

From cello to Indian cello

Saskia Rao de Haas



This article was first published in Shruti magazine in 2014

Introduction

Today, Indian classical music is a global art form. Stalwarts of Indian classical music attracts large audiences, both within and outside India. However, today Indian music is not only performed by Indian artists anymore but also by musicians with other cultural backgrounds. Not only that, Indian music has also adopted many new instruments to play classical music. In my case, the cello and the journey from cello to Indian cello.

My learning process of Indian music began in 1993 at the Rotterdam Conservatory. When I first came to India in 1994 to do research for the final stages of my master's thesis in musicology at the University of Amsterdam, I also had the opportunity to study with the renowned vocalist and musicologist Dr. Sumati Mutatkar. Although 82 years old at the time and considered a purist, she expressed a desire to learn the cello – if only she were five years younger, she exclaimed when she heard the cello! – because she believed the instrument to be very suitable for Indian music. Since the last nineteen years I'm based in New Delhi as a performer of Indian classical music. What surprises listeners sometimes is not only that I am a Dutch woman playing Indian music, but also the choice of my instrument. The cello is not an instrument that was used in Indian classical music much before. I assume that this seems like stating the obvious. But as the violin and several other Western instruments are widely used in Indian music, I always wondered why the cello was never adopted by Indian musicians earlier. In 1931 Tagore wrote to his granddaughter about an instrument that pleased him even more than the violin: *"The cello appeals to me quite a lot. I think it is a good instrument for playing our music."* If such a great influencer in the cultural field such as Rabindranath Tagore already mentioned the cello over 85 years ago, why then was the cello not adapted to Indian music earlier? Perhaps the history of the cello in India gives us an answer.



The cello in India

The earliest examples of Western string instruments being imported into India, is in the 1760's for the Calcutta Harmonic society. These early travelers to India carried violins, oboes and flutes with them, but not cello's,

An explanation that is heard often is that the instrument was too big and fragile to be transported to India. That does seem to be contradicted by the fact that in the 18th century harpsichords were imported which were much larger than a cello. Another possible explanation could be that the role of the cello in the 18th century British musical setting was that of an inessential accompanying instrument. The earliest known works for solo cello are published in ca. 1675 in Italy. It was in this country that the evolution of the cello from an accompanying instrument into a solo instrument took part, not in Great Britain. At the time as the emergence of the Calcutta Harmonic society, the cello only began to slowly grow in acceptance from an accompanying instrument into a solo instrument in Great Britain. In 1806, the music enthusiast and 'bas viol' player Morse had this pre-decessor of the cello built for himself in Calcutta. He is depicted with his instrument on a painting of 1784. Interestingly, the playing position of Morse with his bass viol in the diagonal angle away from his shoulder, not the position of the cello. What fascinated me is that this diagonal holding position and without the use of an endpin is the exact same as the position the cellists in the Maihar band cellists have adapted 150 year later. I haven't found a direct link from Morse's bass viol to these musicians, but Allaudin Khan, the founder of the Maihar band, spent a lot of time in Calcutta in the second half of the 19th century, less than a century later. He had violin lessons both in Western as well as Indian style and was in contact with many musicians. We can assume he must have seen and heard the cello at that time and taught his cellists in the bass viol method, which restricts the player in terms of technical possibilities.

Although the history of the cello in India is a short one and closely related to the amateur musicians of the British Raj, it was used by Indian artists as well. In film music from the 40's onwards, the cello was also often used. Most of these musicians came from Goa and the Parsi community in Mumbai. They had learned the cello directly from western missionaries and other amateur string players. However, the cello never really emancipated into a solo instrument in Indian music as the violin did.

When I started to develop the Indian cello, I was aware of two cellists who played, and still play, Indian classical music at a very high level. One is Nancy Lesh-Kulkarni, who studied Dhrupad on the cello from Ziamohuddin Dagar and the other is Anup Biswas, an essentially western trained cellist who also learned Indian music and made a career performing both styles at a professional level.



The creation of the Indian cello

Introducing non-Indian instruments and inventing new ones appears to be an accepted phenomenon in Indian music. The sitar, sarod, violin and harmonium were all imported instruments, and in the nineteenth century instruments such as the surbahar, sursingar and esraj (or dilruba) were created. More recently the santur, saxophone, mandolin and acoustic slide guitar have been integrated within the traditional framework. With the exception of the harmonium, all these instruments were accepted by the public with little controversy.

Since 1994, Eduard van Tongeren (a violin builder from the Netherlands) and I have conceptualized five different derivatives of a cello that are suitable for performing Indian music. The version of 2005 is named the *Indian* cello. It has five playing strings and ten sympathetic or resonating strings running over a so-called *jivari* bridge, as is common in most other north Indian stringed instruments. Van Tongeren built it in 2005 and based it on the earlier experimental instruments and his expertise in building different types of instruments. The resonating strings were attached by Sanjay Sharma of Ricky Ram musicals and I had the interesting role of being a moderator between these two innovative instrument builders. The *Indian* cello was not the first experiment in making a cello suitable for Indian music. It had four predecessors, all of them having one or two features that made the final Indian cello possible. After this Indian cello, luthier Alexandre Letellier designed and made a travel version of the Indian cello that is so compact that it can travel with me as hand-luggage on flights. This is extremely helpful, since I always had to buy an extra seat for the Indian cello because the instrument is too delicate to travel as check-in luggage. Many musicians could write articles about the debacles of traveling with their instrument. We can only hope airlines will respect musical instruments more in the future.

The different instruments



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Playing the Indian cello

'I have always regarded technique as a means, not an end in itself. One must, of course, master technique; at the same time, one must not become enslaved by it. One must understand that the purpose of technique is to transmit the inner meaning, the message of the music. The most perfect technique is that which is not noticed at all.'

Pablo Casals

Because I didn't have an example to follow, the main challenge was not the design of the Indian cello, but to find an Indian sound and style for the cello. Pt. Hariprasad Chaurasia told me to create a cello *ang* (style) that would suit the instrument and my own artistic temperament best. This is an ongoing process, because a personal style takes time to create and is a fluid concept; it keeps evolving and changing while the artist grows. Arguably, this would be the aim of every musician, even when he plays a well-established instrument.

That I had to adopt an entirely new playing style, practise regime and sitting position became clear during my first lesson of Indian music with Koustav Ray, when I had to change from the regular chair to sitting cross-legged on the floor. Although the cello was an instrument I thought I knew quite well, I was proven wrong at the first lesson. I needed to relearn the instrument completely and forget past lessons to imbibe Indian music effectively. Once I decided I wanted to learn Indian music, I dedicated myself completely to practice and would practice 10 to 14 hours every day for many years. I retreated in my bubble of focus and practiced. I thank God for my good fortune that I was able to learn from Pt Hariprasad Chaurasia and also from Dr. Sumati Mutatkar, Koustav Roy, Pt DK Dattar, Pt Deepak Chaudhuri and Pt Shubhendra Rao. I am also grateful to many other artists who have shared their precious knowledge with me during workshops and I cannot emphasize enough that whatever is pleasing in my playing is thanks to their greatness, whatever mistakes are there, are my own.

The cello is perhaps the closest to the human voice any instrument can get; the sound quality of the instrument is such that I usually get the feedback the audience that they felt someone was singing. At the same time, it can be an instrument of vigor and percussive by using the bow in a different way. I have mostly learned from master exponents of the Maihar gharana and follow the typical Alap, Jor, Jhala followed by various gat or bandish culminating in a fast Jhala. Within this framework, I have incorporated both vocal expression in articulation, tanas and embellishments as well as instrumental techniques such as jhala, embellishments and patterns.

For a bowed instrument, the left hand creates the pitch and embellishments, but the expression and articulation comes from the right hand, the bow.

As an artist, I enjoy the wide diverse performance settings Hindustani music offers me: as a soloist, as part of the jugalbandi with Pt Shubhendra Rao, my husband, creative partner and mentor, and with other stalwarts of Indian music.

As an artist born in Holland, I also feel the need to go back to the music of my childhood and compose music. I have been playing the cello since I was eight years old. For the first ten years of my involvement with Indian music, I wanted to submerge myself in the new culture and did not even listen to other musics for that reason. Today, I enjoy this confluence of these two influences in my composed music and collaborative work, but not in my classical music. That stands for itself. At the same time, daily practice and research in the classical music shows me so many avenues everyday that I still need to explore! It is a universe in itself.

I also teach private students, both from India and abroad who learn Indian music on the cello and a few have also ordered my Indian cello from Eduard van Tongeren and Alexandre Letellier. It is wonderful to see new cellists playing Indian music and continuing what I and the few other cellists have started.

Outside India I have taught at the various Cello Festivals, universities and conservatories in across the world. My approach ranges from providing general information about Indian music to teaching exercises for practicing music that are common in Indian music, but universal in application.

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Indian music as a global art form

'You must have been an Indian in your previous life.' This is what Pt. Arvind Parikh told me after he heard me perform in Mumbai in 2005. Pt. Hariprasad Chaurasia once said: 'She is Indian, because of her music.'

History gives us a few names of artists from the West who were wholeheartedly accepted as professional Indian musicians, the late Jon Higgins being the best known example. He won critical and popular acclaim for his mastery of vocal Carnatic music. No small achievement, considering that, apart from mastering the ragas, talas and compositions, he also expressed himself in different south Indian languages. There are also professional performers of Indian classical music who are not Indian, and do not live in India. Today Indian music has truly become a global artform and I am just an example of this phenomenon.

To ensure that Indian music is given in the right perspective to the next generations, Shubhendra and I started the 'Shubhendra and Saskia Rao foundation'. This is our vehicle to inculcate a sense of pride in children and young adults for their musical heritage. We created a full classical music curriculum for schools and over 35.000 children are studying this program. When I interact with Indian students my hope is that by showing how people from all over the world, like me, value Indian art music they feel a sense of pride and ownership towards their classical music heritage. It saddens me that many children think the only worthy export product from India are films and film music, and they are genuinely surprised by my deep involvement with classical music.

To me, meaningful, beautiful music can be enjoyed on two levels: the aesthetic level that appeals, and the intellectual level that stimulates. One cannot separate these two without making music into either an intellectual exercise or music without meaning. Perhaps to become a truly great artists, we need to follow this idea of Pablo Picasso: 'good artists borrow, but great artists steal.' In the end it is most important to convey the music from our heart, soul and mind at the same time to connect fully with the audience no matter where or who we are.