

# INDIAN STRINGS & DANCES

An exhibition and season of events celebrating Indian music and dance in Britain  
At The Croydon Clocktower 10 April-31 July 2009

by Diana Mavroleon

The advantage of structuring a season of events that includes various exhibitions but all under the same roof, to run over a generous period of time is that it presents its audiences with an opportunity to reflect upon what has past, before awaiting what more there is to come. Here the expression 'with baited breath' could realistically apply.

The main concept behind *Indian Strings & Dance* (S&D) was to reveal/expose how Indian music and dance form a fundamental part of Indian cultural heritage. Through the ambitious and adventurous co-curation of Lata Desai (Scientist and member of the London Sitar Ensemble) together with Rolf Killius (Ethnomusicologist, Sound recordist, Film producer and Radio journalist) a fascinating canvas of inter-related art forms conjoined to produce one of the most explorative and inspiring seasons taking place in London today. Asked to write an article about Indian S&D places



From left: Preeti Dudakia, Lata Desai (curator), Rolf Killius (curator), Monika Mohita (Director Nehru Centre), Councillor Rober Askey (Mayor of Croydon), Beneditta Tiana (Official from Heritage Lottery Fund), Parvati Nair.

me somewhat above my station, as I am a novice in relation to Indian culture but with the proud lineage of my (late) Hindu-Indian Grandmother, Saraswati Devi Kumarani.

From a venture tackling such broad themes and eclectic contents anything could have resulted. What I observed was that Alchemy was at play; what has been drawn out from the patchwork of events created and performed by both India and British based artists has been a distillation of old and new ingredients working together to produce the familiar, the new and the much welcomed un-expected. Drawing from the words of one of the most erudite and respected of Indian

NCPA Mumbai), Jairazbhoy stated... "I always feel that tradition means change, but not violent change. It has to have some degree of continuity. When it is completely overtaken it ceases to be tradition...If you don't recognize the connection between past, present and what is ahead in the future, you are missing the whole point of existence, because nothing can exist without a precedent or antecedent."

Indian S&D's achievement has been to place side by side and within each other, art forms whose stories can be traced across the trajectories of Indian artists residing in India; those who have migrated to Britain; and Brit-Asians who have



LSE photo at Croydon Museum

Ethno-musicologists, (the late) Prof. Nazir Ali Jairazbhoy; speaking in the discussion following Dr Ashok Ranade's paper on 'Confluence Music: The Sixth Category' (ITCSRA's seminar on 'Continuity & Change in Indian Music', Jan. 2004,

been born here, and what their significant influences on each other have been and are today. Nowhere are the meanings of the term 'confluence' more evident than in the context of this exhibition; it throws light onto what is too often a confused and/or misunderstood term or genre; it adds sparks to the on-going discussion around what 'Confluence' and 'Fusion' music might be; it also provides a multi-surfaced canvas illustrating how Hindustani music is the result of an assimilation between a confluence of cultures and confrontations.

To clarify: Dr Ashoke describes Confluence Music as: "...representing an attempt at bringing together two or more musical cultures that otherwise lead to an effective existence irrespective of one another." Whilst on Fusion music he states that: "It is likely to be the preferred channel of musical expression that the second/third generation of expatriates may readily explore..."

and that: "such an attempt is likely to represent their desire to combine features from their inherited past with assets of

their surrounding presence."

It is interesting to set out the four main shades that relate to the meaning of the term 'confluence' and how they are analogous to the concept and results of Indian S&D:

(a) The meeting of two or more bodies of water (usually tributaries to a main-stream)...the collaboration of several organizations to form a body of work, in the present instance, the Museum of



Nicolas Magriel

Croydon, London Sitar Ensemble and Sutton Subrang

(b) Their junction—the Museum of Croydon.

(c) The coming together of people or things...artists and artworks.

(d) A location where latitude and longitude lines cross...elements of cross-cultural inter-relatedness.

Another inter-related level to consider in Indian S&D is the embracing of 'globalization'. A positive definition of this approx 20 year old term would be "The growing interaction between people,



A packed crowd at the Croydon Clocktower enjoys one of the many events making up the Indian Strings & Dance exhibition

wherever they live in the world, for a common set of humanistic and democratic values, for an economic system capable of dealing with old vicissitudes of geography and resources'. (Simon Mundy, Music & Globalization, ITC-SRA Seminar on Globalization & Indian Music, Jan. 2002).

'Communication, the ratio of time to distance in travel and the ease of migration'...are all part & parcel of the organi-

Singh, both Lata Desai and Rolf Killius were guests on a recent radio show (part of an on-going series on 'The Music of India' broadcast on Resonance Radio (www.resonancefm.com). During the show Desai, born in Africa, whose family then moved to India, recalls clearly the memories of sounds, rhythms, textures and colours of that country and its influences and cross-fertilizations with her own Indian cultures, these all having left



Manorama Prasad

sation that went into achieving such an enormously rich and textured project as *Indian Strings & Dance*. Its aspiration, invention, conservation, discoveries and re-discoveries can only but feed positively and progressively into the inter-mingling of Indian cultures with others...how else shall we grow to understand cultures other than our own? Something that should always be recognized/considered is that the traffic goes in both and not just one direction; in other words...it is a two-way concourse: the effect of globalization on Indian music and the effect of Indian music on globalization

The passions of the both co-curators are clearly evident throughout the exhibition. Along with Dharambir



Parvati Nair

an indelible imprint on her imagination, and how these informed her ambition to draw these two lines together. Interestingly, Desai then drew on some of the similarities that exist between West African and Indian musical traditions whereby in West Africa only five families strictly safe-guard the orally passed down musical knowledge, and that even the actual instruments of the kora and sitar have similarity of form; the kora is made from a kalabash and the sitar a pumpkin, and how both musical traditions are improvised.

Tradition and change go hand in hand on our evolutionary journey and no matter how 'classical' we deem Hindustani music, it can only ever have evolved through the various processes of both confluence and fusion, and that is why we came to arrive at the crossroads of international Fusion, albeit often confusion, where various musical developments are harbouring today. Like them or loath them, they are only a part of the whole expression that is 'music' and I am of the school of thought that believes music to be the language of omnipresence...the Universe; in other words it belongs to no-one of us and it has and will always exist in one form or another, be it through the movement of particles in space or the enigmatic ocean waves.

The four presentations and discussions of the season have been on:

*Perspectives on Indian Music in the UK* by Viram Jasani (AMC), *Growing into Music in North India* by Dr Nicolas Magriel (SOAS and Musician), *Development of Indian Music in Britain* by Dharambir Singh (Musicologist and Musician), and *Indian Music Recordings at the British Library: Research, Presentation & Access* by Dr Janet Fargion Topp (Director of Sound Archives at the British Library).

Art & Craft and Dance workshops and performances have included: Gujarat folk, Odissi, Sattriya, Mohiniyattam, Kuchipudi and Manipuri. Music performances included the Sarod, Sitar, Sarangi, Surbahar, Harp, Tabla, Santoor, Taus, Cello and Kora.

The exhibition also showcases objects and instruments from the Horniman Museum, South Asian Diaspora Literature & Arts Archives, plus numerous contributions from local community groups and artists. That all the dancers and most of the musicians received their training in India and now practise their art through performance and teaching in Britain, supports the cross-cultural intentions that under-lie *Indian S&D* by putting into practise the significant influences of musicians and dancers from South Asia in Britain.

The exhibition in Space C Gallery at the Museum of Croydon showcased a stunning collection of Indian dance costumes collated from dancers and private



Classical costumes on display at the Space C Gallery

collectors depicting the eight classical styles of Indian dance, and three of the folk traditions. The highlight was the 'Eagle Costume' of Ram Gopal, Forefather of Indian dance in Britain and dating back to the early 1930s, whilst in the Croydon NOW area of the Museum were a variety of musical instruments including those relating to different forms of Indian dance. To fascinate your senses even further is a collection of eighteen short films, produced by the curators, of oral history interviews and video performances with key figures in the Indian music and dance movement in Britain (these to be deposited at the British Library for use as educational tools).

Whilst 'recovering' at the Clock tower Cafe Gallery & Court, a final glance around the photographic exhibition



Katharine Ryan

shows contemporary dancers as well as the origins and uses of instruments in their native India.

A verse in Rabindranath Tagore's 'Gitanjali' (no. 70) un-cannily captures the essence of *Indian Strings & Dance*, globalization and confluence, indeed all artistic forms. It is a universal treasure that might rest well at the close of this article.

*Is it beyond thee to be glad with the gladness of this rhythm? to be tossed and lost and broken in the whirl of this fearful joy? All things rush on, they stop not, they look not behind, no power can hold them back, they rush on. Keeping steps with that restless, rapid music, seasons come dancing and pass away—colours, tunes, and perfumes pour in endless cascades in the abounding joy that scatters and gives up and dies every moment.*

Diana Mavroleon is a Film maker, Radio Producer/Presenter, Musician and Gardener living between London and North Norfolk. She is currently researching into the making of a feature documentary on 'The Impact of Globalization on the Thar Desert of Western Rajasthan Musical Cultures' and is Producer & Presenter of the on-going series: 'Music of India' on Resonance 104.4fm (www.resonancefm.com). (for further info contact: diana.mavroleon@gmail.com)

