

Indian music and the West: An exploration

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From the 17th century, Indian mythology and ideals have exerted an indefinable influence on Western thought and artistic practice. The use of certain types of note intervals, experiments in transilience (equivalent of the gamaka), as well as atonal/functional harmonies have found their place periodically in themes that were generally classified as mystical or exotic.

English literature on the topic played down the role Indian music played on the West, in concordance with the imperialistic nature of the discourse. However this cannot detract from the influence Indian classical music has played on notable composers and indeed, its contribution to large tracts of Western classical repertoire in the last 200 years: Specifically, composers from the French 'orientalist' school including Leon Delibes (notably in the opera *Lakme*), Georges Bizet (in the opera *Pearl Fishers*), Claude Debussy (several piano reductions post his meeting with Inayat Khan, and also sections of various operatic works); latter day minor composers including Maurice Delage, and his experiments with prepared pianos to reproduce Indian classical sound, notably Carnatic music-influenced motifs following his visit to south India in the early 20th century, and his *Ragamalika* composition that followed.

The English composer Gustav Holst was deeply inspired and indeed influenced by Indian classical ideas and musical specifics in composing *Savitri*, his one-act opera based on the story of Satyavan and Savitri. Holst perhaps embodies the

spirit of India's influence on the West the most. This essay explores some of these composers in detail.

Debussy and the French School

When a strange, exotic Indian man with a flowing beard and equally flowing garments presented himself at No. 80, Avenue du Bois de Bologne in Paris, the concierge armed himself with an umbrella. Shouting to his colleagues to rush to his rescue, the concierge was about to charge when the 'eccentric musician' who owned the apartment above came rushing in to take charge. Admonishing his staff, this small-made Frenchman with a broad, flat head (brachycephalic, to give it its accurate description) quickly took the guests upstairs. They were carrying long stringed instruments of a kind that the staff had never seen before, and indeed, took to be weapons. It turned out that the guests were none other than Hazrat Inayat Khan, his



Claude Debussy

younger brother Musharaff Khan and their accompanist. Inayat Khan was a Sufi scholar, sitar player and musicologist and the founder of the Sufi movement in the West. Apart from all of these distinctions, he was the direct descendant of Tipu Sultan. His daughter would go on to become one of Britain's most acclaimed espionage agents and among the world's first women radio operators.

Hazrat Inayat Khan and group



But this essay is about the little man who rushed his Indian guests upstairs. The year was 1913. And this man would be famous throughout the world as Claude Debussy, one of the pioneers of the 'impressionistic' schools of Western music. His salon pieces and orchestral pieces were already the rage of the day. Having heard and become seduced by both Javanese gamelan music and Indian music at the International Expositions held in Paris in the late 1890s and early 1900s, Debussy was excited at being introduced to Indian musicians directly. A contemporary anecdote of the first encounter mentions how Debussy followed his guests' performance of the evening by immediately mimicking the notes on the piano, calling out to know the names of the ragas being played. Incidentally, they were the ragas Durga and Yaman, with traces of Shyam Kalyan.

This started a love affair with Hindustani classical music that was to be found in both direct and indirect ways in Debussy's music over the next five years, before his passing at the age of 56 in 1918. In particular, I examined the wonderful idea of what 'influence' actually means.

In today's context of Indo-Western 'fusion' experiments, we often find the mimicking of raga-like passages and phrases, or rhythmic cycles with episodic adherence to the spirit and essence of the original raga structure. In simple terms, the raga 'comes and goes'. In the more lazy experiment, an Indian melody is played while a bass line or other accompanying line follows rules of its own and either plays consonantly or not, depending on the mood of the player. It is heady and electric at times, or deceptively minimalist, as if to convey to the listener that the composers of the arrangement are trying to arrive at something profound and innovative that has not been attempted before.

Contrasting this with what went through the mind of someone as prolific as Debussy, I find that the stamp of the raga system at its core makes itself known through a far more internalised, innate fashion. For instance, in his piece for two pianos (*En Blanc Et Noir*; 1913), the left hand is playing a repeated 'drone' structure of the tonic and dominant (C and lower G), in the *Pa-Sa-Sa-lower Sa* pattern throughout several sections. The harmonic frame of this tanpura-based piano lends the entire suite a character unlike many other Western compositions. In his piece *Pas De L'Elefant* (The Elephant Melody) the melody itself roughly follows the *C-Db-F-G-Bb-C* structure, roughly reminiscent of the raga Revati.

In pieces such as *Jardines Suis La Pluie* (Gardens in the Rain), one can distinctly make out the patterns of Malhar in the rising and falling semiquavers in the right hand melodic line, especially in the later sections of the piece. True to the 'impressionistic' spirit, the raga presents itself as a composite of a series of fast-played note sequences in silhouette as opposed to being obviously replicated. He has used the influence of India, and the idea of the raga itself. But he has not compromised on his style of composition or the sensibility most



Maurice Delage

sued to his beloved instrument—the piano.

Later French composers such as Maurice Delage (1879-1961) had the opportunity to travel to India as part of entourages of merchant bankers. Delage's *Ragamalika* (1922) and compositions such as *Quatre Poeme Hindous* (including the ethereal *Madras* composed in 1912) take in the influences of Carnatic music. The raga patterns of several ragas including Saveri, Varali and Latangi are reflected in the compositional graphs of the pieces in these suites.

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Holst and India

History would record Gustav Holst (1874-1934) as a shy, retiring man given to academic pursuits and a quiet life. Indeed, until the later part of the 20th century, his music was largely unknown. The success of his orchestral suite *The Planets* (which itself he was to admit was influenced by his strong interest in astrology, including Vedic precepts) was not to be replicated for any of his other works until recently. He was a teacher for a large part of his life, and quite a reluctant entrant to the international world of fame and glamour that followed the release of *The Planets*. Today, he is regarded as one of the most influential composers of his era, and one who ushered in a new sensibility towards the development of Western classical music.

Holst seems to have taken to India when quite young. In fact, successive visits to the Expositions in London in the 1880s to Indian ideas and concepts seem to have taken over this young, slightly nervous and highly intelligent musician. He taught himself Sanskrit, studying with the famous Indologist Mabel Bode. Further lessons with Ethel Coomaraswamy and Maud McCarthy, early exponents of Indian music in the West, seem to have made a lifelong convert of this English high school teacher into the mystical realm of Carnatic music. Indeed, his first adventure was to recraft the Ramayana for a Western audience through the symphonic form. His *Sita* (composed around 1901), and the 1911 *Rig Veda Hymns* are early examples of using the raga system to craft a unique Western vocabulary. *Maya* (also composed in 1901) for violin and piano, follows a pattern most akin to the raga Vachaspati, while its harmonic contours are bold and free-flowing, in stark contrast to the sort of harmonic ideas prevalent amongst Western composers of the time. The 'drone' idea once again manifests itself.



Gustav Holst

He was to teach himself more advanced Sanskrit, and set about translating and setting to music the immortal *Meghadootam* of Kalidasa. *The Cloud Messenger* (1910-12) is best characterised as a free-flowing symphonic poem, with sweeping passages that imitate the drone and the transilient note (gamaka) and taking contours of several classical ragas.

While these works in themselves achieved little success during his time, the influence of India on this important composer is unmistakable.

Crystal gazing

At a time when the world is debating whether it is indeed one planet or it should cave in to polarised debates on race and gender, I found this exploration significant.

One, men and women freely worked with one another and exchanged ideas. Both Debussy and Holst (and composers thence) studied with learned women and were influenced by their ideologies and vision.

Most important, the Indian classical system exerted a deep influence on not just these major composers but several other musicians and composers of the past two centuries. As mentioned in the initial section, the imperialist discourse saw to it that these early revolutions in music were not highlighted in the annals of music history.

Ex Oriente Lux (From the East came the Light) is an oft-repeated adage. These explorations only bear it out.

This is based on a lecture-demonstration by the author at the Annual Conference of the Music Academy on 31 December 2017.

(The author is a well-known pianist and music educator based in Chennai who heads the outreach initiative Rhapsody)

Anil Srinivasan (extreme R) presenting a lectdem at the Music Academy as Sriram V and N. Ravikiran look on

