



Sangeet4All

SWARA SANGAM

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My Journey with the Sitar ...

Pandit Shubhendra Rao's talent was nurtured by no less than the great Pandit Ravi Shankar with whom he started to learn the sitar from the age of 3 in the traditional Guru-Shishya paramapara. Now, an internationally acclaimed musician, and co-founder of Sangeet4All, Pt. Rao shares his experience



When did you start learning music?

I don't remember exactly when I started, but since both my parents were musicians, there was music at home all the time — the Sitar & the Saraswati Veena. From what my parents said, I could sing before I could speak!

What drew you to the sitar?

The fact that my father played the Sitar, it was perhaps normal that I started playing it from a very young age. I loved the sound of it too. Initially I was too young to hold it upright like the way the Sitar is held and having seen my mother play the Saraswati Veena, I would keep the Sitar in the same position like her but play the Sitar!! This was when I was supposed to be about 2 years!!

It was when I was about 3 and half that I started holding the Sitar in the correct position. I remember it vividly when my father's Guru (and later my Guru too) Pandit Ravi Shankar was visiting our home in 1968 along with Ustad Alla Rakha and the person I was named after, his son Shubhendra Shankar.

They came home to see my grandmother and out of excitement, my father asked me to play something I was practicing. I played a small sargam in Yaman Kalyan, holding the Sitar like the Saraswati Veena.

Everyone was impressed and I remember my Guru giving me the Sitar and asking me to hold it in the correct position from now on. I never looked back since!

How many hours did you practice every day during school years?

During school years, I still tried to practice 2-4 hours everyday.

Of course in those days there were less distractions - there was no television, computer games, social media — only the radio!! I had a normal childhood - school, friends, cricket and other games, movies, books but the backbone of everything in my life was my music. Even today, my childhood friends remember that every time they came to my home to play, I would always be practising.

How did it affect your studies?

I don't think it affected my studies in any negative way. On the contrary, it perhaps helped develop my focus. Music taught me everything that I am today.

You studied under the Guru-Shishya Parampara – how does a student approach a guru to learn from? What are some specific benefits and the drawbacks of the system in your opinion?

It is indeed the most beautiful relationship but it requires 2 people to uphold its sanctity - both the Guru as well as the Shishya. I was surely blessed to have such a wonderful Guru, someone who taught me life and not just music. After a certain point, the Guru becomes more of a figurehead in your life and s/he continues to live through your music, your thoughts and doings.

Your Guru becomes the most important person in your life. As is said by the famous saint/poet Sant Kabir, the Guru is greater than even God since s/he is the person showing you the path to God! The more than 9 years I lived with Pt. Ravi Shankar, learnt from him, travelled with him, performed with him, assisted him

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in his compositions has become the basis of my complete persona, musically and personally too.

But like in any relationship, there are some drawbacks too. It depends on you as an individual what to take and what not to.

Going by your experience, how can the institution still remain relevant in the present times?

Having lived it, I could write many books on just my Guru-Shishya experience! I can surely say that I wish everyone could learn in this way. A formal school can never give that experience & I hope that more children can learn in the true Guru-Shishya *parampara*. Of course there are some downsides to it too, but the positives far outweigh these few things.

It is tough in today's world to maintain the same kind of relationship. Times have surely changed and we surely cannot wind the clock back. But for sure, it is important to keep some essential aspects of this alive and passed on to future generations. Again, it depends on the Guru and the Shishya individually and together as to what they can adapt to today's world.

I do maintain some part of these with my own disciples too. Keep it alive and make it relevant to present times.

Please share a story of your experience with Pt. Ravi Shankar.

There are so many facets to this great, great person, so many different layers and I feel blessed to have been so very close to him all my life. Like I said, there are so many memories of him

since my early childhood and of course, all the stories that I heard from my father. For me, he is still alive inside me and he continues to guide me in my life. Even today, I have experiences where he comes in my dreams and teaches me which I practice when I wake up! The complete devotion to his Guru and his music, his humility, his sense of humour, his zest for life, his child-like-enthusiasm – I wonder how all this could be found in one person.

You collaborate extensively with western musical instruments, like with your wife on the cello and your son on the piano? Can you read western music? How important is reading music for collaborative work?

For Saskia and me, performing & composing together is an extension of our lives together. Ishaan is a brilliant musician who breathes music. When we perform together, it is perhaps the most beautiful feeling. But no - I unfortunately never learnt how to read music - western or Indian. To collaborate and work with other genres of music, it surely helps if one can learn how to read music too. Fortunately, I have not missed this as much since both Saskia and Ishaan are so well versed in both the traditions of music.

What is your advice for students who want to pursue music?

There is no secret — practice, practice & more practice is the only mantra!! Learn to love your practice & enjoy the process. Remain a student of music all your life & stay hungry to learn every day. Music is divine - remain in search of that divinity.

'Sa Re Gaayein' – Everybody Sing!

Sangeet4All conducted an exciting project with TATA Steel's Residential Bridge Centres in the state of Odisha to nurture and promote indigenous heritage by training teachers to teach music in a more structured and standardised manner.



Odisha enjoys a rich and varied tribal culture with a significant 22.84% tribal population (2011 census) that boasts unique and distinctive music traditions across the eastern state.

Sangeet4All conducted an exciting project with TATA Steel's Residential Bridge Centres in the state to nurture and promote indigenous heritage by training teachers to do it in a more structured and standardised manner.

Twenty-eight centres took part in the programme. Sangeet4All trainers undertook intensive on-site and off-line sessions for 3 months. During the time, teachers were guided to teach Sangeet4All components 'Sing, Listen, Learn.'

The teachers-in-training shared local tribal songs based on local festivals. For the month of February songs around the 'Maghe Parab' (festival to celebrate new crops) were identified, which



were practised with the children and then performed.

Through music they also practised languages like Hindi and English, as well as made Ragamala paintings and small percussion instruments.

The program was officially launched with a scintillating concert by Pt. Shubhendra Rao and Maestro Saskia Rao De-Haas at Loyala School in Kalinganagar. Over 500 students, staff, local

community members, and the Minister of Rural Development, Shri Pritiranjana Gharai were present for this event.

This was the first of its kind concert for the people of Kalinganagar. The 'HO' (local tribe) community also performed with Pt Shubhendra Rao and Vidushi Saskia Rao de Haas.

'Sa Re Gayein' serves as a valuable blueprint that can be taken forward in more states.



ISHAAN LEONARD RAO
Plays
AROUND THE WORLD ON 88 KEYS

For 18-year old Ishaan Leonard Rao - a prodigious, emerging talent in the world of music - there are no boundaries in music. Deeply rooted in Indian classical music and a classical piano repertoire, he bridges traditional and contemporary genres from around the world. He sees music as a unifying force that brings people together, regardless of their background, as the one universal form of expression. Like the ancient saying goes, Ishaan is trying to create a world he can live in!

Catch Ishaan's recitals

June 29: Bangalore International Centre

July 01: India International Centre, New Delhi

July 05: Depot 48, New Delhi

July 06: Nita Mukesh Ambani Cultural Centre, Mumbai

July 11: National Centre for Performing Arts, Mumbai

'Our appetite for dreams never stops ...'

Tom Cohen - the founder-conductor of The Jerusalem East & West Orchestra (TJO) - was in New Delhi as part of a collaborative concert with cello Maestro Saskia De Haas Rao and sitarist Pt. Shubhendra Rao to celebrate Israel Day.

TJO is a unique classical orchestra that blends the classical and traditional music from different parts of the world. In his interview, Tom shares his personal musical journey; about TJO's distinctiveness and how music is a universal bridge between and among countries

The Jerusalem East and West Orchestra (TJO) sounds like a one-of-its-kind orchestras!

Yes, our agenda was to create a new musical language that basically melds all the different styles that exist in our country whether they came from the Arab or Muslim countries or Europe or America ... to create it into one style that has the Arabic Makaam melodies of Moroccan or Egyptian or Turkish classics, together with jazz harmony and brass section. TJO turns 15 this year - I'm one of the founders of the orchestra.

What about your musical journey?

I have memories of music before I have any other memories! I think I've always loved music and I was very lucky to have grown up in a very diverse place musically. It was a poor neighbourhood in a desert town in southern Israel. But, I had very educated parents who wanted me to learn music. I caught many different styles of music - at home, in my neighbourhood, in the Conservatory I studied all these got melded.

My mum was a ballet dancer; she stopped her career when she was pregnant with me. My father was very musical but his parents never allowed him to play an instrument; so, for him also my playing was something that he's very much attached to.

My late paternal grandfather was not an educated musician but he was a performer - he had a love for singing; he would be at the centre of family events and parties, and he loved Egyptian and Iraqi music - that was his passion. His enjoyment of music; the Moroccan and Turkish music I heard from my neighbours; the classical music I studied at the conservatory, and the pop music I

was listening to as a kid - all came together for me to create a new genre.

I studied in the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance where I did my Bachelor's degree. At the academy I was playing western classical - Vivaldi, Bach, Mozart I was a wonder child playing with classical orchestras in Israel at a very young age, but I didn't enjoy it that much as I was missing the actual connect with the audience.

So, I also started my quest seeking for other styles of music to express myself. I did my whole journey through Balkan and Gypsy music all the way to Andalusian and Arab music. I found the mandolin, which was my instrument, becoming smaller and smaller, and I wanted to have a bigger palate to choose from! So, I started to compose and that became my career.

After 6-7 years of the Academy, my friends were conductors at western classical orchestras around places in Europe, and I had suddenly started to get invited to create orchestras - like this one here in Delhi!

I got invited to Montreal, Canada and formed an orchestra there; I created the 'Med' in Belgium, also in France with the same orchestration that we have in TJO.

Unfortunately, none of them really survived - Corona killed it! The one that did survive is the one that I created in Morocco.

Morocco ...?

Basically in Jerusalem when I was getting attacked (I mean not literally!) by purists for blending music and touching stuff that



I'm not allowed to, and saying how can I do this with tradition when suddenly I got an offer from Morocco. They said how come you do our music all over the world and not do it here – please come here and create an orchestra for us!

That was a really big move – it was time (in 2015) when Morocco didn't have diplomatic relations with Morocco, so, it was a very challenging and interesting experience. But, it also gave me this stand that what I do is recognised. After establishing it in Casa Blanca my career took a path that today I'm invited to western classical orchestras to make concerts of Arabic classic music, Andalusian

What is different in your orchestra and of a traditional western classical one?

In the basics it is the same. It's a full chamber orchestra with 35 musicians – strings, double bass, brass section, rhythm section, front soloists, etc. But, it also has, like in Morocco, traditional Arabic instruments. In TJO too, according to the concert, we add musicians, like if we do Turkish music we have the baklama, if we do Greek music we have the buzuki; Spanish music we use the flamenco guitar. Here in India, we added the sitar and tabla.

Our original idea was of fusion, and it's been realised beyond expectations!

TJO is popular in Israel?

Yes. It's very, very popular. You can tell by the fact that we do about 90 concerts a year. I have 6 conductors working under me. Interestingly, we've become really popular outside of Israel!

During Corona, everything went to the digital realm. Up until then, in Israel we had competition from other orchestras in the country – but, in the digital realm it was very different! Israel philharmonic was competing with the Berlin philharmonic or New York or others while we were standing alone in uniqueness!

Very quickly we got numbers – our organic numbers for our Youtube channel has 3 million hits a month – while the Israel philharmonic is on 4th place with consumers!

Of these, we have 30% views coming from Morocco, which is almost a million hits per month. Another 18% from Turkey – in

fact, we won the prestigious 'Altin Objectif' award in Turkey in the year in 2021. In 3rd place is Algeria with 14% - that's a country, by the way, with no diplomatic relations with Israel whatsoever!

Wow! So, your music is a real bridge?

Yes, our appetite for dreams never stops – yes, we dream of building bridges that transcend political views. I believe strongly that if everyone in my region will wake up one day and hear 'Oh, by the way there's peace!' - 95% people will say, 'Ok, cool, let's continue with our lives!'

But, somehow we are bound in this stupid dance, and really the job of music and the place it has is that it's a language we all talk, a language that the whole world shares, and it's a culture we share with all of our neighbours, and if we manage to put aside the conflicts that are basically of the past 100 years, then we have hundreds and hundreds of years of coexistence and creative culture together!

What about music education in schools in Israel?

Music education exists very strongly in Israel. It's very much inside the system. But, unfortunately it is almost only about western classical music.

One of the things that Saskia and Shubhendra are doing, this idea of teaching regional, traditional music from a very early age I want to also take forward. We have the mechanism in Israel, it's just not built for our curriculum. We need to write this curriculum, which we have started doing, but, we also need to find partners in the right establishments to help children learn, because the thing is that you either learn to play Bach or Abdul Wahab, and I would like students from a very early age to learn both languages and not have to choose, and not to have the idea that they are contradicting each other in any way.

Sangeet4All developed for Nursery up to Grade 12, serves schools and families throughout India by providing a music curriculum grounded in Indian classical music with a global outlook. The day a child starts school, s/he should experience the joy of music in their lives.

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