

(De)constructing the Indian Sarod; An Instrument-making Workshop and Concert

By Eddie Hutchence

Today's event took place in two parts: firstly, we were treated to a workshop led by the highly skilled and knowledgeable Naba Kumar Kanji and his daughter Pallabi Kanji; secondly came a concert of Indian classical music for the sarod and tablā, with maestros Arnab Chakrabarty on sarod and Shahbaz Hussain on tablā. By the close of the event, the impression left on everyone was certainly an inspiring one—but to speak of the end of the afternoon now would be to get ahead of ourselves.

The workshop

We were very fortunate to have Naba and Pallabi join us this afternoon, for Naba is one of India's most renowned and talented luthiers and had flown across from Kolkata to deliver this workshop for us. His daughter, Pallabi, accompanied him and is currently being trained in the tradition of sarod-making; she is India's first female luthier.

Naba's craftsmanship was on full display as he disassembled the sarod—a delicate instrument made some 140 years ago—for us to see its construction. Arnab spoke as Naba worked so that we might have an understanding of the parts of the sarod and how they can be adapted to produce subtle changes in the sound. The sarod is a stringed instrument resembling a guitar or banjo, with a fret-less metal fingerboard and goat skin covering the body of the instrument. To play the instrument, one hand's fingertips are topped with thimbles (traditionally made of fish scales, though plastics like nylon are now favoured) so as to make pressing the strings to the fingerboard less painful whilst also allowing the player to slide and bend the strings more easily. The other hand strums or plucks the strings over the goat skin body with a plectrum. The sound the sarod produces is quite bright and metallic owing to the metal strings and fingerboard, yet simultaneously it's rich and full thanks to the deep, drum-shaped body reverberating with a goat skin top.

Arnab spoke about the materials used to construct the instrument, highlighting where they differed from similar instruments of Western design; the sarod's bridge, for example, is carved from deer horns or bones, whereas the bridge on a violin would traditionally be wooden. On the topic of carving, Naba informed us that the process of carving a sarod's body—for the body is wooden—can take up to 10 years. A video shot at Naba's Kolkata workshop was projected for us to watch. It showed the lengthy process of carving the log into the shape of a sarod by hand. This timeframe is necessary because, unlike a violin or other similar Western instruments, the sarod is made of a single piece of wood which must cure and strengthen over an extended period of time—between 10 and 25 years—in order to ensure it can withstand the high tension of the instrument's strings.

By now, Naba and Pallabi had taken all of the tuning pegs out of the instrument and removed the fingerboard so that the inside of the instrument could be seen. It was tentatively (remember this particular sarod is over 140 years old) passed around the audience for inspection. All that could be seen, as one might expect, was an empty bowl-like crevice to allow the sound to reverberate within the body of the instrument, much like peeking into the sound hole of a guitar. In the interests of time, Naba and Pallabi had to reconstruct the instrument to allow for a lunch break before we moved onto afternoon's concert with Arnab and Shahbaz.

The Concert

Arnab and Shahbaz performed a series of *ragas*. For those unfamiliar, a *rag* (or *ragas* plural) is a melodic structure acting as a framework from which an entire composition blossoms. By way of analogy, a *rag* is to Indian classical music what a jazz standard is to jazz music; it is a melodic foundation for an extensive improvisation. Indian classical music is heavily improvised, and *ragas* form a seminal part of this musical practice. This quickly became apparent from listening to Arnab and Shahbaz: Arnab would introduce the *rag* melody with his sarod, then Shahbaz would join in and enrich the music with rhythmic drive.

There was a real sense of communication between the musicians in which we, the audience, could hear and see that they were bouncing ideas off one another as the music developed and unfolded. This cooperation came naturally to Arnab and Shahbaz because, Shahbaz said, the two had been performing together for so many years now that they knew each other's tendencies on stage. The friendship that they have formed plays a massive part in their performative relationship on stage.

Midway through the concert, Shahbaz spoke to us about rhythm in Indian classical music and how the *tablā* has its own language that is translatable to rhythm. Essentially, where and how you strike the *tablā* drums depends on different syllables known each individually as a *bol*. These syllables are onomatopoeias of the sounds they produce. For example, *Tin* is played on the smaller of the two drums—the treble drum—and produces a high-pitched, sharp reverberation, while *Ga* is played on the larger bass drum and sounds deeper and rounded. *Bol* syllables can be strung together to form entire beat patterns and compositions, which means that rather unlike Western classical music where rhythm is notated using mathematical beat divisions, *tablā* compositions are entirely based in aural traditions and spoken word. I personally found this absolutely fascinating.

Arnab then treated us to one of his own *rag* compositions, which had a meditative character about it, before both musicians joined together to bring the concert to a close. In all, the afternoon was completely informative and inspiring. The

audience was an eclectic mixture of interested academics, members of the public, and kids from Alderman White Secondary school—everyone, however, expressed their thanks to Arnab and Shahbaz and their newfound admiration for Indian classical music through their enthusiastic rounds of applause.