

ADAPTING TRADITIONS: THE PRACTICE OF INDIAN CLASSICAL MUSIC IN WESTERN MUSICAL COMMUNITIES

Moumita Acharjee

Assistant Music Teacher, BAF Shaheen College, Kurmitola (BAFSK), Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Naren Chakraborty

PhD Research Scholar, Dept. of Vocal Music, MSU, Vadodara



[Read the Article Online](#)



Published on 30 April, 2026

ABSTRACT

This article examines the adaptation of Indian classical music within Western musical communities, focusing on the cultural exchange, teaching methods, performance styles, and collaborations that have facilitated this process. It explores how Western musicians engage with Indian classical traditions, the adjustments made to fit Western contexts, and the impact on both musical forms. Through case studies, interviews, and performance analyses, the article highlights the dynamic process of blending tradition with innovation, fostering a deeper understanding of cross-cultural music exchange.

Keywords: Indian classical music, cross-cultural exchange, raga, tala, fusion music, pedagogy, guru-shishya parampara, Western music education, globalization, and performance practices.

Introduction

Indian classical music, renowned for its depth, intricacy, and improvisational nature, has transcended its traditional geographical and cultural boundaries to find a dedicated following in the West. This expansion has been facilitated by the globalizing forces of the 20th and 21st centuries, as well as by the efforts of Indian musicians who introduced this art form to Western audiences.

The adoption of Indian classical music in Western communities presents a fascinating case of cultural exchange. This article explores how this practice has evolved, the pedagogical adaptations made for Western learners, and the creative collaborations that have emerged from this cross-cultural engagement. Over the years, this music has adapted to new cultural contexts, reflecting the broader trend of globalization, where traditions spread and evolve across borders. This article focuses on how Indian classical music is practiced and performed in Western settings, examining the cultural dialogue that influences this adaptation. Key questions explored include:

- How do Western musicians learn and interpret Indian classical music?
- What changes are made to accommodate Western audiences and settings?
- What role do digital tools and media play in spreading Indian classical music?

A literature review of books, journal articles, and archival materials is conducted to understand historical and theoretical perspectives. Additionally, selected case studies of institutions and cross-cultural collaborations are analyzed. The data is interpreted using a thematic analysis approach, focusing on pedagogy, adaptation, and cultural exchange. This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine the practice of Indian classical music in Western musical communities.

Historical Background

Indian classical music boasts a history that spans thousands of years, deeply intertwined with the spiritual and cultural fabric of India. It is primarily categorized into two distinct styles: Hindustani (North Indian) and Carnatic (South Indian). Each style is characterized by its unique system of ragas (melodic frameworks) and talas (rhythmic cycles), emphasizing improvisation and emotional expression. In contrast, Western classical music has its roots in ancient Greece and Rome, evolving through various periods such as the Baroque, Classical, Romantic, and Modern eras. This tradition is marked by its structured compositions, written scores, and harmony-driven approach. The differences in their development reflect broader cultural values—where Indian music often emphasizes spiritual connection and improvisation, Western music prioritizes formality and adherence to written notation.

Early Cultural Encounters

The initial interaction between Indian and Western music can be traced back to the colonial era, when European missionaries and scholars were introduced to Indian musical traditions. However, the global appeal of Indian classical music took off in the

mid-20th century, thanks to iconic figures like sitar maestro Ravi Shankar. His collaborations with Western artists, including violinist Yehudi Menuhin and The Beatles' George Harrison, played a significant role in popularizing Indian music in the West.

Influential Figures:

- Ravi Shankar: A pioneer who introduced Indian classical music to Western audiences through collaborations and solo performances.
- Yehudi Menuhin: A famous violinist who worked closely with Shankar, symbolizing the fusion of Eastern and Western music.

Impact of Globalization

Globalization has further deepened the exchange between Indian and Western music. The ease of travel and communication has enabled greater interaction, while digital media has made Indian classical music accessible to a broader audience. Today, Western music institutions offer courses on Indian music, and fusion genres combining Indian classical elements with Western styles have emerged.

Teaching Indian Classical Music in the West

Traditional vs. Modern Methods

In India, learning classical music traditionally involves the guru-shishya parampara, where students (shishya) live with and learn from their teacher (guru). This method emphasizes direct oral transmission of knowledge. However, in Western contexts, more structured approaches are common.

Adaptations in Western Contexts:

- Music schools and universities have incorporated Indian classical music into their curricula.
- Online platforms provide lessons, workshops, and tutorials.
- Western musical notation is sometimes used to aid understanding, although Indian music primarily relies on oral transmission.

Teaching Challenges

Western students often find it difficult to grasp certain aspects of Indian classical music, such as shruti (microtones) and tala (rhythms). Teachers often bridge these gaps by drawing parallels with familiar Western musical concepts. For example, explaining ragas by comparing them to western modes helps students understand the melodic structure.

Performance Practices

Adaptation of Performance Styles

Indian classical music is traditionally performed in intimate settings, such as temples or private gatherings. In the West, performances often take place in large concert halls or at music festivals, which necessitates certain adjustments.

Key Changes:

- Performances are often shorter to suit Western audiences preferences.
- Artists frequently provide explanations about the music and its cultural background.
- Modern sound equipment is used to enhance the experience in larger venues.

Fusion and Cross-Cultural Collaborations

Fusion music, blending Indian classical elements with genres like jazz, rock, and electronic music, has become popular in the West. Collaborative projects between Indian and Western musicians have led to new and innovative musical styles.

Examples of Notable Collaborations:

- Shakti: A band led by guitarist John McLaughlin and tabla virtuoso Zakir Hussain, combining Indian classical music with jazz.
- Anoushka Shankar's projects: Anoushka, Ravi Shankar's daughter, has collaborated with various global artists, blending Indian classical music with contemporary styles.

Role of Technology and Media

Online Platforms and Learning Opportunities

The internet has revolutionized access to Indian classical music, allowing learners from all over the world to connect with teachers and resources. Online courses, YouTube tutorials, and live-streamed concerts have made it easier to learn and appreciate this art form.

Advantages:

- Greater access to learning materials.
- Opportunities to archive and preserve traditional music.
- Wider reach for musicians to connect with audiences.

Challenges:

- Maintaining the depth and rigor of traditional teaching online.
- Ensuring that students understand the cultural context of the music.

Social Media and Community Engagement

Social media platforms play a crucial role in promoting Indian classical music. Musicians use platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter to share performances, teaching materials, and insights, building a global community of enthusiasts.

Case Studies

Western Musicians Exploring Indian Classical Music

Several Western musicians have studied Indian classical music deeply, often traveling to India to learn from masters. Their experiences highlight both the rewards and challenges of engaging with a different musical tradition.

Example:

- John Coltrane: The jazz legend was influenced by Indian spirituality and music, particularly in his groundbreaking album *A Love Supreme*.
- Key Challenges:
 - Balancing authenticity with personal artistic interpretation.
 - Avoiding superficial engagement with the music.

Ethnographic Observations

Case Study 1: Ali Akbar College of Music

Established in California, this institution serves as a hub for learning Indian classical music in the West. Observations reveal a diverse group of students, ranging from amateur musicians to seasoned professionals, united by their passion for Indian music. Teachers emphasize traditional techniques while accommodating Western learners through explanatory analogies and simplified exercises.

Case Study 2: Western Festivals and Concerts

Events such as the Darbar Festival and WOMAD showcase Indian classical music alongside world music genres. These platforms not only preserve the art form but also introduce it to broader audiences. Observations at such events reveal an increasing appreciation for Indian music's spiritual depth and technical brilliance.

Indian musicians living and working in the West often act as cultural ambassadors, teaching and performing Indian classical music. They face unique challenges, such as balancing the preservation of tradition with adapting to a new cultural environment.

Cultural and Ethical Considerations

Authenticity and Cultural Appropriation

The global spread of Indian classical music raises important questions about authenticity and cultural sensitivity. While cross-cultural collaborations can be enriching, they must be approached with respect and understanding to avoid cultural appropriation.

This paper was presented at the 'Swar Sanskar National Seminar', organized by Swar Sanskar Sangeet Gurukul
Seminar Convener: Dr. Yash Sanjay Dewale (Co-Founder: Swar Sanskar Sangeet Gurukul, Assistant Professor: MSU Baroda)

Ethical Guidelines for Musicians:

- Learning from authentic sources and acknowledging them.
- Respecting the cultural roots of the music.
- Engaging in collaborations that honor both traditions.

Impact on Indian Classical Music

Innovation and Preservation

The interaction between Indian and Western music has led to innovations within Indian classical music, creating new compositions and fusion genres. While this evolution keeps the tradition alive, it also poses risks of dilution and commercialization.

Positive Impacts:

- Increased global recognition.
- New creative possibilities for musicians.

Challenges:

- Preserving the purity and depth of traditional forms.
- Finding a balance between innovation and tradition.

Future Prospects

The practice of Indian classical music in Western musical communities continues to evolve, with exciting possibilities on the horizon:

- Integration into Education: Indian classical music could become a standard part of global music curricula, fostering greater appreciation and understanding.
- Expansion of Fusion Genres: Cross-cultural collaborations will likely lead to the creation of new fusion genres, enriching the global musical landscape.
- Therapeutic Applications: Indian classical music's meditative qualities could find increasing use in sound therapy and mental health interventions.

Conclusion

The practice of Indian classical music in Western musical communities reflects the broader dynamics of cultural exchange and globalization. While there are challenges in adapting this rich tradition to new contexts, the opportunities for innovation and mutual enrichment are significant. By fostering respectful engagement and meaningful collaborations, musicians can honor Indian classical music's heritage while contributing to its evolution. This ongoing process ensures that Indian classical music continues to thrive and inspire audiences around the world.

References

- Katz, J. (2019). *The Influence of Indian Music on Western Music*. Cambridge University Press.
- Farrell, G. (1997). *Indian Music and the West*. Oxford University Press.
- Shankar, R. (1999). *My Music, My Life*. Mandala Publishing.
- Nettl, B. (2015). *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Thirty-Three Discussions*. University of Illinois Press.
- Miller, T. E., & Shahriari, A. (2012). *World Music: A Global Journey*. Routledge.
- Farrell, G. (1986). *Teaching Indian music in the West: Problems, approaches, and possibilities*. *British Journal of Music Education*, 3(3), 277-290. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265051700000784>
- Oppenheim, M. H. (2012). *Cross-cultural pedagogy in North Indian classical music* [Master's thesis, University of British Columbia]. UBC Open Collections. <https://dx.doi.org/10.14288/1.0073063>
- Wade, B. C. (1998). *Music in India: The classical traditions*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- CMUSE. (n.d.). *The influence of Indian classical music on Western composers*. CMUSE. Retrieved from <https://www.cmuse.org>
- Neuman, D. M. (1980). *The life of music in North India: The organization of an artistic tradition*. New Delhi: Manohar. <https://www.thetonearm.com/john-mclaughlin-shakti-legacy-from-zakir-hussain-to-mind-explosion/>