

EMBRACING INDIAN AND WESTERN CLASSICAL MUSIC IN THE 21st CENTURY: PARAM VIR AND SHANKAR TUCKER

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Abstract

The first (published) mention of Indian classical music¹ in Western discourse takes us to William Jones' *On the Musical Modes of the Hindus* (1784), which ignited a scholarly interest for the Orient in the Western world. Since then, over the years, several researchers in music have been swept along and consumed by the currents of lost, found, translated, (mis-)interpreted, transliterated and transformed literature on Indian classical music². This work delves neither into the labyrinth of the allusive character of Raga, nor the theory, transliteration, and treatises on Indian classical music. Instead, with supporting literature from many diligent scholars, it utilises all the extremely elaborate theories and explanations from the past to initiate a different sort of analysis in this field, one that explores musical material directly in compositions which incorporate both Indian and Western music, using socio-cultural, media studies theories and music analysis theories. The primary intent of this work is to comprehend the creation of a cultural third space brought about by the hybridisation of contemporary Western music and Indian classical music, taking two composers as case studies for this purpose: Param Vir and Shankar Tucker. The parameters of this study centre, in Vir's case, on Indian classical- and 20th century Western classical music theories; and, in Tucker's case, the appropriation of Indian music, using contemporary media studies and popular music theories of a globalised world. Such an analysis is customised and therefore is to be considered as an observation of the current scenario within these two systems of music, within these parameters.

Keywords

Indian classical music – Western classical music – Bollywood industry – hybridisation – socio-cultural theories – media studies theories – YouTube – platform society – diaspora

The introductory chapter discusses briefly the most prominent literature written on Indian classical music, the fields of research so far, the challenges in understanding Indian music in the West and the current development of Western classical music in India. This inevitably entails a discussion of intrinsic factors involved in composing music that incorporates Indian and Western classical music, such as theory and harmony, notation of music and improvisation. Furthermore, the theoretical and methodological framework of this work, which is largely categorised under the term hybridisation, is also introduced in

¹ Throughout this work, North Indian classical music is referred to as Hindustani music, South Indian classical music as Karnatik music and both together as Indian classical music.

² See Emmie te Nijenhuis, *Indian Music: History and Structure* (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1974), for a detailed documentation and description of literary developments on Indian classical music.

this chapter.

The second and third chapters introduce the two chosen composers for this study and their compositions. One large composition by Vir and three small compositions by Tucker are examined in detail here, with appropriate music and cultural theories. Furthermore, there is a dissection of the compositions in order to understand the methods used by these composers to bring the two systems of music under one roof. The final chapter summarises the conclusions, observations and possible research subjects for future academics in this field.

Introduction

Indian classical music was since its commencement, holistic with and inseparable from the theatrical arts and dance. Its evolution over the centuries centred around the further development of melodic contour, genres and introduction of instruments resulting from cultural exchanges.³ With the publication of William Jones' pioneering work in 1784, up until the publication of Vishnu Narayan Bhatkande's treatise on Indian music, both Indian and Western authors have been consumed by the allusive and transformative character of Raga, a problem emphasised by the lack of a notation system and the dominant presence of an oral tradition. In the 19th and 20th centuries, colonial and post-colonial cultural attitudes to Western modernity have been identified as affecting the development of Indian classical music in the works of musicians (such as Allaudin Khan and Rabindranath Tagore for example).⁴ Furthermore, the Beatles-Ravi Shankar and Menuhin-Ravi Shankar collaboration in the 20th century raised the ancient system of Indian classical music to a level of commercial and popular interest.⁵ On the other hand, Indian influences on Western classical music are evident in the works of composers such as Albert Roussel⁶, Oliver Messiaen⁷, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and Philip Glass' collaboration with Ravi Shankar⁸, to name just a few. Although Ravi Shankar himself attempted compositions bringing Western and Indian classical music systems together, the compositions escape deep analytical or performance interest. Few compositions exist which integrate these two systems of music, despite the presence of the West in India or the presence of many Indian communities in the West. This is because the very underlining philosophies and structures of both systems are drastically different.

In this work, I argue that in the 21st century, aided not only by diaspora communities (which blur demarcations between cultures) and technology, but also by the 20th century Western classical music theory systems, such as the 12-tone and serial music theories,

³ See Emmie te Nijenhuis, *Indian Music: History and Structure* (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1974), for more details on historical documentation and developments.

⁴ See Matthew Pritchard, *Cultural autonomy and the 'Indian Exception': debating the aesthetics of Indian classical music in early 20th-century Calcutta* (eBook: Routledge, 2020).

⁵ Refer to Pankaj Jain, *Dharma in America* (Oxon: Routledge, 2020), p.44; Kathryn B. Cox, *The Road to Rishikesh: The Beatles, India, and Globalized Dialogue in 1967 in The Beatles, Sgt. Pepper, and the Summer of Love* (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2017); Ken Hunt, *India - East/West Fusion: Meetings by the River in World Music: Volume 2: Latin and North America, Caribbean, India, Asia and Pacific: The Rough Guide* (London: The Rough Guides Ltd., 2000), p. 109.

⁶ See Jann Pasler, *Writing through Music: Essays on Music, Culture, and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 249-284.

⁷ See Šimundža, Mirjana. "Messiaen's Rhythmical Organisation and Classical Indian Theory of Rhythm (I)." *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, vol. 18, no. 1, 1987, pp. 117-144. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/836909. Accessed 30 Aug. 2021.

⁸ See Philip Glass, *Words Without Music: A Memoir* (Kindle edition: Liveright, 2015).

Western classical music and Indian classical music have arrived at a point where both systems of music can be intrinsically brought together, and be compatible and co-exist within a single composition. Through compositions of Param Vir and Shankar Tucker, this work analyses some of the methods implemented by composers in integrating cultural and musical differences into their compositions.

Theory and Methodology

Analysis based on cultural theories

Cultural theories relevant to the selected case studies are discussed in detail under the corresponding analysis sections. Particularly relevant to this work are theories based on Diaspora⁹ which are closely related to the concept of Hybridity. Other relevant theories include those of migration and identity,¹⁰ bricolage, creolisation (which are discussed largely under the term Hybridisation¹¹). The popular music analysis is furthermore supported by media studies theories of platform society and literature theories such as intertextuality, thus offering a rich palette of interdisciplinary theories in order to understand 21st century compositions better.

Music Analysis

In Vir's case, in which 20th century Western music theory is integrated into Indian classical music theory, traditional forms of music theory analysis are used, aided by the presence of notated scores. Tucker's choice to create music with the support of digital technologies and by collaborating with musicians with a diaspora background, as well as the absence of a notated score, calls for a customised and unconventional form of analysis supported by the above-mentioned socio-cultural, intertextual and video analyses.

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⁹ See Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

¹⁰ Silke Leopold & Sabine Ehrmann-Herfort, *Migration und Identität: Wanderbewegungen und Kulturkontakte in der Musikgeschichte* (Baarenreiter, 2013).

¹¹ See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (Routledge, 1994) and Peter Burke, *Hybrid Renaissance: Culture, Language, Architecture* (Central European University Press, 2016).

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Case Study 1: Param Vir (1952–) is of Indian origin, born and brought up in Delhi until the age of 32 and trained in North Indian classical music and Western piano and composition. His mother, Khurshid Mehta, of Parsi¹² origin, was a poet, choreographer and Hindustani classical vocalist, trained under the tutelage of Ustad Chand Khan of the Delhi *gharana*¹³. His father was an electronics entrepreneur and mathematician born in Rawalpindi¹⁴. In 1984, the 32 year-old moved to England to pursue Western classical music under Oliver Knussen at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama and continues to live in London. His other Western composition teachers include Peter Maxwell Davies, Jonathan Harvey and Randolph Coleman. Among other awards, he has won the Siemens Prize and the Britten Composition Prize.

He was introduced to the Second Viennese School and Twelve Tone row by the German composer Hans Joachim Köllreutter, then resident in Delhi. He was further influenced by the Catholic school where he studied, making him familiar with Plainsongs. His craving for Western classical music led him to the libraries of the Goethe Institute in Delhi, where he found some of the most famous classical symphonies in the history of Western music. According to Booth and Shope, imported recordings in India included “opera, comic songs, military band music, marches, waltzes, classical and church music”.¹⁵ Referring to the

¹²The Parsi are an immigrant community from former Persia, and travelled to India due to the Muslim invasion of their country, arguably circa AD 936. During the colonisation of India by the British, the colonisers chose selected groups of Indians to be introduced to the English education system. The Parsi community, nevertheless viewed as foreigners in India to an extent, were the first to take advantage of the Western-style education and industrial growth. This possibly explains their special bond with Western classical music which is much stronger than in ethnic Indians. The only professional Western Classical orchestra in India, the Symphony Orchestra of India (SOI) is run by the TATA Company, which belongs to a Parsi family.

¹³Gharana is a biological (for example, father-son) lineage to begin with, which later takes the concept of a disciple-chain (disciples and their disciples spread over generations). This is called *guru-shishya parampara* (*shishya* means pupil). In music and other arts, the gharana concept is relevant mostly in north India. For more information on gharana and a brief history of music education in India, see: Gerry Farrell *Indian Music and the West* (Clarendon Press: 1997), pp. 58–64; and Daniel M. Neuman, *The Life of Music in North India* (The University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 41–49. Anoushka Shankar is an example that portrays the importance of the gharana and *guru-shishya* institution in India, or the importance of coming from a well-known musical family which automatically adds prestige to one's name.

¹⁴Param Vir, E-mail message to author, April 14, 2015.

¹⁵See Gregory Booth & Bradley Shope, Introduction: Popular Music in India, in *More Than Bollywood* (Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 15.

coming of sound recording technology in colonial India, they say it catered to the needs of the “European and elite Indian populations, and often reinforced social status”.¹⁶ It is due to such sources that Vir, later in the twenty-first century, could gain access to the music which inspires him. Made available by post-colonial and 20th century resources, Vir’s multi-cultural influences have been diverse, such as “Ragas, Talas, Plainsong, Palestrina, Strauss, 12 Tone Rows and Greek ecclesiastical Modes all meeting in the mind of a teenager in post-colonial Delhi? This was surely a fortuitous conjunction of influences!”¹⁷

Raga Fields

Composed in 2014, *Raga Fields*, also entitled *Three Spaces for Sarod*¹⁸ and *Ensemble*, was commissioned by the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group, Fulcrum Point New Music Project and Klangforum Wien. In this composition, Vir is starkly aware of the differences and challenges involved in combining the metaphysical essence of Indian classical music and the structural and harmonic world of Western classical music. His approach to composition is intrinsic and intertwined as opposed to the ‘fusion’ music often found around the Beatles-Ravi Shankar collaboration in the 1960s. Such a composition faces initial challenges such as a compatible notational system for both the Indian soloist and the Western orchestra.

While Western notation originated and evolved parallel to the development of Western classical music and suited its purpose well, implementation of Western notation to Indian classical music has often caused friction. The problem seems to have been one of translation rather than notation: How should one represent the “infinitesimally minute and delicate shades as in a painting by a master artist? [Or the fluidity of] a vocalist over half a *gamut*? Indeed, how could one convey the concept of raga itself?”: questions Weidman (2006) in her discussion of notating Indian classical music.

Vir employs a combination of Western notation, performance from memory and fixed improvisation to deal with this problem. The sarod soloist performs from memory, the parts that were written for him. Whereas in the first space / movement, he has complete freedom, in the second and third spaces / movements, he has memorized his solo part as required by the composer. This shows that, even though some parts of the solo section are fixed and written out, the soloist nevertheless performs like a traditional Indian musician would do, from memory. Furthermore, in the second space, the sarod alternates between playing within atonal harmonic fields and traditional ragas, combined with orchestral notation systems of 20th century Western classical music and offers a rich counterpoint to the ensemble, which in turn mirrors the sarod’s phrases, comparable to compositional techniques of *Jugalbandhi* in Indian classical music and *antecedent-consequent relationship* in Western classical music. Other examples of compositional methods in this composition involve combining Messiaen’s theory of limited transposition with Ragas, isorhythm, Klangfarbenmelodie, and theories of Tala (rhythm) and cadence structures from Indian classical music.

¹⁶ See Gregory Booth & Bradley Shope, Introduction: Popular Music in India, in *More Than Bollywood* (Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 15.

¹⁷ Param Vir, Interview with Huw Rhys James, May 1999. <https://www.paramvir.net/about/interview-with-huw-rhys-james-1999/> (Last accessed August 30, 2021).

¹⁸ The sarod has 17-25 strings, with 4-5 main strings for playing the melody, 1-2 drone strings, 2 chikari strings, and 9-11 sympathetic strings. The metal strings are plucked with a wooden or bone plectrum.

Shankar Tucker (1987–), born Ambrose Avril Tucker, is an American clarinetist and composer educated at the New England Conservatory of Music, Boston in Western classical music and has a passion for Hindustani and Indian popular music. He lives both in the USA and India. He rose to fame with the release of several YouTube videos and albums which integrate Western / Indian popular music and Indian classical music. His passion for Hindustani music blossomed in his early years during his yearly visits to South India along with his family, followers of the well-known South Indian spiritual leader and humanitarian, Mātā Amṛtānandamayī Devī. The family, along with young Tucker, attended her prayers and Bhajans (Indian devotional songs) where he performed as part of the religious ensemble for about two months, every summer, almost every year. Amṛtānandamayī Devī blessed him with the name Shankar. At the same time, his job in a music library in the USA provided him precious access to varieties of Hindustani music and Indian folk music. He studied clarinet under Thomas Martin and fundamental Hindustani music performance with sitarist Peter Row at the New England Conservatory in Boston who in turn was inspired by the sound of Sitar brought to the USA by Ravi Shankar in the 1960s. After graduating from the Conservatory, Tucker was awarded the Frank Huntington Beebe Fund to pursue further education in India.

Tucker's musical language, production and identity ignites music-sociological interest. His profile fits the vividly changing times of the early twenty-first century. There have been instances of musicians from the west discovering their passion for Indian art music, such as Yehudi Menuhin, George Harrison, Yvette Mimieux, John Handy among others, and students of Ali Akhbar Khan such as George Ruckert and Ken Zuckerman. Tucker was no exception: for one year he studied under the tutelage of Indian flute Maestro Hariprasad Chaurasia. However, it is his unique combination of integrating Indian Classical as well as popular music, digital sampling, collaborations with diaspora musicians and his production through, what he calls as the 'Social Media – Independent Musician Business Model' that makes him music-sociologically interesting.

For Tucker, performing Indian classical music on a Western clarinet posed technical challenges. The ornamental turns and glides characteristic to Indian classical music do not bend to the constructions of a clarinet from the west; this led him to make some changes to his instrument. His self-reconstructed clarinet is suited to perform Indian ragas as well as Western classical music. In one interview, he explains that his clarinet is altered to perform "in a balanced technique for both systems of music"¹⁹ to make up for the different system of fingering used in Indian clarinet performance, as opposed to the German system of fingering for clarinet. The clarinet was taken apart, and replaced in "all the pads with a soft rubber material" giving him a better basis to perform the ornaments and glides, essential to Indian classical music which functions as a Unique Selling Point for his videos.²⁰

These aspects make the elements for analysis in Tucker's case multi-fold. The various online platforms he uses for producing his videos in itself has multiple features that function as analytical points of departure, especially within the interdisciplinary fields of media studies, legal-economic challenges from the governing broadcasting industry and the copyright industry, sometimes coupled with identity politics. Furthermore, the musical and sociological aspects of such a production: hybridisation of music, identity (diaspora), accessibility and image construction fuel further analytical interest. Central to this analysis

¹⁹ Shankar Tucker, interview by author, January 18, 2015.

²⁰ See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VoW-SCB4m3s&list=PLSdVmt4cyOBCvcsQ4s575ErIJMOhBaN1w&ab_channel=Shankar-Tucker (Last accessed: August 30, 2021).

is the hybridization of Western and Indian classical music using appropriate compositional techniques and innovative strategies of the 21st Century.

The focus of this chapter lies in deconstructing these aspects to understand one part of the music hybrid milieu of digital India, and in analysing strategies employed by particularly Tucker, to bring Indian and Western music closer together in the 21st Century. Cultural theories such as bricolage, reterritorialisation, creolisation and intertextual theories such as cophonography²¹ (Burns & Lacasse, 2018) are discussed and employed to analyze the visual and textual content. Coherent in all case studies, is Tucker's core of reality, his digital sampling methods in appropriating Indian classical and popular music. Whereas the first and third case studies display the intertextual aspects clearly, the second case study focuses on his representation of Indian classical music in the foreground, coupled with his skillset to improvise on a reconstructed Western clarinet. The presence of collaborative artists with a diaspora background are also central in his works.

Conclusion

In analysing compositional strategies in two particular case studies, this work attempts to comprehend the creation of a cultural third space caused by the hybridisation of contemporary Western music and Indian classical music. I argue that in the 21st century, aided not only by diaspora communities and technology, but also by the 20th century Western classical music theory systems such as the 12-tone and serial music theories, Western classical music and Indian classical music have arrived at a time where both systems of music can be intrinsically brought together under one roof and can be compatible and existing within a single composition in its own right in a third cultural space.

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²¹ See Lori Burns and Serge Lacasse, *The Pop Palimpsest: Intertextuality in Recorded Popular Music* (University of Michigan Press, 2018).

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