WCMT / Finzi Trust Travel Fellowship:
Five weeks of research into the teaching, learning, theory and practice of Indian Classical Music India

Chris Cook
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Introduction

I'm very pleased and lucky to have been awarded a grant to cover five weeks of research in to the teaching, learning, theory and practice of Indian Classical Music (ICM) in Benares in 2013. I had arranged meetings in India in different musical settings and a four week stay at Benares Music Academy developing my sitar skills. My aims were to share my new understanding of ragas via the internet and with professional organisations, to compose one piece of music of my own and to plan ways of running ICM workshops back in the UK.

What follows is a report of my Travelling Fellowship. I includes reflections on the aspects of my meetings and sessions in India and details of how they helped me to realise my goal of making Indian Classical Music accessible to community groups in the UK.

As I wrote the report I remembered the words that I read of a previous Churchill Fellow, that it was important that as well as gaining valuable new knowledge and skills, that you did something useful for other people with that knowledge and those skills.

I present my report in two parts. The first is an account of my personal journey as a sitar player student. The second is my plans based on experiences of how Indian Classical Music can work in the community. Inevitably, these boundaries are frequently blurred. I still consider future community based applications of my personal experiences in the first section and the group music research sometimes brings me back to considering own personal development. After these two parts, I draw things together as best I can, with conclusions and strategies, for how I will indeed put that which I had learnt into practice in the near future in the UK.

I make reference to my own blog that was maintained throughout the trip. This report is compiled from much of that content and yet has a different focus. The blog is an on going record of my progress as a community musician and includes very detailed notes of my studies in India. On my own blog I am free to write about unlimited topics that interest me. This report, while incorporating a similar blog style, is intended to be focused on the Indian Classical Music experiences that I had and how they could be put into practice now, in the community. That means to be amongst people of all ages in London and my new home of Coventry in the UK. I hope that my words are of use and interest in some way to any reader, but especially those involved in community work or non-Western music.
PART 1 My own development as a sitar player

How on earth did I get into playing the sitar?

This is by far the most frequent question that people ask me so I figure it makes sense to quickly try to offer some explanation, by way of introduction. I grew up in West London, a few miles from the Asian suburb of Southall that boasts two Indian music shops, Jas and Bina. I was lucky in at least two ways as a teenager. My parents brought me up to love music, sharing with me their eclectic record collections and helping to explore recorder, keyboard and guitar. Secondly I did my degree in music in the late nineties when such studying didn’t result in huge debt if you lived frugally and had part time work. Subsequently, when I was 19, I had enough cash to buy a sitar from Bina Musicals.

I used that sitar from Bina Musicals of Southall with the electronic music that I composed and performed since 2000. At the same time I had regular lessons with some great teachers in Brighton and London who have guided me through the daunting world of Indian Classical Music. I’ve made slow but steady progress from lessons on average every two weeks and practice when possible. I would love to write that I’ve practiced for 16 hours a day like the great players, but for better or for worse, I let real life get in the way and it’s more like a few hours practice per week. The sitar has inevitably been incorporated into my music workshop jobs, with elderly groups in particular. Western audiences often seem impressed by the mere fact that I own a sitar but nevertheless I am striving to learn to play it properly! People with an understanding of ICM meanwhile can spot a mile off that I’m still very much, just a student.

I passed a Grade 6 examination with distinction. I have spent the last fifteen years with the sitar as a big part of my life and look forward to this life long journey continuing.

Getting to know The Academy of Music in Varanasi.

I arrived in India on 18th July 2013. Three days in Delhi got me partway acclimatised to India and then a sleeper train took my girlfriend and I to Varanasi. We headed straight for the Academy of Music and met the people. I already felt excited and inspired. The details of this place can be found in their website so I’ll just make a couple of notes that come from interesting conversations that I had early on in my stay.

Deobrat Mishra, academy manager, sitar teacher and performer, explained to me that the tuition is founded on love. He contrasted to me the way that he uses encouragement to progress his students rather than the negative threat of punishment. In previous generations, in other schools or gharanas, physical punishment of students was commonplace but thankfully I won’t encounter such harsh strategies here!

As well as love and encouragement within the guru-shishyra (teacher-student) lesson, the whole building is designed for maximum comfort for the students. We’ve got a supply of fresh water, a shower, air conditioning, etc to make sure that we can concentrate on music as much as possible in the summer humidity of Benares. All the teachers and staff here are very helpful and welcoming and the other students who have been here for a while have offered us handy local tips too. The basis of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, providing for the student his or her basic physiological needs was in place. The basic comfort of learners is ensured so that he or she could concentrate on the music.

Finally, for now, before my first proper lesson I note that my London teacher, Ramesh, also of Benares gharana tradition, is echoed a lot here. He also offers the ‘24 hour music help’ that exists here, staying up all night practicing, listening, playing and always being keen to help and to be available for his students.

Music sessions affected by life in India and beyond

Visiting India for the first time gave me an insight into more than just the country’s music. I started to get the bigger picture of the life of a musician. I tried to understand India.
- the class system
- the colourful and immaculate clothes
- eating, talking and making music sat on the floor
- the rich, vegetarian and generous food
- the whirlwind of street life: humidity, auto rickshaws, tooting motorbikes, constant bartering, piles of rubbish, manual labour, flooding and animals
- Hinduism or Islam (and these are very different religions) may greatly inspire and guide the performance or music, as well as the way a teacher teaches.

I could only learn from spending weeks in India, immersed in the musical world. It’s really useful when facilitating Indian music back in the UK. I was reminded of an issue that was pointed out to me when I suggested that I could lead Indian music to my Workshop Skills course leader, at Goldsmiths back in 2008. Namely that I’m not Indian and, for some, I might instantly look unqualified. Others have since suggested that someone like me playing sitar could be inspiring, depending on the group with whom I’m working.

Sitting with people, showing an interest in culture and festivals, sharing food and in particular wearing a kurta (tunic) does no harm. I hope and I believe that this is not a façade on my part, but simply good presentation and social skills. I wouldn’t pretend to be anything that I am not. The subject of religion is worth mentioning too at this stage. Hinduism was special to some teachers I met, while others were Muslim. My first sitar teacher in the UK happened to be a Sikh. It’s interesting that many musicians are religious and many more spiritual and while it enhances their own music I noticed that no one in Indian or England ever tried to preach to me their beliefs within a music lesson.

I like to have a good, basic understanding of the religions of the world but I think it’s common sense avoid incorporating religious elements in to my music sessions because it could exclude people not from a certain religion.

Gurupuja Celebrations

It was Gurupuja, or Teachers’ Day across India on July 23rd, the day after we arrived in Varanasi. I was invited to the Academy’s Gurupuja ceremony. This consisted of Pt Shivnath Mishra receiving gifts from his students. We brought sweets, flowers and fruit to his room and each student received a kind of blessing. Long standing students received a thread tied round the wrists from the guru.

Students also touched the guru’s feet. Crucially, I was explained, this doesn’t mean any kind of worship but simply that the student is open to learn and the teacher to share. Some students then played their instruments before each other and then we shared the afore-mentioned sweets as well as more food from the Mishras’ house. I was also told that hardly any other establishments in Benares would bother to hold such a ceremony and everyone seemed very proud to be involved in the foremost music academy in Benares.
The Gurupuja event initiated a lot of thought on my part about the guru-student relationship. It continued with my own ceremony with Guruji at the end of my visit. This really is central to the transmission of Indian Classical Music and so it’s actually a relevant subject that I need to understand better if I am to be involved in Indian Music education. Of course I’m not going to try to set myself up as a guru, not now and not ever! I’m grateful to Deo in Benares and my sitar teacher in London, Ramesh, for explaining more about the process to me.

I learnt that becoming a musical ‘disciple’ is not something to be rushed into, and as I stated above, it represents a mutual respect, commitment and openness. Some students wait years before going through this procedure. Ramesh told me that one can have many gurus, many teachers and many guiding lights. It doesn’t have to be formal, it could involve different instruments and one cannot predict how successful it will be. Good teaching can exist in groups or one-on-one. This made me think of the learners with whom I work with in London with learning difficulties and have a one-on-one support worker.

I guess all one really can conclude is that good teaching and learning is good teaching and learning, over the course of hours or years, whether at school, in a guru shishyra parampara or in one of my community music sessions. At this point I hadn’t really considered that I would have my own puja ceremony at the end of my four weeks at the Academy.

**First lesson with Deobrat Mishra**

Instrument lessons are one on one because, Deobrat explained to me, each student is different. I guess even individual lessons are still a group of two people playing together. Inevitably some kind of initial assessment took place. We needed to find out what I should concentrate on and with which raga. I played a little sitar to Deo on my first day. He subsequently said, “OK, you’re in the right place” although I never quite found out what he meant by that! He reached some simple conclusions and said it was my weak right hand that we’d work on and that I’d be studying a raga called Bageshree.

By ‘right hand’ I mean the way that I use my hand, wearing the mizrab, to strike the strings and combinations of the up/down motion on the strings. You can see my Benares style mizrab on my finger in the photo on Page 1 of this document. He was right, this has always been my weakness. My guitar playing might help my left (fretting hand) a little bit but the right hand plucking on a sitar is totally different to picking guitar strings. I needed all the help I could get!

Meanwhile the choice of Bageshree was important because this would stick with me for the duration of stat in Benares. I didn’t practice any other raga Ramesh allowed me to jump around loads of raags and in preparation for the recent exam I had ‘revised’ about ten. Now though it’s Bageshree, bageshree, bageshree. It’s not the easiest raga in the world, but it’s not the hardest. It is one of the raags I studied to some extent as part of the exam syllabus in
the UK. The first of my daily lessons with Deo was totally inspiring not least because I was lent a beautiful instrument upon which to practice. I note that learners are inspired by quality instruments, and to remind funders of this fact!

More lessons with Deo and Guruji

After five days into my residency I had sat with Deo 3 times and Guruji twice. I soon settled into a rhythm of having a lesson with both Deo and Guruji every day. Deo addressed issues with my technique and I believed him when he said that I'm already making some progress. Meanwhile the shorter lessons with Guruji put the taans and paltas that I learnt with Deo in perspective by working on the Alaap, jor and jhalla. Lessons with Guruji were truly special and I enjoyed every one. Guruji spoke only some English and our lessons consisted largely of us playing sitar phrases back and forth. Even with his limited English, Guruji gave me regular encouraging feedback, and also conveyed more information via Deobrat whose English was fluent.

Each note is revealed slowly, punctuated by chikaris and pakads (stock phrases such as Ma Pa Da Ga Re Sa or Ma Da Ni Da). As the previous sentence demonstrates, note names tell us little. Hence, more written notes and recordings specifically concerning Bageshree are uploaded on to my blog for the benefit, I hope, of sitar students just as this uploaded report is supposed to be useful for music leaders.

I’ve also uploaded links to various online groups and forums. I received some very encouraging feedback. Fellow student Nico advises me wisely to record lessons and listen to the before I go to sleep. Nico also lent me a great book “Indian Music The Magic of the Raga” by Dr Raghava R Menon, which describes many of the concepts of Indian Music that I was struggling to understand. I summarised many sections of that book on my blog. The book described the difference between notes and ‘swaras’. I realised that I need to let Guruji totally help me to understand the music (so that notes come alive as ‘swaras’) and at the same time
somehow apply to it myself. Nico sets a fine example of the shishrya (student).

For me the comparison was not just between the direct and current experience of learning with Deo and Guruji, it was also the years of lessons with Ramesh in London who's music was echoed in my Benares lessons on a daily basis. I also observed the way that my girlfriend Chantal learned bansuri form her teacher and how fellow students were taught. All are fascinating examples of the Guru Shishrya Parampura. I'm inspired by the way the students and teachers are totally open and trusting in each other and I hope that elements of these positive examples can find their way into my own work with groups.

A wall

Interestingly, around a week into my stay at the Benares Music Academy I found myself up against an unexpected problem. I felt that I was tired of the sitar and Indian Classical Music. I had never had so many lessons, if not practice in such a short space of time. It’s also the first long break I had had from work for many years, possibly ever. This musical intensity was, for me, a double-edged sword. This meant I had nothing to distract from me really thinking about where my life was going and what on Earth my goals are a sitar player, community musician, composer, performer or teacher. I was physically not feeling very good and I went through a phase of lying on my bed with my eyes wide open and melodies from mine and other people’s ragas going round and round. It was driving me a bit raga-crazy. Luckily Chantal was there to talk with, and Deo offered a ‘24 hour’ availability to discuss anything with his students.

After rest of course everything seemed easier to deal with. A lot can be said for simply taking a break, and that certainly applies to music workshops. Music sessions should be about playing and fun. For me as an individual, though, I find it more complicated. In the short term I can focus on getting to know and Raag Bageshree and realize the wider aims of my trip. It was certainly not enough for me to just ‘enjoy exploring the music’. The fact is that, I learnt, It is not easy to play ragas properly without regular connection with India, indeed with Varanasi. Is it practical for me to return regularly? Otherwise I simply call myself a sitar player and cast the net wider, playing in any kind of music that I choose on the instrument. Discussing it with my peers, helped me but many big questions for me remained unresolved.

Another part of the picture: the instrument

Deo’s pointed out to me that as well as a good guru, a student needs a good instrument. As I said before, it’s inspiring. The good instruments, apparently, come from Calcutta and in Benares, and in Pune. I agreed to buy a 35 year old Radha Krishna Sharma mahogany sitar made in Calcutta. The notes certainly resonate very nicely and if you believe in such things you could say it’s already infused with Indian music. The main thing is that while a great instrument does not a great player make, a student cannot progress on a faulty instrument. The obviously related issue here is budget and making the most of what the students have. Following on from that is the question of whether instruments should belong to the
participants to practice with or is it safer to maintain them centrally? In my case I made the decision that this sitar was something else to pay for and to carefully take home!

**Notes on Raga Bageshree**

I keep specific notes on my learning of Raga Bageshree at the Benares Academy out the way of this report, on my blog. The Bageshree notes are too detailed to be entirely relevant for this report that aims to see the bigger picture of ICM with UK Community Music. I hope that students of sitar may find the online to be of use. I’ve tried to publicise this resource by posting links to it on related forums.

I was pleased with my use of diagrams and audio snippets, taking my blogging to a new level! It was, I think, a good move to bring the laptop with me so that I could maintain these notes as I went. A sense of chronology gives it some structure and it saves a huge amount of work that I would otherwise have to do all at once upon my return. I just had to make sure that I didn’t spend all day typing rather than engaging with real human beings and real music!

I would say that Guruji really guided me through the raga as if he was leading me through a dark forest with a torch repeatedly so that in the end I could find my way through myself. I mean that, after weeks of study with Guruji, I could play a version of Raag Bageshree from beginning to end on my own.

Also worth noting is that this level of attention to one raga, the same one for so many lessons really did increase my understanding of not just this raga but many others. I would therefore tentatively conclude that it’s best to really focus on one raga for a long time than to jump around the basics of many different ones. Many related fundamental factors such as the structure of the different movements and the use of tala (rhythm) can be applied from one raga to the next. Deo repeatedly referred to Ustad Vilayhat Khan’s *seven year* study of just Raag Yaman by way of example!

**My own gurupuja**

Towards the end of my stay at the Academy, and after a bit of careful thought, I accepted the amazing invitation to officially become a student of Guruji Pandit Shivnath Mishra. I was to become one of his many students around the world and will make every effort to continue my training with him in the future, in person.

I was still allowed to have sitar lessons with Deo in Benares or dear Ramesh in London or anybody, but, my guru would now be Guruji, the fantastic exponent of the Benares style sitar. This was not an outcome I originally expected but now I understand a lot more of the guru shishya relationship.

Below are is a youtube link of my rendition of Raga Bageshree after I had completed the Gurupuja ceremony with Guruji. I am accompanied by the great 21 year old tabla maestro Prashant ‘Mittu’ Mishra who kept us in tala despite any mistakes I made and despite the fact that he’d injured his right hand. I am very grateful to Mittu!

http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=mlAvn8htq-g

The ceremony went well. I’m not sure which was more intense, the brief ceremony with Guruji or my performance. The ceremony was beautiful. With it coinciding with an Indian Independence Day concert and there was a small crowd assembled at the academy mostly to have their turn playing or dancing later on. Even the Indian newspaper reported on the irony of an English sitar player having his puja ceremony on Indian Independence Day. As with most of my Indian Classical Music experiences I was aware that I was a good 15 years older than the average students around me! We exchanged garlands of flowers, I gave gifts, we put the mark on each other’s foreheads. Throughout this a Brahman student Avinash chanted a
beautiful mantra.

Later I was one of many students performing. Overall feedback was good but I could have done a better job. I actually had more than enough things to ‘say’ in my allotted time for around 15 minutes. I only had one, brief, practice with Mittu in the morning so I’m quite pleased we played ghats and improvisations in not just fast and slow teental but also jhap tal and matta tal. It’s probably thanks to Mittu’s tabla skills that he kept the tala going when I made the occasional blunder. Roger recorded it and that will really help me to evaluate where I am at, my progress and what I need to concentrate on.

There were two other things to note from the concert. There were lots of very impressive performances by young students. Most touching, for me, was a quartet of blind musicians. The other standout performance was a brief folksong the trio of Deo, Guruji and Nazim Khan (son, no less, of shenhai legend, the late Ustad Bismallah Khan). That was a quality end to a quite special event that I was a part of.

What can one conclude? That I feel inspired by wearing the bracelet that Guruji gave me as I play sitar. Officially becoming a disciple of the guru made me sure that I will learn from him again in person, back in India. I’m also hugely grateful to Ramesh for his continued guidance back in London. Overall it felt like a very positive outcome of my studies in Varanasi, and represented a commitment to continue to study with Guruji as much as possible. We were already discussing when, not if, we return to Benares.

PART 2 Making ICM accessible to groups

Meeting Music Basti, Delhi

Most of my research took place in Benares but it was very good to visit Music Basti in Delhi, a 4 year old project that brings music into the slum areas of the city. I learned lots from talking to director Faith Gonsalves. This is an impressive example of community music in India. She explained the practicalities launching of such projects in India compared to the UK.

My main question was of course: “How do you make Indian Classical Music accessible?” The answer was by starting with teaching Sargam or basic tala, using clapping and games and incorporating really anything that worked for the particular group and the particular tutor. Some tutors are trained in using the Kodaly technique. The voice and simple percussions was used more than ICM instruments for the obvious practical reasons. As an entry point pop music might be used, or regional or national music. Some sessions involve guitar tuition. I learnt from visiting one practice local room, in the Shapur Jat ares of Delhi, that the kids, or some of them at least, like to rock. Creativity, in the form of song writing was also integral to Music Basti sessions.
I looked forward to meeting with the trainers, the tutors and the kids before I leave India. Unfortunately it never transpired, we didn’t manage to arrange a time for me to attend a session. Obviously this was a shame because seeing Music Basti in action would really have made me understand more but it’s still possible that I revisit them when I’m back in India next time, on the way to Benares. I was inspired by the dynamism of Music Basti. UK cities aren’t like Delhi or Benares, at least on the face of it, but there are many in the UK for whom lack of music is a barrier and they miss the enjoyment of music. I made the resolve to find ways, simply, to do something very useful with my musical training.

108 sitars
I discovered lots of inspirational musical happenings but this takes some beating. Deo organized this benefit concert in Benares, raising awareness of the need for funds for maintaining the sacred Ganges River. The majority of sitarists played a simple riff while the front 25 played the bespoke composition. Aside from the two parts (repeated riff and lead melody) there’s minimal exploration of harmony, the sense of Indian music is maintained by having the instruments explore melody and rhythm, but in unison. It was performed after a week of rehearsals. Deo admitted it had been demanding dealing with repeated enquiries from all 108 sitarists all week but nevertheless he was planning another mass sitar performance later this year. It would, in theory, be possible to recreate this in UK with just a small group of sitar players.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PQveL1aAdQ

Sitar, Sarengi, Shanai, Tabla practices and recordings at BMA
Another treat was witnessing the practices at the Academy of Sunil Parsenna on shenhai, Anish Mishra on sarengi, Prashant Mishra on tabla and Deo on sitar. Crucially Deo’s father Guruji was also sitting and occasionally he would sing and gesticulate phrases for each musician to play, like a singing conductor of an orchestra without the written scores. Also Deo was offering directions to each. The structures were raags (Jog, Kalyan, Biragi)

- I was reminded of a jazz ensemble because there is the regular ghat followed by the solo music’s taking turns. Also the shenhai had a saxophone-esque timbre
- The instrumental combination of three melody instruments was quite unusual but once tuning and volume issues were sorted they worked beautifully together. All instruments were designed for playing Indian music.
- There were nice examples of trading phrases of a decreasing number of beats or notes before returning to the theme for the whole group.
- The whole thing was very relaxed and fun.

Two days later we watched and listened to a recording of Anish playing a lehara (a repeated riff on the sarengi) while the 21 year old hands Mittu danced over the tablas and teental flowed, like tracing every detail of a river bed. I helped to record this session and listening back every second of this half hour of music, I am reminded just how focussed and mesmerising it was.
Plenty of books on the subject

Local bookshops in Varanasi have shelves of reference books on ICM, more than I realized existed. Varanasi prices are tempting. Many books attempt to give outlines of the main ragas and talas while others tackle associated areas from music history to metaphysics. We all know that you need to study from a guru to learn but Deo agreed that some books provide a useful reference at least. The shop owner pulled out Deo’s recommendation, “NAD Understanding Raga Music” by Sandeep Bagchee. The notation is in Western Scores of each raga and it certainly has lots of detail.

I subsequently bought ‘Nad’ by Bagchee. It was referred to a lot by myself and the other students. On the plane home from India I read ‘Nad’ just about cover to cover, although I only skimmed through the lengthy descriptions of the different vocal gharanas. It really does give a well balanced overview. There is a focus on vocals but that should not repel any instrumentalist since we all aspire to make our instruments sing. Indeed my understanding of khayal and drupad, as well as tappa and thumri, was greatly improved thanks to reading this. To enjoy the book fully though I will need to acquire some of the recordings that are referred to and analysed in great detail. Indeed, the detailed analysis of different ragas are useful, particularly on the issue of ensuring that one raga cannot be confused with another similar one. So that was 450 rupees well spent.

Divya Jyoti Disabled Development Society, Assi, Varanasi

My girlfriend discovered the Divya Jyoti Disabled Development Society via an early morning yoga class. I probably wouldn’t have stumbled across this place otherwise. I ended up playing music with adults with various learning difficulties in this small setting, down the
road from the academy, on about 5 occasions. There are up to 25 members but, due to ill health, Sawan festival, Ramadan and exceptionally high flood waters, numbers can actually be as low as 5. Four adults work in this day centre every day and resources are minimal compared to a centre in the UK. I think it's fair to say the ‘disabled’ are more segregated in India and Sheila, the centre manager, tells me that in some families, their disabled children are seen as shameful and are locked indoors all day.

This was a happy, friendly, communal atmosphere and was pleasure to take part in music with these people. I can’t help but try and show off a few songs that I use in London with my guitar and staff and students do join in with dhol, tabla and singing.

I couldn’t resist inflicting the dubious joys of ‘The Lambeth Walk’ on the DJDDS. Well they obediently shouted ‘Hey!’ I also attempt the choruses I know from a few 60s film songs (Mere Juta Hai Japaani, Mere Sapno Ki Rani). Familiar tunes to me randomly cropped up such as ‘Kum By Yah’, ‘Frere Jacque” and ‘Twinkle Twinkle Little Star’. Action songs worked well. I had slight déjà vu from my sessions in centres of Asian elders in East London. Sheila recommends I get to know film songs, O Nila Gagan Ki Talay and (my favourite) Kishore Kumar’s Chai Chai chal Mere Sati O meri Hati’) Just singing gentle ‘sargam’ exercises went quite nicely with the guitar. I’ve printed out lyrics for both songs to share with the day centre, but I won’t forget the fact that I’m here, mainly for the classical music! This is just one group, no doubt different groups require different repertoire.

I sat in on their sessions with a harmonium player, Surat, and joined in with their Indian Independence Day celebrations. In the meantime I connected in a positive way with the adults. I mean they danced and smiled at least, and I learnt some things from the experience so I’m grateful to them for having me.

The Benares Sound

Having visited various temples and seen the everyday devotion of the people in the street I wondered how important the Hindu religion was to the Classical Music of Benares. Deo explained to me that it was the important for him, certainly for his family and many original compositions came from ancient sacred texts. In the meantime, Deo and his family and friends often perform classical music in the public temples. I like the idea of bring such great classical music to the people, for free.

Meanwhile I was curious about what made Benares unique from other North Indian cities musically and about the ‘singing style’ that Guruji refers to. Deo explained that Gharanas (long standing music schools) around India have different emphases. The four styles of singing that Benares music is founded on are called drupad, khayal, thumri and tappa. It’s the Khayal style of singing that is central to Guruji’s sitar lessons with me. There’s a detailed explanation of these Indian vocal styles in the afore-mentioned book, ‘Nad, Understanding Raga Music’ by Bagchee.
Group music sessions

On three occasions we sat and used the raga structure as a framework for improvisations. This wasn’t sitting on the sidelines watching, but fully participating. We were Deo and I on sitar, Roger on sax, Chantal on bansuri and Gwen on tablas.

It’s what I’ve been studying in my individual sitar lessons here for weeks so I was in theory in my comfort zone. Chantal did well using a bansuri to play a raag she’s never seen or heard before. We traded alaap phrases, jor phrases and then taans and tihaps within a talas such as teental and jhaptal. We played the asthayi regularly in unison, which helped to keep in with the tala. It was fun; I think we stayed in tala and when the tihaps worked it was great. Deo helped to keep things moving on with spoken and sung instructions.

Two things worth noting after the second session:
- Deo pointed out that it’s disrespectful (in this case of me) to be distracting while he’s playing alaap. Even in this informal session he is giving 100% of himself to channel the spirituality to produce music. This was discussed with no hard feelings.
- Deo also finished the session by briefly giving out some criticism or advice to each of us about our musical contributions. In my case, the advice was to slow down for alaap. A little constructive criticism is like gold dust! There are links to excerpts of the music from these sessions on the blog.

This kind of structured group improvisation, followed by discussion, reminded me of some of the best sessions that we had on the Music Workshop Skills course at Goldsmiths. Maths isn’t necessarily a bad thing!

Indian rhythms are so based on maths that I got thinking about possibilities of a musical maths lesson. In particular the tihai involves some careful planning of when to start playing the right length phrase. A tihai is a rhythmic variation played three times. Fellow student Guiliame came up with the foundation for my tihai based maths lesson. I’m really proud of this idea (inspired by Guillaume) and I will put it into practice in the UK. However, (as with my notes on Raag Bageshree) I don’t want this report to include too much technical mumbo jumbo! A musical maths lesson template is presented in on my blog. (http://chriscook50.wordpress.com/indian-music-2013).

Playing with others

The fact is that we need to do lots of practice. I quite enjoyed getting up early and playing by myself and sometimes using the tabla machine to improve my rhythm. Much better, though, was to play with a human being and it’s invaluable preparation for live performance. Practicing with fellow student Gwen Guittot and or teacher Prashant Mishra was great fun, especially trying question and answer (also known as sawaal-javaab) style improvisations.
It was also great to tune my sitar to Chantal’s bansuri so that we could improvise together on our respective ragas. So, making music on your own is good, with others is better.

**Fairmail Community Photography**

My girlfriend Chantal spent her time in Benares learning bansuri and voluntarily teaching photography to local teenagers through the Fairmail project. They came along to the Gurupuja / Indian Independence Day celebrations at the academy. They took some inspired photos of musicians and dancers and I look forward to sharing their favourites. The relevance to the project here is that I am reminded that music does not exist in a vacuum but is best accompanied with another art form. This was an evening of community music where young people enjoyed Indian Classical Music as well as photography and dance.

There are clearly many positive outcomes from my five weeks in India.
- I learnt about the best ways that Indian music can be shared, exemplified at the Benares Music Academy.
- Becoming a disciple of Pt Shivnath Mishra was an unexpected outcome and feels now like this is a lifelong progression in sitar playing and the music of Varanasi.
- Via my blog I’ve been able to share the theory and practice of how Indian Classical Music can work in groups. I hope my writings about my learning of Raga Bageshree can be of use.
to some one. I’ve had positive feedback from other music leaders who have found it inspiring.
- I’ve created my own music, particularly my own ‘bandish’ for Raga Bageshree in 9 beat matta taal.
- With Chantal’s help I’ve explored the wider culture of India from visits to Temples and making music with different groups in Varanasi, it’s helped me to understand the people that make the music.
- I’ve practiced and reflected about this music more than ever before. As such I have a clearer understanding and a greater confidence in using Indian Classical Music to reach others in the community back in the UK whilst I continue to develop my own sitar playing.

CONCLUSIONS (at the risk of stating the obvious)

- Indian Classical Music is like Western Music in that the music takes the listener on a long journey through many phases. This is analogous to a whole album, concert or a classical work like a symphony. Ragas are quite a world away from India’s popular music. Invest time and concentration in this deep music and the rewards are immense and yet elements of Indian Classical Music can be made accessible to all people.
- An immersion in a limited area of study with regular guidance from a guru certainly increased my overall understanding of the performance of the raga on sitar. As with any genre of music or any discipline, a great teacher is priceless.
- Indian Classical Music shares many common principals with Community Music as I understand it, such as improvisation, minimal notation, reflective practice and mutual respect between all participants.
- ICM can certainly be played by an ensemble as well by a soloist. Playing ragas with others is a great way to learn about playing ragas with other people (as opposed to hours of solitary practice). Players take it in turns to improvise, play melodies in unison and harmony is avoided.
- Genres exist that use elements of ICM within popular music such as folk songs (dhuns) as well as fusion, film music and bhangra. It is also entirely possible to incorporate dance, visual arts or any academic subject into a music lesson.
- Lessons are traditionally begun with learning the scales and the talas but there are creative ways of facilitating this with participation.
- Sessions with learning difficulties adults are similar in India to those in UK, dependent on the skill and care of the facilitator as much as the resources available.
- Raga and tala theory can be applied to any instrument. A good instrument to play on is very inspiring.
- Singing the music is a key part of understanding it.
- It’s easy to make an effort to belong to a different culture in terms of food, dress and language.
STRATEGIES FOR ICM IN THE UK

Is ICM accessible to people in the UK? It's nice that I improved my sitar technique, experienced India and became disciple to a bona fide guru, though I know that's not much use to others reading this article. I hope that below are some practical points that could guide somebody who wants to include ICM within their own session. A great many points are common to any music session of course.

1 The structure of a basic ICM session or sessions could be generalised. Start workshops with Sargam (notes and scales) and simple talas (rhythms). Chant the notes and chant the rhythmic bols before playing them. I've seen Ramesh do this as well as Music Basti. The chanting is a nice introduction. You could compare with other rhymes or compose your own tala. Then again participants might get bored and you can move on to applying the rhythms to real instruments (tablas). Maybe one musician could play a steady motif and learner's could accompany on tablas. You might need to amplify the instrument. Don't under estimate how excited and inspired a group can be by simply seeing an unusual instrument played well and then playing along with it. You could invite them to add to tablas to hiphop, rock, bhangra or whatever popular genre accapela. I think that although this brings us back into fusion territory, it's justified for use when your audience is getting a bit bored and needs to be encouraged and because they are in theory still practicing traditional tala.

2 Establish and maintain a comfortable environment for group music making. This is hardly unique to ICM but it's good to remember that all participants need to be comfortable to be able to focus on music making.

3 After demonstrating, discussing and exploring each section, try a group raga, recreating raga based Group music sessions that I took part in at Benares. This would suit a more advanced group. As described below, get musicians in a circle and play through the raga structure (alaap, jor, jhalla, slow gat, fast ghat, jhalla) taking turns to improvise. It was easiest for me to understand the structure by actually taking part in such sessions, amongst amateurs like myself and professionals like Deo. You need one conductor to convey simple instructions verbally or with body language. Extensions to this could be; encourage creativity, improvisations, call and response, composing ghats and tihais. You could create your own raga and at least try to compose your own ghat, inspired by the various components of raga (mood, ascent, descent, time of day etc).

4 There's nothing wrong with fusion but mixing ICM sessions with other art forms was also proved to be a successful basis of a session. So you use undiluted, non fusion ICM with something like dance, art or photography. Dance in particular is a good activity for engaging groups, as stated in an article on the SOAS website. This suggests the fact that, as I have discovered more than once, collaboration with another tutor familiar with Indian Classical Music, can be a smart move.

5 You can facilitate practice sessions that involve interaction between students, e.g. tabla and sitarist. This could be in conjunction with the mass performances described above. I find Indian musicians don’t always collaborate with each other or advertise themselves. They are there in every city and they could at least play with each other more, let alone in public. A local data base might help, without being too intrusive.

6 Embedding literacy and numeracy is more than just a bit of jargon to copy and paste into lesson plans, it actually can work. You could include tala and tihais in a musical maths lesson as mentioned above. Also try using Indian music to combine a little teaching of Hindi with a little teaching of English. I know from practical experience, trying to learn European languages, that songs are great way to make the process a bit more fun.
7 It does no harm to arrive early, eat with a group, wear traditional Indian dress and even use some phrases in the relevant language of the group, for example Hindi. It’s nice to participate in all aspects of Indian culture but it’s probably best to avoid focusing on any one religion.

8 Why not plan a mass sitar event? Or why not plan a mass ‘Indian instrument’ event inviting all the local players to bring their own instruments, convene and play around your simple composition. The local players will be easy to find via any Indian music school and chances are such a school would at least try out an activity organised by an energetic community musician. As described above, Deo used easy and more challenging parts appropriately for his “108 sitars” event. It could be for a special occasion at a sitar school.

- Beginners can play a simple riff but otherwise everyone plays the composition in unison if you want to keep it sounding more ICM than fusion.
- For a huge event I suggested that there are sub leaders who help to hold the whole thing together.
- Participants bring their own instruments but it would also be ideal to fund the acquisition of some quality instruments to inspire people.
- Consider the venue and the occasion. It could be somewhere that does not usually bear witness to such instrumentation and attract a whole new set of interested parties.

9 Sessions should be based on love; ensuring that all are comfortable, that learners want to learn, not because they want to gain a certificate or are scared of punishment. This is a beautiful note (or swara) upon which to end. Deo described this when I first met him in Benares when he described his music academy in Benares. It beautifully echoes the teaching style of Carl Rogers that were central to Phil Mullen’s Workshop Skills course that I studied five years ago. Anywhere in the world we share music for love, not money.

10 If you feel tired, exhausted or uninspired take a break or try a discussion about the challenges that the group faces.

How this gets put into practice remains to be seen. I will continue to reflect on Indian Classical Music in different community groups in London and my new home of the Midlands on the blog. Is this nothing new? Have you tried anything similar? Have you suggestions? Am I making any big mistakes? There are no definitive answers of course but I’m more than happy to discuss and ideas with other music facilitators around the world. In the meantime there’s just two final quote that resonate with me.

“Success is the ability to go from failure to failure without losing your enthusiasm.”
- Winston Churchill

“The more you know, the more you realise how much you don’t know — the less you know, the more you think you know”
- David T. Freeman
Glossary

(websites and books listed below give overall explanations of Indian Music terminology but nevertheless I hope that including a few definitions of terms that I use in my report may be useful)

**alaap** – exploring the phrases of the raga without the rhythm (tala) of the tablas. Raga performance starts off with alaap

**bansuri** – North Indian flute

**bageshree** – a romantic raga that I studied for the entirety of my time in India. Indeed I’m still studying it three months later back in the UK.

**chikaris** – high pitched drone strings on a sitar

**Drupal** – a heavy singing style of North India

**ghat** – the fundamental repeated theme / melody of a raga

**gharana** a system of social organization linking musicians or dancers by lineage or apprenticeship, and by adherence to a particular musical style

**gurujuja** – a celebration of the relationship between student and teacher

**guru-shishya parampura** the oral tradition or religious doctrine or experiential wisdom transmitted from teacher to student

**ICM** Indian Classical Music

**jhalla** – following the jor, the next stage of raga performance is usually jhalla, playing fast first without tablas, and later on, at the end of the performance, the jhalla is played with the tablas

**jhaptal** - 10 beat rhythm cycle

**JOR** – exploring the raga with a steady pulse after the alaap and still without table accompaniment.

**khaly** – a style of North Indian singing that particularly informed Guruji’s sitar playing

**Kodaly Technique** an approach to music education developed in Hungary during the mid-twentieth century by Zoltán Kodály.

**Maslow’s hierarchy of needs** a theory in psychology proposed by Abraham Maslow in his 1943. Maslow used the terms Physiological, Safety, Belongingness and Love, Esteem, Self-Actualization and Self-Transcendence needs to describe the pattern that human motivations generally move through. The first set of needs, the physiological, were for provided for us in the form of air conditioning, clean water and healthy food

**matta tal** – 9 beat rhythm cycle

**Deobrat Mishra** – Sitar Artist, son of Pt Shivnath Mishra who ran the Academy and gave me daily sitar lessons

**Pandit Shivnath Mishra** – known to all as ‘Guruji’, sitar maestro of Benares who also gave my sitar lessons and gave me sitar lessons

**Mittu Mishra** – tabla artist and teacher at the Academy

**pakad** – identifiable phrases of a particular raga

**paltai (aka alankar)** – ornamental phrase within the raga

**raga** – the fundamental structure of Indian Classical Music that students spend years training to fully understand and put into practice. There are several hundred ragas in North Indian Classical Music each with their own characteristic notes and melodies.

**sargam** – the singing of the basic notes in Hindi “Sa Re Ga Ma PhD ha Ni Sa” which is analogous to the European Solfa scale (“Do Re Me” etc)

**Sawan** (aka Shravan) the 5th month of the Hindi Calendar, began on 23rd July this year which was when Chantal and I arrived in Benares from Delhi. The pilgrimages to the Holy Ganges river intensity, especially on Mondays. We got off our 14 hour train journey in the midday heat at Mughal Serai to get a bus 10 km to Benares. Rickshaw touts were insisting that there were no buses but we marched passed them and got on bus that promptly got stuck in standstill traffic queuing to to get over the thin bridge over the Ganges. We were relieved to finally get to the Music Academy, to say the least.

**Sarangi** – North Indian bowed string instrument
Shanhai – North Indian wind instrument with a reed

swara – a note within music performed so that it really conveys something special

taan – a fast piece of improvisation with in the playing of the raga

tabla – fundamental North Indian percussion instrument

tala – Indian rhythm, spoken or played on table and as important to playing any North Indian instrument as raga theory

tappa - a singing style of North India

teental – 16 beat rhythm cycle

thumri a lighter singing style of North India

Ustad Vilayat Khan (1928 – 2004) One of India’s most well known sitar players

Links/resources

Organisations

Asian Music Circuit, London, UK
http://www.amc.org.uk/amc_home

Benares Music Academy, India,
http://www.benaresmusicacademy.com/page-1

Bhavan Centre, London, UK
http://www.bhavan.net/home.html

Music Basti, Delhi
http://www.musicbasti.org

Sampad, Birmingham, UK
http://www.sampa.org.uk/

University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies
http://www.soas.ac.uk/

Books

Dr Raghava R Menon: Indian Music The Magic of the Raga (Somaiya, 1998)


Joep Bor ‘The Raga Guide’ Wyastone Estate Limited
(another useful pointer 74 ragas covered can be heard partially at least on accompanying 4 CDs)

Gerry Farrell ‘Indian Music and the West’ (Clarendon Paperbacks, 1999)
(excellent discussion of the how Indian Music has been perceived in the West since the Eighteenth Century)

Online

Chandrakantha (Very useful ICM website for theory reference with a forum for ICM discussion)
http://chandrakantha.com/

108 sitars
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PQovelL1aAdQ

My own community music blog
http://chriscook50.wordpress.com/

Notes on my initial understanding of Raag Bageshree
http://chriscook50.wordpress.com/raga-bageshree/