

Taos concert features music of the ancients

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By Ariana Kramer |

As the music of India permeated the Western world and gained popularity in the 1960s, many Westerners, like The Beatles' George Harrison, began to study this intricate music.

According to Taoseño Phil Hollenbeck, who was first introduced to the study of classical Indian music by Ravi Shankar (Harrison's teacher) in the late 1960s, Shankar said that it would take about 25 years of dedicated study before a student would begin to understand the music. Hollenbeck, who has been perfecting his ability to play classical Indian music for four decades, said Shankar was right - it was at about the quarter-century mark that he began to grasp its musical depths.

"Ragas Performed on Sarode and Pakhawaj" is a concert that pairs two highly accomplished musicians well-versed in the Dhrupad style of music, an older form of classical Indian music that is not often performed today. Hollenbeck will be joined by David Trasoff in a concert where they will perform both traditional classical and light classical folk ragas Sunday (Nov. 27), 7 p.m., in the Arthur Bell Auditorium at the University of New Mexico's Harwood Museum of Art, 238 Ledoux St.

Hollenbeck explained that classical Indian music was developed over centuries by yogis (spiritual practitioners) who were exploring the vibrational qualities of sound. With origins dating back more than 3,000 years to the Vedas (ancient Hindu spiritual texts), the music is considered highly beneficial for spiritual development. From a basic understanding that all forms of the material world are in essence vibrations of sound, the texts speak of music as the divine creative language.

Structurally, classical Indian music is based upon ragas (melodies) and talas (rhythms). Trasoff describes on his website (www.davidtrasoff.com), that "a raga is formed from a series of ascending and descending notes selected from a given music scale. Within this skeleton, the musician brings out the melody that gives a particular raga its character and mood: Joy, sadness, romance, or a combination of these and other basic emotions. In a classical performance, the raga is presented in two sections. In the first part, called alap, the musician plays unaccompanied and presents the notes contained within the raga, proceeding until all the notes and their interrelationship are explored. This allows the character of the notes and the raga to be shown in a framework free of a fixed rhythmic structure."

The percussionist then enters into the mix to lay down a rhythmic structure. Trasoff further explained that the architecture of classical Indian music makes it possible for musicians to easily improvise with one another.

"On the one hand, the forms are very specific and there is a lot of learning that goes into them," Trasoff said. "But once we're within those forms we're free to improvise and create the music as we go. So, musicians can come together and create a program - it's not that we have to have a fixed set of pieces like you would for a Western recital. We basically create the music with each other and also with the audience and with the setting."

Their Taos concert at the Harwood marks the first time that Trasoff and Hollenbeck have performed together, though they first met as beginning students in the early 1970s.

"This is going to be an interesting program," Trasoff said, "and a little different than other programs of Indian music that people have seen because Phil and I both have training in an older form of the music than what's usually heard on stages today. We're going to certainly play some in that form (Dhrupad)."

The musicians will also play some lighter, folk pieces. In addition to playing together, Trasoff and Hollenbeck will illustrate the subtleties of their unique instruments in solo performances.

The sarode is a relatively new, stringed instrument in the classical Indian repertoire. In the 20th century, Ustad Allaudin Khan (father of the late Ustad Ali Akbar Khan) made changes to the Afghanistan rubab and its playing style and developed today's sarode which is played with a coconut plectrum or fingernails on a fretless, steel fingerboard. The sarode is deeper in tone than the popular sitar. Ali Akbar Khan, considered by many to be the best classical Indian musician of his time, was Trasoff's teacher. Ustad is a title of honor meaning "master." It is used in reference to Muslim musicians of Indian music. Pandit is a similar title used for Hindu musicians.

North Indian classical music used to be referred to as Hindustani music, but Hollenbeck said that because the music is played by Indians of all religious backgrounds, it is now more often referred to as North Indian classical music. The music is historically from North India, Pakistan, and to some degree Bangladesh, Nepal and Afghanistan. It is distinct from the music of Southern India.

The pakhawaj is a double-sided drum of North Indian music. It is said to have originated thousands of years prior to the tabla and is played in a vast number of styles of music across South Asia. The drum is hollowed out from a section of the trunk of a hardwood tree. Both ends are covered with three layers of skin. The resulting drum can be struck with the fingers and palms to produce more than 20 basic sounds. The pakhawaj is known for its warmth and expressiveness and is played in classical dances, Dhrupad music, temple or devotional music and solo performance.

North Indian classical music is taught as an oral tradition, passed from teacher to student through repetition. Hollenbeck explained that when he began his studies in Varanasi in 1969 under the tutelage of late Pandit Amarnath Mishra of Sankat Mochan Hanuman Temple, he worked with him one-on-one. Mishra played a piece of music, and Hollenbeck repeated it, as best as he could. Gradually the pieces became more and more complex. Hollenbeck described the process:

"You stick one-on-one with a teacher and you try to basically follow and imitate what they do," Hollenbeck said. "There's not a whole lot of explanation at first because at first you're just learning rudiments and that goes on for a few years."

Hollenbeck explained that there is a verbal language for teaching the rhythm called bols ("bol" means "word"). A teacher will use this language to recite a phrase of rhythmic pattern and the student must repeat it. Gradually the recital of the phrases increases in speed, but initially the teacher repeats it slowly to allow the student to hear the musical pattern completely - with all its subtleties. Hollenbeck explained that this language describes the weight and tone of the sounds, and that teachers will take one phrase and play it several different ways, emphasizing different beats or compositional parts to further illuminate the piece.

Hollenbeck admitted that the study of classical Indian music is difficult at the beginning, but he said it has given him a lifetime of satisfaction. "The study of Indian music gives you a framework to understand a lot of the traditional music of everywhere."

Trasoff has appeared in concert in arts centers, universities, conservatories and festivals in the United States, Europe, and Asia and has made numerous performing tours in India. He has also composed and performed music for film, theater and dance projects, including an award-winning Los Angeles production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream," the award-winning documentary "Broken Tail's Last Journey" and the acclaimed Indian art film "Leela." His recordings include a CD of North Indian classical music recorded with Ustad Zakir Hussain.

Hollenbeck is said to be the most senior Pakhawaj/Mridang artist in the Western world. He is a professional accompanist in both the Dhrupad and Odissi styles of pakhawaj, accompanying vocalists, instrumentalists, and dancers of many traditions. Hollenbeck also performs with South Asian folk and devotional artists and with Western jazz, world-fusion, and other traditional musicians and dancers.

Tickets to the concert are \$15, \$12 for Harwood Alliance members. For more information, call (575) 758-9826 ext. 120.

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