

Aditya Prakash and Carnatic fusion

A south Indian living in Los Angeles, singing Carnatic music in the Western world defined who Aditya Prakash was, over a decade ago. A disciple of gurus from multiple banis, Aditya has grown over the years and now, has created a niche for himself in the world of Carnatic fusion. Collaborating with artists of various genres, from Bharatanatyam dancers, to jazz instrumentalists, he has released many albums and singles on various digital platforms.

In 2010, Aditya Prakash founded the Aditya Prakash Ensemble consisting of artists from different genres, who have performed together in many prestigious venues around the globe. The album *Diaspora Kid* was released in 2020 by this team.

In an interview with **VIBHA KRISHNAKUMAR** for *Sruti*, the multipotentialite artist, talks about his guru, his experiences while collaborating with artists, as well as his inspirations to create his unique music.

How was the Aditya Prakash Ensemble formed? What was the idea behind it?

The Aditya Prakash Ensemble was formed from the experience of college friends living together, conversing and being curious to explore a space where our different musical languages met. We all met at UCLA and were undergraduates in the Ethnomusicology program. It was not formed with the intention of creating a ‘band’—that happened later. The hunger to learn, share and just be around each other first and foremost as friends, and then musicians, is what makes this group very special to me.

The act of actually making music happened in my second year of college. During a ‘jam session’ party, I was called up to the mike to sing along with a keyboardist, bassist, drummer and guitarist. I was hesitant at first, I did not know what I could do or how I could keep up with them; but something special happened that night. Not only did the music click between us musicians, but the audience in attendance stopped all side conversations, perked up to listen and got involved with the music they were hearing. From then on, I was confident that we needed to do more than just ‘jam’.

What or who inspired you to collaborate with artists of various genres?

My mother, Viji Prakash, a prolific Bharatanatyam dancer and guru in North America, used to regularly collaborate with a variety of artists from the traditions of Kathak, jazz tap, break dancing, belly dancing, beat boxing, gospel singing, and flamenco to name a few. Thus, my upbringing at home was a huge influence on my collaborative and experimental nature.

You went on a tour with sitar maestro Ravi Shankar when you were a teenager. Did that alter the way you looked at music henceforth?

Being around Pandit Ravi Shankar was an eye-opening experience for me. It was a blessing to be around someone of his stature who was so humble, curious, and excited to share his knowledge. It opened me up to the world of Hindustani music and I fell in love with it. I was also introduced to jazz and Western classical musicians through Raviji and his daughter, Anoushka Shankar. Before that



moment, I had no exposure to cross-genre collaboration and hence kept the idea of “fusion” at a distance from me – the only setting I saw myself performing music in was in the Carnatic kutcheri essentially.

Through Raviji, I saw that a serious, and rigorously trained classical musician can also branch out beyond the “traditional” format of presenting music and can attract a diverse audience and be relevant beyond a very specific community of Indians. There was a feeling and confidence that he gave me, that I could be a Carnatic musician, but I could also step into other musical settings with ease and open this music out to a wider audience base. Raviji always advised me that first and foremost, my Carnatic training and involvement should never waver or lose its depth in the pursuit of a career of exciting collaborations. I hear this urgent reminder in my head quite often!

How do you find the process of integrating Carnatic music with other forms of music?

The process of finding new spaces of expression is so fulfilling as an artist. Whether it happens in a Carnatic concert or in a collaborative experiment matters not. The process of integration of many different cultures and genres can really come to fruition only when there is a deep engagement in the styles involved. This engagement is a long and thorough process, through an extended collaboration with other artists entrenched in that tradition and/or living and imbibing the culture of the music style you seek to understand and dialogue with. To be honest, I think time, care and an intuitive understanding and internalisation of the forms of music must take place; there is no other short-cut.

After listening to a few of your tracks, I realised, many of them were a mix of jazz and Carnatic music. Do you think they have more in common than what a layman understands?

Jazz and Carnatic share a heavy importance on improvisation and give value to reacting to the moment by listening to your co-artists on stage. This listening can move the music in a direction that can be unexpected. I really connected with the rigour and virtuosity that went into their craft as jazz musicians. Improvisation was the most obvious link between both jazz and Carnatic music. Apart from that, the jazz modal approach fits nicely with the melakarta raga system. Although looking at raga as a scale is a skeletal and very basic approach, it gives us the language to connect and develop ideas melodically.

Other than that, there is not much of a technical overlap, in jazz and Carnatic music, but I think any music can be influenced from another style if there

is engagement and an honest approach as to why you are combining and integrating other styles.

Did your ensemble take inspiration from yesteryear jazz artists like Miles Davis and bands like Spyro Gyra for the tracks in your album Diaspora Kid?

I was definitely inspired by artists like Herbie Hancock and Miles Davis, as they are genius artists in their craft. Another huge influence on the album *Diaspora Kid*, is Tigran Hamasyan, who has found a way to re-imagine his Armenian folk tradition and his jazz tradition into a space that is uniquely his own. I seek to do that with my music as well.

Not only have you had collaborations with musicians of other genres, but you have also collaborated with Carnatic musicians, as well as Bharatanatyam dancers. Has the learning process been the same in all the cases?

I have primarily worked with my sister, and Bharatanatyam dancer, Mythili Prakash. Working with dance has given me the ability to better react to the moment and step out of the world of my own mind. In singing for dance, the singer's ego must be curbed

to a certain extent. This happens because I do not have all the control that I think I do as a 'main artist' in a kutcheri, where I am calling all the shots and deciding the direction of the music. I have also gained immense growth from working with the brilliant Akram Khan who deepened my knowledge on these matters.

Over the years, how have your various gurus supported your endeavours?

My initial vocal lessons began with Debur Shrivathsa, a well-known vocalist for Bharatanatyam, whose encouragement was a big reason I trudged through the tough early morning practices. Then I began learning from Rose Muralikrishnan, a music teacher in LA, who continued to foster my learning and encouraged me greatly.

In 1999, my parents thought it would be good for me to get a further push in my training and took me to Chennai to study with vidushi Sugandha Kalamegham who instilled in me the importance of listening to the yesteryear masters. Under her guidance I started gaining the skills needed for manodharma. I also learnt

A practice session



mridangam from Neyveli Narayanan in Chennai, whose guidance in laya and mridangam technique have helped me immensely.

I delved more into my love for Carnatic music and there began an obsession with Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer's music. My father saw this and took me to learn in the Semmangudi bani under the guidance of senior disciples of Semmangudi—gurus Palai Ramachandran and P.S. Narayanaswamy. Both gurus took a deep interest in me and helped shape me and mould me into who I am today.

As I tried to balance a career in the USA, I felt a drift from Carnatic music as I found it harder to spend concentrated time in Chennai. It was at this point that I began mentorship under vidwan R.K. Shriramkumar (RKS) and T.M. Krishna (TMK).

Both RKS and TMK brought back the spark in Carnatic music for me—a similar obsession I had when

I popped in my first Semmangudi cassette as a kid. They expounded on the detail and nuance of the movement of the gamakas, and the way they articulated this was astounding. They expanded my understanding of the phraseology of ragas like Begada, Kannadagaula and Todi, to name a few. I learned about the erasure of prayogas in certain ragas, the alteration in compositions that have taken place over generations. It is true when people say learning is a never ending journey; I feel extremely grateful to have such magnificent guides on my journey.

Even as the pandemic situation eases, do you think you will continue with virtual collaborations?

I think virtual collaborations are a nice place holder for now. Nothing can ever replace the human connection we get from sharing music. I realised



A virtual collaboration

I had taken that connection for granted before the pandemic. However, now when the opportunity arises to do a live concert, or to have a live music creation session with another person I am filled with such a different sense of gratitude, excitement, joy and transcendence. I do think the virtual space is important to fill in the blanks or the gaps of time in which we cannot make in-person music, but it cannot be the full-time replacement.

(Vibha Krishnakumar is a young student at Vidya Mandir, Mylapore, and also a disciple of Carnatic vidushi Geetha Raja)



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