really beautiful about that.”

A god-shaped doubt

In the play, Alex wonders about ‘a higher power’: Does God exist? Is he in the weird number that is pi? Is he ‘in the feeling of water, in the shape of a roll of land, in the way the light falls on a city in the beginning of an evening’? Is he faceless? Is he a *he*? Is he imaginary? The questions are endless.

Like most atheists, the closest he comes to desperately praying is in a hospital bathroom, with his wife across the hall on a bed in an operation theatre.

“*Sea Wall* really speaks to these times because there are a lot of things in it—about loss, how people deal with it and enduring it—that resonate very differently now, given the situation we are in”

Jim Sarbh as Alex in *Sea Wall*





Yet, eight years later, he suspends disbelief. And it is that transition, written by Stephens, directed by Guthrie, acted out by the excellent Sarbh, that makes *Sea Wall* a powerful watch. “I want to acknowledge something,” Alex says in the play. “I know it’s something that you will have noticed. There’s a hole running through the centre of my stomach. You must have all felt a bit awkward because you can probably see it. Even in this light. Mostly people choose not to talk about it. Some people tell me that they’re sorry but that, yes, they can see my hole. ‘What’s that, Alex?’ they say. ‘You appear to have a great big hole running right through the middle of you.’”

And how can we see the hole? Because, maybe we all have one within ourselves. And sometimes, thanks to a pandemic, thanks to a play, thanks to a language-less grief that expresses itself post-loss, we, hole-y beings come together to sit, smile, and fill up a bit of each other’s hurt.

A one-man play for all

After the premiere of the play at the NCPA ADD ART Festival in 2019, Sarbh and Guthrie met a man who came up to them and spoke about losing his mother. The play, he said, had helped him process a part of his repressed emotion. Another man—a

guy who was managing one of the food stalls at the festival—said *Sea Wall* was exactly his sister’s story and had been cathartic to watch.

Towards the end of yet another showing, Sarbh and Guthrie were approached by an elegantly dressed woman in her late 80s. Rather matter-of-factly, she spoke about how she had recently lost her husband, but had not been able to cry about it. It was *Sea Wall* that finally brought her close to tears. “It made her feel the loss,” says Guthrie, and I can hear the grateful smile in his voice. “And so, I gave her a hug and Jim gave her a hug.” He adds, with a certain nostalgia, “Those were times when we were still able to hug people.”

The last year, Guthrie comments, has been difficult for artistes everywhere. While films could shift to smaller screens, where could plays—ever so personal—go? Left without stage directions, Theatre wandered, artistes brooded but brewed ideas—ones they’re keen to bring out now. “It’s been difficult to set deadlines in the middle of the pandemic, because everything changes almost on a daily basis,” Guthrie says. “We have been talking about putting this together for a while now—almost three months. But there was this whole thing of ‘will-we, won’t-we?’ as the pandemic threw up a whole lot of things that would not usually be a problem. But, it is finally happening. Loads of people have come together to make it happen, and it is happening.”

In a single, heartbreakingly beautiful sweep, *Sea Wall* drops, like the bed of the ocean, and you’re left aghast, agape, amazed

Theatre without a stage

Making things happen, though, was just part of the process. As the pandemic continues to claim headlines, coming together to experience *theatre* seems difficult. This is why the NCPA has decided to film *Sea Wall* so that it can be streamed to viewers across the country.

Of course, this means the play will reach more people, but it also means giving up on so many elements of theatre that make it theatre—sitting an arm’s length away from your viewer, playing up to viewer reactions, post-play live audience interactions. And, Guthrie’s production is very conscious of that. “We are not shooting it as if it’s a movie. There is a pandemic on, without which our seats would be full of people. So, we’re shooting it with the empty seats in the background. This way the audience will always be conscious of the fact that we’re not trying to do a film. We are filming a play.”

The storyteller and the story

It was three years ago that Guthrie saw Stephens’s *Sea Wall* in London. Starring Andrew Scott, it was playing close to where he was and Guthrie walked in blind. “I knew nothing about the play,” he says. “I just experienced it. Usually, whenever I watch a play, because I work in theatre and because I’m a director, I end up breaking down the text, what the director’s done, the production—one just can’t help it. But with this, I was just completely captivated. I remember how I felt watching the play, but not

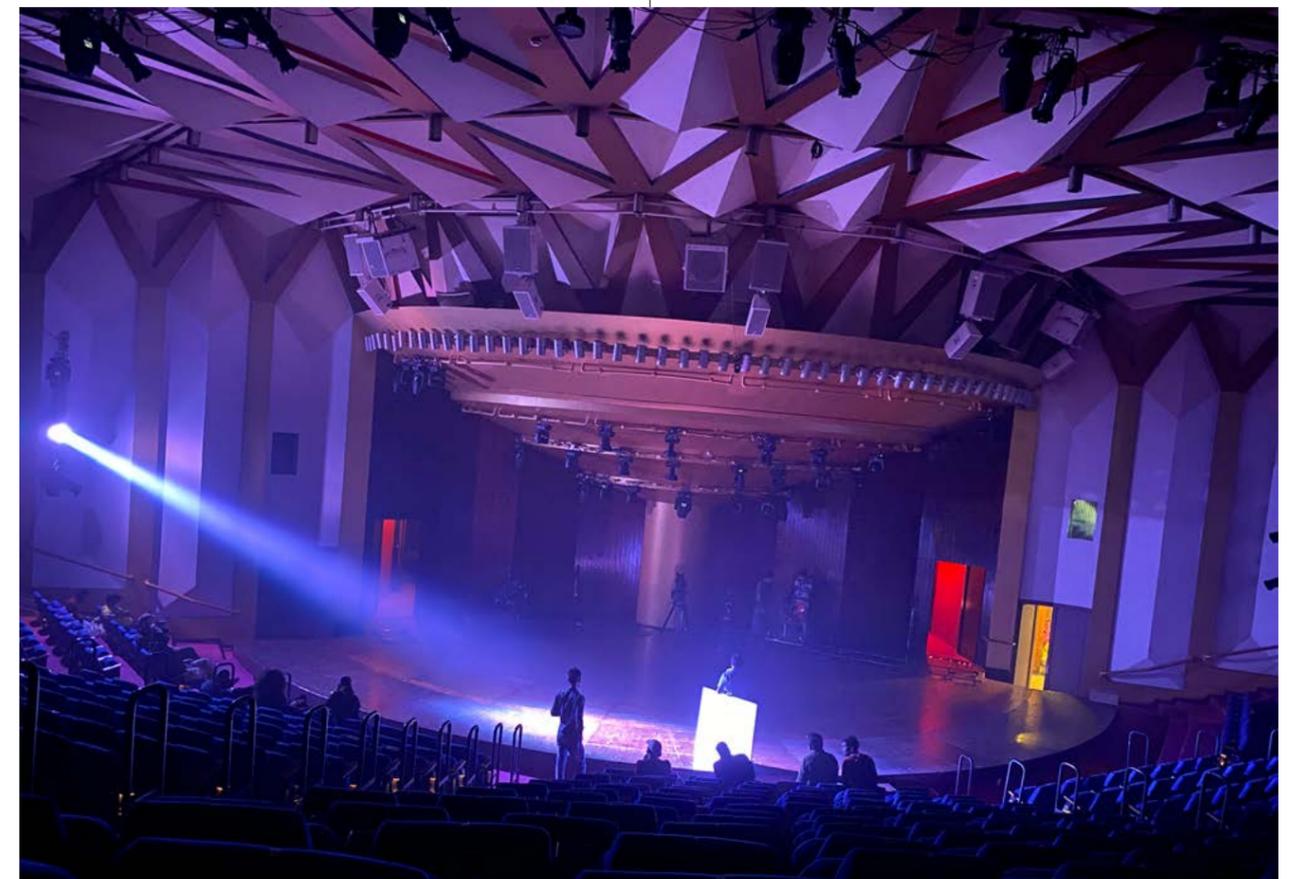
necessarily the play. Just like how people won’t always remember what you said or what you did, but they will always remember how you make them feel. And since then, I knew this was a play I had to explore.”

Having decided thus, Guthrie contacted Sarbh. The two had just finished working on *Constellations*, a love story of possibilities, set across multiple dimensions. Sarbh read the play, called Guthrie immediately and said the two words he wanted to hear.

“Jim, as an actor, brings something fresh and exciting to everything,” says Guthrie. “He is very playful, so he always gives you lots of options as a director. We’ll do one reading at the table and then we’ll just get up and start doing it. We’ll play with ideas, the journey, the acting. It’s a process. And you evolve. That is a joy as a director—when you have actors who give you great options that are completely based on serving the story and the character and not about what they can do.”

And it is this process that is important to Guthrie. Calling himself a text-based director, he tells me his job is to respond to what someone has written. “Just as musicians are there to serve a piece of music in a symphony, we are here to serve the text.”

Sticking as close to the original story, thus, Guthrie adds his flourishes. The result is a gorgeous piece of work—that inspires, engages, tickles and breaks your heart. A story of fear, hope and faith—in each other and perhaps something far above. ■





A female musician charms an antelope with a sitar in this miniature painting from 1825

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK, FRIENDS OF ASIAN ART, PURCHASE, MR. AND MRS. ANDREW SAUL GIFT, BY EXCHANGE, 2001

Sitar: Then and Now

Of the three Indian and Indian-origin artistes whose work has been nominated for the Grammys this year, two are sitar players. From Ravi Shankar's famous collaborations with George Harrison, Yehudi Menuhin and Philip Glass to its contemporary use in a popular Puerto Rican singer's EP, what is it that makes the sitar a much-loved instrument for global *jugalbandi*? In this brief history of the sitar, **Dr. Suvarnalata Rao** debunks myths related to its origin, and sheds light on how its ever-evolving structure allowed for versatility and a rich sound, making it a self-sufficient instrument.

Way back in 1834, Captain N.A. Willard in his well-known treatise on Hindustani music wrote: The sitar is very much admired, is used both by professional men and amateurs, and is really a very pleasing toned instrument in the hands of an expert performer.

One hundred and twenty-five years later, the sitar went on to be a phenomenon in the West as well, making it the first instrument from the Indian soil to make a mark on the global music scene. In the 1960s, after it was popularised by Ravi Shankar, the sitar was readily adapted by the Beatles and became a favourite of pop, rock and jazz bands. Since then, there has been no looking back. Today, after having

Legend has it that Amir Khusro (1253-1325 AD), the Sufi poet-musician, was the inventor of this long-necked lute. Several theories have also been proposed involving the Persian *sehtar*, ancient *tritantri-vina* and the Kashmiri folk instrument *setar* or *saitar* as prototypes. However, reliable oral and written sources indicate that the sitar appeared first in Delhi shortly before 1740 A.D., and scholars accept it as an invention of the 18th century by Khusro Khan, brother of the famous musician-composer, Sadarang.

Documentary evidence, including paintings and drawings, shows that multiple versions of the instrument were prevalent throughout the late 18th and 19th centuries. The structural aspects differed

Legend has it that Amir Khusro (1253-1325 AD) was the inventor of the sitar. However, scholars accept it as an invention of the 18th century by Khusro Khan, brother of the famous musician-composer, Sadarang.

survived hippie culture, the sitar is synonymous with not only Indian music but with Indian culture itself. Amongst Indian instruments, the sitar is perhaps the first to ably don a solo avatar, leaving aside its subservient role as an accompanying instrument. With its distinctive repertoire, today, sitar is at the centre stage of Hindustani music.

Origin and physical evolution

In striking contrast to the antiquity (of over three millennia) associated with the Indian music tradition, the sitar is a product of times not far back in history, the times that also shaped the course of other instruments like *sarod* and *tabla*, and genres such as *khayal* and *thumri*. It is indeed paradoxical that the early history of these genres and instruments including the sitar is riddled with controversies, although the instruments are less than 300 years old.

in terms of the number and tuning of strings, the material and number of frets, shape of the bridge and the number of resonators.

Available information points to an original nucleus of three strings including the main and supporting strings. The number eventually grew to 18/20 (including the sympathetic strings) but it seems that the tuning order of the three-stringed sitar as reported by Willard (1834) and Day (1891) seems to be the fundamental pattern of tuning that remains unchanged even today.

The presence of sympathetic strings is a special feature of the sitar. These strings run parallel to the main strings, and are tuned to the notes (*raga*) to be played on the main string. Even without being actually struck, the sympathetic strings vibrate due to the physical phenomenon of forced vibrations, and thus reinforce the volume and timbre of the sound produced on the main string.

To ensure a uniform tone quality for a note produced on any of the strings, either in position or deflected (to produce *meend* or legato phrases), a unique technique called *jawari* (also known as *jowari* or *jiwari*) was devised. This technique involves levelling of the bridge surface to achieve a parabolic curvature necessary to maintain a specific angle between each string and the bridge surface. With this, the sitar tone and its sustainability improved remarkably.

Stylistic evolution

It appears that the sitar was initially used as an accompaniment to dance and songs, especially for the Sufi genres of qawwali and ghazals played by amateurs for chamber and home entertainment. There is also some evidence to indicate its use in the bhajan ensemble. By the 1830s, however, the sitar was known for its solo performance. It has been

suggested that in the 18th century the art of playing the rudraveena was a well-guarded secret within the bounds of some families, especially the Seniyas or the descendants of the legendary singer Tansen, and in order to accommodate students from outside the family-fold, some of the techniques of playing this “highbrow” and “respectable” instrument were transferred onto the surbahar and sitar. On the surbahar, which is like a big sitar having a bass sound, maestros would teach slow movements of *alap* and the pulsating section of *jod*. On the other hand, compositions and elaborations were played on the sitar to the accompaniment of tabla. Besides the rudraveena, the stylistic features of the sitar have been evidently influenced by other instruments such as rabab (now extinct) and pakhavaj.

Over the years, as the capability of the sitar increased, especially with respect to producing

Modern sitar music reveals dramatically changed performance styles, albeit continuing to maintain a fine balance between tradition and innovation

An 18th-century sitar made from gourds, wood and other materials



A sitar with four strings. Patna, c1820

meends extending over three to five whole tones, it became a self-sufficient instrument even for playing the *alap*, *jod* and *jhala*, supplanting the surbahar that was hitherto solely used for this repertoire.

It is notable that a special instrumental repertoire and style came into practice in the context of the sitar and sarod. The forms, though influenced by the vocal music, were distinct from it. Sitar repertoire has also deeply influenced present-day solo performance of instruments such as the bansuri, violin, santoor, sarangi, etc.

The contemporary sitar

The region around Kolkata in West Bengal is well known for its fine-quality sitar. While the body is made of *tun* wood (Indian mahogany, a variety of red cedar), a dried pumpkin gourd is used as resonator, resulting in a more resonant and richer tone. The fretboard is a 90-cm long and 7.5-cm wide hollow and deeply concave tube covered with a thin piece of wood. Nearly 20 frets of German silver are secured on the fretboard by pieces of gut which pass underneath. This arrangement allows the frets to be moved on the fretboard to obtain the desired intervals of any scale.

There are about six to seven main metallic strings including those for the drone and rhythmic accompaniment, which are plucked with a metallic plectrum (*mizrab*). In addition, there are about 12 sympathetic strings which, as mentioned earlier, enhance the volume and tone of the instrument. The main strings and the sympathetic strings pass over separate bridges made of staghorn. Special curvature of the main bridge (*jawari*) ensures optimum contact with all the strings, even when the main string is deflected to produce certain embellishments.

The standard model for sitar performance in the 20th century seems to be a fine synthesis of *alap-jod-jhala* from the *dhrupad* tradition, and *khayal*-influenced compositions (*gats*) and elaborations. Recital begins with *alap* (slow-paced melodic elaboration), *jod* (melodic patterns with a definite pulse in a medium and fast tempo) and *jhala* (swift interplay of notes produced on the main string and the rhythm strings) in a given *raga*. This is followed by compositions in slow (*Masitkhani gat*) and medium/fast tempo (*Razakhani gat*), accompanied by the tabla. Sometimes, compositions (*dhun*) based on light music are also performed to conclude the recital.

During the past few decades several great contemporaries have introduced striking new developments in *gat* style and elaboration. As a result, modern sitar music reveals dramatically changed performance styles, albeit continuing to maintain a fine balance between tradition and innovation. At present, six distinct styles/schools (*gharana*) can be identified: Seniya, Jaipur-beenkar, Maihar, Indore, Vishnupur and Imdadkhani-Etawah.

Some illustrious representatives of these schools in the 20th century: Enayet Khan, Mushtaq Ali Khan, Vilayat Khan, Ravi Shankar, Nikhil Banerjee, Abdul Halim Jaffer Khan, Manilal Nag and others.

Notwithstanding some stray efforts made to produce electric or electronic sounds, the sitar still continues to thrive with its acoustically buzzing sound. In a short span of 300 years, it seems to have scaled great heights. Where will it go from here? Only time can tell.

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GREAT MUSIC IS GENDER-BLIND



British composer
Sally Beamish

ASHLEY COOMES

Historically, the works of many women composers did not quite make it into the canon. It is perhaps why the female sensibility continues to be viewed through a celebratory lens – like a rare event, so to say. We take a look at some of these prolific composers who did not get their due and speak to a contemporary composer and a musician to understand why.

By Beverly Pereira

The Experimental Theatre at the NCPA was packed to the hilt on every one of the four evenings of Con Brio 2019. While aware of the programme, many in attendance were not acquainted with some of the composers whose works were to be performed. Of course, most knew of Clara Schumann; the 10th edition of the festival, titled 'More Schumania', celebrated her exquisite compositional skills in the bicentennial year of her birth. While not as widely recognised as her husband Robert Schumann, Clara was the first woman to be regarded as an equal by her male counterparts – a rarity, really, in the 19th century, with its conspicuous gender constructs. Along with highlighting her quiet genius, Con Brio - The John Gomes Memorial Piano Competition presented the works of other prodigiously skilled women composers like Élisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre and Mélanie Bonis who were in fact enabled by Clara's success but were sadly under-represented during their time. According to Parvesh Java, pianist and festival director of Con Brio, many of the young performers too had not heard of some of these composers prior to the festival. "It was almost like an alternate reality: a classical music festival with works from the 11th to the 21st century with a totally different set of names," he says.

The second half of the programme on the day of the semi-final of the competition comprised a fitting showcase of Sally Beamish's *The Seafarer Trio*, a unique composition written by the contemporary British composer for narrator and piano trio. Needless to say, what unfurled over the course of those four evenings was beguilingly magical and, according to many, refreshing. But, why is it that the celebration of the female voice still feels like a rare and invigorating occurrence even today? Such showcases are certainly the need of the hour. Not only do they help rectify mistakes made in the past, but they also highlight the importance of diversity – in both programming and curriculum design.

NOW AND THEN

Beamish tells us in an email interview that Clara Schumann was the only woman composer she had ever heard of as a child despite the fact that she had never been exposed to her music at the time. "I decided she would be my role model, but there was little opportunity to hear her music," says Beamish, adding that she does not remember any women composers

being mentioned later at music college, too, where she completed a degree in the '70s that included music history. "I had opted to study viola rather than composition, as I didn't see composition as a possible career. I knew I would always compose, but assumed I would need to support myself by playing."

Beamish feels there are several factors that contribute to gender disparity in the field of composition today. Besides the lack of role models, confidence is another consideration. "Speaking personally, I know I am dogged by a lack of self-belief, and that this comes partly from my education. The 'great masters' that we learnt of were male. Even women composers who were well-known in their lifetime were later forgotten because music histories did not include them. A surprisingly low proportion of women come forward in competitions and calls for scores. This could come from a lack of confidence – or simply a lack of time. And perhaps women are less likely to want to compete."

Indeed, some of history's finest women composers ought to have become household names by now, even if they had not in their time. Despite the fact that



Child portrait of
Austrian composer
and pianist Maria
Anna Mozart
(1751-1829), older
sister of Wolfgang
Amadeus Mozart



French composer, conductor and teacher, Nadia Boulanger (1887-1979)

they possessed the prerequisite streak of genius and endured the rigours of a thorough music education, many women composers were not treated as equals by their male counterparts or even taken seriously by society. To be considered a woman composer in 18th- or 19th-century society was rare, and appreciation didn't come easy. "I think it is similar to gender disparity in wages in certain fields, such as film, even today. I imagine that when the men composed, it was their profession and hence their livelihood, so it carried a different weight than when the women did - it was more of a hobby, their homes did not run on the merit of their compositions," says Java.

WOMEN OF NOTE

Take Maria Anna Mozart, the older sister of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, whose birth anniversary falls this month*. Nicknamed Nannerl, she was widely known for her virtuosic piano skills in the 1760s as she toured European concert halls with her father when she was just 12. "It's very likely that some of Wolfgang Mozart's early works were actually composed by Nannerl. Their father knew it was much more lucrative to foster a male child genius than his older sister, who was also exceptionally gifted. Nannerl had to marry and she gave up composing," Beamish points out. And so, unlike her famous brother, this Mozart did not quite get her due.

Another exceptional composer who shared a similar trajectory is Fanny Hensel née Mendelssohn. She too was an older sibling to someone who would go on to become one of the most celebrated figures in the Western classical tradition. The sister of Felix Mendelssohn was already playing Bach preludes from

memory when she was 14 and went on to compose scores of pieces for the piano during her short lifetime. In the early half of the 19th century, societal conventions prevented her body of work from being heard; many of her works were even published under her brother's name.

Like Mendelssohn or Schumann, the pioneering composer and skilled pianist Amy Beach was also discouraged from making a career out of music. Recognised as a child prodigy capable of improvising counter-melody, she made her performance debut when she was 16. While she will always be remembered as the first American female composer of large-scale art music, not forgetting her "Gaelic" Symphony, she continues to be one of those oft-neglected composers whose works are gradually making it into concert halls. "As time progressed, it took a while for people to adjust to the fact that women could also be professionals. Beach was regarded as one, but I imagine people couldn't let go of the fact that she was a woman, and so her success was a bit muted. But she showed the world that she could play with the big boys and paved the way for future generations of women composers and performers," says Java.

The French composer and conductor Nadia Boulanger was said to have given up writing music based on the belief that she possessed no talent whatsoever when it came to composing. This, despite the fact that she achieved early honours at the Paris Conservatoire. She focussed on teaching, instead, to support her family after her father's death and inadvertently became one of history's most influential teachers with a diverse set of students including Phillip Glass, Vanraj Bhatia, Lalo

ERICH AUERBACH/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

“WOMEN COMPOSERS MAY BE WELL-KNOWN AND RESPECTED IN THEIR LIFETIME, BUT DO NOT THEN MAKE IT INTO THE CANON AND ARE NOT TAUGHT AS IMPORTANT FIGURES”

Schifrin, Astor Piazzolla and Quincy Jones. Besides teaching, she nurtured her career as a conductor and made a name for herself as the first woman to conduct orchestras like the New York Philharmonic and London's Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. Boulanger's work is not often performed, though her sister Lili, who died at 25, is better known as a composer. "In general, women have been much affected by their circumstances, and without the support, both artistic and financial, of a man, could not achieve performance or publication outside the drawing room," Beamish observes.

Germaine Tailleferre, one of Les Six, found it degrading to be branded a "woman composer" when the men in the influential French group of the 1920s were rightly called only composers. This, however, wasn't her first brush with gender disparity. Tailleferre is believed to have changed her last name embittered by her father's reluctance to her music studies.

Florence Price, the first African-American woman to have her music performed by a major symphony orchestra, is, as musicologist Douglas Shadle puts it, mentioned for this very identity more often than she is heard. The recent emergence of her Fourth Symphony has added another dimension to her rediscovery, but though her music was well received, it was not easy to get by on it. In a letter to Serge Koussevitzky, conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, she introduced herself thus: 'To begin with I have two handicaps - those of sex and race. I am a woman; and I have some Negro blood in my veins.'

THE WAY FORWARD

"As large-scale works have always defined the canon of 'great' composers, very few women are ever even mentioned in the context of 'great' music. Female composers may be well-known and respected in their lifetime, but do not then make it into the canon and are not taught as important figures," says Beamish. "We have several good recordings of Beethoven Sonatas, but there still doesn't exist even a single recording of several valuable works by women from the same time," adds Java. Beamish concurs that it is important that as much music as possible is made available in recordings.

Contemporary female composers have come a long way from beating the odds and having their talents doubted in the once all-male bastion of Western classical music. Kaija Saariaho is a glowing example. The Finnish composer with a distinctive musical style, personal voice and a 100-plus works to her credit, has



American composer and pianist Amy Beach (1867-1944)

been widely acclaimed for the great strides she has made in spectral music.

Yet, even as programming is on the way to becoming more inclusive and diverse, it is hard to look past the glaring prejudices that linger on - be it on music charts or in concert halls. While composers of today may not face the same set of struggles as their erstwhile counterparts, little has changed by way of perceptions in a society casually structured to favour the works of male musicians. "It's exciting to see how the musical landscape is shifting to include music by women, but sad to realise how much music has been lost, or never committed to paper in the first place, due to the assumption, as voiced by Clara Schumann: 'A woman must not desire to compose - there has never been one able to do it,'" says Beamish. "Music needs repeated hearings to be assimilated by its listeners. A single performance of a work will not necessarily grab its listeners, who may compare it unfavourably to music they know well, and which therefore they have come to love. And importantly, girls need role models."

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APIC/GETTY IMAGES

In the Groove and Spirit of Indo Jazz

On the surface, Indo jazz may sound like a strange amalgam of two decidedly different musical universes, but in reality it is a fascinating experiment with powerful results. **Anurag Tagat** talks to veteran musicians to discover how the genre is about experimentation, improvisation and spirituality.

If we consider the centuries that Indian classical music has thrived, it is only relatively recently that the form took hold in the rest of the world. Like different forms of music, Indian classical and jazz were separately finding shape through other cultures. Pioneering percussionist Trilok Gurtu, who recently released his album *God Is A Drummer*, points out that jazz took from Western classical and African rhythms and was further built upon by the big band sound that the Jewish community infused.

As jazz grew and created legendary experimentalists such as Miles Davis, Don Cherry, John Coltrane, Don Ellis and more in the 1960s, Indian music appeared on the scene in the U.S. and several musicians took cognisance not just due to its sonic nature, but also the spirituality that came along with it. Gurtu, who was trained in the tabla and took to drumming by the 1970s, says, “Our strength in India is the spiritual element of music. It’s not just entertainment. They said you can come very close to god with music.” Out in Britain, Indian composer and violinist John Mayer worked with saxophonist Joe Harriott and created a group quite simply called Indo Jazz Fusions in the mid-1960s. Composer, educator and sitarist Ashwin Batish offers an interesting analogy to explain the coming together of the two musical universes. “Jazz is like a little child, you see. So it finds comfort in the arms of Indian classical music,” he tells us from California.

“Our strength in India is the spiritual element of music. It’s not just entertainment,” says Indian percussionist Trilok Gurtu

THE PIONEERS

This brings us to an unmistakably formative figure in the history of Indo jazz—guitarist and composer John McLaughlin. A follower of Indian spiritual leader Sri Chinmoy, the mind behind jazz-fusion band Mahavishnu Orchestra was influential right from the early 1970s, even as he first formed a friendship with tabla virtuoso Zakir Hussain around that time. After Mahavishnu Orchestra released seminal albums like *The Inner Mounting Flame* in 1971 and *Birds of Fire* in 1973, McLaughlin formed Shakti with Indian classical musicians in 1974. It was a heavy-hitter line-up which featured Hussain, violinist L. Shankar, Vikku Vinayakram on ghatam and mridangam artiste Ramnad Raghavan.

McLaughlin, who had previously been a key player on seminal jazz albums such as Davis’s *Bitches Brew*, had now solely set his sights on enriching his spiritual side with help from India’s widely acclaimed musicians. Ranjit Barot, the Mumbai-based drummer who weaved in and out of multiple music communities and their chosen styles, worked with McLaughlin on the acclaimed, Grammy-nominated record *Floating Point* in 2008 and agrees that the spiritual aspect that draws musicians to Indo jazz is a strong force. The drummer says, “What happens is it ceases to have a name. It’s just very fluid and universal. It’s a bit like praying. It doesn’t matter where you pray, which temple, church, or mosque. The commonality

is the faith vested in that moment. Indian classical music and all forms of jazz have always co-existed harmoniously and beautifully.”

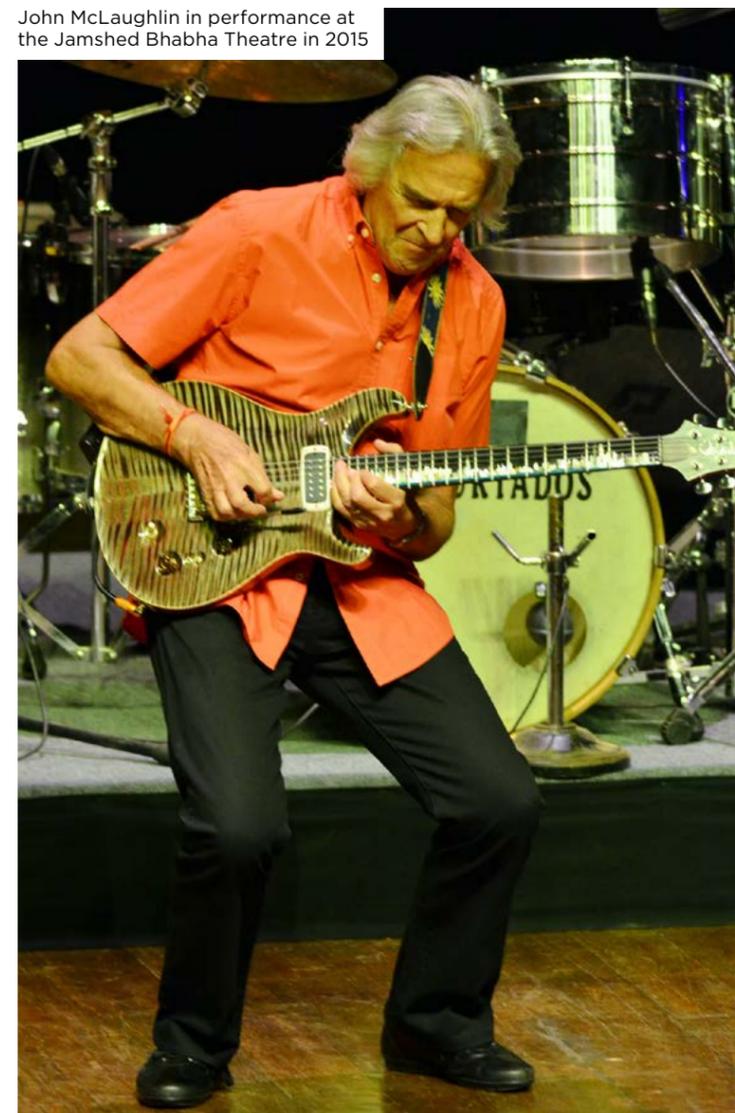
By the late 1970s and early 1980s, the world of music stood witness to the true power of the experimental style that was now being called Indo jazz. American musician Warren Sanders trained in Hindustani vocals under Bhimsen Joshi and formed a band called Antigravity, which included soprano saxophonist Phil Scarff. He later went on to form Natraj in 1987. Meanwhile, Indian virtuosos such as violinist L. Subramaniam teamed up with American artistes such as saxophonist Frank Morgan to create his 1979 album *Fantasy Without Limits*.

It was not just in America alone, with pianist and keyboardist Louiz Banks setting up the Jazz Yatra Sextett in 1980 with ace saxophonist Braz Gonsalves, later morphing into a group called Sangam. Barot, who worked extensively with Banks and was part of the Jazz Yatra Sextett, recalls, “Louiz was really up with the whole approach and showed a lot of people the way, the possibilities that existed with these two musical forms.” Soon enough, we saw trailblazing classical musicians—such as saxophonist Kadri Gopalnath on alto saxophone, mandolin exponent U. Srinivas and more—add to the Indo jazz canon from within the country, which furthered a wondrous cultural exchange across decades. In Kolkata, tabla artiste Subhen Chatterjee joined hands with the likes of jazz guitarist Amyt Datta to create an Indian jazz fusion group called Karma in 1985.

IMPROVISING IS IMPERATIVE

What was immediately evident to musicians who worked in this realm was the power of improvisation for both Indian classical and jazz music. Batish says, “Right now, I find jazz is in the same spot that Indian

John McLaughlin in performance at the Jamshed Bhabha Theatre in 2015



Ashwin Batish (right) with members of Sitar Power



Louiz Banks

Ranjit Barot



What was evident to musicians who worked in this realm was the power of improvisation for both Indian classical and jazz music

music was when it started to let loose and go into this expansion. I equate jazz to the classical music of America, in a sense." In 1986, Batish released *Sitar Power* and specifically promoted the song 'Bombay Boogie', which had the sitar at the centre, but went over rock and jazz arrangements.

Gurtu, born to classical vocalist Shobha Gurtu and having worked with McLaughlin, Pat Metheny, Don Cherry and Larry Coryell, says, "When I saw my mother and the musicians she worked with, I didn't know it was called improvisation. I was seven or eight years old, so how was I to know? Later I found out that the common thread is music, and specifically, improvisation."

Through the years, Gurtu's style became so lauded that he was voted the best percussionist by America's leading jazz authority, *DownBeat* magazine. The artiste emigrated to Germany from India after his stint with Cherry and he signals that when one seems to experiment and push boundaries, the pressure to stay consistent remains throughout. "When I won the *DownBeat* poll at a time it was very big, I had to deliver. You have to work and rehearse and you can't take it for granted," he says sternly.

The result is that Gurtu is still very much considered one of the game-changing musicians who added to



Trilok Gurtu

Indo jazz as well as Indian music on a wider scale. Barot agrees: "Gurtu understood the essence that exists within improvisational music in the Indian classical tradition and jazz. He is a very important part of the journey, very informed. I am a big fan of some of the early works he did."

A THRIVING GENRE

Barot added to the Indo jazz canon himself with his 2010 album *Bada Boom* and the drummer also namechecks guitarist Sanjay Divecha's album *Full Circle*, released in 2012. Batish, who currently teaches tabla and Indian music alongside his "raga jazz" performances in California, points to the next generation of Indo jazz musicians, like pianist Vijay Iyer in New York, who are furthering the craft.

In the new millennium, projects such as saxophonist-pianist George Brooks's Raga Bop Trio with Carnatic-style guitarist R. Prasanna, Hussain's collaboration with saxophonist Charles Lloyd and drummer Eric Harland spawned a live album called *Sangam*, released in 2006. The New York scene which spawned Iyer, also gave birth to a more riotous kind of Indo jazz with drummer and percussionist Sunny Jain's band Red Baraat that fuses energetic dhol rhythms, big band jazz and psychedelic rock.

Gurtu harks back to the spiritual aspect of Indian music that can be a key guiding force for Indo jazz. "Evolution is in you and how honest you are," he says. Barot adds, "The beautiful thing about music is that we can absorb it and bring it out in new ways. I urge more people to experiment and explore. Be fearless and I'm waiting to be surprised by whoever makes something new."



SPECIAL MENTION

Soli Sorabjee, one of the foremost patrons of jazz in India, discovered the genre by accident. At 18, he went to Rhythm House, the once iconic music shop in Kala Ghoda, Mumbai, to buy a record of Brahms's *Hungarian Dances* and upon listening to it at home, found that the record within the Brahms sleeve was actually of the Benny Goodman Trio playing 'Tiger Rag'. That's when he says he was 'bitten by the bug'. The effects of that happenstance have endured. Three years into his law practice, he bunked court to go to Karachi to watch Dizzy Gillespie perform. Later, as an eminent jurist, he was invited to attend an anniversary of the Magna Carta in England on the same day that Goodman was performing in New York. His choice, he has said, was based on 'pure logic'. "I figured the Magna Carta would stay. Benny, on the other hand..."

The former Attorney General of India, now 90, has loved and promoted his 'first love' for decades and has been instrumental in nurturing an audience for the genre. Jazz Yatra, India's first-ever jazz fest, which was inaugurated in 1978 in Bombay, has travelled across the country and brought masterful musicians like Sonny Rollins, Sam Getz, Max Roach, among others, to perform in India. "[During the festival] Groups from different countries who could not speak to each other in a common language have played in Bombay, Delhi, and also in Goa and Bangalore," he once wrote. He has seen the love for jazz among audiences rise and fall over the decades but for him, it has always been an abiding passion. To explain what jazz means, he once quoted jazz producer Willis Conover in one of his articles: Jazz is a language. It is people living in sound. Jazz is people talking, laughing, crying, building, painting, mathematicising, abstracting, extracting, giving to, taking from, making of. In other words, living.

HUMOROUS ASPECTS

As part of a series on artistes' reflections on dance productions they have presented at the NCPA, **Priyadarsini Govind** discusses the conception of her humour-infused production *Hasati* and how it was brought about by a long, fruitful relationship with the NCPA.

My first association with the NCPA was a performance I gave many years ago, during the early years of my dance career. I distinctly remember it because it was one of my first experiences dancing in Mumbai (then Bombay). It was an audience very different from what I was used to. The performance was made even more special for me by the presence of Mahalingam Pillai, who had come to watch the show.

The second time I came back to the NCPA was in 1986 with my guru, Kalanidhi Narayanan, and that remains one of my most cherished memories associated with the organisation. Kalanidhi Maami used to regularly visit the NCPA for workshops. This was my first time accompanying her and I remember staying with her at the guest house. It was an immersive week of *abhinaya*. I was fascinated by the diverse group that came to learn *abhinaya* and the sincere interest with which they received every moment of it.

That workshop has also stayed in my mind because of the professional way in which it was conducted. Every little detail was taken care of. I remember the care with which an artiste like Kalanidhi Maami, senior not just in stature but also in age, was looked after, and the effort made to provide all necessary facilities for the students. There was an atmosphere of complete immersion in the arts with the students attending classes all through the day, and later in the evenings they would go to the theatre to watch performances. The entire experience was enjoyable for both Kalanidhi Maami and the students. It was akin to being in a *gurukul*. Personally, it was my first experience of something of the kind. These workshops conducted several decades ago by the NCPA are, I am quite certain, the forerunners to the many immersive workshops and residencies that are commonplace today.

A haven for the arts

By bringing gurus like Kalanidhi Maami, the NCPA was creating rare opportunities of learning for all the artistes and students of Bharatanatyam living in Bombay, ensuring that they had access to some of the greatest gurus of our times. It was visionary work by the NCPA, even in those early years, to facilitate all-so-important access to resources and teachers. While the organisation has always done a stupendous job of presenting dance and the arts, it has never just rested with this. As a cultural institution committed to the preservation and propagation of India's artistic heritage, it has channelised a big part of its resources in creating a strong infrastructure for learning and education, which I believe is of utmost importance for the healthy growth and continuance of our art forms. And this, the NCPA has done regularly.

Three of the most important milestones in my career have been associated with the NCPA. The earliest of these was a collaborative performance with Bombay Jayashree, commissioned by the organisation and created especially for it. This was followed a few years later by a collaboration with T.M. Krishna. These have been very special and artistically enriching collaborations. The professionalism with which the NCPA arranged these performances, the attention to detail in all aspects of organisation and the thoroughness of the publicity campaign resulted in a fantastic audience turnout—what else could an artiste ask for?

First and foremost, every artiste feels the need to be appreciated. Appreciation brings about wide reception of their work with respect. The NCPA makes it a point to consistently ensure superior infrastructure, good facilities and provide the assurance of a good audience for each performance. In

Three of the most important milestones in my career have been associated with the NCPA and these have been very special and artistically enriching collaborations



India, there are few organisations and theatres capable of offering state-of-the-art facilities and performance infrastructure on a par with the NCPA. An organisation which makes it a habit to show their appreciation and respect for the artiste through their work, automatically assumes a special place in any artiste's heart.

Humour through Bharatanatyam

Most recently, I presented a full-length solo work titled *Hasati*, once again a concept suggested and commissioned by the NCPA for the *Mudra* Festival in 2019. To date, this has been one of the most artistically satisfying projects that I have worked on. I have always felt humour is an intrinsic part of life. The ability to look at oneself and things around you with humour is not only important, but insightful. Contrary to popular perception, *hasya rasa* has a strong presence in Indian poetry. Since the compositions that we perform in Bharatanatyam are mostly centred around *sringara* (love) or *bhakti* (devotion), there is often a misconception that Bharatanatyam only deals with serious and sombre matters. Yet, even matters of love and devotion are not without their due share of *hasya*, and this has been brought to life by many poets of the Indian pantheon. In the process of working on this project, it was a joy to explore this vast and unique variety of work available to us.

There is a fabulous song from a Tamil movie about humour and laughter performed by ace comedian N. S. Krishnan in which he, among other things, sings while laughing. It became an iconic song for people who are familiar with old Tamil cinema. So the moment I was told that the theme for that year's *Mudra* Festival was *hasya*, I knew I wanted to do something like that song. The composer Rajkumar Bharathi also writes lyrics, so I told him I wanted a song inspired by this particular Tamil song. What he then created became the first song in *Hasati*, about *sirrippu*, which means laughter, and different kinds of laughter.

We also included a piece that portrays a conversation between Krishna and Radha, which was already part of my repertoire since I had performed it first with T.M. Krishna. The conversation, the wittiness of the answers of the *gopi* and the word play in Sanskrit was wonderful. I had also spoken to a few friends who are



***Hasati*, commissioned by the NCPA for the *Mudra* Festival in 2019, has been one of the most artistically satisfying projects that I have worked on**

well versed in poetry, like R. K. Shriramkumar, the Carnatic music violinist, and asked them if they were familiar with compositions in which humour was predominant. Shriramkumar pointed out two that eventually became part of *Hasati*—the one with Ashwatthama and the other in which Parvati speaks to her two sons when Shiva consumes poison.

Finally, we chose compositions which we felt could be knit together to form a performance. We also made a conscious choice to make it multilingual. The idea was to show poetry from different parts of the country and from different time periods. The music for this production, composed by Bharathi, aptly complemented the lyrics, drawing out the *rasa* in the words with subtlety and delicacy. We worked on each and every piece for *Hasati* with great relish. This production was eventually also brought to the virtual platform through the NCPA@home broadcast series during the period of national lockdown.

Lockdown loyalty

Through this unprecedented and challenging year, the NCPA has restated its

commitment and duty to the world of Indian arts in an even more compelling way. At a time when art is thought of as a luxury, considered only second to many other 'essentials', the NCPA has been reinforcing the crucial importance of art in our lives through its continuing work during the pandemic. Having had to close its theatres to live performances and live audiences for the first time in its 50-year history, the prompt efficiency with which the NCPA took the performing arts into the homes of people through the NCPA@home series is commendable. This is also a reflection of the painstaking archival work that has been an ongoing part of the organisation's activities over all these decades. It has been swift to move learning activities to the virtual platform. It has most importantly recognised the need to offer support to the artiste community to promote their mental well-being through the pandemic. Through this kind of prompt readiness to respond to a calamity, it has once again displayed and reiterated its commitment to the arts. ■

New Avenues

The success of the first edition of Winter Fiesta, held online, has opened up a new world of possibilities of learning and teaching the performing arts.

By Ela Das

Every year, the NCPA hosts Summer Fiesta across the months of May, June and July, which includes arts and culture workshops for both children and adults. But with everything being different due to the pandemic, it had to be cancelled and then reimaged. “What we wanted to do was create a series of workshops online that were interactive and live. And, we wanted them to be a bit different from what’s already available, with an added value to it (unlike one-off workshops), hosted by top practitioners so that once the children completed their five-day course, they could leave with a certificate,” explains Bruce Guthrie, Head of Theatre & Film for the NCPA. And so, in November 2020, the first edition of Winter Fiesta was hosted by the NCPA, albeit with a twist—each workshop was conducted on Zoom with a member of the NCPA staff serving as a host, along with a subject expert conducting the class for children from the ages of three to 20.

PERFECTLY PLANNED

“Planning this initially was tough because learning these sorts of skills is all about being physically present in a room for an immersive experience. There’s always an element of not being able to control the environment of the student taking the lesson from home—they have their own things going on there in the background...we had to take this into consideration, and plan it down to the finest detail. And, since this was a different medium, we had to also figure out a way to give everyone the opportunity to speak, room for participation and to present their work,” says Guthrie. And, with a new way of teaching comes a different way of learning, which turned out to be quite interesting, with newer possibilities. Taking advantage of the Breakout Rooms feature



Props used for the Being Beethoven workshop



Bianca Mendonca conducts the Being Beethoven workshop

“With the success of the Winter Fiesta, we are now in the process of building a new education plan, where we will continue teaching online in addition to our physical classes at the NCPA”



The Hocus Pocus magic workshop in progress

on Zoom, kids were paired in groups to go off by themselves and work on something independently, such as a script or speech.

“My preference is to have classes in person, whenever it’s possible, because that’s always going to be the best way—but moving forward, we’ve realised that the ability to conduct workshops online allows us to reach an audience across the country and, even, across the globe. So even once we’re in safer times, we will resume physical classes but continue our online workshops as well. This opens doors to people who’ve never had an opportunity to experience learning at

the NCPA before. They can now get more involved and interact with us in a way that they never could. We never considered this before, and the possibilities are vast now,” says Guthrie.

For an innovative and successful Winter Fiesta, there was a lot of planning and research that began months before—that, too, remotely from home. “Luckily, we had a bank of phenomenal practitioners, who were going to lead the workshops. We talked to them about how they envisioned going about these lessons online—the more critical aspect we all found ourselves zeroing in on was the content, and from there we started to work out the key people who would plan and create it. Then, we started to find ways to execute it in an engaging way online. We also faced the challenge of training people from home. Even once our staff could start coming in in September, everyone had to be socially distanced, wearing masks at all times, and keeping every safety norm in mind. But despite all this, it was wonderful. The first day when the group of six people who were going to be hosts for the workshops were in the same building—they hadn’t seen each other for six months—there were tears in their eyes and lumps in their throats. The funny thing by the end of it was the people who could stay and work from home ended up getting jealous of the ones who could come in and see each other every day,” recalls Guthrie.

INNOVATION AND CREATIVITY

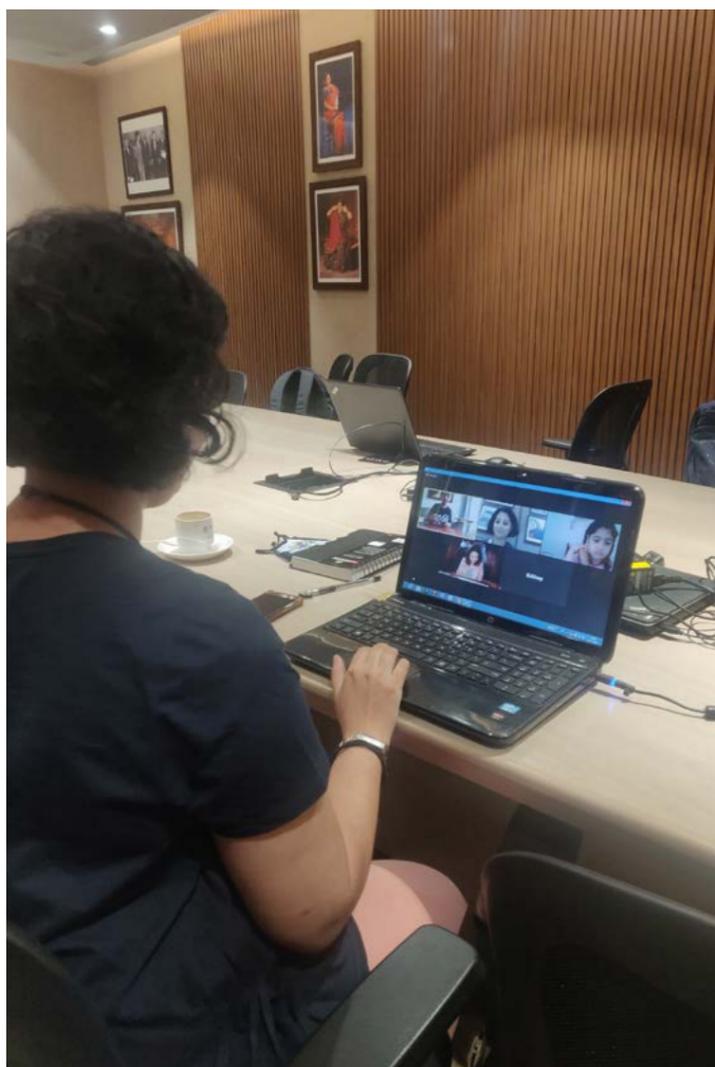
Bianca Mendonca, Marketing Manager, Western classical music, and a member of the Symphony Orchestra of India, designed a unique curriculum on classical music for children between the ages of five and ten. “Since May, we had started conducting trial music appreciation sessions online, and began to notice what worked and what didn’t. When most of the methods we could initially rely on stopped working, we had to think out of the box,” she explains. This led to the unique idea of teaching children music through the story of the *Three Little Pigs*, where every expert conducting the workshop wore masks in character and the students were suddenly able to see sounds in order to understand and learn about them. “The violin, for example, was for the mummy piggy and the saxophone was assigned to the big bad wolf—so when we huffed and puffed to blow the house down, we played with different sound volumes to teach musical dynamics. If the saxophone played too softly, the house wouldn’t blow down,” she fondly remembers. “The entire lesson for five days was written like a script for a play, with everything from text cues to spotlights planned. To keep younger minds engaged, you have no room for distractions or messing up. The slightest lag or pause, and you’ve lost their attention.”

For SOI musician Deon D’Souza, the entire fiesta was something he was initially wary of, but it soon taught him valuable lessons in teaching. “My perception of online learning and conducting has changed tremendously. While we were anxious about the whole thing, we noticed our students were very receptive to the change and didn’t complain even once. And, the level of creativity we saw from the children was astonishing, which was very rewarding for us. You definitely have to have a sense of humour when working with children, and a lot of patience. Luckily, my wife is a kindergarten teacher and gave me a handful of tips to help me along the way.”

“While we did have a few practitioners backing out initially, being apprehensive about conducting their classes online, we were overwhelmed with the number of people who were over excited and thrilled to work with us on the fiesta,” exclaims Binaifar Bhesania, Manager-Programme Coordinator. Rajeshri Shinde, Assistant Manager, Theatre & Film, looks back on promoting the entire programme as an important learning process. “We reached out to parents through diverse channels, from directly approaching schools to posting messages on mom groups on WhatsApp. I definitely noticed the need for exclusivity because there’s already so much available online. The moment you are presenting something on the internet, you’re competing with everything available there—from big productions on Netflix to free content on YouTube. But, just like the SOI, which took some time to grow and build and gain in popularity over the past decade, I feel our online programmes, too, will get their recognition soon.”

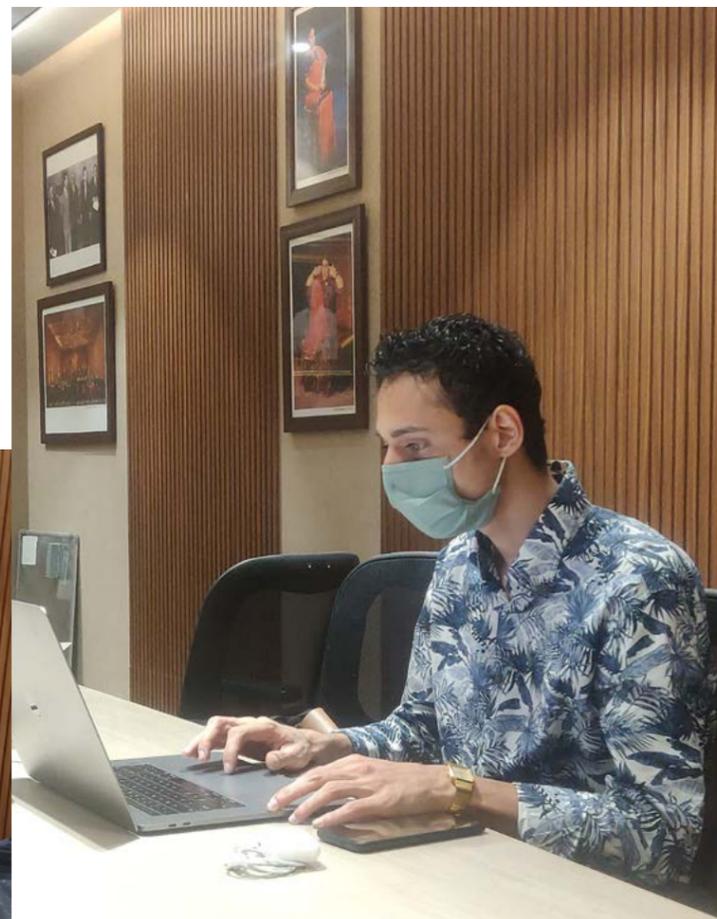


The Creative Writing workshop in progress



SPECIAL ENCOUNTERS

One of the highlights of the fiesta was a workshop with the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford-upon-Avon conducted by Michael Corbidge, Lucy Cullingford and Cathleen McCarron on navigating the Bard’s text in a unique way by using techniques and learning skills that focus on the use of voice, body and mind to tell stories and write one’s own text. “They’re considered the best in the world at what they do, and it was a real treat for anyone

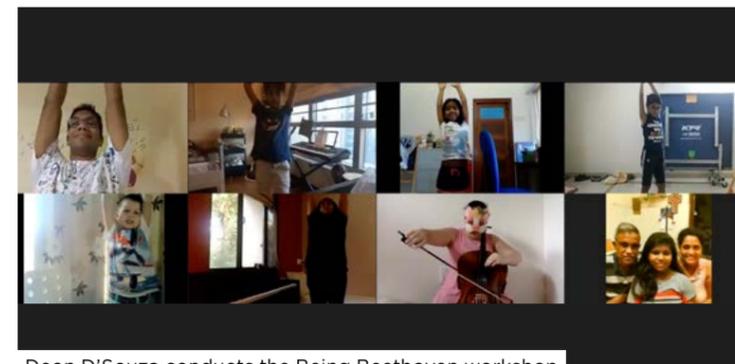


Maneck Billimoria hosts the Being Beethoven workshop

enthusiastic about Shakespeare’s work. For something that most people consider extremely cerebral and intellectual, this workshop turned out to be a lot of fun and one of the most entertaining. In the past, we could have never expected to host such a course from renowned international experts for our students, but now the possibilities are infinite. With the success of this, we’re now in the process of building a new education plan, where we will ideally be able to continue teaching online (in addition to our physical classes at the NCPA) and collaborate with educational institutions across the city and the country to include our lessons in their curriculum,” says Guthrie.

Later this year, an initiative with the National Theatre in London called Connect is going to be held with eight schools in Mumbai, where students will be given a script by an award-winning playwright to stage a play themselves, eventually to be performed in the Experimental Theatre at the NCPA. And the Summer Fiesta, too, might continue to be purely online or a mix of both physical and virtual classes.

One of the highlights of the fiesta was a workshop with the Royal Shakespeare Company on navigating the Bard’s text in a unique way



Deon D’Souza conducts the Being Beethoven workshop

Surabhi Shrivastava, Officer, Theatre & Film, shares her fondest memory of the Winter Fiesta in which a four-year-old girl was initially shy and reluctant to join the class, and would run off and sit in one corner. “Suddenly on day three, we saw a marked change in her. She started approaching the screen on her own and curiously prodded us to begin the class so she could start dancing.” She also remembers participants joining in from across the globe, one of whom was a student from California, who was enrolled by his grandfather who loved the NCPA when they lived in Mumbai. For Dhanya Nair, Deputy Manager-Online Communications, it was the two brothers who started each class with mock fights every day that left the team in peals of laughter. “I definitely noticed a big opportunity for having classes for siblings, especially with the feedback we received from parents. These programmes also serve as a great platform for families to bond together over a shared hobby or interest,” she says.

According to Guthrie, the success of the Winter Fiesta has expanded the scope of what is possible. “We will be planning this moving forward because it opens doors to everyone across the globe, not just the city of Mumbai. Our new way of thinking is to have more programmes online because we didn’t find it difficult to keep the kids engaged during the Winter Fiesta. We did have our moments when everyone went a little mad, but that is the point of it all because learning is supposed to be fun while being educative and informative,” he says. “I honestly think the next generation of creatives will not come from textbooks, they will come from some form of artistic background. And even though we are going through a pandemic, our responsibility to teach the arts does not end.”

A Daughter Remembers

In Soumitra Chatterjee's passing, the world has lost a theatre legend, cinema icon, great littérateur and a liberal, fearless voice. In an interview with *ON Stage*, **Poulami Basu** reflects on the special bond she shared with him as daughter and fellow theatre actor-director

By Snigdha Hasan



Snigdha Hasan (SH): What are your earliest memories of the realisation that you were born in a house that breathed theatre, cinema and literature?

Paulomi Basu (PB): While my brother and I were growing up, our house was always filled with laughter, music and a lot of *addas*—creative discussions on literature, the arts, paintings, sculptures, and of course, cinema and theatre. My father would have lots of friends over, mostly from the literary world. Poets like Shakti Chattopadhyay and Sunil Ganguly visited us. We would regularly go to plays by Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen and Tapan Sinha in the evening and if that meant, I had to do my homework later at night or wake up rather early the next day, so be it. We were exposed to different kinds of music—Western classical, Indian classical, Carnatic music. We were taken to watch all kinds of movies—serious ones of the Calcutta Film Society, Hollywood movies that were released in the city at that time and Bengali films. We were not exposed to mainstream Hindi movies but not to worry, I made up for that when I was growing up. We were encouraged to read books

all the time but never told that we must read Fyodor Dostoevsky or Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay. It was as if we imbibed these things through osmosis.

It was a very interesting and thriving environment with never a dull moment. We didn't have the choice to say, "I am bored", like today's children do. It was almost an idyllic childhood. Now that I have children of my own, I look back and wonder how our parents made it possible. It almost seems unreal.

SH: As a young person, what were your conversations with your father like?

PB: Ours was a very free-thinking household. Things were never imposed on us, though certain things were expected of us. My father and mother led by example. They encouraged us to discuss anything under the sun with them and there is nothing in the world that I didn't talk to my father about. Apart from cultural, literary stuff, our conversations were about my boyfriends, my fears and insecurities—everything was addressed.

Now that he is no more, I realise what a truly liberal

person my father was. There was no hypocrisy. I still remember, I must be 16 and was going out with a guy. Despite his reservations, he gave me a go-ahead telling me I must learn to look after myself. He was always by my side, but I must say, whatever problem I took to him, he encouraged me to work it out myself. That really helped me in life. Even when we were doing theatre together, it was the same. That was the biggest thing he could have done for me—make me independent.

SH: Despite his immense popularity, he kept stardom at bay. How did he ensure the same for his children?

PB: At the height of his career, my father was still the simple man who was born on the outskirts of Calcutta in Krishnanagar and brought up in a middle-class family. He believed in plain living and high thinking and that was indeed the motto of our home. He would never let stardom go to his head. He would come back home, wear his *lungi* and sit down with his books or pen and paper. He was also a very busy theatre actor, continuing with it [regardless of the] almost non-paying medium it was.

He retained his values and made sure we never led a fancy lifestyle either. We lived in a middle-class neighbourhood, playing with all the children around. Our whole world was books, films, theatre, dance performances, going to hear Bhimsen Joshi, or Vilayat Khan's sitar and that was the high point of our lives. We would have an *adda* every evening but it was never a filmy gathering and it was very reassuring growing up that way. My father loved to walk down to the store round the corner to buy stuff for home. I still remember the day I needed supplies for my school project. He drove me to New Market and as soon as he got out of the car, he got mobbed. But he ignored all that and took me all over the market. It was a hilarious sight—I was marching up and down the row of shops, my father running behind me and a whole gang of people following us. I was getting irritable with so many people bothering my father. Now when I think back, I marvel at his tenacity to remain rooted, and to make me feel I was the most important person in his life. He continued to make me feel so till his last day when I saw him at the hospital. He was an international figure, not just a cinema and theatre actor and director, but also a poet, essayist, painter. But family came first. That's the way we grew up, that's the way we always will be because that's the way he was.

SH: As a theatre practitioner yourself, how did your father's approach to acting, directing and stagecraft inform you as an artiste?

PB: My earliest memories of my father are of the rehearsals that were held at our place. He would compose the music. Our drawing room would be turned into a rehearsal space, my mother's sarees and dresses would be used as costumes, and he would make a replica of the sets with his cigarette packets and matchboxes. I have grown up watching him do all that, and the theatre bug bit me very early on. I would stand in front of the mirror and try and enact whatever he had done in the rehearsals.

Our whole world was books, films, theatre, dance performances, going to hear Bhimsen Joshi, or Vilayat Khan's sitar and that was the high point of our lives

Later on, when I grew up and started working with him and he was directing me in plays, he was no longer my affectionate father. He was a very strict disciplinarian, and I saw the exacting standards that he put his actors and technicians through. He would never misbehave but expected work to be of the highest order. Before a show, as soon as he reached the venue, the first thing he would do is inspect the stage. The most important thing I learnt from him, which he learnt from his guru Shishir Kumar Bhaduri, is that there is always a subtext. Like a detective, you have got to find it. He would ask me to go through text and find the soul of the play, the soul of the character. When it comes to acting, he is my ultimate guru. But it is also true that having learnt my basics from him, when I started directing—he acted in three of my productions, *Kaalmrigaya* (dance production), *Phera* and *Ghotok Bidaii*—my directorial instincts were different from his.

SH: A sense of restiveness gripped Mr. Chatterjee under lockdown. Now, as theatres reopen you are back to travelling with plays. A daughter's tribute to her thespian father?

PB: During the lockdown, and as it got extended, my father was slowly becoming restive and unhappy. I have never seen him not working. Work was an addiction, it was his religion. So the lockdown period was difficult for him to deal with emotionally and intellectually. He would sit and paint and scribble things and do a lot of writing. But he really wanted to work and that was the reason we started shooting a docu series with him. I had wanted to do it for a long time and it all culminated towards the end of the lockdown. That work remains unfinished.

We have now started doing plays and the first show [which was] on 25th December and all our future shows are dedicated to him. We will be doing his plays. This is our theatre group's way of keeping his memory alive. We have also started the Soumitra Chatterjee Foundation. Through this foundation, we will be archiving all his work. It is a huge responsibility. My father's body of work spans 65 years. We will not be concentrating on his cinema initially but his theatre, writings, paintings, and then move on to cinema. The aim is to preserve his legacy and also carry forward the excellence of his vision, the way he wanted to see the art world. ■

Poulami Basu is a theatre worker and Artistic Director of her group Mukhomukhi.

On a Literary Note

From scholarly works and biographies to films, **Swapnokalpa Dasgupta**, Head – Programming (Dance) at the NCPA, in collaboration with her team, recommends essential reading and viewing to widen your understanding of and delve deeper into the genre.

Academic works

Renowned dance historian, scholar and critic Sunil Kothari's work in the classical dance forms of India has been distilled into a series of authoritative books on Bharatanatyam, Odissi, Kuchipudi, Sattriya and Kathak in the *Indian Classical Dance Art* series (The Marg Foundation, Abhinav Publications). From tracing their history to the myriad shades of their contemporary practice, the tomes—many of them interspersed with the brilliant images of photographer extraordinaire Avinash Pasricha—offer deep insights into the art forms. Kothari's warm and guiding presence at the NCPA's cultural and academic programmes bears testimony to a lifetime of learning and patronage of the arts.

If the just-mentioned body of Kothari's work explores classical dance forms, his edited book, *New Directions in Indian Dance* (Marg Publications, 2003), features essays by the who's who of Indian dance and researchers on, as Alessandra Lopez y Royo writes in her review, "the exciting work, increasingly known as modern/contemporary dance to differentiate it from the classical tradition, created by Indian performers throughout the 20th century." Divided into Early Experiments, Innovations in Specific Forms, Personal Experiments, Extensions at Home and Abroad, and A Cross-section of Choreographic Works, the essays have been authored by Kapila Vatsyayan, Manjusri Chaki Sircar, Kumudini Lakhia, Astad Deboo among others.

Practitioners' voices

Stalwarts of Indian classical dance have not only strengthened their respective forms through performances and training the next generation of artistes but have also taken upon themselves the task of theorising their learning and making complex concepts more accessible by authoring books on them. *Bhava Niroopana* (Nalanda Dance Research Centre, 1996) by Mohiniattam exponent Kanak Rele, is one such work followed in many institutions in India, including Kerala Kalamandalam, for undergraduate and postgraduate studies. A detailed account of *abhinaya*, the *rasa* theory and its implications, it also explores the correlation between the development of religious thought and aesthetics.

Choreographers are storytellers, and ace choreographers tell stories that speak truth to power. Never the one to sift out politics from her art, Mrinalini Sarabhai used the language of Kathakali

and Bharatanatyam to choreograph performances that highlighted societal wrongs. In *Creations* (Mapin, 1986), Sarabhai pens the stories behind her choreographies—from one reflecting on the enigma of existence to one of remorse for the polluted Ganga—in 13 essays. Richly illustrated with photographs of Sarabhai, daughter Mallika and other dancers from the Darpana Academy of Performing Arts which Sarabhai founded, the book contains a foreword by pioneering American dancer Merce Cunningham.

Biography

In *His Dance, His Life: A Portrait of Uday Shankar* (Himalayan Books, 1983) can be witnessed the coming together of two personalities whose vital contribution to Indian dance continues to shape it to date. Perhaps there could not have been a better person to write this definitive biography of Shankar, the renowned dancer-choreographer who presented traditional Indian dance using the language of European theatrical techniques, than Mohan Khokar. It was after witnessing a dance performance by Shankar and his troupe that the scholar and dance historian was inspired to learn Bharatanatyam, after all. The book features an introduction by Ravi Shankar, who carried forward his elder brother's work in popularising another facet of Indian performing arts in the West. Having known Shankar from close quarters, Khokar in his mammoth dance collection left behind the priceless treasure of extensive audio recordings of the pioneer.

Fiction

When a Bharatanatyam prodigy is faced with the inescapable reality of having become a below-knee amputee, how does she cope with it? In her 2015 novel, *A Time to Dance* (Penguin Books), Padma Venkataraman tells the story of a young Veda, who picks up the pieces and starts all over again to discover what dance truly means to her. Told lyrically through verse, the novel is as much an ode to Bharatanatyam as it is to the human spirit.

Resources

Art historian, biographer, critic and author Ashish Mohan Khokar has carried forward his father's legacy of documenting dance in its entirety and given it the shape of the seminal yearbook, *Attendance*. In its 22nd year, the annual publication features issues, events, exhibitions, shows, seminars, books, biographies and obits from the dance universe, and



covers dance in Indian metros and major centres abroad. With serious dance writers contributing to it, the yearbook has delved into such rare themes as the origins of the Bharatanatyam tunic costume with front-fan look, a *Purusha* issue for reviving male solo dancing, the key role dance played in the life of the celebrated author-screenwriter Nabendu Ghosh, etc.

Dance on Camera: A Guide to Dance Films and Videos (Scarecrow Press, 1998), edited by Louise Spain, is considered the most comprehensive resource available on dance films and videos in distribution in the US at the time of publishing. Apart from five essays on the many aspects of filming dance, its main section lists 1,400 films and videos arranged alphabetically, with other details like the date of production, running time, format, distributor, producer, director, choreographer, principal dancers, dance company and composer. For more information, visit www.dancefilms.org

Films

When making a film on a legend whose contribution to a dance form is as vital as shaping its modern identity, in addition to iconic choreography and work towards training Odissi gurus of the future, the canvas is vast. Kumar Shahani's *Bhavantarana* (1991) on the life of Kelucharan Mohapatra does great justice to the subject and his oeuvre while capturing him against the beaches and temples of his *karmabhoomi*, Odisha. Told through Mohapatra's dances arranged for the camera, poetry and excerpts from his life, the film also features the Odissi guru's foremost disciple, Sanjukta Panigrahi. A 90-minute blend of documentary and feature film, *Bhavantarana* won the National Award for the Best Biographical Film in

1991. The film can be viewed on Indian Diplomacy's official YouTube channel.

The Unseen Sequence: Exploring Bharatanatyam Through the Art of Malavika Sarukkai (2013), in the words of director Sumantra Ghosal, is a film not simply about Sarukkai; "It deliberates the valuable connections and departures that the artiste makes from a hallowed and, often, unforgiving tradition." For, though rooted in tradition, the Bharatanatyam exponent is known for her contemporary interpretation of the classical form. Shot over a period of 18 months, the film weaves the narrative through interviews, archival footage and performance. Ghosal's other work in the performing arts includes his 2003 documentary, *The Speaking Hand: Zakir Hussain and the Art of the Indian Drum*. Both movies can be purchased for viewing from home at www.cinematixfilms.com

Another celebrated name in the world of Bharatanatyam whose practice manifests an amalgam of tradition and modernity is that of Alarmel Valli. The title *Lasya Kavya* (2012), a film on the iconic dancer and choreographer directed by Sankalp Meshram, Consultant Creative Producer, NCPA, is a Sanskrit compound word which translates to dance as visual poetry. And quite rightly, Valli is seen moving gracefully to not only Sangam verses in the film but also to a poem in English by Arundhati Subramaniam. Through rehearsal, performance, choreography and teaching sequences, it explores the world of the artiste in the context of which she performs. The film won the 59th National Film Award for the Best Arts/Cultural Film. For more information, visit www.alarmelvalli.org/lasyakavya ■

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This article was first published in the July 2020 digital issue (Volume 9, Issue 12) of ON Stage.

Learning the digital ropes

At a time when the virtual world has become indispensable in all aspects of our lives, the NCPA, supported by HSBC, is conducting an online workshop on live streaming and home production for performing artistes.



Adequate knowledge about the PA system and sound recording is essential to a performing artiste's career. Besides, the current pandemic has thrown an additional challenge of having to understand the digital space as well. With limited to no access to recording studios and concert venues, the lockdown has compelled several artistes to present their art form to connoisseurs from their living room. The concept of stitched-together concerts where musicians record individual pieces from their home, which are then edited and amalgamated, too is a lockdown phenomenon. While the experience of a live performance remains unmatched, technology combined with the knowledge to use it optimally can ensure that recording in home set-up is executed professionally. However, the demands of technology can be quite challenging, and at times, frustrating.

In continuation of its series of workshops to support artistes through expert guidance, the Indian Music department of the NCPA, supported by the HSBC, will host a demonstrative workshop aimed at simplifying the art of live streaming for singers and musicians, and preparing them to engage in home production. The session will be conducted by noted singer-sound designer Gaurav Chopra and will delve into several areas: how to use the microphone to full advantage, the difference in sound quality when the mic is connected to a phone, laptop or mixer, the accessories to choose, the best signal flow path for broadcast, the best medium to live stream or record, how to create a captivating atmosphere during performance, etc. Further, the session will include discussion on the innovative methods of performance with

other artistes, especially under current constraints.

Chopra's expertise encompasses both sides of the microphone. Having trained in Hindustani music, he is an accomplished ghazal and bhajan singer. He is also an award-winning sound engineer and acoustician with a vast experience in sound design for live events, commercials and parallel cinema. When training as a vocalist, the nuances and throw of the voice and the role of the PA system in conveying it undiluted to the audience caught Chopra's attention. The workshop is gleaned from this practical experience.

The Artiste on Both Sides of the Mic by Gaurav Chopra will be presented online on 16th January. To register, visit <https://bit.ly/NCPA-HSBCSoundWorkshop>

Kaleidoscope

Your window to the latest in the performing arts across India and the world.

Music in magical places

The capital of Slovenia, Ljubljana, is known for its strong cultural proclivities and is home to several museums and galleries. In winters, snow is a constant presence, and the city lights up, shimmering throughout the festive season. In the midst of this magical setting, the annual Winter



Festival celebrates Western classical music with multiple concerts over several weeks. This year, from 18th to 31st January, nine concerts by musicians like violinist Sergei Dogadin, flautist Irena Grafenauer, pianist Arcadi Volodos, among others, will be presented. The final concert will be a recital by opera diva Anna Netrebko, who was awarded the International Stanislavsky Prize in 2020 for her contribution to the development of world theatrical art. For more information, visit www.ljubljanafestival.si/en

An ode to emptiness

The outbreak of the global pandemic has silenced theatres around the world. In June 2020, the Edward Lam Dance Theatre and Freespace of the West Kowloon Cultural District invited 30 Hong Kong-based actors to reflect on their relationship with the audience in an empty theatre. With no rehearsals, and standing alone in Freespace's black box theatre, each artiste produced short,



intuitive videos exploring the inherent nature of live theatre. The collection, subtitled in English and free to watch, gives voice to the silenced in a manner that is both striking and heartfelt. To watch, please search for *An Invitation: On Empty Theatre* on the YouTube channel of West Kowloon Cultural District. To keep up-to-date with their upcoming offerings, please visit www.westkowloon.hk/en

Visual wizardry

This year, the organisers of the M1 Singapore Fringe Festival are inviting us to witness provocative and cutting-edge productions from all over the world, including Ecuador, Cambodia and India, that will be accessible in theatres as well as online. The festival, to be held from 20th to 31st January, will include *a line could be crossed and you would slowly cease to be*, a



play written by Andrew Sutherland and directed by Koh Wan Ching, on climate change with 'arresting visuals' and 'gorgeous form' and from India, *i am not here* by The Lost Post Initiative, a two-hander on feminism and censorship that plays out in a boxing ring. For more information, visit www.singaporefringe.com/fringe2021

A good old-fashioned musical

It is restorative to know that somewhere in the world, live theatre is now thriving in a way that we are all waiting for in our hometowns. In Christchurch, New Zealand, the 50-year-old Court Theatre produces diverse and dynamic productions to the over 150,000 ticket buyers entering its doors each year. Currently, the theatre's



mainstage has been showcasing the Tony Award-winning musical sensation *Jersey Boys* since November 2020 and now, due to popular demand, the season has been extended till the end of January 2021. The story of the rock band The Four Seasons, from their humble beginnings on the streets of New Jersey to their spectacular rise to fame and fortune has been called 'a rousing, roof-raising return for musical theatre'. For more information, visit www.courttheatre.org.nz

Intricate traditions

Ultra-glamorous costumes, elaborate make-up and hairstyles, spectacular stages and a rich blend of music and dance, traditional Japanese theatre is enticing in more ways than one. The Japan Arts Council has started the National Theatre Online series on their website through which they share videos that introduce those interested in the traditional performing arts of Japan. Additionally, they also have helpful introductory sections to Noh, Kyogen, Bunraku and



Kabuki which explain the historical importance and nuances of each form. Which form, for instance, is dominated by ghosts and spirits? What is the difference between *jojuri* and *shamisen*? In which form do men perform as women? To find out all this and more, visit https://www.ntj.jac.go.jp/english/topics/top/2020/national_theatre_online.html ■

- Vipasha Aloukik Pai

The Performing Arts Dispatch

A series on houses of culture from around the world. In focus this month: Teatro Colón.

Performing arts centres across continents find themselves at a similar juncture in their otherwise richly diverse histories today—being closed for a prolonged period practically for the first time. The cultural landmark in the heart of Buenos Aires, Teatro Colón saw its majestic auditorium fall silent in March 2020, on the eve of the dress rehearsal for Verdi’s *Nabucco*, and a week before lockdown was imposed in Argentina. It had witnessed closure only once before; in 2008, for purely voluntary and welcome reasons as the venue got renovated in its centenary year.



One of the great opera houses of the world, Teatro Colón is counted among the very best, including La Scala of Milan, the Paris Opera, the Vienna State Opera, London’s Royal Opera House and the Metropolitan Opera, New York. From the performance of *Aida* at the inauguration of the building that presently houses it, the stage at Teatro Colón has presented the who’s who of ballet and classical music. The list boasts such names from the world of dance as Anna Pavlova, Vaslav Nijinsky, Maya Plisetskaya, Paloma Herrera, composers such as Richard Strauss, Igor Stravinsky, Camille Saint-Saëns, Aaron Copland, conductors like Arturo Toscanini, Erich Kleiber, Leonard Bernstein, Karl Böhm, Zubin Mehta, Miguel Ángel Veltri, solo instrumentalists Paco de Lucía, Itzhak Perlman, Yo-Yo Ma, Pinchas Zukerman, and singers including Enrico Caruso, Luciano Pavarotti, Maria Callas, Joan Sutherland, Delia Rigal. The legendary tenor Pavarotti is said to have famously praised Teatro Colón’s acoustics in these words, “[The theatre’s] acoustics have the greatest defect: they are perfect! Imagine what this signifies for the singer: if one sings something bad, one notices immediately.”

At the peak of the pandemic, the only sound that reverberated through its space, though, was the whirring of sewing machines in its basement workshops where the theatre’s seamstresses, costume designers and volunteers stitched several thousand face masks a week for the health workers of Argentina. “This is a factory of dreams. The Colón has this advantage that everything you see on stage, when the curtain opens, is made right here,” stage director Enrique Bordolini said in an interview to AFP, referring to the in-house workshops for machinery, scenography, props, tailoring, shoemaking, tapestry, set mechanics, sculpture, photography, make-up, hairstyling, props decoration and costume painting.

The workshops may have looked like the mise-en-scène of a play set in a PPE factory, but the action moved online under #ColonDigital, of which #Colonforkids is a notable initiative. Designed to introduce young minds to the artistic disciplines Teatro Colón nurtures, the dancers, actors, musicians and singers associated with the opera house bring together children’s literature, classical music, ballet, art, scenographic objects, etc. in short, engaging videos. Though this

has the potential to get adult viewers hooked, the digital series has much to offer to them too. In addition to online broadcasts of opera, ballet and concert performances of recent seasons and from the archives, the theatre has introduced CasadeÓpera, a series based on short lyrical pieces seeking new, edgy ways to approach the operatic genre. There is also a wealth of archival articles from the *Teatro Colón Magazine* now available under #ColonDigital, which through the history of the theatre also offers insights into the history of Buenos Aires.

The thoughtfully curated digital offerings only make one think of what this iconic Argentine institution—now grappling with financial challenges like several of its counterparts around the world—could present to its audiences when theatre is a safe place again. “Over the past century, there was something similar only in the world wars, art is undergoing a key moment and we are searching for how to flourish in this new stage ahead,” Colón’s principal ballet dancer Federico Fernández said in the AFP article while soprano and pianist María Castillo De Lima added, “After so much tragedy, humanity will need art anyway now.” ■

- Snigdha Hasan



SCHOLARSHIP FOR YOUNG MUSICIANS 2021-22 HINDUSTANI MUSIC

Applications (bio-data on music education) are invited from students for a scholarship in advance training in **Hindustani Music (vocal – *khayal / dhrupad, percussions – tabla / pakhawaj*)**. The value of the scholarship is **Rs. 10,000/- per month for one year** (April 2021 to March 2022). Send in your application (bio-data on music education) via mail to **ncpascholarships@gmail.com** on or before **15 Jan 2021**.

The application must contain details regarding the candidate's name, date of birth, address, contact number/alternate contact number, professional qualification, email ID, music teachers/gurus, number of years of total training and details of achievements / prizes / scholarships and performances, amongst other noteworthy details. Scanned copies of the certificates / audio / video clips of musical performances are not required. A bio-data containing all details in the listing format will be sufficient. The shortlisted candidates will be informed via email or telephone. The audition of the shortlisted candidates will be conducted in the month of February 2021 either online or in the NCPA premises at Mumbai depending on the Standard Operating Procedure declared by Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (BMC).

Eligibility Criteria & General Instructions :

- Candidate's bio-data will be considered as his/her application for this scholarship. There is NO separate form to be filled.
- Age Limit -
 - For Khayal /Percussions** - 18 to 30 years of age (as off 1st March 2021)
 - For Dhrupad** - 18 to 35 years of age (as off 1st March 2021)
- Candidates who are beneficiaries of other scholarship/grant in the field of music during April 2021 to March 2022, are not eligible to apply
- Candidates who are full-time / part-time working professionals at any company cannot apply
- Professional musicians including those with 'A' grade from All India Radio are not eligible to apply
- Applications received in hard copies through courier will not be accepted. Only the applications received on email id mentioned above will be considered
- Only Indian citizens are eligible to apply
- Applications received after 15 January 2021 will not be accepted
- The decision of the NCPA Selection Committee will be final

Contact No: 8591064547 (Mon to Fri. 10.30 am to 5.30 pm)



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