

Music as a Form of Cultural Dialogue: The Case of Ravi Shankar

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The paper explores the notion of cultural dialogue in terms of a specific application: the contributions made by the sitar music of the Indian musician Ravi Shankar to the setting up of a conversation between the musical traditions of North India and their reception and partial assimilation by largely Western audiences. A survey of Shankar's career, contextualized by a more general discussion of the problems and challenges encountered in bringing the musical conventions of one tradition into conversation with the musical expectations and assumptions of another culture leads to the conclusion that what Shankar achieved, over a lifetime of creativity and musical fusion, was a partial success: on the one hand, it disseminated the auratic aspects of this musical tradition to a wide global audience; but on the other, it did so at the cost measured by purists in terms of a simplification or dilution of the music as practised in its original cultural contexts.

'I gotta to use words when I talk to you.' (T.S. Eliot, *Sweeney Agonistes*¹)

1. Of Dialogue and Conversation

Shortly after the demise of the great Irish poet William Butler Yeats in 1939, his younger British contemporary, W.H. Auden wrote an elegy that remains one of the most perceptive combinations of eulogy and critique ever written by one author about another. At about the same time, Auden also wrote a prose dialogue in which he staged a court drama: a public prosecutor who questions the claim that Yeats can be admired as the greatest poet of the twentieth century, and the voice of a Counsel for the Defence who defends Yeats against such criticism. Auden's dialogue 'The Public v. the Late Mr. William Butler Yeats' (1939) guides me in presenting a bifocal view of how a modern musician, the late Ravi Shankar, might at once be admired and quizzed for his role in setting up an ongoing dialogue about music and culture – indeed, about music *as* dialogue – which has something of significance to offer not

only to those interested in music in general, and Indian music in particular, but also to anyone willing to consider the possibility that music constitutes a unique interface for a wordless dialogue between cultures.²

In his obituary on Ravi Shankar, Amlan Das Gupta remarks that 'with Ravi Shankar's passing a great phase in Indian classical music has formally come to an end'.³ The time is as appropriate to assess his accomplishment in relation to Indian music and the West as Yeats's passing was for Irish poetry and the modern tradition in English. For this purpose, I will use the notion of dialogue in both a literal and a figurative sense. What does the idea of dialogue entail? In literal terms, at least two people talking to one another in real space and in the same time-continuum. How dialogue builds on this foundation depends on the balance of difference and commonality between interlocutors. Without difference there is no need for the element of give-and-take in dialogue; too great a difference and dialogue becomes difficult or impossible. The first requirement in bridging difference is a shareable mode of communication. We can call it language. As soon as we do, it becomes evident that even literal dialogue is based on language as a type or instance for a mode of communication. If you and I do not speak the same natural language we can still hope to communicate through other forms of semiosis: that is, through any mode of communication that functions like a language. Natural languages have a vocabulary and a set of rules that constitute their grammar. For dialogue to work, two people must understand one another: either through a common vocabulary and grammar, or through forms of semiosis that supplement or bypass natural languages (a shrug or a frown and a smile can sometimes speak more than words). In all cases of dialogue, communication occurs within a larger force-field where the lexical, grammatical, and idiomatic resources of a natural language are surrounded by other communicative possibilities. Since music is one instance of such alternatives, what we can learn from the attempt to communicate the musical values of one culture to others can provide a template and a metaphor for the general idea of a dialogue between cultures.

Speaking metaphorically, music constitutes an entire language of its own, split into many formal systems and their traditions, each functioning like a dialect that is sometimes akin to and sometimes remote from other music systems. The kind of dialogue I wish to focus on, as fostered by a type of instrumental music deeply entrenched within the grammar and idiom of a specific culture, works with and around an entire set of cultural binaries. A difference between cultures provides the impetus for the desire to communicate, and through dialogue, bridge difference. The irony of this situation is that the presumed differences that instigate conversation – and the desire to convey some musical 'truth' about one side in the conversation to the other – are often based on cultural typologies that codify cultural traits and values, sometimes to the point of stereotypes, without necessarily impeding or frustrating the attempt to communicate with an interlocutor who might be unfamiliar with, suspicious of, or indifferent to what is attempted by way of communicative dialogue.⁴ Since instrumental music sublimates communicative intent by channelling expression through melody, rhythm, timbre and harmony, the grammar of music is one way

through which cultures can communicate across difference to evoke moods and states of mind and feeling.

2. The Two Sides to the Value of Conversation

It is worth recognizing that instrumental music facilitates a dialogue between cultures precisely because it can bypass the gap in conversation created when two parties do not speak the same natural language. Over a period of about 60 years, stretching from the 1950s to 2012, the musical practices of the Indian sitar-player Ravi Shankar (1920–2012) sustained a type of cross-cultural exchange that revised old paradigms and contributed to new conceptions of cultural hybridity. In trying to bring Indian music to the West (and other parts of the world as well, but secondarily), Shankar modified some of the conventions and practices of his musical tradition. Along the way, he also accommodated his mission to a variety of Western perceptions – and clichés – concerning how the West has tended to perceive India and Indian music. As the combined effect of several provocations, Shankar incurred the disapproval of those in India who felt that the attempt at conversation had distorted or abandoned the austerities of the orthodox tradition, and diluted or betrayed tradition in his attempt to make it more palatable to Western tastes.

His Indian contemporaries notwithstanding, Shankar has had enormous success all over the world, both as an experimentalist and as a traditionalist. If we apply the vocabulary of Walter Benjamin to the conversation initiated by Ravi Shankar, musical aura may have lost some of its cult value, but it certainly gained vastly in exhibition value. My aim here is to present the situation in a Benjaminian perspective.⁵ For that purpose, it is useful to use the notion of translation – in a literal and figurative sense – to argue that such exchanges constitute a new economy of gain and loss, in which the transformation of tradition is poised ambivalently between an enabling and a disabling function. The metaphors of language and translation also raise a more general question: what does music as conversation tell us about the question of whether it makes sense to posit the universals of human experience, which music might be said to draw upon in undergoing translation? As Benjamin argued, does the possibility of translation depend on some primal language subtended by the source and target of translation? We move from a consideration of how in the case of Shankar musical aura is shared with Western audiences under the belief that the grammar of musical genres can thrive on opening itself to change in interaction with other – and seemingly alien – grammars. Auden-like, I will then turn that argument on its head, and present the counter-argument for thinking of the dissemination of musical aura as incurring a cost in direct proportion to how orthodox forms are modified in making them more accessible to untrained ears. My analysis is thus dialogic in nature, and leads to an open-ended question: how might we respond to the tension between translatability and the attenuation of musical experience when the need to set musical cultures in conversation drives the conversationalist against the grain of his inherited vocabulary: who gains? What is lost in exchange?

3. The Grammar of Indian Music

Let us first consider the sense in which music is like a language, with a specific vocabulary, grammar, idiom, and a historical inheritance that disseminates various ideas of tradition and convention for any individual artist working within that tradition to either uphold or modify. Let us first make a distinction between art music and folk music, and add that the various traditions that are recognized as classical music grow out of, but formalize, refine and stylize folk or popular music traditions. The main difference between the grammars of Western and Indian art music, or of most non-Western music systems, is that the latter reduces the role of harmony, concentrating instead on an enormous refinement of melodic possibilities combined with the development of many complex patterns of rhythm. Thus, Ravi Shankar, in *My Music, My Life* (1968) notes that in comparison with Western music, the modal music practised in India has no use for the modulation of keys within a piece of music (or even within a lifetime of music performance), and ‘has no comparable system of harmony and counterpoint.’⁶ On the negative side, this can give the untrained ear an impression that Indian music is relatively thin and repetitive or monotonous in sound, and lacking in development. On the positive side the Indian musician revels in a refinement of melodic materials and a play over minute distinctions between notes, such that the meaningfulness of expressive content is created not simply from playing the notes of a melody but in how one slides or glides between and across notes – that is to say, in how notes are bent. There are at least three other differences that present a challenge to a musical dialogue across cultures: Indian classical music improvises on a melodic template, transmits traditions of performance practices without reference to transcription or notation, and merges or blurs a distinction that remains distinct in the Western tradition between the musician as composer and the musician as performer.⁷

This last difference has considerable influence on audience expectations, on how listeners might understand and appreciate a given performance, and also in how they might recognize its unique accomplishment in relation to a history of such performances. The traditional Indian musician is slightly less than a composer and considerably more than a technician. In the Western context, a Bruch or a Brahms composes a violin concerto and a Heifetz or a Menuhin performs it, with the printed score as the substantive element of the given to the music, which ensures that different performances all refer back to a singular score. In contrast, the Indian performer improvises practised patterns on a skeletal structure or template of melody known as a ‘raga’. This provides the performer with a minimal element of the given, which can lead to, permit, and even encourage many variations within the scope of the raga template, such that there can be many differences between two or more performances of the same raga by the same musician on different occasions. The degree of difference between the Indian system and its Western counterparts is significant. For a dialogue between cultures to occur, the listener (who is a vital although seemingly secondary participant in the dialogic exchange between production and reception) must cooperate in being drawn out of the circle of familiarity created by the parental

culture, and open to the new possibilities of experience and conception provided by the unfamiliar in cultural experience.

4. The Life of the Musician

Engaging people who are not familiar with one's mode of expression and communication is never an easy undertaking. One has to be prepared to deal with indifference, rejection or misunderstanding. To sustain commitment to dialogue under such circumstances takes a mix of foolhardiness, gumption and a thick skin. Offering the complexities of a highly evolved musical system to ears untrained for the experience must also call for a temperament that has ample measures of grit and self-confidence. A number of factors contributed to Shankar's self-selection for the task of bringing Indian music to Western listeners.⁸ Not only did he prove to have the requisite temperament for the undertaking, several factors played a major role in directing ambition and commitment westward: his early youth was spent as a member of a travelling group of dancers and musicians who performed all over Europe and America. The experience took place at a formative stage of his life. A keen desire to explain and propagate the music of India to the West was reinforced from two directions, by tutelage with two masterful presences in his life, each predisposed to a strong mix of innovation and experiment. The first was his elder brother Uday Shankar (1900–1977), who took his brother to Paris as the youngest member of his dance company in the early 1930s. The second was his music guru, Allauddin Khan (1862–1972), with whom Shankar studied for seven years, starting in 1938. His teacher combined an intuitive genius for nurturing and disciplining musical talent with mastery over numerous musical instruments. He had two other traits that made him stand out among Indian musicians of his times: he could play a number of instruments in the style of Western music, and he was keenly interested in organizing bands that used Indian instruments for collective ensemble performances, something hardly ever attempted in the genre of Indian classical music. His willingness to experiment found a corresponding temperament in his favourite pupil, Ravi Shankar, who practised at the feet of his master, worked with All India Radio in the 1940s, and who also composed music for several feature films in the 1950s, while taking part in duets with his wife, Allauddin Khan's daughter, Annapurna Devi, a player of the surbahar (sitar-like, but larger, with thicker strings, and a deeper sound: a viola to the sitar's violin). Ravi Shankar started on his music tours of the West in the 1950s, and performed many duets in America and Europe in the 1960s and 1970s with Allauddin Khan's son, the distinguished sarod player Ali Akbar Khan (1922–2009). Collaborations with Western musicians and composers started from the 1960s. The most significant of these were his friendship and recordings with the violinist Yehudi Menuhin, his association with a member of the Beatles, George Harrison, and his recording sessions with the composer Philip Glass.

Shankar played on stage with Menuhin for the first time in 1966 at the Bath Festival, where he had his first taste at creating what has since become known as 'fusion music': a musical piece that used an Indian raga (in this case Raga Tilang) as a

melodic base from which to grow musical motifs that combined Indian melodic materials with Western instrumentation and harmonic experiments. He named the piece 'Swara Kakali'. Within a short period of time, the experiment led to three LPs, starting with *West Meets East* (1967), which, according to the sleeve note of an EMI re-publication, 'topped *Billboard* magazine's Best Selling Classical Albums chart and won in the Best Chamber Music Performance Grammy category' in 1968.⁹ There was no looking back for Shankar after that. He and Menuhin played together in many of these recorded tracks, with Shankar taking the lead, and Menuhin happy to adapt his violin to Indian styles and melodies. In comparison, the association with George Harrison, which took place during the late 1960s, had more to do with that specific member of the Beatles wanting to learn the sitar than with the two making serious music together. The metaphor of conversation has less to do in this case with what Shankar provided Harrison than with what Harrison could take from an Eastern musical ambience. Indian music became the pretext for a mood of the times, which found a temporary fascination in vague, distorted ideas of an exotic East. The sound of the sitar became part of a superficial infatuation with sadhus, spiritualism and trances induced more by drugs than meditation.¹⁰ This *zeitgeist* culminated in the frenzied responses with which Shankar's music making was received at the Monterey Pop Music festival of 1968 and the Woodstock Festival of 1969. The sitar became one more metonymy for an imaginary East that was to be antidotal to the woes of the West, along with incense, hashish, and mantras. The mood passed as suddenly as it had come, but a residue of interest in the sitar remained, and could be taken up in a more tempered but sustainable way by a scattering of interested Westerners open to the possibility of exploring the grammar of that musical culture.

Shankar's encounter with Philip Glass, in 1965, was more significant. The young Glass, a student of Nadia Boulanger, reported that 'World music was completely unknown in the mid-60s'.¹¹ When they eventually collaborated in the album *Passages*, released in 1990, it reached third position on *Billboard's* Top World Music Albums chart, indicating how much the concept of World Music had taken hold by then (sooner than the concept of World Literature). Other collaborations from the 1980s included *Gandhi* (1982) with George Fenton, and a 1989 recording, *The Encounter*, with Daniel Hamrol, to name just a couple. Since then, many other musicians born in India have toured the West and experimented with Fusion Music, and many Westerners have gone to study music in India for varying degrees of time, returning home to propagate that music in their own countries. The door opened by Ravi Shankar and Ali Akbar more than 50 years ago remains open to this day. World music and fusion are almost as successful in their commercial realm as Bollywood and Hollywood films in their spheres. The questions that remain are these: how often does an interest in another culture and its music lead to actual musical hybrids with lasting interest and impact, as compared with music that keeps to its cultural heritage, and how often does it find a receptive audience in a foreign culture? Is music bound to its culture, or is it capable of floating free from it, any more or less than cinema or literature in translation? Shankar tried to change some aspects of performance practice in how he presented his art to the West, although he always retained the

ability to perform music in the orthodox fashion preferred by his Indian audiences. The orthodox style was altered much less by his musical partner Ali Akbar Khan, or by Nikhil Banerjee (1931–1986), a slightly younger student of Allaudin Khan, or by Shankar's main rival or counterpart in India, Vilayat Khan (1928–2004). Shankar's career as a musician provides the most obvious material therefore for assessing the give-and-take of music as a dialogue between cultures that operates at the level of dissemination and hybridization. Like the others, he introduces Indian music to cultures outside India. Unlike them he also composed hybrids: three sitar concertos, the first commissioned by the London Symphony Orchestra (conducted by Andre Previn) in the 1970s, the second in 1980 by the New York Philharmonic (conducted by Zubin Mehta), and the third in the 1990s by the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra and performed for the first time by his daughter Anoushka Shankar in 2009.

5. The Interface between Indian Grammar and an Ethos from the West

If music is a kind of text, the grammar of its tradition provides a formal cause to the efficient cause of the performer. In this mode of speaking of music as the product and process of a four-fold causality, what might we describe as its telos or its final cause? The answer is traditional and unchanging when it comes to Indian classical music: the evocation of states of mind and feeling; the creation of dispositions; the articulation and sustaining of a complex mood that is affective and numinous. The ancient texts describe the intentionality of the arts in terms of a typology of nine states of feeling and emotion: the *rasa* theory. Each *rasa* (or essence) is allied to a corresponding *bhava* (state of mind and feeling). The *Natyasastra* of Bharat identifies eight such pairs: *rati* (love), *hasya* (laughter), *shoka* (grief), *krodha* (anger), *utsaha* (sanguine energy), *bhaya* (fear), *jugupsa* (disgust), and *vismaya* (wonder or astonishment).¹² Music becomes the most elaborate and effective means of evoking or communicating specific states of mind and feeling. The entire set of technical and expressive resources at hand to the musician must focus on that objective. We can see how this works as a simplified or purified language: the communicative intent is keen and focused, and what it aims for can bypass words and linguisticity to get directly at states of mind.¹³

In the late nineteenth century, the Victorian writer Walter Pater claimed in his essay on 'The School of Giorgione' that 'All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music'.¹⁴ He wanted to provoke thought without making any simple claim that all the arts seek to emulate music. Music got to where it aimed to be, in the ear, mind and soul of a listener, by the most effective route. A comparable recognition provides the foundation for the arts in India: music, dance and the graphic and plastic arts. When human beings organize sounds in patterns they create a mode of expression that is neither more nor less than language, but simply different. This difference finds expression through melody, rhythm, harmony and timbre: a universal vocabulary more effective than Esperanto, and more sustainable than a cry or a shout. Although musicality begins with the human voice and keeps returning to what is most apt for the voice, the complex systems of sound thus created, in all societies and culture, can be understood not only from the point of view of who or what produces

them, but also from the perspective of what they bridge, which is noise and silence. The mediatory role of music poised between silence and noise was expressed in ancient Indian thought through two related concepts whose power over music prevails to this day in the subcontinent. First, we have the mythic idea that the world was created through sound: the primordial vibration of the open-vowel reverberation of ‘Om’.¹⁵ Second, the belief that all the sounds we hear have a significant relation to what we do not hear: ‘ahata nād’ (heard sound) in relation to ‘anahat nād’ (the inner sound of silence, or as a Zen *koan* by Hakuin Ekaku puts it, ‘the sound of one hand clapping’).¹⁶ Everything that is, is based on a distinction from what is not: sound has meaning in relation to silence, just as existence acquires significance in relation to nothingness, and dialogic conversation comes into its own as the opposite of solipsism. That is how music can become a significant protagonist in a dialogue between cultures.

This dialogue can also be spoken of as an attempted translation in two senses. What the sounds seek to evoke is accomplished as an act of translation from the realm of sounds to that of states of mind and feeling. Such states of being may result from listening to a performance, but they are recognizable as experiences distinct from the music that produces them, as an effect from its cause. The second sense of music as translation occurs when music attempts to cross the gap that divides the music systems and listening habits of one culture from those of another. Like other forms of semiosis, such musical attempts at conversation are premised on two beliefs: first, although much may be lost in translation, enough can survive the translation to make the effort meaningful; and second, regardless of how a listener might be conditioned by the music systems of one culture, it is easier for a willing ear to step out from that cultural silo through listening to the music of another culture than to step out from the familiar world of one language to engage with the words of a foreign language. Melody, rhythm and harmony are received more intuitively than alien word sounds and signs. In that sense music is better at its work of figurative translation than the labour of literal translation. Feelings and moods transfer better than the denotative and connotative specificity of words, just as a smile or a frown might circumvent linguistic and cultural barriers.

We have noted that instrumental music may be spoken of as a language unto itself which has no direct need of words. The grammar of instrumental music changes from region to region, much as languages differ from place to place. But all the dialects of instrumental music share two features: sound as utterance is cultivated and patterned to elicit a specific set of feelings, emotions, and states of mind; and at least two of the three basic elements of music – melody, rhythm and harmony – combine to create music practices and traditions. The tradition in which Ravi Shankar was trained has always been centred on the concept of the raga: ‘a tonal framework for composition and improvisation’, which enables the musician to ‘evoke a particular emotion or create a certain “mood”’, and ‘move the listeners and stimulate an emotional response.’¹⁷

A typical performance of Indian music involves a soloist accompanied by a drone and a percussionist. The drone establishes the tonic of the raga to be performed. The raga is a traditional melodic template, with a specific pattern of notes and

combinations of notes. The template provides the basis on which the musician improvises a performance that can last from a few minutes to over an hour. The standard form begins with an unmetered slow section (the *alap*), followed by a faster section (the *jor* and *jhala*) and set melodic patterns (*gats*) accompanied by the tabla. The instrument on which Ravi Shankar performs his music is the sitar: a lute-like instrument of Persian derivation, with six or seven main strings, 10–12 sympathetic strings, movable frets, and a resonating gourd. If we now address the question of where, or in what manner Shankar in his experimental guise departed from tradition, one can identify two tendencies. The fusion pieces he created in collaboration with Menuhin, Glass, and others either use a traditional raga as a melodic motif from which variations are produced, mixing the sound of the sitar with other, Western instruments. Pure melody is made to make room for various harmonic effects. The sound world of the raga is altered radically. A trained listener might recognize the raga that appears in fragments here or there along the way as the music unfolds, but for most listeners the effect is of a melodic, a composite sound world in which melody and harmonic material combine, while constantly keeping the ear always informed that two sound worlds coexist in that one piece.

The sitar concertos are a little more ambitious, taking the same principle of free improvisation a step further. Each ‘movement’ is supplied with Italian tempo markings as in Western classical music, while also retaining the names of the ragas they are based on as the names of individual movements. Thus, the first concerto follows the sequence (1) Raga Khamaj; (2) Raga Sindhi Bhairavi; (3) Raga Adana; (4) Raga Manj Khamaj. The second concerto follows the sequence (1) Lalit (Presto); (2) Bairagi (Moderato); (3) Yaman Kalyan (Moderato); (4) Mian ki Malhar (Allegro). In an orthodox recital one could conceive of the ragas of the first concerto played in exactly that sequence. The second concerto provides a sequence of two morning ragas following by a night raga and a seasonal raga. Once again, the logic of the sequence makes sense to the orthodox tradition, although playing morning and night ragas together would entail a compacting together of pieces that would ordinarily get performed in two separate recitals. Apart from that, what changes most dramatically is the sound field, which accommodates a variety of instruments, played in combinations or in solo pieces one following the other, with dramatic changes in tempo, and a prominent role for percussive effects. One can see how the experience garnered in composing for films in the 1950s came in handy during the ensuing decades of free composition. This type of hybrid composition was adopted by many other musicians, including Ali Akbar Khan, Hariprasad Chaurasia and, Shankar’s daughter, Anoushka Shankar, to name just a few, as an alternative to their traditional repertoire, and it continues to attract audiences, especially in the West, under the category of World Music.

However, the traditionalists from India – some of whom performed almost as successfully as Shankar before Western audiences (notably Nikhil Banerjee and, in his later years, Vilayat Khan) – were never drawn to this alternative. They played overseas more or less exactly as they would in India. The assumption underlying their practice has a more circumspect hope for music as cultural dialogue: listeners not

familiar with the Indian tradition were welcome to listen, and encouraged to appreciate the nuances of the orthodox performance style, but no compromises were made in how a raga was presented. Nikhil Banerjee proved very lucky in the quality of sound recordings he received overseas during the 1970s and 1980s, as did Vilayat Khan from the 1990s onwards. As a consequence, their current discographies match that of Shankar for depth and quality of playing, despite his more prolific recording activities overseas. Their legacy boasts raga recordings of great ambition, length, and technical intricacy, whereas Ravi Shankar's legacy, although he is as technically original in his own way, shows far fewer ragas of a comparable scale in ambition and length. His companion in the US, Ali Akbar Khan, took pride in his longer performances, while also playing shorter pieces. Ravi Shankar, in his recorded legacy, has fewer ambitious pieces than any of these three musicians. To suit the belief that Western audiences had a limited stamina for elaborate raga development, he tended to shorten the development of his ragas. He even claimed that many of the great musicians from India that he had heard in his youth rarely went over 20 minutes or so in their performances.¹⁸ Other formal presentational variations included a much more prominent role for a musical dialogue between sitar and tabla, which often culminated in passages of frenzied playing by both musicians. The orgiastic aspect of this performance style became very popular both overseas and among certain Indian audiences, but the more orthodox musicians tended to downplay this dimension in their performances. They too gave the tabla player a chance to show his skills. But they did not work the music to the kind of frenzied climax that Ravi Shankar obviously enjoyed performing, often with his preferred tabla accompanist Alla Rakha (and then with his son, the equally distinguished Zakir Hussain, who developed a long career as a fusion artist).

To his severest critics, the hybridizations that Shankar was so fertile with are difficult listening today. The Western wonderment of the 1960s, contemplating an India of the mind, is difficult to recreate today. The world has grown smaller, or we in it more jaded, or less naïve, and more sceptical. Listening to those recordings as pure – or mere – sound, the music can sound like an idea that might have seemed good once, but feels tasteless on the palate now: a bit of sitar here and there interspersed with orchestral sounds that dwarf the sitar in volume, fragments of melodies pulled out from their matrix in raga development of the orthodox kind played cheek by jowl with western instrumentation following the curves of Indian melodies, to show that they too can dance to that tune. Musicians such as Nikhil Banerjee and Vilayat Khan had no sympathy for the dual creativity of Ravi Shankar. He, on his part was very self-conscious about his dual affiliation. What some might describe as a kind of performative schizophrenia was recognized by Shankar as his 'double identity'.¹⁹ He was proud of the fact that he could switch at will between an experimental and traditionalist hat, whereas a traditionalist such as Nikhil Banerjee believed that there was a more severe limit to the scope for dialogue between cultures: he argued that when cultures differed, learning to cross that difference appreciatively was possible and desirable, but the mixing of productions derived from disparate cultures only led to hybrids that were culturally insignificant.²⁰

The issue remains an open one to this day. The traditionalist accepts a limit to dialogue. The introduction of Western motifs and orchestration is felt to dilute tradition, and to lead to music that belongs neither here nor there. The supporter of fusion, hybridity, and world music revels in variety and newness, and is indifferent to how tradition is modified or abandoned. Furthermore, the individual performance, in the context of the orthodox conception of tradition, is but the tip of a large iceberg, whose hidden elements are not so readily transposed in the East–West encounter either in tutelage or in performance (and hardly possible anymore even within India, given the pressure and solicitations of early publication and commercialization of talent): a long and rigorous discipline, the sustained devotional aspect of the *guru-shiysha* (teacher-disciple) relationship, and the sense in which music is an act of homage or celebration of what Daniel Neuman aptly calls ‘divine intercession or grace.’²¹ It may well be, in the context of the notion of tradition in Indian classical music, as Neuman remarks, that in order for things (to appear) to remain the same they have to keep changing, just as ‘in order for things to change, they have to appear the same’ (Ref. 21, p. 234). But the type of fusion music that has followed Ravi Shankar’s radical example, is change of an entirely different order, whose long-term viability remains undecided, although the popular success of the many musicians who have followed him down the paths of experiment suggest that the principle underlying his practice – if not the practice itself, or what it led to by way of recordings – shows sufficient stamina for the time being.

What then does music as a metaphor tell us, in the case of Ravi Shankar, of the hope for a dialogue between cultures? Several things. First, the continued popularity of fusion implies that there are musical universals underlying cultural differences that such experiments assume and animate through working on that assumption. Second, it radicalizes a tendency inherent to the history of all art forms: orthodoxy taken to an extreme can lead to ossification; the true tradition lives on and retains its integrity and coherence by always remaining open to change and development. From that perspective, those like Shankar who are willing to take risks, will always see themselves as accelerating a process already latent to the history of musical forms and cultural exchanges of any kind. On the other hand, the more conservative opinion, especially in India, remains that despite the heady exhilaration of experiment and fusion, the kinds of change that tradition grows with and through need to be less radical, more confined to the set of rules created by one grammar, rather than a mixing of two grammars. One might conclude with an analogy derived from how languages interacted when placed in contact situations between extremely divergent cultures. The history of colonialism shows that when two peoples met and lived together for extended periods, each with a language of their own, sustained contact first produced pidgins, and over subsequent generations that led to the creation of creole languages and cultures. Perhaps what Ravi Shankar attempted in his music as dialogue was a kind of pidgin, and we now live in an era where world music is full of several creole systems, each professing the virtues of hybridity. Time will tell if the orthodox tradition of Indian music will disintegrate slowly under the double onslaught of Bollywood and world music, or – as seems more likely – continue to remain largely

distinct from hybrid performance styles, while changing at its own more imperceptible pace, and allowing musicians and audiences the option of the occasional or habitual cross-over, without losing a sense of a self that remains the same despite all the changes it undergoes.

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2. W. H. Auden (2002) The Public v. the Late Mr. William Butler Yeats. In: E. Mendelson (ed.), *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden, Prose: Volume II, 1939–1948* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), pp. 3–7. First published in *The Partisan Review* (Spring 1939). W.H. Auden (2007) In Memory of W. B. Yeats. In: E. Mendelson (ed.), *Collected Poems* (New York: Modern Library), pp. 245–246.
3. A. Das Gupta (2012) In Memoriam: Pandit Ravi Shankar (1920–2012). *The Telegraph* (Calcutta, India), December 18.
4. M. Clayton (2000) *Time in Indian Music: Rhythm, Metre, and Form in North Indian Rag [sic] Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 5. for example, notes how Western responses to Indian music, and its culture-specific handling of time and rhythm, have been bedevilled by one or the other of two clichés about Indians and their culture: 'the Indian as backward, unsophisticated, and inferior to the European' and 'the Indian as spiritual, mystical, and capable of highly sophisticated thought inaccessible to materialistic Western minds'. It will be obvious that – whether consciously or deliberately – Ravi Shankar's music and career reinforced the first half of the second stereotype.
5. W. Benjamin (2003) The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility, Third Version. In H. Eiland and M. W. Jennings (eds), *Selected Writings*, IV, 1938–1940., trans. H. Zohn and E. Jephcott (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press), pp. 251–283. 'Cult value as such tends today, it would seem, to keep the artwork out of sight [...] *With the emancipation of specific artistic practices from the service of ritual, the opportunities for exhibiting their products increase*' (p. 257, emphasis in the original).
6. R. Shankar (1969) *My Music, My Life, with an introduction by Yehudi Menuhin* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House. [First published by Kinnara School of Indian Music, Inc., 1968]). This passage, p. 18a. 'A mode, or scale type, is defined in terms of the relationships between the fundamental, unchanging note – the tonic – and successive notes of the scale. This relationship between the tonic and any other scale note determines whether a note is the interval of a second, a third, a fourth, a fifth, and so on. And in order for the musician or the listener to understand and hear this relationship, in any composition the tonic must be sounded.' (p. 18b). In a recent book, J. Powell (2011) *How Music Works: The Science and Psychology of Beautiful Sounds, from Beethoven to the Beatles and Beyond* (New York: Little, Brown and Co.), confirms more broadly that

- ‘traditional non-Western music places far less emphasis on chords and harmony’ (p. 116). R. Shankar (1999) *Raga Mala – The Autobiography of Ravi Shankar*, Edited and Introduced by George Harrison (New York: Welcome Rain. First published 1995).
7. Some musicians do use rudimentary forms of notation, but these are personal and private rather than shared. Ravi Shankar’s teacher, Allaudin Khan, for example, is reported to have devised a notation method of his own in his early days, see W. van der Meer (1980) *Hindustani Music in the Twentieth Century* (Amsterdam: Martinus Nijhoff), pp. 144–145.
 8. ‘In the mid-fifties, I do not think there was anyone in the horizon who was articulate enough to explain the finer points of Indian music, especially to the Westerners. The nuances, the differences, the depth and the spiritual qualities of our music ... so I took upon myself the entire responsibility of it. And I am glad that I did because it opened up a whole new world for the West in terms of appreciating our music.’ A. Roy (2004) Ravi Shankar. In: *Music Makers: Living Legends of Indian Classical Music* (New Delhi: Rupa and Co.), pp. 214–233. This passage p. 231a.
 9. EMI 2-CD set, *Shankar: Sitar Concerto and other works*, 7243 5 72655 2, 1998, sleeve note, p. 4a.
 10. G. Farrell (1999) *Indian Music and the West* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press) offers an explanation for why the sound of the sitar was found compatible by pop musicians: ‘The sitar, albeit remotely, was similar in construction and playing technique to the guitar, and the latter had become the pop instrument par excellence since the mid-1950s. Furthermore, the sound of the sitar mixed that of the acoustic and the electric guitar in one instrument. As Jimmy Page noted, the resonances of the sympathetic strings sounded like electronic feedback, and the strings could also be laterally deflected (a technique known as *mind* in Indian music) to produce a glissando and heighten the pitch, a ubiquitous technique in blues and rock guitar playing. The sitar easily functioned as another, or substitute, lead guitar with a mysterious, exotic sound. This is the role that it played in the majority of pop records on which it appeared’, p. 179.
 11. R. Shankar and P. Glass (1990) *Passages* (Atlantic Records CD booklet, p. 2).
 12. M. Ghosh (ed.) (1960) *The Natyasastra, I* (Calcutta: The Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal), Chapter 6, pp. 157ff.
 13. Cf. S. Langer (1953) *Feeling and Form* (Macmillan: New York) ‘The tonal structures we call “music” bear a close logical similarity to the forms of human feeling – forms of growth and of attenuation, flowing and stowing, conflict and resolution, speed, arrest, terrific excitement, calm or subtle activation and dreamy lapses – not joy and sorrow perhaps, but the poignancy of either and both ... music is a tonal analogue of emotive life’, (pp. 80–81). P. Holroyde (1972) *Indian Music: A Vast Ocean of Promise* (London: Allen and Unwin) summarizes the concept of *rasa* into its three constituent elements: (a) *sthayi bhava*: a permanence in the steady-state where emotions remain in a latent form; (b) *vibhava*: that state that arouses the appropriate emotions; (c) *anubhava*: the experience that comes from physical expression and which gives rise to these emotions.
 14. W. Pater ([1877] 2005) *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (New York: Dover) ‘All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music. For while in all other works of art it is possible to distinguish the matter from the form, and the understanding can always make this distinction, yet it is the constant effort of art to obliterate it. That the mere matter of a poem, for instance—its subject, its

- given incidents or situation; that the mere matter of a picture—the actual circumstances of an event, the actual topography of a landscape—should be nothing without the form, the spirit, of the handling; that this form, this mode of handling, should become an end in itself, should penetrate every part of the matter:—this is what all art constantly strives after, and achieves in different degrees’ (p. 90). This is paraphrased by R. E. Jones (2007) *Music and the Numinous* (Rodopi: Amsterdam) to mean that ‘the ideal condition of art is for the matter to be inseparable from the form, so that the more effectively the material is fused in form the more splendid the work of art’ (p. 95).
15. *Mandukya Upanishad* (Online edition: http://www.swami-krishnananda.org/mand/Mandukya_Upanishad.pdf. Accessed 12 March 2013.)
 16. P. Yampolsky (Trans.) (1971) *The Zen Master Hakuin: Selected Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press), p. 164. According to R. Massey and J. Massey (1976) *The Music of India* (London: Kahn and Averill) in the 11th century Sangeet-makaranda, attributed to Narada, ‘anahata nada’ is referred to as ‘sound produced from the ether’ (p. 92).
 17. J. Bor (ed.) (1999) *The Raga Guide: A Survey of 74 Hindustani Ragas* (Nimbus Records with Rotterdam Conservatory of Music), p. 1.
 18. ‘I have heard many of the old greats and they never sang or played for too long. [...] This proves that you need to show the cream of the raga and not get caught in tedious repetitions and meaningless variations like that of a computer [...] The real test is when you have been listening to a raga for over an hour ... yet you feel it has just been going on for a mere ten minutes and you earnestly want it to continue [...] if you can bring tears to the eyes by striking just one magical “sur”, that is so much more, and that is really the core of our music’ (Shankar interview in W. van der Meer (1980) *Hindustani Music in the Twentieth Century* (Amsterdam: Martinus Nijhoff), p. 229b).
 19. Interviewer: ‘Is that the fundamental difference between you and your contemporaries like Vilayat Khan and Nikhil Banerjee? That you took risks with your music? That you explored new frontiers, did more radical experiments, attracted more ire?’ Shankar: ‘The difference between all of them and me is actually a very simple one. It is my double identity. When I play the sitar in the traditional gharana learned at the feet of Baba, I am very orthodox. On the other hand, when I compose original music, I am daring, radical. I use non-Indian instruments. I experiment. People often confuse these two identities of mine. They think because I am experimenting, I am no more pure, I am gone.’ P. Nandy (1999) *The Rediff Interview/Pandit Ravi Shankar* (Rediff on the Net. Online: <http://www.rediff.com/news/1999/mar/23nandy1.htm>. Accessed 14 March 2013). I am grateful to my friend and colleague Dr Saranindranath Tagore for numerous discussions on music over the last decade, and for drawing my attention to this and several other references cited here.
 20. Nikhil Banerjee (1931–1986) was taught by the same guru as Ravi Shankar, and also learnt with Shankar’s main duet partner, Ali Akbar Khan. His response to musical experiments across cultures was scepticism about musical fusion. Here is part of an interview. Interviewer: ‘Pandit Ravi Shankar has done some interesting experiments with his Sitar Concertos, using symphony orchestras and such.’ NB: ‘No comment, no comment. But I definitely didn’t like that duet with Mr. Yehudi Menuhin, *East Meets West*. No, I’ve heard Yehudi Menuhin many times; in Western music he’s a different giant, but when he’s playing some Indian music it is just like a child. For a stunt, it’s OK, but I really disagree, I don’t like this idea. You cannot mix up everything! It is not possible.’

- I. Landgarten (1986/1991) Nikhil Banerjee Interview, Part 2 (Online: <http://www.raga.com/interviews/207int2.html>. Accessed 14 March 2013).
21. D.M. Neuman (1980) *The Life of Music in North India: The Organization of an Artistic Tradition* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press), p. 30.

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