

Indian sitar virtuoso Shujaat Hosain Khan plays sitar during a performance.
SOCIAL MEDIA

It was one of the most rewarding and beautiful periods of my musical life.

Some believe that classical music should remain faithful to its historical frameworks, while others argue that innovation and collaboration with different musical styles are essential to keeping it alive. Where do you stand in this debate? Have your international collaborations, including those with Western musicians, influenced your personal musical language, or do you prefer to explore the sitar's identity primarily within its own traditional context?
I have seen many musicians use computer-generated loops, keyboards and big drums in their performances. On rare occasions, I have performed with a very respected and interesting classical guitarist who accompanies me with some chords and provides a musical background. But it is not a duet or anything of that kind.
I want people to understand what our music is, whether they like it or not. It is their choice to enjoy it or not, but they should at least have the opportunity to experience the tradition in its authentic form. Diluting music to suit what we think other people might like is not something I do. Other musicians may choose to do that, but it is not my interest.

Today, young musicians can access an enormous wealth of music through the internet, historical recordings and online tutorials. Yet Indian classical music education has traditionally relied on a close teacher–student relationship and the direct transmission of practical experience. Can modern technology replace some aspects of this traditional relationship? What is the most important skill a sitar student cannot acquire simply by watching videos or studying written material?
This is a wonderful question. We have so many choices and so much access to information nowadays that people are spoiled by the abundance of material available to them. At the same time, I believe this can make people lazy.
I have particular beliefs in this regard, and I am sorry, but perhaps that is because I am old-fashioned. I live according to what I believe. One of my beliefs is that if you want to learn music or any other fine art, you need to sit with your teacher. Sitting in front of a screen does not work for me. This is only my personal opinion. I have nothing against people who choose a different approach. I am not on social media myself, specifically because of my personal beliefs.
For me, learning face to face is the most important thing in music. You need to be in touch with your teacher and understand their feelings. You need to understand why and when they make certain musical decisions, what is happening in their life, how they compose, and how they put music together. You learn about the teacher's personality and emotions, whether the teacher is a man or a woman. All these things are part of the learning process.
Watching videos and studying written material cannot replace that experience. In my opinion, technology will never, by itself, make you a musician. Thousands of people watch YouTube, but watching someone perform is not the same as learning music from a teacher.

Given your collaboration with Kayhan Kalhor and the interest Iranian audiences have shown in Indian classical music, there have been discussions in recent years about bringing you to Iran, including a possible performance at the Fajr International Music Festival. However, these plans have not materialised. Are you still interested in performing in Iran? What conditions would help make a concert or collaborative project with Iranian musicians possible?
The simple answer is yes. I would love to perform in Iran. Iran is one of the countries with the most beautiful, wonderful and profound cultures in the world. Your country has given so much to the world, and there is such wonderful emotional depth in the way Iranian people connect with music.
It is my loss that I have not been able to perform in your beautiful country. There have been discussions about my coming to Iran, but for various reasons, these plans have not materialised. Sometimes the obstacle is financial. I do not perform too many concerts, and I am trying to reduce my schedule further. I therefore need to receive a certain fee for my performances, and sometimes that amount is not available.
Another issue is visas. Musicians from our countries need specific visas that allow them to travel internationally without complications. International politics can also become an obstacle, and these circumstances sometimes prevent us from bringing our music and feelings to another country.
Nevertheless, I very much hope that one day I will have the opportunity to come to Iran, perform for all of you and enjoy the experience. It is one of my unfulfilled dreams.

The Grammy-nominated Ghazal Ensemble, the brainchild of Iranian kamancheh virtuoso Kayhan Kalhor (L) and Indian sitar master Shujaat Husain Khan, performs at Pace University's Michael Schimmel Center for the Arts in New York, the US, in 2015.
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When you look back on your professional journey and your experiences performing in different countries, what would you most like audiences to remember about your music? Is a great musician's legacy primarily about preserving and passing on the tradition inherited from their teachers, or does it also lie in opening new artistic pathways for future generations?
People often ask me how I would like to be remembered as a musician and what kind of legacy I want to leave behind. To be honest, I do not pay too much attention to these questions. My legacy will happen naturally through what I leave behind: my music, my personality and everything associated with my life.
I have always craved the love and affection of my listeners, and that is the greatest blessing. When I perform somewhere and see people smile and open their hearts to the music, I feel that I have received something truly special.
I would rather people remember me as a good human being than simply as a famous musician. I hope they will remember me as someone who enjoyed life, smiled a lot, laughed a lot and was genuinely happy to live a simple, relaxed life surrounded by friends. That is what I have always strived for.
I believe that my destiny will take care of my professional standing, popularity, position, money and luxuries. All these things will happen as they are meant to happen. What matters most to me is being regarded as a thorough professional in my work and a nice gentleman.
I have never asked anyone for work throughout my professional life. If there is one person who can stand up and say that I have asked them for work during the past 50 years, I would like to know about it. I believe in the grace of God, and the affection and love I have received from people have been far greater than anything I could have expected from my music alone.
I already feel that I have received everything I need. I am simply enjoying a beautiful life and enjoying the people I meet, including people like you who reach out to me. I am extremely grateful.
I am not very good at talking about myself. I am just a simple musician who wants to get up on stage and play. I hope people enjoy my music and laugh and cry with me through it. Explaining my feelings and emotions in words is difficult, but I have tried my best. Ultimately, I want to enjoy my music and my life, and I hope people will enjoy that journey with me.

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