

Interview in Hindustan Times
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What was your earliest exposure to Indian music?

I saw Ravi Shankar and Alla Rakha perform at Carnegie Hall many times in New York City during my college years.

What really sparked your interest in Indian music?

The concerts of Ravi Shankar were mesmerizing. I liked how I felt during and after the music. The energy of the music and those musicians led me to be first a listener and later a student and performer of Indian classical music.

What made you take up the Indian violin as your main instrument?

I was already a Western classical violinist. When I met my first teacher, Acharya Roop Verma, a sitarist and disciple of Ali Akbar Khan and Ravi Shankar, I asked “Do I need to take up an Indian instrument?” He pointed at my violin, and to my relief, he said “That is an Indian instrument”.

You were struck by the meditative and emotive quality of Indian music. Can you please explain, and give details

During the alap, I found pauses between notes so meditative, they put me in the present, and I incorporate silence now into my workshops on music and meditation. In the gat and jalla, I experienced the intense emotion of this music. It was only a matter of time before I was to seek out a teacher. After living in London for a few years, where I saw violinist Yehudi Menuhin with Ravi Shankar, and listened to the recordings of John McLaughlin and the Mahavishnu Orchestra, which combine jazz with Indian music, I returned to New York to find my first teacher of Indian music and begin was to become a lifetime of study.

To be a fine violinist, how necessary is it to go through the classical training and repertoire?

I am so grateful for the time I put into studying Western classical music and overcoming challenges, and enjoying its beauty. I discovered the Partitas and Sonatas for unaccompanied violin by Bach with a teacher who understood the analytical, emotional and spiritual aspects of his music.

Which musicians have influenced your playing?

In my childhood, I especially liked David Oistrakh, Nathan Milstein and Isaac Stern. After his second recording of the solo violin works, Milstein said that he felt he had finally captured the improvisational nature of Bach. Every violinist I hear adds to my understanding of the varieties

of interpretation, and there are many wonderful young violinists today. In Indian classical music, I love the playing of my Guruji, V.G. Jog. He instructed me also to listen to vocalists, because “all our music comes from the vocal music”. I have come to love hearing the wonderful vocalists of Indian classical music, in recordings and live. I have also learned from Debaprasad and Sulaya Banerjee and Mili Bose in Kolkata, and currently with Krishna Mohan Bhatt of Jaipur.

Over the years you have brought different musical sides of yourself together. You play Western Classical, Indian, Celtic and improvisatory recitals. Indian classical music has an improvising tradition with an age-old repertory, which is different from Western classical music or Celtic. How do you approach these different forms and styles?

Beside contrasts, such as the fact that Western music has harmony while Indian emphasizes melody, there are many similarities, such as the rhythmic impulse of all three, and the use of pentatonic scales in Celtic music and many ragas. All have healing effects on the listener as well the player. V.G. Jog, after hearing me play solo Bach, encouraged me to play both Indian and Western classical music in the same concert, in order to show the listener the similarities and contrasts, and I add Celtic tunes. I started learning Celtic music at the Irish Arts Center in New York City at the time I began my study of Indian classical music.

And then how do you place them within different structures, say Indian or Western?

Both have energy and impulse, and meditative and emotive qualities, and a sense of improvisation, since even when notes are given, the phrasing, emphasis and emotion will be different in every performance. I had the opportunity to accompany the epic poem *From the Ganga to the Tay*, by Bashabi Fraser, in the Gorgie Church Edinburgh, Scotland in August, 2011. This poem is a conversation between the rivers of India and Scotland, read by two readers with the violin weaving Indian ragas with Scottish tunes. The concert was recorded into a CD which is available along with samples on my website at www.michaelbraudy.com.

You had studied with violin maestro Pt. V.G. Jog. Tell us something about your relationship with him and how he influenced your playing?

He felt like a grandfather to me, it was a touching relationship, in the way of Guru-Shishya, as I lived with him on my first visit to Kolkata. I loved his rhythmic nature and the inventiveness of his tans. He listened to my pitches or srutis, and helped me become more careful in my playing. He said that if one is not playing precisely in tune, even so slightly that listeners cannot discern it, the effect of the music will not be there. During the time I was with him, I also came to understand more how to listen to music in the present. It was an inspiration to me how Indian listeners listen to music, responding in appreciation in the moment rather waiting until the end of a performance as we are taught to do when listening to Western classical music. Now I listen more in the present as I play Western music as well.

Tell us something about your collaboration with noted veena player and medical doctor, P. Bharathi, who has pioneered music for therapy in India?

I met Dr. Bharathi on my first visit to Pondicherry, taking a break from study in Kolkata. She had made several CDs of music for health, and asked me to record with her. I returned for two years and we recorded three CDs together. The musical interaction between us in the studio was magical, and the intention for healing was there in us both. We made CD's for the heart (*Sumanas*), for energy (*Vridhhi*), and for peace (*Awakening Peace*), the latter recorded right after 9/11.

Dr. Bharathi conducted clinical tests with our *Sumanas (Ragas for the Heart)* in Chennai in 2002, and the results were statistically significant for the lowering of blood pressure. I would like to do more clinical tests of our and other music in the future. I also have made a video using Indian music for patients with dementia at Beth Abraham Hospital in the Bronx, New York City, with musical therapist Benedikte Scheiby, which she uses today with patients there.

My Scottish fiddler-friend Alpha Monro, who has written beautiful tunes that I love to play, has also investigated the healing effects of Celtic and Indian music.

You played at the bedside in health care facilities. Why?

I wanted to give comfort and healing, and music is healing not only physically, but also emotionally, mentally and spiritually. I had met sitarist Trina Purohit Roy in Shantiniketan, who played in hospitals in Germany, and she impressed on me her observation that the performer's intention and the relationship between musician and patient is as important as what music one chooses to play. I played many genres for the patients in the rooms, including Indian and Western classical and Celtic folk.

What was the outcome?

People were very grateful and I found it opened my compassion. Once a doctor in the hallway came by a patient's room where I was playing and said "Come and play out here, we need you as well." One of most moving moments was playing for a patient in a coma, with the family by her side. They assured me that they knew she could hear the music even though not awake or responding to it externally and we all felt this to be the case, and the music helped to unite the family with her and all of us in that hospital room.

Do you perform so-called crossover works with classical players?

Yes, and I performed an Indian raga with Celtic tunes at the concert Friday, Feb. 24, 2012 at the American Center in Kolkata with Indian violinist Indradeep Ghosh, playing a composition in Rag Kafi into which I wove the Celtic tunes, as we had done in New York City. I am involved in a recording project in Kolkata with Indradeep and violinist Surjo Sengupta, which will include Indian and Celtic music crossovers. In New York City I play jazz and Indian music with guitarist George Kormendi, and we often improvise in an open style. I accompany storyteller Diane Wolkstein on stories of the world.

What do you think about the records you have made so far and which one satisfies you most?

A favorite CD of mine is the one of the ragas for health series with Dr. P. Bharathi called *Vridhhi (Ragas for Growth)*, because of the lyrical opening together, and the energy of the sections, and it was our first in the studio together. I also like the concert recording of the poem *From the Ganga to the Tay*, which gave me a chance to combine Indian and Scottish music in an innovative way.

Forthcoming projects

I plan to play more for children in schools, to inspire and encourage them to play themselves. I want to give more “Music for Relaxation and Health” workshops, and offer it in companies in the US as I did at Syntel in Mumbai and Pune where it was well-received. Having given several radio interviews on music, health and meditation, I plan to do more of these in the coming year. There are the projects of cross-over music I have already mentioned. And of course, I will continue to perform.

Thank you for this opportunity to share my musical life and thoughts with you.

Michael Braudy