

## "Avant Garde of Oriental Music"

His passion for music must be seen to be believed!! And the depth of his knowledge of music is bound to stun the strongest of critics into silence. Meet T. M. (Timothy Michael) Hoffman, leading exponent of what may be called Asian 'classical crossover', a new genre of music that is set to counteract the growing Western influences on the diverse oriental schools of music by providing opportunity for intra-Asian innovations without diluting the distinctive flavours of the originals.

The present example of this crossover ideal is the authentic rendering of Indian classical music on Japanese instruments with all the appropriate nuances, and the use of Japanese classical poetry in Hindustani vocal music forms and styles. In pursuit of this ideal, Hoffman has spent more than half of his life in Asia, far from his native land.



T. M. Hoffman

Singing *thumri* with Japanese *haiku*

Born in 1951 in USA, Hoffman garnered his educational qualifications from institutions across the world, namely B.A. (International Christian University, Tokyo), M.A. (University of Hawaii/East-West Center), Visharad in Hindustani classical vocal and flute (Bhatkhande Music College, Lucknow), and trained intensively in piano (under late Grace Mundorf Myers, USA), Japanese flute *shakuhachi* (late Yamaguchi Goro, Japan), Indian classical vocal (Pandit Ganesh Prasad Mishra, Lucknow), and is married to a Japanese musician.

Hoffman has rendered Japanese classical and Hindustani *raga* on shakuhachi in numerous live concerts and TV and radio in Japan, India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan, England and USA. He has also conducted workshops and organized visits to India for Japanese musicians and to Japan for Indian musicians for cooperative performances and workshops.

He has authored *Raga for Shakuhachi and Koto* (instruction book, in Japanese), translated musical texts, fiction and poetry collections for prominent Japanese authors, Japanese government agencies and UNESCO.



T. M. Hoffman

Japanese *koto* & Baul singer in Santiniketan

In 1989, he co-founded Indo-Japanese Music Exchange Association (IJMEA), with an advisory board and membership of respected artists and scholars of both countries. Since 1993, Hoffman has been a lecturer and professor in Ethnomusicology at the Musashino Academia Musicae, Tokyo.

T. M. Hoffman visited Delhi with two Japanese musician for a series of joint music programmes with Indian artists under the aegis of the IJMEA. This NNE correspondent ran into him during a lecture-demonstration conducted by the maestro Pt. Ravi Shankar at one of the local schools here.

Thereafter, sitting in his lodging near Bengali Market, it was a sheer delight to hear him play on the Japanese vertical bamboo flute shakuhachi while elaborating on the subtle nuances of Indian and Japanese classical music.

One could not help marveling at how the man has painstakingly mastered the essentials of Indian classical music and studied the Devanagari and other Asian scripts in order to research the respective music systems.

In fact, his knowledge of Indian heritage and culture would put most of us to shame. It was indeed amazing to hear him demonstrate effortlessly one raga after another. It is amply evident that the gentleman has imbibed the quintessence of music in his heart, mind and soul...

**The elaborate interview with Mr. T. M. Hoffman is reproduced below :**

**Tell us about your family background and how you became interested in Oriental music.**

Music was always in the family, my father being a well-travelled singer and my mother a self-taught pianist. They arranged my studies under a distinguished piano master in Pennsylvania from age four. Then, years later while studying Western music composition in college in California, I became interested in microtonal music, improvisation, and other features that have long been part of Asian musical art. I began my relationship with Asian music and language by entering a university in Tokyo, attending performances and learning shakuhachi under Japan's top master. After graduation, I have been privileged to travel, live and study in nearly all the nations of East, Southeast and South Asia, including some 20 years in Japan, 6 in India, 1+ in Sri Lanka, etc. Intensive studies and performance of Indian classical music have proved to be particularly helpful in my efforts to understand Asian music.

**Why does Oriental music, by and large, fascinate you? How is it different from Western music?**

A work of music is of interest to both its producer (the musician) and its consumer (listener), but the process of performing belongs to the musician alone. The nature of the experience of the performer is greatly dependent on whether or not the element of harmony is dominantly present. In a Western orchestra, the clearly defined roles of the respective players in combination produces a grand group effect, but does not allow improvisation by the individual musicians. Conversely, the soloist in Asia - singer of *khyal* or *kriti* in India, player of traditional shakuhachi music in Japan - weaves many different melodic and rhythmic variations into the performance in a self-directed experience. Such music is more of an inward-directed process for, first and foremost, the performer, whereas Western classical music is an artistic product designed mostly for the consumer (the listener).

Of course, performer and listener are part of the equation in both cases, but the difference in emphasis is significant. Also, discipline is equally important in both Western orchestra music and Indian raga music, but the allegiance is to the composer and conductor in the former, and to the principles of the art form (of *raga* and *tala*, for example) in the latter. I cherish the experiences of making music in both of these artistic environments - as a member of a social collective, as in a band or orchestra, and as a seeker of discovery through spontaneous combination of rhythm, melody and language, as in *khyal* or *thumri*. Then, among the many unique music traditions within Asia, the extent to which improvisation is incorporated into the artist's (and listener's) world, and the factors behind the presence or absence of improvisation - this is a topic which very much interests me.

**Are Indian music and Japanese music at all similar?**

Yes, very much, though on the surface they may not appear to be so. While Western (and Chinese) music and instruments are built around principles of absolute pitch and harmony, both Indian and Japanese music and instruments feature careful attention to rhythm and melody within the principle of relative pitch. To the eye, Japanese instruments appear similar in shape and ornamental design to Chinese instruments, but the ear reveals tuning schemes and manipulation of strings etc that resemble those of India. In both India and Japan, music has been inspired by and developed primarily in relation to the voice, and the instruments are capable of a great variety of graces (*gamaka*) such as those in Indian and Japanese classical vocal music. Microtones (*shruti*) are important elements of melody, and performance progresses from slow to medium to fast (*vilambit-madhya-drut*, or *jo-ha-kyu* in Japan).

In terms of religion, the Japanese pantheon includes the deity of music and learning Benten, a counterpart of the Hindu goddess Saraswati. Many of these correlations are results of transmission from India to Japan via the Asian continent. Furthermore, the Japanese language is closer to Indian languages in phonetic, grammatical and poetic structure than it is to Chinese or Western languages. After noting this through comparison of the structures of Japanese and Hindi, we have demonstrated this in practice by singing Japanese classical poetry in khyal and thumri style (from ten years ago in Japan, and most recently during the past three weeks of public performances in India), something which would be unapproachable with English or Chinese poetry.

The differences between India and Japanese sound culture are equally interesting, for they suggest potential for meaningful sharing of compatible innovations. Consider the relative role of ear and eye - the aural and the visual aspects - of sound in the aesthetic experience of people in the respective cultures. The written characters in South and Southeast Asian scripts, for example, represent the sounds of the language (as *nadarupa*), whereas East Asian languages using the Chinese ideographic script approach meaning through thousands of unique visual forms. Likewise, in India and throughout South Asia the *sargam* pitch names and notation represent musical tones without referring directly to any specific instrument or other visible/material object, while in Japan and East Asia the notation symbols refer to hand positions on specific instruments.

The Japanese orientation is 'hardware intensive,' while the Indian is a more abstracted 'software intensive.' This is also true in the computer industry. It is not surprising, then, that Japanese listeners consistently notice details of stage setting, dress and posture of performers and other visible elements, whereas Indian listeners are more likely to remark on aural features such as rhythms and melodies.

### **What are the factors that could help in Indo-Japanese musical collaboration?**

First of all, the will to collaborate for mutual benefit, and an investment of time and effort. In Japanese music, the two pentatonic (*audav*, in Indian terminology) scales *In* and *Yo* form the skeleton of a small number of loosely defined melodic modes. Indian classical music, on the other hand, systematically recognizes hundreds of scales and modes, each with its own distinctive melodic features and moods achieved through the unique arrangement and individual tones in that raga. Japanese melody itself belongs, as mentioned earlier, to the world of relative pitch, but Japanese music terminology and notation symbols refer to 'absolute' positions on the instruments. In other words, the system uses 'absolute symbols' to represent 'relative relationships.' The instruments are most suitable for relative pitch, so Japanese musicians could more easily note the potential for performing hundreds of melodic modes on their own instruments if they were to think in terms of relative pitch, such as is possible with Indian *sargam*.



**T. M. Hoffman**

**Raga on Japanese flute *shakuhachi***

One example of what would become readily apparent is the relation of the prominent Japanese *In* and *Yo* pentatonic scales (mentioned above) to the *Bhairavi that* (scale) of Hindustani classical music, while the predominant scale in Chinese music is similar to *Kalyan*. These two scales are diametrically opposite in terms of interval arrangement. Many such observations can spring from cross-application of theory and practice in Asia. The compact lyricism of Japanese poetic forms and style could provide Indian poets and vocalists with valuable insights for their own art. It is just a matter of acknowledging the scope for and value of such exchanges. This is perhaps the most 'revolutionary' aspect of the intra-Asian crossover topic - the fact that progressive international/intercultural collaborations need not involve the Western world, and that, furthermore, in many cases significant creative developments can be possible only if the Western element is excluded from the equation. Sounds funny coming from a Euro-American? I just find it incredible that cultural colonialism is being welcomed and perpetuated by artists and others in regions of the world where political colonialism has been so vehemently decried.

### **Would you brand your kind of music as fusion?**

No, it is crossover, and there is a world of difference between the two. Fusion can have any instruments playing together in any

combination or style whatsoever - there is no particular identity to be maintained, no objective criteria for excellence. It is much like *kitchiri* produced from whatever happens to be in the kitchen at a given time - it may or may not result in something tasty or nutritious, but in any case it happens. There is some very interesting and enjoyable fusion music around, and also much that is by its nature unreasonable - as the Japanese expression 'fusing wood to bamboo' aptly expresses. Raga cannot be performed in Western-style harmony, *tabla* is not a good partner for piano, etc. On the other hand, raga and tala concepts are intrinsic elements in traditional Japanese music, the Japanese *koto* is the ultimately ideal stringed instruments for raga, etc.

I spent a few years testing this hypothesis in Lucknow, using Japanese shakuhachi to complete the *Vadhya Visharad* (Distinction) for *bansuri*, something which would be impossible with the Western flute. In short, the (Japanese) instruments are able to 'cross over' completely into the second culture (India), to render the classical music fully as it is - two Asian traditions positively interacting without undue compromise in principle, technique or instrument configuration. Indian musical concepts often succinctly address what may be perceived as characteristically Japanese in Japanese music, and Japanese instruments are latent purveyors of raga-like melody.

Thus, there is great potential for sharing between India and Japan in relation to musical and linguistic arts, and such interaction can promote understanding and development within and between the respective traditions and in the broader context of music in Asia and the world. When will the fundamental similarities in rhythm between Korean *changdan* and Indian tala become the seed of interaction? Again, it is just a matter of getting beyond limiting preconceptions as to who can be partners in collaboration. There is more than enough East-West fusion. When will the more promising East-East (intra-Asian) connections be fostered?

### **What is the IJMEA all about?**

The Indo-Japanese Music Exchange Association is a private, non-profit organisation founded in Tokyo in June 1989 for the purpose of promoting opportunities for Japanese and Indian musicians to observe, study and appreciate the classical music of their counterparts, both as performing art and subject of theoretical and historical study. Founding members of this Association have, through research and applied studies, ascertained that significant structural, stylistic and historical relationships exist between Indian and Japanese music. An advisory board comprising fourteen renowned cultural figures in Japan and India guides the Association. A majority of its members both in Japan and India are performing artists, teachers and advanced students of Japanese or Indian music with interest in music of both cultures.

### **What qualities should one have in order to be a good musician?**

- Patience
- Passion for ones music and respect for that of others
- Perception of the difference between time and space, and of the role of ear and eye in learning and propagating music.

### **As a person what has music given to you?**

Awe of the power of the unseen, immaterial - sound, time, emotion, God. And (laughs) perhaps it has made me unintelligible in any other language than music...

*(As told to Ruchira Ghosh)*

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