

asian music and dance

Pulse

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Magazine

INSIDE

Listener's Guide

Rāga in popular music

In The Frame

Sufi: Zen

Reviews

Malavika Sarukkai, Aakash Odedra, Sanjukta Sinha, Seeta Patel, Kamala Devam, Hetain Patel, Chandralekha Group, Beeja, Manganiyar Musicians, Sunil Kant Gupta/Jyotsna Srikanth, AR Rahman, Soumik Datta/Shivkumar Sharma, Zakir Hussain/Ranjit Barot/Sabir Khan, Ravi Shankar

Summer 2010 – Issue 109

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Dance in Drawing

Two artists one passion

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Kathak innovator

Piali Ray
Premier Promoter

Geetanjali Lal
In Conversation

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London performances in collaboration with Red Earth: www.redearth.co.uk

July
Winchester Hat Fair: www.hatfair.co.uk
Milton Keynes International Festival: www.ifmiltonkeynes.org
Stockton International River Festival: www.sirf.co.uk

September
Mintfest: www.lakesalive.org
Bristol Do: www.thebristoldo.com

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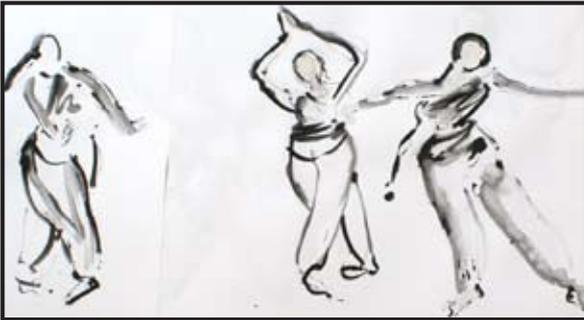


Contents



Start your Pen!

Activate your TalkingPEN with Issue 109 by touching the play symbol with your PEN



6 Dance art synergy

Two artists who capture movement



10 Sonia Sabri

Taking kathak forward



17 Sufi:Zen

Dance in the great outdoors

Cover Photo – Terence Lewis, contemporary/Bollywood image by Subodh Poddar

This Page – Photos: 1 – Kali Chandrasegaram, Sangeeta Ghosh, Sonia Sabri by Noelle Williamson / 2 – Sonia Sabri | Photo: Simon Richardson / 3 – Sufi: Zen | Photo: Simon Richardson

Upfront

- 2 **Editorial and Letters**
- 3 **News**
- 4 **Listings**

Features

- 6 **Dance in Drawing**
Isabel Putinja gets an insight into the inspirations and technicalities of drawing movement with visual artists Subodh Poddar and Noelle Williamson.
- 9 **Listener's Guide**
In the concluding chapter of the eight-part series Dharambair and Surmeet Singh take a look at how raga is influencing popular music.
- 10 **Geetanjali Lal**
Abhay Shankar Mishra talks to the Queen of the Jaipur Gharana.
- 12 **In the Frame**
Akademi's Sufi:Zen production captured by the lens of Simon Richardson at London's Southbank Centre.
- 14 **Sonia Sabri**
Shezad Kahlil talks to the dancer who is pushing the boundaries of the form with every new production.

- 17 **Young Pulse**
Hiten Mistry who gave his arangetram recently is interviewed by Kavya Kaushik.

- 18 **Piali Ray**
The director of sampad shares her experiences of setting up one of UK's most dynamic South Asian art's agencies.

Reviews

Dance

- 20 **Ganga Nitya Vaahini** (Malavika Sarukkai)
Triple Bill (Aakash Odedra/ Sanjukta Sinha, Seeta Patel/ Kamala Devam, Hetain Patel)
- 21 **Sharira** (Chandralekha Group)
From the Heart (Beeja)

Music

- 22 **Manganiyar Seduction** (Manganiyar Musicians)
Darbar Festival (Sunil Kant Gupta/Jyotsna Srikanth)
- 23 **Music of AR Rahman** (London Philharmonic Orchestra with guest artists)
Darbar Festival (Soumik Datta/ Shiv Kumar Sharma)
- 24 **Shraddanjali** (Zakir Hussain, Ranjit Barot, Sabir Khan)
Nine Decades Volume 1 (Ravi Shankar)

asian music and dance
Pulse

Summer 2010 * Issue no 109
ISSN 1476-6019

Supported by

kadam connecting
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Audio Content sponsored by

A&B

Published by Kadam Asian Dance and Music
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Annual subscription £30 with free delivery.
Pulse TalkingPEN is priced at £14 with free delivery.
Cheques payable to Kadam,
c/o The Hat Factory, 65-67 Bute Street, Luton LU1 2EY.
For online subscriptions and payments please visit
www.pulseconnects.com

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Letter from the Editor

Dear Readers

We have come to expect a high standard of photographs as descriptors of dance, and these remain our principal tool in remembering and connecting with dance. A less common media is drawing and painting. Sometimes the reduction of dance movement to a few essential lines gives a more intense experience than detailed representation. The minimalism of **Subodh Poddar's** calligraphic approach (cover), gives an interesting contrast to **Noelle Williamson's** freehand runny line (p.8) which can incorporate ink blobs that add to form and texture.

Both artists are attracted to dance of all styles: Western and Indian, classical and contemporary. They do not make a distinction – perhaps rather than the outward form, they are capturing the flow of energy. As Ash Mukherjee put so succinctly in his interview (issue 108), “The only thing really pure about dance is energy.”

The First Lady of kathak dance, **Kumudini Lakhia**, recipient of the 2010 Padma Shri award, is captured in a cameo by Williamson. It's a rare treat as Kumudini gave up the stage to develop the form. Today she is hailed for her contemporary approach to choreography and producing a new generation of artists like **Daksha Seth** and **Aditi Mangaldas**. Picasso-like she continues to re-invent herself (p.20).

In the week of the Naad Festival of Kathak (12–13 June, Bhavan, London), we have an interview with **Sonia Sabri**, one of the UK's most original interpreters of this form. She has absorbed the grace and finesse of her Guru **Nahid Siddiqui** and has continued to learn with prominent teachers and choreographers. She mentions **Geetanjali Lal** (p.10). A magnificent photograph taken by Avinash Pasricha shows Geetanjali in the glory and dignity of her age.

Lastly, we celebrate the re-opening of the much-loved **mac**, home to **sampad** and its Director **Piali Ray**. An exhibition tracing the history of sampad over the last twenty years runs at mac until the end of August. A trip down to see the exhibition and enjoy the park will make a great summer outing.

We wish **Pandit Ravi Shankar** a happy 90th birthday and thank him for his life dedicated to giving us glimpses of the greatness of our musical tradition.

Let's sing and dance to propitiate the gods to grant us a long, hot summer.

Sanjeevini Dutta
Editor



Photo: Rachel Cherry

Line between earthly and spiritual

Vertical Road, the latest contemporary ensemble piece from Akram Khan Dance Company premiers at The Curve in Leicester on 16th September, followed by premiers in Germany and London's Sadler's Wells. Based on the universal myth of angels, which exists across cultures, the dancers too are drawn from a wide geographic area including North Africa and the Middle East.

The Khan-Sawhney collaboration continues in *Vertical Road*, with producer Farooq Chaudhry lining up an impressive list of co-producing houses and the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage.

The Company will be in residence developing the production, at Jerwood House, DanceEast in July, and in August at the Curve in Leicester. CICD taking advantage of this wonderful opportunity, have arranged a kathak workshop with Akram Khan on Sunday 8th August at the Curve Theatre. For further information contact CICD on 0116 2552862



Multiple images Kumudini Lakhia by Noelle Williamson

Pulse salutes Kumudini Lakhia

Kathak exponent Kumudini Lakhia was honoured with a Padma Bhushan conferred by President Pratibha Patil on 7 April at Rashtrapati Bhawan. Her career spanning sixty years has been dedicated to the deep study of kathak dance and to shaping the form in a contemporary context.

This spirit of enquiry and the creative output has not ceased and Kumiben, (as she is affectionately called), has produced a brand new piece as recently as March 2010. *Tathaa*, premiered at the Alchemy Festival in London's South Bank, touched the Pulse reviewer with its 'freshness and vitality'. Picasso-like (who created into his 90s), Kumiben continues to find new and original ways to play with her beloved kathak and make it reveal its secrets. Pulse salutes this indomitable spirit.

First Symphony, 90th Birthday

Is there no end to Panditji's energy and creativity? Pandit Ravi Shankar has been edging towards the creation of a symphony for decades: first came his virtuosic duets for sitar and violin written for performance with Yehudi Menuhin, then the two thematically accomplished Concertos for Sitar and Orchestra. Now in the year of his 90th birthday, a fully-fledged symphony composed by Panditji will be unveiled at the Royal Festival Hall on 1 July 2010. The new composition will be played by the London Symphony Orchestra (with Anoushka Shankar on sitar), in a programme that will also feature Philip Glass's Violin Concerto No. 1 and Adam's Shaker Loops. The event is awaited with great excitement by music lovers of all persuasions.

We wish Ravi Shankar many happy returns on his 90th birthday.

FREE 1st July 6.15pm–6.45pm | Royal Festival Hall An introduction to the music of Ravi Shankar.



21st Century space image courtesy mac

A twenty-first-century space

On 1 May 2010, sampad and mac opened the doors to their newly-refurbished centre at Cannon Hill Park, Birmingham. mac, which is steeped in South Asian arts' history, now shares the expanded and much-improved space with sampad, the dynamic South Asian arts agency led by Piali Ray (see pg 18).

The original buildings, developed in the 60s, have been re-imagined as a totally

integrated centre. The new spaces include a purpose-designed gallery, a theatre with increased capacity, a brand new performing arts studio with retractable seating for 150 and the addition of a dedicated visual and audio media studio with capacity for live capture and transmission to and from any other area of the house. Further, the building is wifi-enabled throughout, bringing it right up to date. Particular attention has also been paid to making mac fully accessible to everyone.

An exhibition, *The sampad Story*, mounted in the new gallery and marking the 20th anniversary of the company will run until 29 August.



Big Dance image on site | Photo: courtesy Shrishti

Big Dance Gets Bigger

The phrase Big Dance was coined well before the current government's Big Society idea. Established in 2006 in the capital city by the Greater London Authority in partnership with ACE, this bi-annual Festival leads up to the Cultural Olympiad 2012. This year London hosts an ambitious programme to get the maximum number of people taking up dance as art, recreation or exercise, between 3 and 11 July involving hallowed institutions such as English National Ballet to the local bharatanatyam group. A highlight is creating a human dance chain spreading from London's Southbank Centre to Trafalgar Square. Choreographer Luca Silvestrini will direct five co-choreographers for the Big World Dance on Saturday 10 July 2010. You can upload your favourite dance moves at www.danceatlas.org

Fifty organisations and individuals across the capital have been awarded micro-grants to help stage their events. Shrishti will be running Bend It Like Bengal, a football-themed creative dance activity, with boys and young men across the borough of Harrow in the Big Dance week.

Big Dance Goes East, the celebration in the six counties of the Eastern region, also has a theme of boys and men dancing. In Luton on 3 July Ash Mukherjee, runner-up to BBC 3's *Move like Michael*, will lead the crowds in MJ's iconic *Man in the Mirror* number. The event is jointly promoted by Kadam and Luton Culture.

Ed Vaizey for Culture

Ed Vaizey, has been appointed Under-Secretary of State for Culture, a post he held formerly as a Shadow minister. Vaizey is the son of the late Lord Vaizey, a life peer, and Marina Vaizey, a well-known art historian. An Oxford graduate he worked as a political researcher, before training and practising as a barrister. He has also worked in public relations and journalism.

The new government has announced that it will increase the proportion of the Lottery funding to the three good causes, art, heritage and sport from the current 16.6 per cent to 20 per cent. Ed Vaizey was invited in January by the Asian Music Circuit to meet with members of the South Asian arts organisations.



Dance Vote logo | Courtesy Dance UK

Dance Vote 2010

Dance UK, the national voice of dance, has been politically active advocating for dance among the

Parliamentary candidates in the run-up to the general election. At the website www.dancevote.com members were invited to log on, check out their local constituency candidates and fire off an email containing a pre-written message with a personal addition if so desired. Responses to the emails were put up on the website. Shame that neither **Jeremy Hunt**, Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport nor **Ed Vaizey**, Minister for Culture were among those who responded.

Now that the election is over, it's time to start lobbying the new MPs. Dance UK has said that the system will stay alive but obviously switch to direct contact with Members of Parliament instead of candidates.

Progression routes for young CAT dancers

The Centre for Advanced Training, a government-backed programme to pick up gifted and talented students and fast-track their training, has just completed its first year of operation. Some may be aware that DanceXchange in partnership with sampad has been hosting the South Asian strand of this national scheme. The auditions for next year's recruits have been taking place at various centres over the past month.

As part of the CAT scheme's responsibility for the future outlook of its graduates, a research commissioned by the lead bodies points to the importance of placements of students with dance companies and agencies and mentorship by professional artists. There is even a recommendation to create "a careers document focusing on the South Asian Dance sector specifically, to encourage dance to be considered as an exciting and viable career option rather than simply a valued recreational activity".

Hope for Milapfest

Milapfest, the Indian Arts Development Trust, have moved to a new home on the Creative Campus of Liverpool Hope University, in the year

that they celebrate their 25th anniversary.

The Capstone Building, where the offices are located, houses rehearsal rooms, a recording studio and the Hope Theatre, Liverpool's newest performance space. Milapfest plans to promote more performance and offer wider education opportunities for Liverpool, while continuing its commitment to other partners and regions.

Vice-Chancellor Gerald Pillay marked the new partnership by lighting a lamp at the beginning of a dazzling evening of kathak and kuchipudi performed by Sonia Sabri and Arunima Kumar on 25 March as part of the opening celebrations.



Bireshwar Gautam | Photo: Vipul Sangoi

In Memory of Bireshwar Gautam (1962–2009)

The Asian Music Circuit will be holding a seminar on Tuesday 27 July, in memory of Bireshwar Gautam whose tragic and untimely death last year left the art world bereft of a unique and brilliant talent. Amid AMC's 2010 *Sounds of Asia* Summer School programme at the Royal Academy of Music, the commemoration will mark the life of an artist who UK audiences had the privilege of knowing through his tours of baithak thumri and his central role in the play *The Dying Song*. Bireshwar Gautam's mastery of dance and song was perfectly demonstrated by the depth of expression he evoked through body and voice in his rendition of baithak thumri.

Through a student recital, film and testimonials by

colleagues and friends, AMC invite you to celebrate the life of a man who will be sorely missed as a dedicated artist, great teacher and trusted friend.

To submit a news story or an event listing, please email editorial@pulseconnects.com

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JUNE

- 2 **Music** | Gurdev Singh: sarod
Recital Room, Armstrong Building, Newcastle University . www.kalapremi.org
- 3 **Storytelling** | Peter Chand
mac, Birmingham . www.macarts.co.uk
- 4 **Music** | South Asian Music Degree Performance
Brunei Gallery Lecture Theatre, SOAS, London . www.soas.ac.uk/music/
- Dance** | Kathaknatyam: Quincy Chareles, Insha Ahmad-Pavez
Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, London . www.bhavan.net
- 6 **Music** | 'O Shakantala' Debashish Bhattacharya: slide guitar
Purcell Room, Southbank Centre, London . www.southbankcentre.co.uk
- 11 **Music** | Milun: Indo-Irish Music
Seven Arts, Leeds . www.saa-uk.org.uk
- 12 **Dance** | Rama & Ravana' FIPA
Bradford Mela, Peel Park . www.bradfordmela.org.uk
- Dance** | Naad festival of Kathak: Sarita Kalele, Sonia Sabri, Sujata Banerjee, Abhay Shankar Mishra
Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, London . www.naadarts.org.uk / www.bhavan.net
- Music** | 'O Shakantala' Debashish Bhattacharya: slide guitar
Bridgewater Hall, Manchester . www.bridgewater-hall.co.uk
- Music** | 'O Shakantala' Debashish Bhattacharya: slide guitar
The Capstone, Liverpool Hope University . www.milapfest.com
- Music** | Mid-day Mantra – Milun: Indo-Irish music
Symphony Hall, Birmingham . www.thsh.co.uk
- 13 **Dance** | Rama & Ravana' FIPA
Bradford Mela, Peel Park . www.bradfordmela.org.uk
- Dance** | The Magic of Odissi: Sujata Mohapatra
The Capstone, Liverpool Hope University . www.milapfest.com
- Dance** | Naad festival of Kathak: Saberi Misra, Gauri Sharma Tripathi, Kajal Sharma, Padmashri Pratap Pawar
Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, London . www.naadarts.org.uk / www.bhavan.net
- Music** | 'O Shakantala' Debashish Bhattacharya: slide guitar
The Sage, Gateshead . www.thesagegateshead.org
- 14 **Music** | Remembering Jayashree: memorial concert
Seven Arts, Leeds . www.saa-uk.org.uk
- 18 **Music** | Operashots: 'Entanglement' Nitin Sawhney
Linbury Studio Theatre, Royal Opera House, London . www.roh.org.uk
- Dance** | The Magic of Odissi: Sujata Mohapatra
Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, London . www.bhavan.net
- 19 **Music** | Bengali Music Programme
Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, London . www.bhavan.net
- Music** | Operashots: 'Entanglement' Nitin Sawhney
Linbury Studio Theatre, Royal Opera House, London . www.roh.org.uk
- Music** | 'O Shakantala' Debashish Bhattacharya: slide guitar
The Capstone, Liverpool Hope University . www.milapfest.com
- 20 **Dance** | Nature's Icons, FIPA
Glasgow Mela, Kelvingrove Park . www.seeglasgow.com/glasgowmela
- Dance** | The Magic of Odissi: Sujata Mohapatra
The Lowry, Salford Quays . www.thelowry.com
- 21 **Dance** | Arunima Kumar: kuchipudi
The Nehru Centre, London . www.nehrucentre.org.uk
- 24 **Music** | Operashots: 'Entanglement' Nitin Sawhney
Linbury Studio Theatre, Royal Opera House, London . www.roh.org.uk
- 25 **Music** | Operashots: 'Entanglement' Nitin Sawhney
Linbury Studio Theatre, Royal Opera House, London . www.roh.org.uk
- Dance** | Gopika Varma: Mohiniyattam
The Nehru Centre, London . www.nehrucentre.org.uk
- Music** | Taal Vadya Kacheri: Shahbaz Hussain (tabla), R.N Prakash (midangam) and R.R. Prathap (ghatam)
Seven Arts, Leeds . www.saa-uk.org.uk
- 26 **Music** | Hindustani Vocal Music: Upendra Bhat
Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, London . www.bhavan.net
- Music** | Surdhvani – Slide Guitar Odyssey: Barun Kumar Pal
Arena Theatre, Wolverhampton . www.arenatheatre.info
- Music** | Operashots: 'Entanglement' Nitin Sawhney
Linbury Studio Theatre, Royal Opera House, London . www.roh.org.uk
- Music** | Tarang
The Capstone, Liverpool Hope University . www.milapfest.com
- Music** | A Musical Soirée: Sitar and Tabla student showcase
The Yoga Space, Leeds . www.saa-uk.org.uk
- 27 **Music** | Under One Sky, Srishti Yuva Culture
Harrow Arts Centre . www.harrowarts.com

JULY

- 1 **Music** | London Symphony Orchestra, Ravi Shankar Symphony (world premiere)
Royal Festival Hall, Southbank Centre, London . www.southbankcentre.co.uk
- Poetry** | Mushaira: the poems of Rabindranath Tagore and Allama Muhammad Iqbal
mac, Birmingham . www.macarts.co.uk
- 1-4 **Dance** | Counterpoint', Shobana Jeyasingh Dance Company
Somerset House, London . www.shobanajeyasingh.co.uk
- 3 **Dance** | Inner Rhythm, Sujata Banerjee Dance Company with Uzambezi Arts
The Bloomsbury Theatre, London . www.thebloomsbury.com
- Dance** | Srishti Yuva Culture, International Youth Arts Festival
The Rose Theatre, Kingston . www.iyafestival.org.uk
- 4 **Music** | Mridangam Concert: Bala & students
Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, London . www.bhavan.net
- 5 **Music** | Nine Lives – William Dalrymple, the Bauls of Bengal and Susheela Raman
The Sage, Gateshead . www.thesagegateshead.org
- 9 **Music** | Sarod, Aashish Khan – Freedom Now
Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, London . www.bhavan.net
- 10 **Dance** | Srishti Yuva Culture, London Youth Dance Day
The Scoop, More London . www.morelondon.com/scoop.html
- Dance** | Srishti School of Dance: annual summer showcase
Harrow Arts Centre . www.srishti.co.uk
- Dance & Music** | 'Mini Ustaads & Srimatis': dance and music student showcase
The Yoga Space, Leeds . www.saa-uk.org.uk
- Dance & Music** | Rajasthani Folk, Dhol Foundation, Bombay Baja
Mouth of the Tyne Festival, Tynemouth & South Shields . www.northtyneside.gov.uk/mouthofthetyne
- Music** | Milun – 'Indo-Irish music'
The Sage, Gateshead . www.thesagegateshead.org
- 11 **Dance** | Srishti "Bend It...." as part of Watch This Space
National Theatre, South Bank, London . www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/wts
- Dance** | Utsav, outdoor bharatanatyam performance
Parker's Piece, Cambridge . www.sanskriti.org.uk
- Music** | The Rajesthani Manganiyar Group
Oakwell Hall, Birstall . www.manasamitra.com
- 14 **Dance** | Colours of Kathak: Nilima Devi and CIDC dancers
Nehru Centre, London . www.nehrucentre.org.uk
- 16 **Dance** | Gulmohar: showcase by students of Srishti and Urja Desai Thakore
Jackson's Lane, Highgate . www.jacksonslane.org.uk
- Dance** | Odissi New Directions
Nehru Centre, London . www.nehrucentre.org.uk
- Music** | Divya Reddy and R N Prakash: veena and mridangam
The Carriageworks Theatre, Leeds . www.manasamitra.com
- 17 **Dance** | Rama & Ravana, FIPA
Southampton Mela, Hoglands Park . www.artasia.org.uk/southampton-mela-festival
- Music** | Mid-day Mantra— Soumik Datta: sarod
Symphony Hall, Birmingham . www.symphonyhall.co.uk
- 22 **Dance** | Srishti 'Bend it....' as part of Milton Keynes Festival
Midsummer Place, Milton Keynes . www.ifmiltonkeynes.org
- 24 **Dance** | Srishti 'Bend it....' & 'These Are a Few of My Favourite Things'
Ludlow Assembly Rooms . www.ludlowassemblyrooms.co.uk
- Music** | A R Rahman
The O2 Arena . www.theo2.co.uk
- 25 **Music** | A R Rahman
Wembley Arena . www.wembleyarena.co.uk
- Dance & Music** | Sampad arts Mela: Utsav
mac, Birmingham . www.macarts.co.uk
- 26 **Seminar** | Music & Nature, as part of AMC Summer School
Royal Academy of Music, London . www.amc.org.uk
- 27 **Dance** | In Memory of Bireswar Gautam 1962–2009
Royal Academy of Music, London . www.amc.org.uk
- 29 **Music** | AMC Summer School Concerts: Rajasthani Folk Music & Taiko Drumming
Purcell Room, Southbank Centre, London . www.southbankcentre.co.uk
- 30 **Music** | AMC Summer School Concerts: Satish Prakash Qamar Ensemble & Chinese
& Japanese Strings
Purcell Room, Southbank Centre, London . www.southbankcentre.co.uk
- 31 **Music** | AMC Summer School Concerts: Uday Bhawalkar (dhrupad) & Sunanda Sharma (thumri), Manik Mude (pakhawaj)
Purcell Room, Southbank Centre, London . www.southbankcentre.co.uk
- Dance** | Rama & Ravana, FIPA
Luton Mela, Wardown Park . www.luton.gov.uk/mela
- Music** | Karnatic Vocal, Balamurali Krishna
Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, London . www.bhavan.net

AUGUST

- 1 **Music** | AMC Summer School Concerts: Rajan & Sajan Misra: khyal
Purcell Room, Southbank Centre, London . www.southbankcentre.co.uk
- Dance** | Rama & Ravana, FIPA
Luton Mela, Wardown Park . www.luton.gov.uk/mela
- Dance** | Nature's Icons, FIPA
Croydon Mela, Lloyd Park . www.croydonsummerfestival.org
- Music & Dance** | Hindustani Vocal & Kathak: Esha Bandyopadhyay & Vaswati Misra
Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, London . www.bhavan.net
- 4 **Dance** | 'Bend it....' as part of Fusion 2010
Harewood House, Leeds . www.girlguiding100years.org.uk/fusion.aspx
- Music** | Anoushka Shankar Project
- 7-8 **Music** | Bhavan Summer School participant's performance
Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, London . www.bhavan.net
- 22 **Music** | Arun Ghosh Quartet
The Victoria Theatre, Halifax . www.calderdale.gov.uk/victoria
- 29 **Dance** | Rama & Ravana, FIPA
Belfast Mela, Botanic Gardens . www.belfastcity.gov.uk
- SEPTEMBER**
- 24 **Music** | Ranajit Sengupta in Concert: sarod
Seven Arts . www.saa-uk.org

EXHIBITIONS

The sampad Storyat mac, Birmingham
1 May – 30 August . www.macarts.co.uk

SUMMER SCHOOLS

- Music** | SOAS World Music Summer School 2010
26 June – 9 July | College Buildings, Russell Square, London . www.soas.ac.uk/music/summermusicsschool/
Exploring the basics of Indian Classical music for melody instruments
- Music** | SOAS World Music Summer School 2010
7 – 9 July | College Buildings, Russell Square, London . www.soas.ac.uk/music/summermusicsschool/
Tabla – an introduction to the basic drumming techniques and rhythmic structures
- Music** | 'I See Music' Community Summer School 2010
7 – 14 July | Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha, Leeds . www.saa-uk.org.uk
Beginners course featuring Sitar, Santoor, Tabla, Vocals and Bansuri
- Dance & Music** | Bhavan 2010 Summer School
17 July – 7 August | Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, London . www.bhavan.net
Carnatic & hindustani vocals, Mridangam, Tabla, Sitar, Violin, Bharatanatyam & Kathak
- Dance** | Unlocking Creativity 3
22 July – 25 July | UK Centre for Carnival Arts, Luton . www.pulseconnects.com
Choreography course
- Music** | Dartington International Summer School
24 July – 28 August | Dartington Hall, Totnes, Devon . www.dartington.org
Demystifying Indian Music – an introductory course for musicians of all backgrounds
- Music** | Asian Music Circuit Summer School 2010
24 July – 1 August | The Royal Academy of Music, London . www.amc.org.uk
Indian Classical Music courses in Khyal, Dhrupad & Thumri plus Japanese music courses
- Dance** | Dance India 2010 – Milapfest
12 – 13 August | The Lowry, Salford Quays . www.danceindia.org.uk
Introduction to Indian classical dance
- Dance** | Dance India 2010 – Milapfest
15 – 22 August | The Lowry, Salford Quays . www.danceindia.org.uk
Kathak, Bharatanatyam, Odissi & Kuchipudi at beginners, intermediate and advanced levels

Dance in Drawing: energy captured

Subodh Poddar in Mumbai, India and Noelle Williamson in Cheshire, UK have both been smitten by the romance of capturing the energy fields that build up around dancers. Between them they use pencil, inks, charcoal and watercolours. Isabel Putinja asks them, what is the draw?

Words by Isabel Putinja

The inspiration suddenly came to artist Subodh Poddar during a performance in Mumbai in December 1988. Four great dancers, Birju Maharaj, Kelucharan Mohapatra, Sanjukta Panigrahi and Sonal Mansingh were all taking to the stage on the same evening. "This was an electrifying experience and the first time I felt like drawing dance live," he reveals. Using a black pen and the bright red invitation card as his canvas, he attempted to capture the energy of the dance movements he was seeing on stage. Soon both sides of the card were covered with his sketches. He then borrowed his neighbour's card and continued drawing. This was the birth of Subodh's project Dancescapes and from that day on, he has never attended a dance performance without his sketchbook and pen. Over the past twenty years he has had the opportunity to sketch many celebrated dancers including Mrinalini Sarabhai, Birju Maharaj, Kelucharan Mohapatra, Sanjukta Panigrahi, Malavika Sarukkai, Astad Deboo, Saswati Sen and Sujata Mohapatra to name only a few.

Different art forms have often inspired each other. Sometimes they even cross-pollinate and create another artwork together. When drawing or painting dance, the artist can become a part of the performance, taking the creative energy of a momentary dance movement and capturing it on a canvas for posterity. Noelle Williamson discovered that "capturing a moment of dance on paper requires great concentration, some adrenaline and, if successful, is

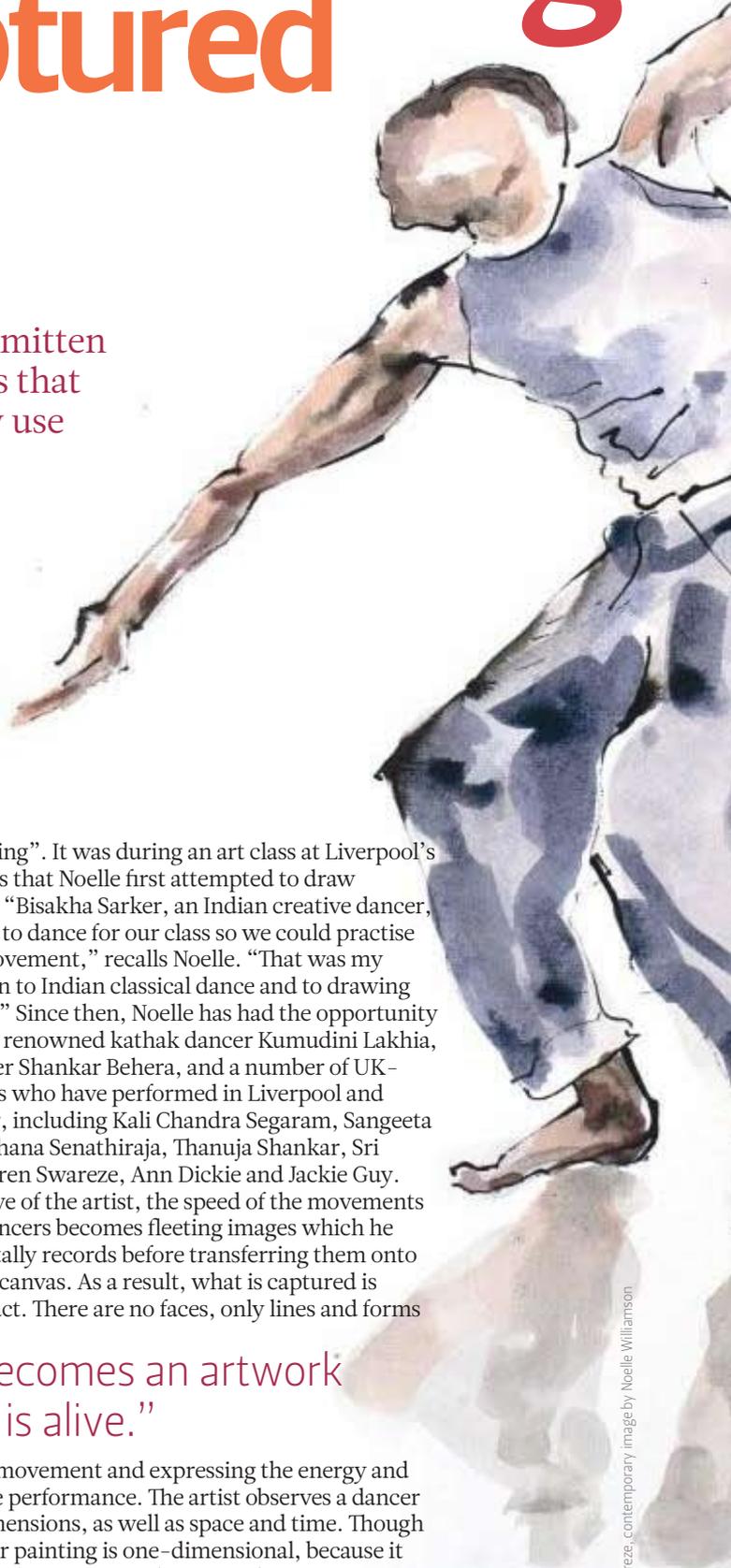
very satisfying". It was during an art class at Liverpool's John Moores that Noelle first attempted to draw movement. "Bisakha Sarker, an Indian creative dancer, was invited to dance for our class so we could practise drawing movement," recalls Noelle. "That was my introduction to Indian classical dance and to drawing movement." Since then, Noelle has had the opportunity to paint the renowned kathak dancer Kumudini Lakhia, odissi dancer Shankar Behera, and a number of UK-based artists who have performed in Liverpool and Manchester, including Kali Chandra Segaram, Sangeeta Ghosh, Archana Senathiraja, Thanuja Shankar, Sri Sarkar, Darren Swareze, Ann Dickie and Jackie Guy.

In the eye of the artist, the speed of the movements made by dancers becomes fleeting images which he or she mentally records before transferring them onto the page or canvas. As a result, what is captured is often abstract. There are no faces, only lines and forms

"...it becomes an artwork which is alive."

suggesting movement and expressing the energy and mood of the performance. The artist observes a dancer in three dimensions, as well as space and time. Though a drawing or painting is one-dimensional, because it also records the essence and energy of movement it becomes an artwork which is alive and not static.

"As soon as I have settled down with my paper



Darren Swareze, contemporary image by Noelle Williamson



Top Left Mrinalini Sarabhai, Top right Jaychandran, Bottom Right Prashant Shah images by Subodh Poddar

and inks,” explains Noelle, “I am totally engaged in watching the dancer... looking at the beauty of line or for an unusual angle and deciding where to place the image on the page.” Subodh agrees that capturing fast-moving dance on a canvas requires “intensified concentration”. While an art student at the JJ Institute of Applied Arts in Mumbai, he would diligently work on the twenty sketches he was required to produce every day during his long morning commute on Mumbai’s suburban trains. Using his pen and sketchbook, he would capture the scenes of everyday life he caught glimpses of through the train window. This is how he learned to capture these blurred, passing images, which he feels is no different to drawing fast-moving dance.

Both artists prefer to draw live rather than from photographs, as it gives their work a freshness and spontaneity, though this is not without its challenges. “I prefer to draw live as the results are definitely the most spontaneous and the advantage is that I am unable to control the image,” explains Noelle. “The challenge is to reproduce on paper an impression of a moment of movement in the most spontaneous manner possible. Some drawings I work on away from the performance and then I would use preliminary sketches and photographs for reference. The results are less impressionistic but I am able to think more about composition and colour. I may use a stand-in model to correct the foreshortening on an arm or leg for example. These studies are not as immediate as ‘live’ drawings but within them I still try to capture a

moment in time.”

“My work is completely spontaneous,” echoes Subodh. “Art is composition. So the first challenge is to finish even before I’ve started, as my sketches happen in seconds. I have to be able to see the image before putting pen to paper. I make rapid drawings with a brush on paper, fast, one after the other, continuously. I have to eliminate unwanted details like costume and jewellery, to be able to get to the essence of a dancer’s body. I work only in black so the elimination of colour is also a challenge.”

“He would capture the scenes of everyday life... through the train window.”

Each artist has an individualised way of working with different tools and materials which is often influenced by the dance form being depicted as well as the creative environment. “I use pen on paper most of the time when I’m sketching dance performances from my seat,” explains Subodh. “But when I visit a dance school or a workshop, I carry my easel, paper and ink and use various kinds of brushes to suit the dancer’s body language. I love the effect of Chinese ink on rice paper. But the slow-drying ink is very difficult to manage.” Noelle also uses ink diluted with water and applied with a brush. “For the lines I use a wooden stick rather than a pen as I find a stick gives a more lively



Bisakha Sarker image by Noelle Williamson

line. I also usually draw while seated on the floor.”

Both artists have sketched a variety of dance forms and find that each has their own challenges. “I am willing to attempt most forms of dance,” says Noelle, “Indian, modern dance or fusion. I find Indian dance with its defined movements the most challenging.” Subodh is attracted to contemporary dance forms: “I

“The advantage (of live drawing) is that I am unable to control the image.”

like to draw Western contemporary dance because they only make forms with their bodies unlike Indian classical dance which is mainly narrating stories. But I don’t get many opportunities to sketch Western dance.”

If Subodh and Noelle’s artwork is inspired by dance, can the artists’ work inspire dancers in return? How do dancers react to their work? “I think I can safely say that all dancers are interested in seeing a painting of their dance,” affirms Noelle, “though I always emphasise that it is an impression.” Subodh recalls

the reactions he has received from some of the famous stalwarts of Indian classical dance. “Mallika Sarabhai saw my work and said to her students: ‘Shouldn’t we get inspired by Subodh’s work like he gets inspired by ours?’ When I asked Mrinalini Sarabhai to autograph one of my sketches she wrote: All movement is life

“The first challenge is to finish even before I’ve started.”

intensified. She was so right! Once I went backstage to take Birju Maharaj’s autograph. He carefully looked at all my sketches and said: ‘I will sign all your sketches if you give me one.’ This is the best compliment I ever got! Kelucharan Mohapatra would always say: ‘Look I can also draw,’ and draw a dancer in the corner and then sign. My friend Antonella Usai, an Italian bharatanatyam and contemporary dancer said: ‘From Subodh’s drawings we get to see the movements that were created and also died on the stage.’ ”

Though the applause has faded and the curtains have come down, the spirit of the dance will live on, because thanks to artists like Subodh and Noelle, fleeting movements have become lasting images.

Listener's Guide to Rāga

Part 8 – Rāga in Popular and Contemporary Music

Words by Dharambir Singh and Surmeet Singh

In previous editions of this Guide, we have discussed the fundamentals of raga including the building blocks, mechanics and aesthetics. We were then taken on a journey through various genres of rāga music including dhrupad, khyāl and thumri ang and semi-classical and devotional styles as well as looking at the instruments used to render rāga performances. In the final part of the Listeners' Guide to Rāga, we explore rāga in the contemporary context.

The rhythmic make-up of music and the texture of the instrumentation are the key elements of modern music. In the contemporary world, where traditions are meeting, there is a confluence of ideas. This new opportunity has given rise to very interesting and diverse music.

On the rhythmic front, the cyclic structures of the Middle Eastern world and Indian tāla have opened up new frontiers in giving us rhythms with varied accents and odd time cycles. African beats, coupled with the Western liking for grooves have made musicians perceive melodies in a variety of ways.

The melodic basis of music is either harmony-based with accompanying chords and multiple melodies played together giving a huge and complex template to work on; or modal where a variety of scales and tunings have given a different kind of template. Within the genres associated with different cultural groups, one element dominates: if the music is perceived in India there is a predominance of either rāga or folk-based melodic lines; Middle Eastern music will have the dominance of the Maqāms; and in Western music chords and harmonies are favoured.

Bollywood

The main music in India where these elements started to be mixed together is Bollywood (or the music of Indian cinema). The composers of this genre have positively experimented and created songs reflecting the changes in society. The main melodic basis of the earlier Bollywood songs was the folk music of different regions of India or the classical rāgas of North and South Indian music. In the current Bollywood music the trend is more towards choral and harmonic basis for music.

Mera Saaya Saath – Lata Mangeshkar from the film Mera Saaya (based on Rāga Nandī)



Inhi Logon Ne – Lata Mangeshkar from the film Pakeezah (based on Rāga Kalyān)



Baharon Phool Barsao – Mohammad Rafi from the film Suraj (based on Rāga Shivrājanī)



Indo-jazz

Rāgas have also been the basis of some Indo-jazz music where the rhythms are jazzier with the melodies constructed from the rāgas. The Western devices of multi-layering and playing simultaneously are also explored to make the music different from the traditional.

'Lady L' – Shakti (based on Rāga Bhimpalāsi)



Varta – Rāga Nova (based on Rāga Ahir Bhairav)



Chandra – Free Spirits (based on Rāga Todi)



Mirror Mirror – Samay (based on Rāga)



Orchestral music

Rāgas have also been used as the basis within the Western orchestral idiom. Pioneering works of Pandit Ravi Shankar, L. Subramaniam, Ilayaraja and others have exploited this sound to the template of the rāga.

Concerto for Sitar & Orchestra Fourth Movement – Pandit Ravi Shankar and London Symphony Orchestra (based on Rāga Manj Khamaj)



Muthu Natramam – Ilayaraja (based on Rāga Sarasāngī from the South Indian tradition)



Bombay Awakes from Bombay Dreams – A.R. Rahman (based on Rāga Shivrājanī)



Others

In the UK and USA in particular, there are numerous composers and artists using classical rāgas as a base for their music. These are often combined with electronics and drum and bass grooves to create a whole new expression, which exposes a whole new audience to the beautiful concept of rāga.

Nadia – Nitin Sawhney (based on a Dadra in Rāga Desh)



Shri Durga – DJ Cheb I Sabbah (based on a composition in Rāga Shri Durga)



Geetanjali Lal

Suyogya Shishya Hi Se Hai,
Guru Ka Naam!



Abhay Shankar Mishra shares rare material from his research project into kathak gharanas. The second in the series features Geetanjali Lal, performer and teacher at the top of her game, for three decades. She has also been on the Faculty of the Kathak Kendra for half that time.

A product of kathak gurus Shrimati Roshan Kumari, Gopi Krishna, Mohan Rav Kalyanpurkar and her husband, the late Devi Lal ji, Geetanjali carries forward their names and reputations.

Here she shares her early learning experiences and reflects on how dancers can take the best from different paramparas, giving her own example.

You have witnessed two generations of kathak, what difference do you make of the kathak you used to learn and the kathak you are teaching today?

I will tell you the difference in two ways – firstly the way Gurus used to teach back then when I was learning and I would like to share one experience with you, that will be with me always.

My dance training started with Roshan Kumari ji and this incident occurred on the auspicious day of Ganesh Chaturthi. In Maharashtra, this day is celebrated in every home, and there is no comparison of the level of festivity in Mumbai! There was a celebration at my neighbour's house to which my father was invited. There I was asked to present my dance and I couldn't refuse. I didn't even know who would play the tabla and who was singing! My father told me to go with him, and that's it, I was ready.

I performed and the programme went well. By coincidence, the next day, Roshan didi visited my house along with one other artist who was by chance at the programme the previous day and had seen my dance. There he then started complimenting me, saying Wow! What a performance, how well you have taught this girl, she presented such a prepared dance, my heart was very happy. Roshan didi asked me, yesterday? Where? And that was the end of that conversation.

That same evening I went to my dance class and started tying my dancing bells, when Roshan didi's father came and told me to untie my bells and go home. I couldn't understand as I was very young. I was only 8 or 9. I reached home and started crying and I remember my family also got very upset. I told them they didn't allow me to dance today and sent me home.

The next day my father took me to Roshan didi. Didi said very clearly that if you want her to learn dance, then she has to strictly adhere to the rules of parampara, (the succession from Guru to disciple). Didi said, whatever the reason, without prior permission and blessings of Guru, nothing can be allowed. That's it. That one line that I heard and learnt that day has never left my mind. After that, I never went anywhere without her permission until I arrived in Delhi, and neither did I expect to perform at any programmes. I decided that it is more important to learn first and in one sense, this is my Guru's mantra (prayer) for me.

You learnt the Jaipur style from Roshan ji, from Gopi Krishna ji you learnt the Banaras style and you also learnt from Devi Lal ji, and then you continued to work for Kathak Kendra's productions under Pandit Birju Maharaj ji in which you presented many roles. You currently hold the post of a Guru at Kathak Kendra and also work in the production unit. Did you plan your progression or did it happen in its own way?

There has always been music in my family from the start but there were no dancers. Let me tell you that my father was a well-known artist, and there were always crowds of artists at our house. Whether it be morning or night, there was always a musical atmosphere. In our apartment block in Mumbai, there were artists such as Nikhil Bannerjee, Ustad Ali Akbar ji and Omkarnath ji living there. We were always socialising with them and I always counted myself very lucky to have these opportunities. My heart was always in dance but my father wanted me to be a singer. Even today my mother jokes that I learnt to walk later and dance first, that too when I wasn't even learning from anybody – maybe that continued from my past life. First I used to learn singing and then started learning dance too, and slowly my mind and heart were getting more attached to dance and I was going deeper in that.

On the one hand, we can see elements of Banaras gharana in your dance, and Jaipur gharana's openness, with prepared rhythmic sense and on the other hand we also get to see expression and grace. Is this something you have developed in yourself or is it due to being linked to both gharanas?

Here I believe that it depends on the artist, because one can learn the expression and the technique of the rhythmic cycle, but if they lack something special from within then how much can be taught to them? Here it is irrelevant what each gharana's characteristic is, as Lucknow is known for its graceful and elegant use of the minor limbs yet it does not mean it lacks a rhythmic cycle, or is weak when it comes to preparation. Similarly an artist from the Jaipur gharana is the same. They will come prepared in both a good discipline of the rhythmic cycle as well as good expression and then they will sketch their performance. If you consider other gharanas then after learning Banaras and Jaipur, I started working under Pandit Birju Maharaj ji and there I learnt many things which added the grace in my movements which was not there before. Basically I have never left the habit of continuously developing, not even today.

Do you believe that these things you just mentioned are only believed by open-minded people and generally people only support their own gharana and aren't interested in others?

Yes, that is the case. But I believe that if everyone only supports and develops their interest in their own gharana then a lot of valuable things can get lost. That is why I believe that it is the vital role of every dancer to not only follow and learn their gharana but to also enquire into other gharanas too.

You have learnt under the Guru-Shishya parampara and today you are also teaching under that parampara. Do you notice any changes?

The main change I have noticed is that in the previous era, everyone had plenty of time, and in today's generation no one has any time. Life is moving very fast and today the trends are of fast food and fast music. Today even a Guru does not have enough time for so many disciples and if the Guru has time then the disciple doesn't. Today education is important, and so is playing, painting, and also computer training as well as watching the match. Hence there have been changes in the level of mental concentration and although this may not necessarily affect the limit to which they can learn, however, it will affect the artist's grounding and basic grasp of the dance.

You were not born into a gharana-based family, but after marrying Pandit Devi Lal ji, you are linked to Jaipur gharana. However, after the sudden and tragic death of both brothers Pandit Devi Lal and Pandit Durga Lal ji, how do you manage to maintain this parampara's responsibility on your shoulders?

I do. I definitely do. And if I do only then can something continue, so I will try as much and as long as I can to do justice to their name and their work to a high standard so their parampara can continue for so long and that way the parampara's name will get recognition and more people will continue to follow.

What is better, Vansh parampara or Shishya parampara?

It is difficult to maintain a Vansh (familial line) parampara as if at any point in a generation, one drops out then the parampara will not continue; however, a good shishya (disciple) can promote and preserve their Guru's name, irrelevant of whether they belong to the same Vansh or not.



Sufi:Zen is choreographed by Gauri Sharma Tripathi with the support of Jonathan Lunn and Mavin Khoo. It merges on multiple dance styles, including kathak, bharatanatyam, contemporary and ballet. Set to a score by Shrikanth Sriram, this performance reflects Akademi's long-standing reputation for presenting modern perspectives on traditional South Asian dance forms in unusual and distinct spaces shot here at London's Southbank Centre during the Alchemy Festival..



Sufi:Zen Commissioned by Without Walls and Lakes Alive, supported by Lanternhouse and Southbank Centre
 Dancers: Manuela Benini, Mavin Khoo, Archita Kumar, Sanjukta Wagh



Sufi: Zen

An intimate dance theatre experience that unites the stillness of Zen meditation with the rapturous motion of Sufi dervishes. Evoking a cultural landscape that extends from Persia to Japan, Sufi:Zen exists in a world of contrasts – of ice and fire, entropy and energy, introspection and divine omniscience.

Photos by Simon Richardson

Sonia Sabri is a dancer, choreographer and the artistic director of the company she set up in 2002. Sabri maintains that kathak as a dance technique is open to evolution and her role as an artist is to develop the style from within.

In conversation, Shezad Khalil investigates how Sonia Sabri's early experiences, training and inspirations have influenced and continue to motivate her dance career.

Words by Shezad Khalil



Sonia Sabri

Intelligent interpreter

Early Days

As a child, my inspirations for dance were twofold. Firstly, my parents were devoted to watching Bollywood films, so a great deal of my time, especially when returning from school, was spent watching Indian films and in particular their dance routines. My first experience of Indian dance or any kind of reference to the 'skills' of dance was primarily the actress Rekha. Rekha was my idol, that is, before I knew anything about classical dance. Her grace, charisma and subtlety in dance routines was captivating and mesmerising – I even used to dress up like her, as in her film *Umrao Jaan* and dance in the living room pretending to be her. I knew all of her moves to all the songs in *Umrao Jaan!*

Secondly, I was also inspired by 'Western' dance. My mother and I would spend a great deal of time watching the latest music videos of Michael Jackson. It was Michael's energy in his performances and virtuoso moves that fascinated me. His dance sequences were innovative and spellbinding. So many people around me were also in awe of his inventive motions. But at this stage of my life I don't ever remember thinking that I would become a dancer. However, I soon discovered that my father's aspiration for me was to become a Bollywood actress, (to fulfill his own lost dream). With this mindset, he began to research into the required aptitudes for his daughter becoming a successful actress. Acting and dance skills were crucial – he was told. So I was sent to the Birmingham School of Speech and Drama as well as enrolling in and trialling various dance classes: modern – dancing to Michael Jackson's songs of course! – jazz, and then finally by accident, kathak. In fact, both my father and I went to see a bharatanatyam class and as we had some time to spare before the class we ended up walking around and found a kathak class in progress. My father told me to try it since we were already there and since then I've never looked back.

Training in Kathak

Even though I enjoyed dancing as a young child in the privacy of my home, I don't ever remember thinking of becoming a professional dancer. I was extremely shy and introverted and at times found it quite horrific to attend classes. However, it was observing the passion and drive of my kathak teacher, Nahid Siddiqui, which proved infectious. She was enthralling and spoke about and danced kathak as if there was nothing else in the world. She was and still remains a beautiful and outstanding performer. Within a year I was totally hooked. I was only

"I strongly believe that it is crucial for an individual dance artist to develop a personal style."

8 years old and I wanted to become just like her; to dance as exquisitely, and with as much joy and devotion. There was immense respect for Nahidji and many students were almost afraid of her as she was a perfectionist and would tell students off for not practising enough or repeating mistakes in class. But then when she took an interest in me and invited me to her home studio for regular training, a new door opened.

I used to train every day after school and would be instructed until late at night. This was great, especially when I was at primary school. On the other hand, secondary school was a completely different issue. While in secondary education life was unpleasant for me as I had very few friends who took a real interest in me and

my dance. All my classmates seemed to be interested in were the latest pop idols, fashion and beauty which I found such a bore. The routine of going to school, coming home and going to my teacher's to train till late, return home, do homework and then bedtime continued throughout my school and college life. I also continued to attend the Birmingham School of Speech and Drama at weekends as well as the dance training. From the age of 14 I began touring the world with my teacher's company, which involved a great deal of time away. Fortunately, my school was very understanding and would allow me to take schoolwork on tour, even while studying for my GCSEs and A-levels. My family was also very supportive throughout my training and touring, although some of my relatives disapproved. In conversation with my parents, they would also remark that I was given far too much freedom like that of a 'son'. Yet, some of these relations enjoyed hearing about my performances abroad. However, most of my family's friends were very supportive and attended many of my concerts. I really loved travelling to different places and dancing to such warm audiences. It truly was one of the most exciting times of my life. And as a result of my training and hard work, I gave my debut performance (a two-hour solo) at the age of 17 in Lahore, then Karachi and finally in Birmingham.

On returning to my A-levels, I took Theatre Studies, English Literature and General Studies. Theatre Studies helped me incredibly as I learned about method acting which I applied to my dance work, namely with regard to abhinaya or expressional pieces. I also learned about lighting design, stage planning, stage direction, scriptwriting, stage production and management, skills that are necessary when conceiving and devising. For instance, the lighting design for *Neon Dream* in *Parallels* (2008) was done by me. English Literature has helped me to gain further understanding of text. I look out for rhythm, rhyme, imagery, sub-text and character development that continuously inform my dance work.

After A-levels I could have gone on to university, but I felt that I had so many opportunities that I did not want to miss out on. During this period I trained with kathak guru Kumudini Lakhia, and worked with composer Nitin Sawhney and choreographer Peter Badejo. I was learning how to be a successful dance artist, manage a company, and most importantly I was developing my own individual and personal style of kathak.

Observing Performance

As part of my training, I was encouraged by my teacher to observe performances of different styles. I saw presentations of kathak, bharatanatyam, flamenco, ballet, African, South Asian contemporary, Western contemporary, anything that looked good on publicity and was playing at a nearby theatre or arts centre. At such a young age, I did find Western contemporary an almost 'alien' form, with its lack of facial expressions and sense of focus. It felt that the contemporary dancer's head was not thought about. In kathak, the head is given foremost attention.

What I took away from these performances were means by which to explore innovative concepts. For example, ensemble choreography always fascinated me. During these dance recitals I would make drawings and take notes about aspects of group choreography so that I could use these later.

I observed the style's relationship with the musical score and other constituent features of a production; quality of performers, quality of dance vocabulary and so forth. All of these traits informed my practice consciously as well as subconsciously.

The creation of the Sonia Sabri Company

I formed my dance company after I was married. It was actually the result of useful advice from many dance entrepreneurs and funding bodies that it would be easier to access funding to support my ideas including working with collaborators of various disciplines. Another reason for 'setting up' my company was that I would be taken more seriously as an artist.

My family had concerns whether this line of work would give me sufficient financial security. On the personal front they worried about in-law opposition to the dance profession. And luckily, I married my husband who is a musician and whose Indian ancestors were also musicians in the royal court of the Mughal Emperor Akbar. My family was very proud of me when I did form the company, as it demonstrated both to them as well as their friends the seriousness of and dedication to my experimental work.

My dance composition started even before my company was set up. My first commissioned piece *YOU* (2000), was inspired by a miniature figurine encased in a rotating glass box that I saw as part of an exhibition at the Rembrandt Museum in Amsterdam. The statuette also had associations with the Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD), a condition whereby a person thinks that he or she is damaged in some way because they feel that they are not acknowledged or tolerated. It was a nervous venture as I'd never created a full-length piece on my own. I consulted a psychologist and devised *YOU* around a loose narrative. Though this piece was a descriptive account, I utilised other parts of the body such as the spine (with my back to the audience) as well as my hands and feet (with no other part of my anatomy visible). The reason for this was because I wanted to create something different and extend the conventional vocabulary. I performed this composition at The Place's Resolution, 2000, to numerous positive press reviews. It then toured nationally as part of a two-part programme.

Parallels

I think each of my compositions has taken a step forward within both realms of classical and contemporary kathak. *Parallels* has been the most demanding of

all of my work, especially within the contemporary 'solo' context as each piece illustrates a facet of kathak. Working with numerous choreographers has given an invigorating and refreshing appeal to my solo dance compositions. For instance, the way I choreographed and moved in *Spill* right the way through to the means by which I danced under the direction of other choreographers for pieces such as *Neon Dream to Trail*. Each piece demanded a key dynamic which provided variety for the spectator. Within the classical segment of *Parallels*, the pieces were self-choreographed and were not from nor resembled the traditional repertoire of kathak. The choreography was informed by contemporary techniques, which for many kathak audiences are intriguing. I would say that today I am

“... I would constantly worry about whether what I was doing was correct or corrupt!”

much more confident in enquiring about the kathak form, playing with ideas, pushing the boundaries and challenging myself stylistically and conceptually. In addition, I also have a stronger desire to develop my own personal style of kathak as opposed to the earlier days of my dance career when I would constantly worry about whether what I was doing was correct or corrupt! I strongly believe that it is crucial for an individual dance artist to develop their own style as a way of extending the form rather than becoming a direct imitation of one's dance teacher. For me, this is how art evolves.

The Future...

In terms of the future, I would like to see myself generating new and pioneering ideas within kathak and reach all corners of the world with my work. I wish to inspire a new generation of dance artists to continue the evolution of the art (without fusing it with other dance styles!). I would like to touch the lives of people from different backgrounds. I would like to make a contribution to the world of dance in a powerful way – in the same way that dance has made such an impact on my life and my self.

Choreographers, teachers and mentors

Shobana Jeyasingh – choreographed *Curve*, *Gaze*, *Whip* for SCo's first production. Also *Neon Dream* – her first solo in kathak. A great movement analyst and knows how to push a dancer to their limit.

Kumudini Lakhia – trained with her in short phases. I danced in her choreography *Timecycle* (NS&Co). She is another dance-maker who pushes that dancer forward towards individuality and choreographs traditional material in a refreshing way.

Geetanjali Lal – trained and was mentored by her in some of my creative endeavours. Geetanjali is a master of the Jaipur gharana which embraces a very different dynamic range from the Lucknow gharana. To develop my versatility as a dancer I decided I needed a heavy dose of this!

Filip Van Huffel – I was part of Filip's research and development for Akademi's *Coming of Age*. The techniques of choreography within the Western

contemporary dance genre offered an interesting palette of tools to apply to my own work.

Lea Anderson – introduced me to the techniques of creating for site-specific work. She's probably the most adventurous choreographer I've ever worked with: humorous and quirky. Lea's way of conjuring stimuli for a piece was most bizarre and fun.

Nikky Smedley – was my artistic consultant during the creation of *Spill* for The Place Prize. Nikky offered great artistic support which one needs when creating a solo work. She made think about the audience much more – what should they see, feel, sense, etc.

Richard Alston – mentor on my research for a new production, which is currently in development. His understanding of music and space is exquisite and he offered me lots of 'top tips' around group choreography and interaction.

Hélène Blackburn – research using non-Western contemporary dance style within Western

contemporary choreographic technique. We experimented with a range of text and music, which gave ever more creative ideas to try out in the future.

Lisa Torun – choreographer of *Trail*, one of the solos in *Parallels*. What she noticed about my style was that it was similar to her own so there was an interesting exploration and actually a revelation. She enabled me to find kathak in every dance style and to develop the unique features. *Trail* has been the only piece so far in which I use spoken word.

Peter Badejo – Peter has left a lasting impression ever since my earlier years. Not only did I learn several African styles of dance and learnt to use my spine (!) but he drilled into me the spirit of the dancer in the dance (many choreographers talk only about the spirit of the dance). His spiritual and philosophical approach to movement, music and the relationship between the two is truly inspiring and I can never thank him enough for it.

Apprentice Dancer

Words by Kavya Kaushik



in bharanatyam. I recite *jatis* in my sleep. I like kathak, but it's just not for me.

At what point did you realise that this was your career path?

Much later on. After going to Kadam's summer camps aged 16–17 and seeing V.P. Dhananjayan and C.V. Chandrasekhar perform, I decided that was it. I was really inspired and taken aback by C.V. Chandrasekhar, the way he taught it. I felt...this guy is 73 years old and dances beautifully. I love dance and I'm so passionate about it. Seeing other people ignited the fire I had inside me. I thought...I can do this.

Do your family know you want to be a dancer and do they support it?

Yes. They're 100% supportive. My mum had her initial fears regarding money. Obviously, dance is not a financially viable career, and money is a big part of being Gujarati! And as the only son the pressure is a bit stronger. My aunts would occasionally make comments to my mum, my other cousins had gone to uni and I wanted to go to India. My mum felt a bit apprehensive about it but my dad... Everyone else seems to have a supportive mum and apprehensive dad, but for me it was the other way round. My dad has been the backbone of all my training. He took me to classes when I was younger and had full confidence in me. He believed in me, and my mum eventually went along with it. They're now both accepting after seeing the responses of other people when I dance.

Who are your heroes?

That's a hard question...First and foremost I have to say it's the Dhananjayans. I'm inspired by them a lot. They have such an intense energy when on stage. Especially V.P. Dhananjayan, his *abhinaya* is absolutely amazing. I could watch him for hours. There's also C.V. Chandrasekhar. His physical strength, his stamina, every movement is pure. He's absolutely amazing. I saw Mythili Prakash perform in 2006. She's had a huge impact on me. I absolutely adore her and she's one of the reasons why I went to Chennai to do my training. I also have a mentor in India called Shijith Nambiar with whom I am taking my training further. He's another great inspiration and I hope to follow his career path.

Any non-dancers?

Hmm...no.

What are you doing to prepare yourself for the life of a dancer?

I do a lot of reading. I think it's really important to open your mind to a lot of new ideas. I watch a lot of dance in auditoriums and on video. Obviously, I do a lot of practice which you have to do. I attend Mavin Khoo's weekly classes and I'm also continuing my training with Pushkala Gopal. She's a true inspiration to me. I came to learn from her in 2006 after meeting her at the summer school.

I really liked her teaching style, technique and her *abhinaya*. I travelled down during my school holidays to learn. I owe a lot to her and I've just touched the surface of what she has to teach me. We have a long way to go.

Are you scared of failure?

No. I dream of success and don't ever think about failure.

Do you think that as a man the failure rate will be relatively lower than one for a woman?

In the UK, yes. In India, no. They don't like to see sweaty male dancers. There are definitely opportunities for men there, but they are very limited. Men usually perform in husband-wife duets. In the UK I think I do have the advantage. Pushkala aunty has really encouraged me to become a solo bharanatyam dancer. There's a lot of contemporary floating around but I'd like to work as a classical soloist.

How important is beauty for dancers?

Very. It's always a bonus if a pretty dancer appears on stage. The best dancers are very pretty women: Malavika Sarukkai, Priyadarshini Govind. The most successful male dancers are successful because they are manly. Sadly, often there is a perception of a male dancer being effeminate and not strong because of what the audience sees with other male dancers. That's why V.P. Dhananjayan is such an inspiration to me. He comes on stage and dances like a man. I would love to be like that.

Is it an aesthetically-driven career? Do you also have to be a good-looking man to dance?

Yes, definitely. Aesthetics are so important in dance as you're working with your body. You have to be presented beautifully. First of all, the audience has to want to look at you. It has to look good for someone to sit and look at it for two hours. I don't mean to be pompous, but thank God my parents have good genes and I look OK. Of course, this is all part of a bigger package. The dancer also has to dance well!

Is dance a 'proper' job?

For me personally, yes. But it's definitely a difficult job. There's a lot of prejudice behind male dancers but I guess you just have to eliminate it. If I'm performing and people are talking about it then I think I'm doing my job. If people don't talk then I'm not doing it.

What other options are you keeping open?

Well, I want to dance, that's my plan but otherwise...In 2007 I won Boogie Woogie International Dance Championships which opened the whole world of Bollywood to me. I got a few offers for a couple of short films which sadly never got released due to various reasons. But there is the avenue of Bollywood if things don't work out with bharanatyam but I try not to think about it. Let's see how it goes...

Hiten Mistry, 20, performed his Arangetram on 21 February 2010 at the Peepul Centre, Leicester. Thousands of students complete their training to this level but only one in a thousand will make dance a career. Kavya Kaushik quizzes Hiten on his dreams and motivations for the future.

Why did you start learning dance?

I was 8 years old at a Diwali show at my community and I saw Smita Vadnerkar (my first teacher) perform. There was something in her performance, it was beautiful. So I approached her afterwards, I was really small and I pulled at her costume and said "Please teach me, I want to learn!" My parents spoke to her and I was in class by the next week.

What are your earliest memories of dance training?

I was a fat little boy going to class every Friday at 7.30. I had lots of fun. Smita aunty was very motivating. She was a great teacher and made it fun whilst really working hard. I was a shy, quiet boy and bharanatyam made me a loud and confident person.

Why did you choose bharanatyam?

I've been to both kathak and bharanatyam classes. But there was just something about bharanatyam that really made me feel at home – the geometry and its structural perfection. I feel it's a lot stronger and dominant for a man to perform. When I walk down the street I walk



Ray of Light

Piali Ray, pioneer promoter, has built a permanent home for South Asian arts in the UK's second city. Donald Hutera catches up with Piali in the run-up to the reopening of the new mac in Birmingham

Piali Ray has, in the best sense, a lot to answer for. As the director of the South Asian arts development agency sampad for the past two decades, this gracious visionary has done much to enrich the cultural life of Birmingham, the Midlands, Britain and, indeed, other parts of the world. Writing in *The sampad Story*, a book commemorating the organisation's first twenty years, colleagues from Ravi Shankar to Akram Khan praise Ray's immense energy, charm and determination. One of them even dubs her a national treasure. It's an especially fitting tribute once you recall that the word sampad is Sanskrit for wealth.

Sampad's twentieth birthday celebrations coincide with its move into new, open-plan offices shared with the Midlands Arts Centre, popularly known as mac. Brought in on time and on budget (£15.2million), the revamped mac is a vast improvement on the always friendly but aesthetically discordant hodgepodge it was

Words by Donald Hutera

previously. Showing me round the building two weeks before the official opening, Ray is practically humming with pleasure at what the new facilities will be able to offer.

"... a multitude of talented artists ... working alone".

She's very fond of mac, and with good reason. "We've always received tremendous support here," she says, "as well as from the Birmingham arts community and the community in general." Born into a family of renowned artists in Calcutta, where she trained in bharatanatyam at the Uday Shankar school, Ray arrived in the UK in the early 1980s with a husband who'd come to acquire a Ph.D. in biochemical engineering. "We planned to go back home after four years," she recalls, smiling at the memory. Instead he got offered work while she steeped herself in the British

dance scene, bringing to it a background in classical dance (also including kuchipudi and kathakali) and traditional folk styles that had been learnt from respected gurus like Thankamani Kutty.

One of the first classes Ray herself taught, in 1982, was at mac. In due time, having been appointed dance animateur for the Midlands in 1985, she was conducting workshops all over the region. "The years I spent travelling across the country at schools and community centres gave me a lot of exposure to the UK's way of thinking, and the opportunities - or lack of them - that were available." Ray gradually discovered a multitude of talented South Asian artists in all fields, but often working alone and with insufficient support. Such first-hand knowledge informed her way of thinking when she conceived sampad.

"It was an idea from an individual," she says. "There was no reason for anybody to believe in it, or invest any money in it." So how did Ray convince others that an

creative teams – manage to transform it from its humble origins as an annual festival and a host for local workshops into a year-round programme with a global scope? “By being determined to raise our profile through an association with prestige events and venues,” she replies, “and by ensuring that we were offering high-quality and relevant work. We had a long-term vision of strengthening the infrastructure of the profession, developing capacity within the communities, creating jobs, making strategic and international partnerships and taking risks to enable artists to realise their own vision and creative urges.”

In terms of audience development one of Ray’s literal signature strategies was hand-written invitations. As she says, “People would say, ‘We had to come – Piali wrote us personally.’ And we’ve been able

“One of Ray’s strategies was hand-written invitations.”

to retain those personal relationships even twenty years down the road.” At heart, she believes, it’s about ownership. “People buy into sampad. It’s theirs as much as ours.”

Asked to pick out highlights from among sampad’s many achievements, Ray first mentions the early festivals that “brought the community together and created a space to celebrate our culture and make connections”. Large-scale productions like *Heer Ranjha*, *Layla Majnun*, *Dounia*, *Dido* and *Aeneas*, staged in mac’s outdoor arena, placed enthusiastic amateurs alongside professionals in what she describes as “the magical ambience of summer evening performances as the sun went down”. Ray is also proud of both DanceIntense, an international professional development programme that has to date brought together sixty emerging professional dancers from the USA, Canada, India, UK, Singapore and Germany, and Aarohan, targeted at South Asian professionals who, in her words, “possess the ability and passion for creating a leadership role for themselves in the cultural sector”. Thus far thirty delegates have been exposed to the latter programme. Lastly Ray cites several international conferences and symposiums held during the 1990s when, as she states, “critical issues around the status, identities and new directions of South Asian art forms required political and economic recognition, and the profession itself needed a platform and cohesive voice”.

Where does Ray feel that sampad stands in relation to the UK’s other South Asian arts promotion agencies? “Most have developed their niche in terms of location, arts profile and programming style. We’ll continue to develop partnerships of mutual benefit with them when appropriate, and where they can have a wider impact for the future of the arts sector.”

Ray keeps a keen eye on the bigger picture. “South Asian artists, promoters and audiences have increased in numbers, and it would surprise me if some performance or cultural event wasn’t taking place in most UK cities on any given weekend.” But, as she puts it, the reality has shifted. “The label ‘South Asian arts’ is rightly coming under scrutiny as a politically expedient term that plunks together all art forms with any kind of reference to the Indian subcontinent, or its diaspora cultures, but fails to recognise the distinct identities of those forms. What was a useful term in 1990 may not work in 2010 for those who want recognition for their expertise in a specialist practice as opposed to its specific geographical origins.”

What, then, is the future for South Asian arts in Britain? “I always feel like saying the future’s bright, the future’s orange!” Ray jokes. In truth she finds the tensions between Euro-centric and South Asian arts exciting. “South Asian arts are more integrated and profiled within the UK than ever before. The distinctive quality of our art forms provides an edge. Many artists use this to work collaboratively with other forms of music and dance. However, that throws up the challenge of maintaining

“The tensions between Euro-centric and South Asian arts (is) exciting.”

our position while keeping an eye on the qualitative – as well as quantitative – impact of our work. We’re constantly debating, reviewing and repositioning ourselves. This adds to the dynamism of what everyone is doing.”

Ray’s leadership qualities have been duly recognised via an OBE, an honorary doctorate and a 2009 citation from the Asian section of the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce and Industry as Outstanding Business Person of the Year. As indicated earlier, her peers are unstinting in their admiration. Delia Barker, senior dance officer of Arts Council England, dubs Ray as “one of those people who, along with inspiring, informing, educating, embracing, amusing, challenging and keeping you sane, displays a generosity that knows no bounds”. For her part, Ray seems happy with the accolades but just as happy to get on with the business of running sampad. She now maintains a staff of ten, hiring in additional freelance help as needed. “It’s important for us to stay within a certain size,” Ray explains. “We need to be fleet of foot and not invest so much in administration and infrastructure. I want the money to go to productions and artists.”

Donald Hutera writes regularly about dance, theatre and live performance for *The Times*, *Dance Europe*, *Animated* and many other publications and websites.

organisation focused on developing artists, and creating work of high quality across many disciplines, would benefit South Asians and the wider community alike? It’s a question, she believes, of what your attitude is when facing fresh challenges. “There are challenges all the time. How can you make them into opportunities?”

According to Ray, sampad was born at a time when notions of multi-culturalism were being met with political goodwill. “The government wanted to do things for minority communities. We fit that agenda.” By the mid-90s the organisation

“... taking risks to enable artists to realise their own vision”.

had, she admits, taken over her life. How did Ray – and, as she’s quick to point out, a succession of strong, responsible and carefully delegated administrative and

Dance Performances

Alchemy 2010 — Ganga Nitya Vaahini – The Eternal River

10 April 2010

Malavika Sarukkai

South Bank Centre, London

Reviewed by Anusha Kedhar

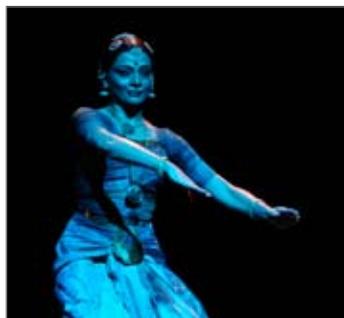


Photo: Brian Slater

In a panel discussion on Indian dance held the previous day, Malavika Sarukkai, a solo bharatanatyam dancer-choreographer from India, commented that she sees her practice of dance not in terms of tradition or change but tradition and change. Sarukkai's performance of *Ganga Nitya Vaahini – The Eternal River* was testament to her firm belief in the continuing relevance and evolution of classical Indian dance.

Sarukkai is one of India's premier bharatanatyam dancers and has performed widely in India and abroad for nearly three decades. She began studying bharatanatyam at the age of 7 from Guru Kalyanasundaram of the Tanjavur School and Guru Rajaratnam of the Vazhuvoor School. An early student of Kalanidhi Narayanan, she is also a skilled exponent of *abhinaya*.

In *Ganga Nitya Vaahini*, her seminal piece, evolved choreographically over a decade, Sarukkai pays homage to the river Ganga and its importance in terms of Indian culture, history, the environment and spirituality. Drawing on pan-Indian texts and music, both old and new, she brings classical and contemporary aesthetics into harmonious balance.

The first item, *Gangavatam*, in Ragamalika, describes the mythological descent of Ganga from the *jata* (knot) of Siva's tresses. Dressed in a simple,

flattering turquoise costume and lit only in a pool of soft light, Sarukkai commands our full attention. As she enacts Ganga's descent, she seems to take on the qualities of the river itself. At times she floats, glides and lilts across the stage, like a quiet mountain stream, while at others she moves with all the dynamism, force and energy of a torrential flood. Soft undulations of the torso and fluid, circular arm movements replace the sharp linearity of classical bharatanatyam. Even her bells seem to imitate the gentle fluctuations in the cadence and speed of a babbling brook. Although she may not have the deepest *aramandi* or the most perfectly raised *swastika*, her grace and stage presence more than compensate. In fact, it was quite refreshing to see a mature dancer who knew her body's strengths and limitations, and what movements suited her.

Set on the banks of the river Ganga at dusk, the second item, *Sunset over Ganga*, reveals the river's multifaceted uses through the unfolding of three narratives: two young people anticipate nightfall for a lovers' tryst on the riverbank; an elderly woman comes to the river to mourn the loss of her son; a priest lights oil lamps and sets them afloat for the evening's *aarthi*. Here, we see Sarukkai in consummate form, morphing effortlessly into and out of the different characters. In the next item, based on the contemporary poetry of Sarukkai's sister Priya Sarukkai-Chabria and set to Rāga Subhapanthuvārālī, pilgrims call out to mother Ganga, lamenting the loss of her purity. Examining the environmental implications of pollution, this is by far Sarukkai's most overtly political piece.

The last item of the evening, based on a fifteenth-century Tansen poem in Rāga Revagupti, returns us to the sacred origins of the Ganga. This was followed by a *tarana* in Rāga Purvadhanashree in which Sarukkai showcased her signature backward jumps, which I found both striking and cumbersome.

A review of *Ganga Nitya Vaahini* would be incomplete without praise for the standout musicians,

M.S. Sukhi on percussion, Srilakshmi Venkataramani on violin, and vocalist, Murali Parthasarathy, whose honeyed tones complemented the liquid grace of Sarukkai without ever overpowering her or distracting our attention from the dancing. An altogether unforgettable evening, indeed.

Alchemy 2010 — Dance Triple Bill

10 April 2010

Aakash Odedra & Sanjukta
Sinha/Seeta Patel & Kamala
Devam/Hetain Patel

South Bank Centre, London

Reviewed by Sanjoy Roy



A. Odedra and S Sinha | Photo Ahmedabad DNA

A triple bill of dance at the South Bank's Alchemy festival may have been intended as a showcase for young up-and-coming artists, but in the event it was an absent 80-year-old who dominated the programme: Kumudini Lakhia. A major figure in kathak dance, Lakhia had been working in India on a duet for British dancer Aakash Odedra and Indian Sanjukta Sinha, accompanied by dhrupad singers the Gundecha Brothers. And though *Tathaa* ('and also') is still a work in progress, its London performance showed a vitality and freshness that outshone the rest of the programme.

Tathaa is an essentially classical kathak piece that has been inflected – suffused, even – by a spirit of personal intimacy. To the opening *alap* section of the music, the two dancers simply walk, turn and spiral, sometimes drawing near and sometimes drifting apart, like planets circling freely in each other's orbit. The light footwork and understated gestures become more detailed as they grow closer, dancing both side by side and face

to face, as if they were both companions and lovers. Odedra is the sharper and lighter dancer, though I'd love to see him let go more (freedom, not control, seems his greatest strength). The dhrupad music works wonders, more elemental than the standard Hindustani style, particularly in Umakant Gundecha's remarkable bass voice, as deep and growling as a didgeridoo. But it's the lucid, almost carefree choreography that makes the piece: you see through the steps and spins into the heart of their relationship. There's an easy, intimate conviviality between the two dancers: once, when seated, Odedra casually circles his arm around Sinha's waist – a quite literally touching moment. In *Tathaa*, desire does not, as so often in Indian classical dance, take the form of unfulfilled longing or ardent courtship. Here the attraction is mutual, and these characters already know each other, personally and physically. Theirs is a post-coital relationship – the honeymoon period, perhaps. That's what makes you melt.

Though still a work in progress, *Tathaa* feels complete. In contrast, Kamala Devam and Seeta Patel's *Last One Standing* has the feel of a workshop presentation: a fruitful central idea not yet fully realised in the material. The idea is jenga (the game in which players try to remove pieces from a tower of blocks without making it topple) and the two bharatanatyam dancers have plenty of fun with it: Devam chops and kicks around Patel like a kung fu fighter, trying to break her concentration; Patel positions her errant limbs into bharatanatyam positions as if they were precarious pieces of a puzzle. They play around with time and space, forwarding and reversing their sequences like the video running behind them (by Maria Akesson), which mirrors the stage action but jazzes it up with special effects. The video is great to watch, but is also the work's main downfall: film is an attention-grabbing medium that often, as here, overpowers live action. More judicious use is needed.

Hetain Patel's *Kanku Raga*, a dance for screen only, shares these ideas of forwarding and reversing, but is much more

focused. The screen is split into four equal frames, each showing Patel's torso: bare on the left; on the right, daubed with a red cross. Each frame changes according to a spoken *taal*, and as the *dhas* and *dhins* progress we see the bare torso become painted on one side while the cross is gradually erased on the other. You can read what you like into the symbolism (the St George's Cross springs to mind), but what makes this film work is its formal inevitability. Like a minimalist composer, Patel sets up the elements and the process, and lets them play out to their end. That's very satisfying.

Sharira

11 April 2010

Chandralekha Group – Tishani Doshi and Shaji John

QEH, South Bank Centre, London

Reviewed by Anusha Kedhar



Photo: Sadanand Menon

Chandralekha (1928–2006), a Chennai-based choreographer, poet and graphic designer, was a pioneer of modern Indian dance. Never one to shy away from provocation or controversy, she consistently flouted notions of 'tradition' in Indian dance. Her work was driven, instead, by a 'politics of the body', which sought to challenge normative constructions of gender and sexuality.

In *Sharira* (2001), her last choreographic work, Chandralekha tackled head-on the question of femininity and female power. A duet between Tishani Doshi (trained in yoga) and Shaji John (trained in kalaripayattu), *Sharira* follows *Raga* and *Sloka* in a trilogy exploring erotica through the duality of male and female energies.

The piece opens with a striking image of Doshi

in a finely balanced yoga *asana*. Seated centre-stage with her back towards the audience, Doshi begins to unfold, stretch, and bend her limbs with a concentrated slowness. Nothing is rushed; no movement taken for granted. Time is given to meditate on the minutest articulations of the body – the splaying of fingers and toes, the tensing of a calf muscle, the restrained sensuousness contained in a gentle, unexpected encounter between foot and hand. In an age where speed and surface are king, the deliberate slowness and pared-down minimalism of *Sharira* is in itself a compelling political statement; it forces us to consider the female body in terms of its complexities and layers instead of being dazzled by mere spectacle.

One of the most memorable moments in *Sharira* is when Doshi eventually turns to face the audience. Her gaze, uncompromising and unflinching, penetrates to the back of the hall. For so many centuries, the female Indian dancer has been seen within the parameters of an orientalist, male gaze as an exotic, sexualised object to be looked at. In *Sharira*, Doshi returns the gaze and demands to be viewed not as an object of pleasure or entertainment but as a source of power and strength.

John emerges roughly half-way through the piece and begins an intimate duet with Doshi in which their bodies collapse, fuse, and fold into and out of one another, at once consuming and giving birth to the other. Where the body begins and ends is unclear, the distinction between gender made irrelevant. After a sharp, kalaripayattu kick, John descends into a deep plié in front of Doshi's outstretched limbs; later, he emerges headfirst from between her legs. Despite the seemingly sexual nature of their interactions, very rarely do Doshi and John actually touch. In fact, it is in the almost-but-not-quite touching of their bodies that the eroticism of *Sharira* is most palpable.

I did wonder, however, about the rather stereotypical representations of male and female energies with John kicking, lunging, and bouncing in an upright position, while

Doshi remained close to the ground, stretching and opening her legs horizontally across the stage. For a choreographer who constantly played with the performance of gender, this distinction seemed like a curious choice.

The Gundecha Brothers provided a hypnotic soundscape of dhrupad music. With its abstract syllables and stretched out *alaps*, dhrupad was the perfect counterpart to the pared-down yogic and martial movements of Doshi and John. Sadanand Menon's lighting design was particularly effective, heightening the erotic tensions between the two performers like the chiaroscuro of a classic Caravaggio. The side lighting during Doshi's extended beginning solo accentuated the musculature of her calves and forearms and the detailed articulation of her toes.

The last time Chandralekha's work was shown in the UK was in 1992 with *Angika*. Let's hope that tonight's performance heralds a new era of transnational awareness, appreciation, and collaboration in contemporary South Asian dance.

From the Heart

15 April 2010

Beeja

Rich Mix, London

Reviewed by Sanjeevini Dutta



Photo: Vipul Sangoi

Anusha Subramanyam is well-known in dance circles for her work with special needs and community groups and as an excellent bharatanatyam teacher. She has made regular appearances at the Chennai Winter Season but somehow in the UK, the performance stage has eluded her. Therefore to see her present a full-length solo show and that, too, of her own

choreography created great excitement.

The show opened with the piece *Nasat*, based on lines from the Rig Veda, which contemplate the origin of the Universe in paradoxical statements. The dancer in a dim pool of light, her back to the audience and arms raised, rotates imperceptibly conveying the stirrings of life as wisps of air or cosmic dust rise and begin to circulate. The opening sequence is mesmerising with the dancer turning and spinning, rooted in her spine but the axis veering at angles. This leads to the first of the oppositional states of deathlessness and life. Gasping for air, shaking compulsively and letting out a primal scream evoked images of *butoh*. A new type of *abhinaya*, more open and less formalised was deployed.

The short piece has a smattering of *jattis*, but these unfortunately do not add to the atmosphere; they are performed to a box-like structure, and the conveying of space both literal and metaphoric is lost. The audience is left hankering for the magic of the opening section.

The second item *From the Heart* is based, the programme notes tell us, on the dancer's experiences of working with people with special needs. The dancer enters in a diagonal shaft of light, exploring levels and angles with foot stamps to unpatterned *dhi-dhi-theis*. She arrives at a rectangular lit space downstage right. Her dance is tightly focused and framed by the lit space. Our attention is grabbed by images of bodies and shapes that do not quite conform to convention. Half-stretched limbs at awkward angles, feeling the beauty from within but unable to convey it bodily are etched as if by an animator creating a number of frames between the start of the movement and its completion at the final perfect posture. The structure of bharatanatyam with its angularity and rigid spine, relaxes and breathes. The spaces between the movements are revealed. It is a moment of stunning originality.

The poignancy of the lyrics *Sundar Sharir* (body beautiful) is felt by those members of the audience lucky enough to

understand the language. A longer padam under green light is lost in lack of translation.

There is, however, some kernel of truth at the heart of this performance which is transformative for the receiver. A dancer with great technique and grace, steps out of the structures of her received form to express freely an individual vision. Anusha's performance is part of the current trend in South Asian dance, which is about using technique but finding one's own voice. With further crystallisation *From the Heart* has the potential of becoming a signature piece for this dancer.

Music Performances

The Manganiyar Seduction

5 March 2010

Royston Abel and the Manganiyar musicians

Barbican, London

Reviewed by Jahnvi Harrison



Photo: Courtesy The Barbican

Take forty-three musicians from the heart of the Rajasthan desert (handle carefully); one well-formed stage set, and 300 small light bulbs. Gradually combine ingredients together one by one, and then knead rhythmically for one hour.

The resulting dish is *The Manganiyar Seduction*, directed and designed by Royston Abel. It premiered at the Barbican to a packed house – no surprise after touring worldwide for the past four years to rave reviews.

Though the piece is described as musical theatre, its concept is simple. There are no set changes, and the performers are humbly attired in traditional Rajasthani dress. There is a pleasing simplicity, too, in the way that the piece is structured. Each musician sits inside a personal cubicle, arranged in rows and

stacked on top of one another. The piece begins with just one sarangi player, soon joined by a single voice. Over the remaining time, the music unfolds, gradually at first, picking up speed and energy until it reaches its dazzling, joyous crescendo.

Abel's striking set design was conceived as a series of windows in a red light district, where the audience watches almost as a voyeur. It does succeed in this regard, conjuring up a sense of drama and unpolished glamour. The rows of spotlights that line each compartment play a vital part too, glowing dimly until the musician within begins his part, then lighting up to perfectly complement the changing patterns in the music.

Though the cast of performers is large, each had a chance to display their unique character. One of the stand-out performers was conductor Debu Khan, whose joyous dance-like movement provided a welcome contrast to the seated, fairly static musicians. Though his back was turned to the audience almost throughout, his sense of humour and dextrous karatal-playing evoked cheers from the captivated audience and a standing ovation by the end.

Surprisingly for a show that departs so little from a traditional Indian music concert, the audience were mostly non-Indian, and a diverse group at that. It was a real delight to watch their reactions throughout. After some sniggers at the beginning as the singers displayed some characteristic vocal gymnastics, a hush descended as the piece slowly unfolded. Each new instrument that was introduced stimulated smiles and pointing, and by the time the giant, rib-rattling dhol drum sounded out, many looked as if they were barely holding back the urge to jump out of their seats and dance.

As a dynamic piece of entertainment, it couldn't be faulted, although at times I did wonder if the artificial separation of the musicians created a certain stiffness. Part of the joy of watching music performance is seeing the lively interaction between the musicians. This presentation seemed to stifle that somewhat, especially considering the raw, bursting energy of the music. I also considered whether for

performers coming from such a spontaneous tradition, playing the same hour-long piece, night after night, might be equally stifling.

The performance came to a poignant close with a speech by Abel, who joked that the musicians – forty-two Muslims with the last name 'Khan' – caused a great deal of concern at every airport they passed through. Considering the recent blockbuster success of *My Name is Khan* and the lead character's similar dilemma, this is still a very sensitive issue. But Abel stressed that leaving aside religion, the spiritual passion behind the music is tangible and universal. He closed by inviting the only Hindu member of the troupe to lead the group in a lilting love song dedicated to Lord Krishna. As the choir of voices swelled, pulsating with romance, heart and soul, I think this message was wonderfully conveyed.

Darbar Festival

2 April 2010

Sunil Kant Gupta (bansuri) and Jyotsna Srikanth (violin)

King's Place, London

Reviewed by Jahnvi Harrison



Photo: Courtesy the artist

This double bill of Hindustani and carnatic music kicked off with the UK debut of Sunil Kant Gupta, who has trained under many esteemed gurus, including Pt. Subhash Roy and Ragnunath Sheth. He began by introducing the audience to his personally modified instrument – a traditional bansuri with an attached device at one end that allows the player to reach one additional lower note. While this may sound relatively insignificant, Gupta calmly announced that it provided a much greater scope for flexibility when playing certain ragas. Without much further

explanation, he proceeded to demonstrate by quickly sketching out a variety of ragas. Nods and quiet tuts from the audience signalled their immediate appreciation for his subtle, masterful style.

Gupta spent the majority of the next hour playing a detailed exposition of Raag Yaman. Beginning with a nuanced *alap*, he carefully crafted an aural experience that gained power and momentum gradually, never failing to delight. His skilful *gamaks* evoked some beautiful imagery: falling leaves, a flutter of wings, lines of light drawn in each direction and the sudden onset of rain. At the start of the concert, storyteller and compere Vayu Naidu told a brief folk tale about the magic of the bamboo flute, able to speak the essence of sacred, special words through its music. Accompanied by the tabla of Sukhwinder Singh (who stepped in at a moment's notice after Satyajit Tawalkar was detained in India), Gupta's flute brought the beautiful story to life. Unfortunately, though Singh's tabla had moments of breathtaking brilliance, it often seemed unnecessarily loud and showy – overshadowing Gupta's dignified playing. After completing the *bandish* and fast-paced *jhalla* sections, Gupta closed with a few short folk Bengali *dhuns*, demonstrating a deep sensitivity that resonated long after the concert's close. Some senior musicians in the audience later remarked that it was refreshing to hear a flautist who didn't emerge from the Hariprasad Chaurasia school – a style of playing that has received a great deal of attention and coverage.

Jyotsna Srikanth's recital also came as a surprise to the audience, who were expecting to hear the vocals of Ranjani and Gayatri. Ranjani was present but unfortunately Gayatri also had visa difficulties, so the late-night listeners were instead treated to the fluid and dextrous sound of Srikanth's violin. She presented a full traditional carnatic recital, flanked by two mridangams (a fact which prompted the emcee to pronounce Srikanth a lioness!). She began with a jaunty, crisp *krithi* – Manavyala in Nalinakanthi – that filled the dark space with energy and vibrancy. In Saraswathi

Namostute in Ragam Saraswathi the more ornamentally dense style of carnatic music was evident. Especially when contrasted against the earlier bansuri of Gupta, I sometimes wished that Srikanth's *alaps* had the same slow building, meditative quality. Undoubtedly her effortlessly fluid torrents of notes were breathtaking, but could become a little overwhelming at times.

At one point, Srikanth sweetly asked the audience if they'd like 'a fast piece or a slow one' – to which most called for fast, and so the pace continued. Raghuvamsa Sudha in the complex Ragam Kadhankuthuhala was a joy to watch as well as listen to. The two mridangists took turns to accompany the dizzying variety of *sangathis*, playfully throwing the rhythms back and forth and anticipating her nuanced phrases perfectly. Occasionally one of them would improvise something striking, and they'd both chuckle, provoking laughter from Srikanth without interrupting the flurried movement of her fingers.

The nicest element of the performance was the knowledge of its spontaneity. Srikanth had no concert prepared, and one of the mridangists had arrived just a couple of hours before the start. Over and above their technical mastery, one was left with that wonderful sense that audience or no, they'd still be joyfully playing on.

Alchemy 2010 – The Music of AR Rahman

7 April 2010

London Philharmonic Orchestra

Royal Festival Hall, London

Reviewed by Ken Hunt



Photo: Courtesy The Southbank Centre

AR Rahman is a composer who comes trailing a mean list of plaudits, panegyrics

and platitudes behind him. For Alchemy 2010 he summoned a team to match the statistics. In an article that ran on the day of the concert he spoke to the Metro's *Arwa Haider* (and a fair few London commuters) about "a 100-piece orchestra, a choir and guest soloists from India on sitar and flute". Numerically, it was only a slight overegging of the orchestral pudding, although the 32-strong Metro (no relation) Voices *did* bolster the head count somewhat.

Rahman's London Philharmonic Orchestra vision was predominantly one seen through a Western rather than an Indian prism. After the 'vagueness' of themes from *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* and *Couples Retreat*, when the melodic theme from *Roja* – his breakthrough switch from Tamil- to Hindi-language film – began, it felt strangely like bumping unexpectedly into an old friend on the street. For me, the themes from *Bombay* (yes, shame on me, even Bombay!), *Lagaan* ("Tax"), *Slumdog Millionaire* and *Lord of the Rings* never quite pulled off the same trick.

The Rahman that first seduced me musically was Rahman of the Tamil-language films *Thiruda Thiruda* and *Pudhiya Mugam* (on one handy CD) and the *Roja* soundtrack (similarly released by Magnasound in 1993). What singled the boy wonder out was his melodicism and his intense grasp of rhythmicity. That rhythmicity, as opposed to *talam* (rhythmic cycle), was the paramount, the essential Rahman ingredient missing from the concert. For example, at the risk of inviting charges of critic-as-wannabe-arrangement-consultant, had the concert opened with 'Azeem-o-Shaan Shahenshah' from the 2007 swords 'n' saris costume drama *Jodhaa Akbar* with Rahman-strength brass fanfare, timpani and unison percussion and the Metro Voices chorale blasting out, what a wonderfully alternative musical world of *Rahmania* the LPO might have made of it.

Ultimately, no one concert is ever going to do justice to the cavalier waywardness of Rahman's vision. This one felt like him tasting the orchestral possibilities of his music with

the massed banks of western instruments and big choir delivering the power punches with a professionalism that the Indian film industry cannot yet deliver. Particularly praiseworthy were the contributions of the female vocalists Alma Ferovic and Ann De Renais, Katie Bedford and Naveen Kumar on metal and bamboo flutes, the trombonist Mark Templeton and percussionists Andrew Barclay and Simon Carrington.

The concert finished, as it had begun, with *deva*-bearing children and women theatrically processing along the aisles in the spirit of Diwali (the Festival of Lights) or Vaisakhi (the Spring Festival). The *deva* lamps flickered flame-free in the spirit of Health and Efficiency, Health and Safety or whatever. Hold that image. It might serve as a metaphor for the concert. Next time, more adventurousness, more thrills... and, please, fewer Western films and productions. The demographic of the concert-goers was massively tilted to non-white faces. South Asia is still Rahman's core audience.

Darbar Festival

4 April 2010

Soumik Datta and Shivkumar Sharma

Kings Place, London

Reviewed by Ken Hunt



Photo: Sreeji

The British-based sarodist Soumik Datta, accompanied by Shahbaz Hussain on tabla, had the honour of opening the Darbar Festival's final evening. Datta's guru, Buddhadev Das Gupta happens to be an important influence of mine as a writer on the Indian art music condition. Like few maestros in Hindustani music, he knows the travails dedicated musicians undergo in order

to make music when they aren't hereditary musicians. His pupil played superlatively, as if to the manner born. Here comes the 'but'. Datta should, in my opinion, play fewer notes and deliver the ones he plays with more heart and a keener eye on storytelling. Yes, *storytelling*. *Rāgas* are stories. Because *laya* (tempo) is essential when pacing stories, at times he felt too rushed, too junior gunslinger. The bandish (fixed composition) from Radhika Mohan Moitra – his guru's guru – in which a played phrase is immediately echoed is a fine signpost to Datta's future. And despite spilling his natural exuberance youthfully all over the place, Soumik Datta showed himself to be highly promising. I have my beady eye on him. And I'm not afraid to speak to his guru.

Take it as a given that Shivkumar Sharma and the words 'santoor', 'maestro' and 'visionary' go hand-in-hand. Sharma chose Jog as the main course for the last night of the festival. In our post-Walter Benjamin age of mechanical reproduction, he put one of his past glories, one of his finest ever recordings up for comparison. This Jog likewise went through the conventional sequence of movements from alap via jor to jhalla – which was where Anindo Chatterjee began to reveal his inner and extravert Anindo – to gats, three compositions in sevens and sixteens. The alap was like an incantation of spells and then came the jor. Let's face it, many listeners view its unmetered pulses like some necessary lay-by snooze before arriving at the final destination. Sharma's jor resolutions were exquisite – astronomically speaking, without getting kozmic, like the stuff of cosmic dust taking form. Jog overall was beset with sound problems. But when Jog's last notes decayed acoustically, this Jog's eloquence could only have been the product of the imagination of only this one musician.

Overrunning because of a late start, he encoored with a folk-like melody of five-star strength in the six-beat dadra cycle. Intriguingly unidentifiable, it could have been a dhun (folk air) or some half-remembered tune from a

Bollywood flick that you can't put your finger on. At times his melodic feints and statements swept me back to the exquisite traditional Czech melodies of Jiří Kleňha the maestro of the Fischer's Mandolinette – a hammer dulcimer cousin of the santoor – on Prague's Charles Bridge. Afterwards, Shivkumar Sharma told me it was a dhun in Pahari. Without quite knowing its course, so to speak, he had launched his dhony – the Kashmiri boat of G.N. Joshi's notes for Sharma, Brijbushan Kabra and Hariprasad Chaurasia's classical blockbuster, Call of the Valley. Unplanned 'tales', journeys made without preconception are the living essence of Hindustani art music. And, as tonight, that is where the lucky witness, spontaneous magic unfurling.

Shraddhanjali
30 April 2010

Zakir Hussain, Ranjit Barot and Sabir Khan

Queen Elizabeth Hall, London
Reviewed by Ken Hunt



Photo: SR Siddhu

Since his death in February 2000, the London-based Alla Rakha Foundation has been putting on yearly tributes for the tabla *nawaaz* Alla Rakha. The tenth annual tribute – *Shraddhanjali* means 'tribute' – had a heightened poignancy, for his wife Begum Alla Rakha – or affectionately, *Ammaji* (mother) to Alla Rakha's *Abbaji* (father) – died in late 2009. The billing was Zakir Hussain, Ranjit Barot and Sabir Khan – three sons taking forward Indian arts in their own way.

Ranjit Barot's mother is the noted, *Padma Shree*-class dancer Sitara Devi. The decision to have him open *Shraddhanjali* was inspired. His performance showed how

far Indo-fusion drumming has come since Rich à la Rakha, the 1968 release that paired Alla Rakha and Buddy Rich. His solo opener, *Invocation*, had him playing kit drums to pre-recorded tapes. High in the mix was a fanfare of Indian shawm. Although it sounded like a folk *shehnai*, surprisingly (well, maybe only for me) it turned out to be southern *nagaswaram*. Artfully, its sonorities arced over to the unbilled appearance of Tim Garland on soprano and tenor saxophones on *Hamsadhawani* – a composition messing around with the carnatic raga of the same name. *Bada Boom* – a title punning on US yoofspeak and *bada* to mean 'Big Bang' – with Garland on tenor meshed better. *6/8* deployed kit drums, vocals, sarangi, tenor and soprano saxes playing off, and against, samples. Given the *Shraddhanjali* context, I felt its metallic and radio static atonalisms were too intrusive, too stray.

6/8 followed by *Song For Abbaji* marked the UK public debut of Sabir Khan, the son of sarangi maestro Sultan Khan. The short-bodied, squat sarangi is not the most graceful of stringed instruments but in the right hands it sings like a baby angel. His were the right hands. In him meet the finest young sarangi player since Aruna Narayan, the daughter of sarangi virtuoso Ram Narayan. Although Alla Rakha's son Zakir Hussain played on the second half's ensemble performance piece, Barot's *Song For Abbaji*, it was in the sarangi and tabla interactions and the duo's swapping of supporting roles that the infinite complexities and mind- and body-quaking subtleties of Indian rhythmicity were unleashed and the magic flew. Even mid-performance tuning revealed the marvels of tuned percussion. There were passages when Hussain's hands were a blur. There were times as gentle as a term of endearment wooing the ear. There were also interludes of reminding us that the Punjabi style of tabla-playing is more than arty. Tabla is also about life or vignettes of the natural world. That might be a bolting deer startled by a hunter. Or anywhere India's street chaos of biggest goes best,

with big vehicle, big elephant and hapless little pedestrian trying to weave to the other side. People talk about the greatest this, the greatest that. The contention that there is a greatest rhythmist is absurdly subjective. However, at *Shraddhanjali*, Zakir Hussain, while playing for his life and his father's reputation, proved himself patently the greatest rhythmist on the planet this particular night. No contest.

CD Reviews

Nine Decades: Volume 1 (1967–68)

Ravi Shankar

East Meets West Music Inc.
Reviewed by Ken Hunt

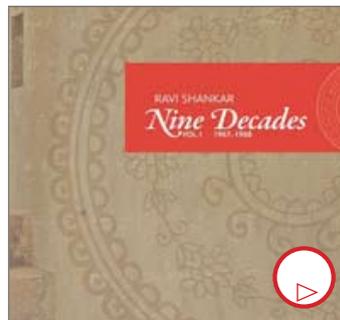


Photo: Courtesy East Meets West Music Inc

Nine Decades: Volume 1 untaps what is planned to be a new stream of releases of audio and visual material from the Ravi Shankar archives. It is the inaugural release from the sitarist's new label East Meets West Music. For decades Alan Kozlowski has been archiving Shankar's past and with this release we get a taste of what the lockers contain. The label debut has 1967–68 as its artistic unity.

The most important morsel prised from the vaults here is a 1968 performance of *Gangeshwari* with Alla Rakha on tabla and Kamala Chakravarty on tanpura, recorded on the banks of the river of its title at Allahabad. It is one of several *raga* devisings that he obtained while 'mucking about' with the sa as entry port. The recording may lack hi-fidelity – ears attune and the drop-outs get forgiven – but it captures elements of his art when he and Alla Rakha were playing for dear life. This is a non-

sterile environment musically and all the better for that. You can eavesdrop on Shankar exhaling and murmuring to himself as he plays the *alap* and *for* in the great outdoors. Six or so minutes in, Alla Rakha enters and the performance rises. This is *Gangeshwari* with dirt under its fingernails – at some remove from Anoushka Shankar's cover/reconstruction of her father's composition on the 2005 triple set *ShankaRagamala*. The sitar has, for instance, a different vocal and tonal range to his later instruments. By the time they are, say, twenty-five minutes into the performance, the figurative feathers are flying and by the conclusion thirty minutes later they are tempestuous. From still air to levitation and earthquake to silence in fifty-five minutes makes for an exhilarating musical journey.

Four minutes of priestly Vedic chanting – 'Duga Suktam' and 'Mahishasura Mardini Stotram' – counted in by Shankar conclude the time capsule. Of at best fleeting interest are the post-concert vox pop responses ('West Meets East') to a 1967 solo concert – which from the accents probably took place in California, though one out-of-state lady talks about attending an Uday Shankar performance.

With CD sales, one hears, in decline, it is imperative that the custodians of this archive improve the quality of the notes and the packaging. Much of this release's notes are little better than press release. Give more context, be more editorially stringent, be less pontificating (no matter how tempting). To home in on just one area: however good your Sanskrit may be, you know there must be a body of listeners – perhaps people whose mother tongue is German or Japanese, Tamil or English or whose faith isn't Hinduism – for whom the Vedic chants convey little without translated lyrics or providing a synopsis and contextual explanation of their hymnody. East Meets West Music Inc. is the official recording label of the Ravi Shankar Foundation. Henceforth, it needs to go the extra mile to do justice to Panditji's legacy. In my opinion.

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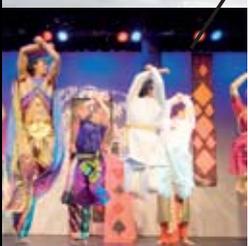
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