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AUTO RICKSHAW

stepping up to
tradition



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The traditions of classical Indian music
and Western jazz find common ground
on the plane of improvisation

auto rickshaw

BY TILLMAN LEWIS

A MODERN SPIN
ON A CLASSICAL
TRADITION

From the silence arises a lone, pure female voice, chanting ancient syllables with a centuries-old inflection, each savoured in a precisely prescribed melisma. “Gaaa-Naaa...,” the elemental vowels flower, each in turn.

Deliciously, incongruously, the rising and falling of the voice is echoed, not delicately by an Indian violin or bamboo flute, but by the fat, languid strains of an electric bass, intimately shadowing and supporting it.

As the two trade phrases, the voice drops lower and lower, approaching the depths of the bass, until they cross, the bass reaching to briefly glow above the richness of the voice in its lowest register.

The timeless, shimmering drone of an electronic Sruthi box emerges, sounding the open fifth that will become the anchoring bedrock as the song unfolds.

Finally, this preliminary exploration having settled, the syllables grow into a full word—"Ga-na-murthy..."—and now the tabla drum enters like a gentle rain and the singer completes the line "... Sri Krishna Venu Ganamurthy" (Oh Krishna! The divine flautist)—the tabla drives the tune delicately, bending notes underneath; the bass one moment joins its rhythmic pulse, the next intimately echoes the vocal inflections. A subtle hit to the drum kit, and the voice rises exultantly, continuing the classic Carnatic song in praise of the deity of music.

These are the sounds of Toronto's Autorickshaw, a four-piece ensemble with an Eastern spirit and a Western soul. The band has created a buzz, from folk festivals to jazz festivals and on the concert stage, from the Kala Manjari Indian performing arts association in London, Ontario, to Sound Symposium in St. John's, Newfoundland, from CBC's SmallWorld and Music Around

Us series to the International Association of Jazz Educators showcase in New York. And in December, they will tour India and test the reception of their Indo jazz fusion in the country from which its roots largely derive.

Whether singing the praises of the Hindu pantheon, with all of their colourful stories and idiosyncrasies, crafting originals, or putting the Autorickshaw spin of multimetres and microtonal inflections on well-known jazz standards, Autorickshaw has charm to burn alongside a dignity rooted in the South Indian classical discipline of Carnatic music.

connecting the dots

Singer Suba Sankaran is the daughter of master drummer Trichy Sankaran—who, since being recruited from India to York University in 1971, has been hugely influential in Canada's thriving world music scene. Suba and tabla player Ed Hanley share artistic direction of the band.

Suba is describing to me the complexities of the highly systematized ragas (scales) of the South Indian, or Carnatic, classical tradition. It is a monophonic tradition with no harmony and no modulation; each piece remains in a single raga, grounded by a drone

that sounds throughout. But the melodic and rhythmic complexities are manifold. A raga may have a different pattern on the way up than on the way down, and specific microtonal inflections that are appropriate just to that raga. So not only do you have to learn hundreds of ragas, Suba explains, you also have to keep them straight. "And it's not only that, but if you dive in a little deeper, you see that the ragas have stock phrases that make them what they are, so you need to put the weight in the right places."

Not unlike like the medieval modes, I suggest.

"Exactly." Suba becomes animated. "So you start to see that music was happening on parallel courses in different parts of the world. And it fascinates me—it reminds me that the world is a very small place. It seems to be my purpose in life to draw these connections and connect the dots."

Suba's search for connections has led her in many directions. A classically trained pianist, she was a student director of York University's jazz choir, Wibijazz'n', and sings in a capella groups that specialize in Renaissance vocal music and '80s hits. She has worked with dancers, film, and radio, and her first foray into theatre, creating music for the independent theatre production Bombay Black, earned her a 2006 Dora award for sound design.

For her graduate thesis in ethnomusicology, Suba explored vocal jazz improvisation in a paper on Bobby McFerrin. Using the interdisciplinary approach of dance movement analysis to analyze McFerrin's vocal attitude, Suba writes that his fresh and creative one-man band approach shows that a singer needs to rely on neither lyrics nor an accompanying instrument. "A vocalist only needs ideas to ignite improvisation, specific vocabulary to sustain a way of singing and create variation, and the wisdom to know when and where to use a certain part of the vocabulary."

intercultural blending

Indian music first came to wide popular attention in the West, thanks to George Harrison's studies with sitar master Ravi Shankar, in the late 1960s—just a few years before Trichy Sankaran moved his young family to Toronto. Although expressing distress at the superficial reception that hippy culture accorded to all things Eastern, Shankar performed at such 1960s watersheds as the Monterey Pop Festival in 1967 and Woodstock in 1969. The decades since have seen a fertile intercultural blending of musics. Indian classical traditions have been used to create diverse hybrids with popular Western idioms. Suba cites three influences on Autorickshaw's approach, each of which is redefining world music in their own way: the fusion

Autorickshaw

An autorickshaw is the modern, motorized version of the traditional South Asian rickshaw, a small two- or three-wheeled cart pulled by a person. A light vehicle for hire, often driven by a young graduate, the autorickshaw is one of the chief modes of transport in India and other South Asian countries.



band Shakti, and percussionists Trilok Gurtu and Talvin Singh.

Shakti was put together in 1975 by British jazz guitarist John McLaughlin, with North Indian drummer Zakir Hussain and two South Indian musicians, violinist L. Shankar and percussionist T. H. Vinayakram. The band broke new ground in blending not only the traditions of East and West in which they were immersed, but also the traditions of India's North and South, which had remained quite distinct. McLaughlin and Hussain have recently revived the band as Remember Shakti, and their Indian fusion draws sold-out crowds in India.

As a band with two percussionists, Autorickshaw is particularly drawn to expressions of rhythmic complexity, such as that of the unique Eastern-Western drummer Trilok Gurtu. His adventurous explorations with both popular and world musicians in London have also been an inspiration to London's thriving Asian dance scene. Born in Bombay, Gurtu has collaborated with McLaughlin and Hussain, jazz greats Don Cherry and Jan Garbarek, and more recently with world musicians such as Nitin Sawhney, Angélique Kidjo, and Salif Keita.

Among the younger generation of Indian musicians making music in London, Talvin Singh, Autorickshaw's third influence, is a leader. Singh was born in 1970s London, his Indian parents having fled Idi Amin's Uganda. Classically trained as a tabla player, Singh found his own niche crossing traditional sounds with drum'n'bass electronica. Singh DJ-ed at the east-end London nightclub Anokha, released the seminal 1997 compilation *Soundz of the Asian Underground*, and continues, as a solo artist, to bring his traditional training into a modern context to create new hybrids.

Multicultural Canada, and Toronto in particular, has also become a hotbed of world musics bending and blending. Prominent veterans include percussion ensemble Nexus, whose explorations of contemporary and world musics since 1971 have introduced cross-genre collaboration to several generations of University of Toronto students; the Evergreen Club Contemporary Gamelan, established in 1983, who commissioned the first original composition to be written by Trichy Sankaran; the Toronto Tabla Ensemble, established in 1991 by Ritesh Das, Ed Hanley's tabla teacher; and Maza Mezé, with whom Autorickshaw's second percussionist, Debashis Sinha, has long played, and who recently celebrated their tenth anniversary.

"There is so much world-music blending because of the diversity of the city," suggests Ed. "There are few inhibitions in the musicians to try new things, and



the volume of that activity has created an audience open to experimentation."

Specifically on the Indo-Canadian scene, Tasa, founded by tabla player-composer Ravi Naimpally, blends the musics of North and South India with diverse world traditions to create a distinctly Canadian voice. Catherine Potter plays world jazz on the bansuri, the bamboo flute often pictured in the hands of Lord Krishna. Ragaffaire, led by virtuoso sitarist Neeraj Prem, serves up a world-jazz fusion. And on the art music end of the spectrum, Robert Rosen's "La" is a successful Indian-influenced composition for violin and tabla, commissioned by violinist Parmela Attariwala and recorded with Ravi Naimpally.

carving a path

Autorickshaw, a relative newcomer on this scene, was born of a 2003 collaboration on a dance commission by Natasha Bakht, in which tabla player Ed Hanley combined forces with Suba, and both felt an instant connection. The tabla, a pair of tunable hand-played drums, is the principal percussion instrument of the North Indian Hindustani tradition. But Ed's studies, including those under Trichy Sankaran, have also extended to the South Indian Carnatic vocal percussion and drumming traditions. "Tabla and North Indian music have rich connections to Carnatic music," Ed explains. In fact, he considers the mrdan-



Brown to join them in playing, Suba and Ed thought, Why not let Rich double the voice?

Perhaps the most distinctive element of Autorickshaw's sound is this unexpected, intimate interplay between Suba's voice and the infectious gleefulness of the bass. "I actually owe a lot of that to Suba," Rich explains, "She and I would spend a lot of time going through the melodies phrase by phrase to make sure the nuances and inflections, called gamakas, were being properly articulated." But Rich doesn't just match the gamakas with precision; he brings to the sound a huge, appealing heart. "Like every other bass player," says Rich, "I checked out a lot of Jaco Pastorius when I was getting my sound together. But I also grew up listening to the funk and R&B of the '70s and '80s, and I'm still learning from the artists who are part of that scene today. That's always been a big part of my sound."

"The beauty of it is that we have all this invisible harmonic space that's available to us," says Suba. "He's down low, and I'm mid to high, and we can both join in and out in that territory. It allows for creativity in our arrangements, and in improvising as well—you don't get stepped on anywhere. I'd love to be singing

I certainly see what performing—some categories to it, but

gam, the South Indian two-headed barrel drum of which Trichy Sankaran is a master, to be "the grandfather" of the tabla.

Shortly after their initial collaboration, Ed and Suba travelled together to India, where Ed studied with a mrdangist named Karaikudi Mani, translating mrdangam repertoire for the tabla. Suba deepened her study of the Carnatic vocal tradition with singer Sankari Krishnan, from whom she learned what has become an Autorickshaw signature tune, "Ganamurthy," by the eighteenth-century saint composer Thyagaraja. Ed had first discovered this piece in a recording by U. Shrinivas, and he and Suba subsequently chased down as many recorded versions as they could get their hands on.

In Indian tradition, a vocalist is always supported by a melodic instrument, more typically a violin, which has become thoroughly established in Carnatic music, where its own distinctive style has evolved. Having invited the remarkable self-taught bass player Rich

those notes, but I'm not going to be."

The fourth band member, percussionist Debashis Sinha, brings a South Asian heritage and a background in Arabic and world traditions to "a crazy hybrid of traditional instruments and drum kit elements." He says, "We've all known each other for a long time, played together in different contexts, and it was really a great thrill to be asked to join this band. Having a bass and two percussionists means you have to be careful about your choices in your groove. When they told me it was just the four of us I was really surprised, but it continually amazes me how full the sound of the quartet is."

The Autorickshaw spin is a palatable blend, but one that does more than scratch the surface of the Indian tradition and borrow a few exotic elements. Autorickshaw's fusion is rooted in a backbone of tradition and discipline. Ed and Suba are both trained in Indian musical traditions, he explains, "but we grew up in Toronto, so we have a similar vision about what

fusion can be.” There’s jazz in the sound—as Suba says, “All of us in the band have had our hands in jazz to one degree or another. [We’ve either] studied it, . . . are self-taught, [or] . . . are just immersed in it through the listening.” But there’s a distinct pop sensibility, too. While efforts within India to incorporate Western pop elements can be stilted, in the multicultural hotbed that is Toronto, Autorickshaw is able to express a deep respect for the classical Indian traditions within a listenable popular idiom.

daughter and disciple

A key influence on Toronto’s world music scene has been Suba’s father, Trichy Sankaran, master of the South Indian mrdangam and kanjira (a lizard-skin tambourine). In addition to collaborating with leading international artists in Carnatic music and returning to India regularly to perform, he has expanded the tradition with creative collaborations and original compositions that find deep connections between cultures. The first of these was a 1984 commission by Toronto’s Evergreen Club, for which he invented a tuned set of mrdangam drums to complement the

away a couple of generations of musicians, inspiring them to learn more of Indian music and drumming. Once people start studying with him, it’s impossible not to develop a deep respect for the tradition and the way he teaches it. The number of musicians who understand concepts like korvai (a calculated rhythmic climax) are a testimony to his influence.”

Suba visibly glows when she describes the privilege of growing up at her father’s side—for who he is, as both a master drummer and as a person. “One of the first sounds I can remember is [his tuning] the right head of the drum. It’s a pitched sound, and it’s a sound that, when he does it—and he has to several times in a concert—it’s like coming home for me.”

Suba grew up surrounded by music, and by the visiting international artists who would pass through their home, exposing her to a fertile mix of South Indian, European classical, jazz, and world music. Suba says that Sankaran, coming from a very traditional place, “started music at such a young age and just stayed on the path. There was very rarely a fork in the road, I think. But at the same time, once he came to Canada, he was able to understand other cultures and bring them into his compositions and collaborations.”

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ut for me, **it’s in the music**

AUTORICKSHAW SINGER
SUBA SANKARAN

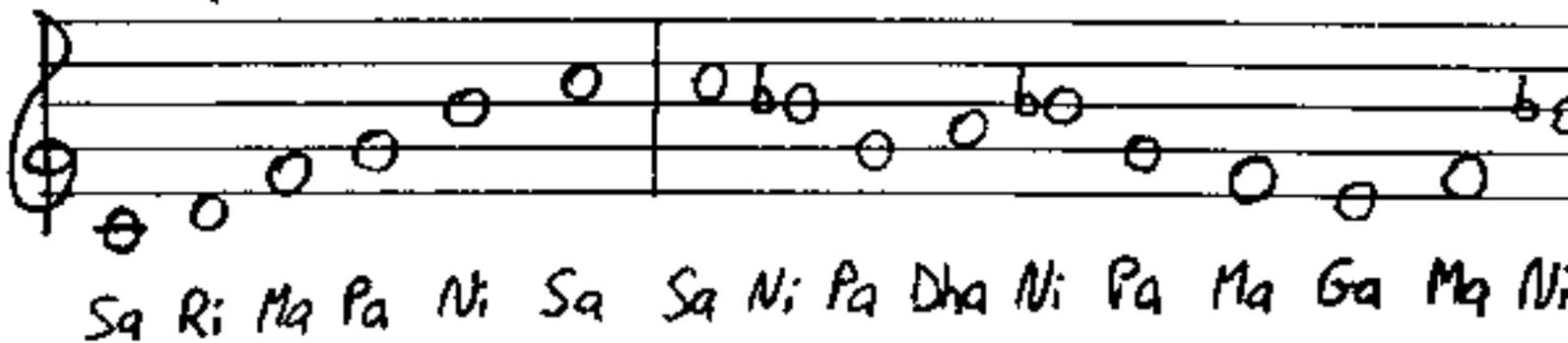
tuned pitches of the gamelan (see Musicworks 59).

As a teacher, Trichy Sankaran adapted a tradition of personal transmission that requires complete devotion to a master-student relationship that could profitably be shared with Western university students. The rhythmic cycles, or talas, of the Carnatic system are taught using spoken syllables, solkattu. Just as there is no modulation from key to key, the tala of a piece is invariable, but it is subjected to increasingly complex and mathematical subdivisions as a piece progresses. In concert, the tala will be clapped by a tala-keeper, often an apprentice to the master, and a knowledgeable audience may join in, using stylized hand gestures.

Sankaran insists that the rhythmic complexities must be learned by doing, not by abstracting or theorizing about them. His influence, I am told by John Gzowski, co-artistic director of Toronto’s Music Gallery, cannot be overestimated. “Sankaran’s performances over the decades he’s been here have blown

The family came from India shortly after the birth of Suba’s older sister. Suba was born and raised in Toronto—she’s “the Canadian sister,” which may account for her insistence on carving her own path. “I grew up in a fairly traditional household, but it’s not like we were part of a specific Indian community. I was probably the only Indian person in my public school, which is pretty wild. I was immersed in many things—I’d have my Christian friends and my Jewish friends. Our neighbours were Seventh-Day Adventists, and I’d go to Bible school with them because I really liked the music, and I’d come back singing the hymns and reading the psalms. So my parents were really open to that. Whether they realized it or not, or even whether they liked it or not, they were setting the stage for what my path was going to be.”

The languages spoken in the house were Tamil, which her parents spoke to each other; Telugu, which Suba considers her mother tongue, and with which the parents addressed her and her sister; and English,



with which the sisters would respond. She'll still go home to review the pronunciation of a new song, with the same studious care with which, as a child, she banished the family's foreign rolled r's from her accent in English.

Suba displays an ease on stage that may have its roots in the natural way performance was introduced to her. At age four—"pretty wild to be so young and uninhibited and innocent," she recalls—Suba with a few other children performed the invocation at a Nine-Night Festival in honour of the three goddesses Saraswati, Lakshmi, and Durga, organized by her father and his colleague at Wesleyan University, the late South Indian flute player T.Viswanathan.

Trichy Sankaran has occasionally performed with Autorickshaw, proudly exclaiming that now his daughter is calling him to hire him for gigs. The relationship is so close, says Suba, that sometimes it's hard to tell where the daughter ends and the disciple begins. The intensity of her relationship with the master drummer, who can trace his own musical lineage back several generations to the mid-nineteenth century, is of a different character than that of university students who may pass through for a few years. "He has created a legacy," Suba says. "I think he's passing the torch in different ways to different people, and I think I may be unique in that I can carry on certain parts of the tradition while still staying true to who I am as a Canadian, following both streams at the same time."

a convergence of styles

Suba describes the Carnatic style as being both elevated and pure. It is a classical—as opposed to folk—style, and coming from the South of India, was less exposed to the various invasions that came down through the North over the centuries. Above all, what Suba feels her father has passed on to her is "the discipline that comes with that tradition . . . I want to make sure that I'm not diluting the tradition in any way, that I'm borrowing the aspects that really mean a lot to me,

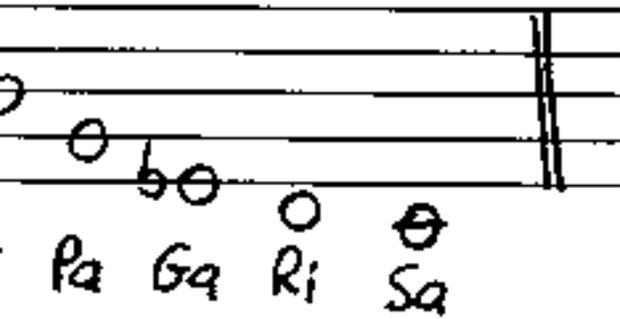
and maintaining that integrity."

Improvisation is essential to Carnatic music, although it follows prescribed forms. And it's on the plane of improvisation that the traditions of classical Indian music and Western jazz find common ground. In both traditions, playful improvisation within predetermined boundaries is a means by which soloists build complexity, sometimes competitively. And both traditions feature ornamental "bent" notes. But it's not only the similarities that can be a point of contact, says Suba, it's also the differences. Sometimes it's exactly where they're most dissimilar that you want to draw from one tradition or the other: "For example, there are no key changes in Indian music. That's why the drone becomes so essential. And there's no harmony. So all of a sudden, you get to the jazz side, or just the Western side in general, and you've got this amazing potential, and endless possibilities for harmony."

Some Autorickshaw originals use classical Indian forms, such as the four-movement Hemavati Suite on the 2004 CD *Four Higher*, which features improvisations structured after the classical ragam tanam pallavi. "Within the classical music, you have all sorts of composed forms," explains Suba. "There's something akin to the rondo form, a refrain that you come back to, it's a chorus of a tune called a pallavi. You have a feature called the ragam tanam pallavi, and within that pallavi you'll have the big percussion breakdown. So I found that I really gravitated to the structures, they're so beautifully laid out."

Mind you, the four movements in Autorickshaw's radio-friendly rendering clock in at about five minutes each, a far cry from the hour-and-a-half showcase such a form might traditionally take. "We're editing as much as we can without chopping the legs off these pieces," Suba admits.

Autorickshaw most often improvises in the familiar jazz style of playing a head and then opening it up for improvisation. Rich explains: "One of my favourite songs in Autorickshaw is called 'Manju Nihar,' which is a traditional Bengali folk song. Although this is a classical South Asian piece, we use the jazz approach



to improvisation (head-solo-head-out). And yet when we play our version of Leonard Cohen's 'Bird on a Wire,' we start this piece with a vocal alap, which is a classical Indian vocal improvisation based on a specific raga."

Another fruitful parallel is with the element of scat singing in jazz. In Indian tradition, there's a vocabulary of svara (pitch) syllables that correspond to the Western solfège: sa, ri, ga, ma, pa, dha, ni, sa. But beside those is a vocabulary of sound syllables that have no specific meaning, but that allow you to run through scales and arpeggios. "So to be able to go in a song from the Indian vocables to scat singing is amazing, because you've got these two languages that are marrying one another," says Suba.

I ask how formalized the Indian vocables are. "People all use the same syllables—you may gravitate to certain ones rather than others, but they're generally ta, la, dha, ma ... and usually the vowels are ahs, ees, and oos, which are found in Sanskrit; so they've got a real tie back to the origins of the languages. To me, they allow you to not have to sing the solfège, you can use these more open vowels like we do in scat singing. In this case, we're not necessarily emulating an instrument, as we might be in jazz, where I might be imitating a first trumpet. But they serve the same purpose in that they allow you to launch into an improvised area without having to use specific words for specific notes."

Sanskrit is the ancient language of Vedic chant, the language of the primordial mantra Om. Suba herself doesn't feel a specifically religious connection, but to the extent that the meaning is carried in the sound itself, it is there nonetheless. "I grew up in a Hindu household," she says. "I don't find that I necessarily need to put a name or a face to a higher power ... But I certainly see whatever that higher power is when I'm performing—some people put a name to it, some people put categories to it, but for me, it's in the music."

so the journey goes

The band's third album is due out in November, 2006. Its infectious title track, "Chalanata Blues/So the Journey Goes," is a reflection Suba wrote on her reception in India as a foreigner, who stood out by the way she carried herself. It moves playfully through jazz into traditional territory, with a little "rap" naming South Indian train stations in the middle. "Nalina Kanthi," a piece commissioned from Trichy Sankaran, is in a traditional South Indian style, with the rhythmic challenge of maintaining a steady eight-beat cycle (adi tala), but with a focal point one-sixteenth note after the downbeat. A Bitches Brew-type improvisation highlights the signature sounds of a number of guest artists (Mark McLean, John Gzowski, George Koller, Trichy Sankaran, Kevin Breit, and Dylan Bell), using them as "live samples" in a soundscape of loop and hooks. And a "corny Bollywood love song" called "Aaj Ki Raat" (Tonight's the Night) features the Hanford Street Silver Band in an arrangement from the Bollywood Brass, a UK brass band.

When I asked band members to describe the Autorickshaw sound, Debashis summed it up beautifully: "I think it has to do with our desire to enter into the heart of the music we play, to find and distill the essence of the traditional songs and rhythms we use, and then with awareness re-present it. That, and joy."

Tilman Lewis, a Toronto cellist, is an active member of the Association of Improvising Musicians Toronto (AIMToronto). His previous contributions to Musicworks include an interview of David Mott for Musicworks 95 and a profile of John Gzowski for Musicworks 89.

fyi Suba Sankaran's father, Trichy Sankaran, was featured extensively in *Musicworks 29* and *Musicworks 59*; aspects of North Indian music were discussed by Charles Noyes in *Musicworks 34*.

résumé français

Par son caractère multiculturel, le Canada, et Toronto en particulier, est devenu une pépinière de musiques du monde qui se mélangent et se transforment. L'ensemble torontois de jazz fusion indien Autorickshaw en est un exemple éloquent. Fille du maître-percussionniste Trichy Sankaran, éminent enseignant de la tradition musicale carnatique du sud de l'Inde, la chanteuse Suba Sankaram partage la direction de l'ensemble avec le joueur de tabla Ed Hanley. Ce groupe tire peut-être son caractère distinct de l'interaction particulière entre la voix de Suba et l'entrain contagieux de la basse électrique de Rich Brown, laquelle n'est décidément pas un instrument traditionnel. Suba évoque la possibilité de « relier les points » entre différentes musiques et discute des points communs et des différences entre le jazz et la musique carnatique.