

When east meets east

What does Indian music on a Japanese instrument sound like? Just ask T M Hoffman, an American ethnomusicologist who plays classical Hindustani music on *koto* & *shakuhachi*



Published : 12 February 2020 06:44 AM



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<https://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/bengaluru/2020/feb/12/when-east-meets-east-2102098.html>

BENGALURU: An American man, an Indian raag and two Japanese instruments – Saturday evening at the Indian Music Experience saw a cultural amalgamation like never before. Recently in town during a pan-India tour, performing artist T M Hoffman showed an intimate, enthusiastic crowd how the Japanese stringed instrument koto and flute shakuhachi lend themselves very well to Indian music. He firmly states that the music he played does not fall under the fusion category, but is a “classical crossover” instead. Put simply, “it is a Japanese classical instrument with Indian classical music, where nothing is compromised. Instead, we only double their potential without diluting any salient features,” explains the Pennsylvania-born musician, who has spent 40+ years in Asia now.

Pointing to his instruments, Hoffman shares that he has been playing the same koto for 15 years and the same shakuhachi for over 40. One might liken the latter to the Indian bansuri but he explains, “This is open on both ends and is played vertically instead.” He goes on to show the five holes - four in the front and one at the back - and continues, “I

have to keep changing the blowing angle to get the right pitches.” According to him, the syntax of Indian and Japanese languages run parallel, and the musics are compatible.

“So the raag and taal is the software of the music, and the Japanese instruments the hardware,” he says, adding that the instruments are very versatile as well. “The shakuhachi can be played like two instruments: regularly blown, or if I push the air from the other side, it produces bols (sounds) of a tabla. The koto, on the other hand, can be played like the veena, sitar, sarangi, santoor (with meend), and even more,” says the ethnomusicologist who completed 5-year Visharad degrees in both Hindustani classical vocal and flute (using shakuhachi) in Lucknow, and trained extensively in North Indian classical vocal under the late Benares gharana doyan Pandit Ganesh Prasad Mishra.

“I like Indian classical music for its wide variety of melody and rhythm. There are many different scales available, and the rhythmic structures are also not just vast but also systematic,” says the 68-year-old. During his lecture-demonstration, Hoffman also enthralled his audience with his koto-accompanied vocal renditions in both Hindi and Japanese languages, and a Baul song in Bengali. “Sometimes, people find it confusing to see me with this music, since I’m neither Indian nor Japanese. In spite of all the East-West fusion in arts and society, two Asian things in combo is relatively rare,” he says, adding that he would like to see more R & D efforts with Asian instruments. Given the nature of his musical journey, not surprisingly he feels himself as Indian, Japanese and American, saying with a smile, “My loyalties and energies are not divided, but multiplied by three.”

In depth

Hoffman’s lecture-demonstration was held in conjunction with the launch of a book on Sri Annamacharya Project of North America SAPNA, which was founded by Dr Sarada Purna Sonty and her husband Dr Sriram Sonty. The book, *SAPNA @32*, looks at the origin and history of the organisation, which was conceived in 1987 to introduce Indian classical art traditions, Annamacharya and saint compositions and Carnatic music to the Western hemisphere.

“We address three levels: Students and the younger generation, the older generation who migrated to the USA, and the mainstream American community,” explains Sarada, adding that in 32 years they have organised 4,000 performances in USA, Canada, Mexico, Egypt, South Africa and Croatia as well. “Besides the history, the book also documents the names of all the performances and accompanying artistes for these 4,000 shows,” she adds.