

PROGRAM NOTES | May 27, 2011

By Robert Kirzinger

The final Boston Modern Orchestra Project concert of the 2010-11 season, “Sangita: The Spirit of India,” features four works—three of them world premieres—deeply inspired by Indian classical music. (“Sangita” is a Sanskrit term essentially encompassing the three branches of music: vocal, instrumental, and dance.) The classical music traditions of India—to say nothing of the rich vernacular traditions—can be traced back thousands of years, praxis enriched or diluted by legend on the one hand, theory on the other. The two main branches are the North Indian, or Hindustani, tradition and the South Indian, or Karnatic. To attempt to limn these two millennia-old ideas in a few sentences would be hubris, but it is perhaps salient to point out a few details. Both are based on a complex pitch system of ragas, which can be thought of as a much more formalized version of Western music’s modal (or scale) system. Both also employ highly complex and systematized metrical and rhythmic organization, *tala*, with virtually no analog in the West. Both Hindustani and Karnatic traditions, within their formal constraints, are improvisatory, and notation is little used. There is also a high degree of correlation with ancient Indian aesthetic philosophies. Even with these basic similarities, however, North and South Indian musics differ from one another significantly. The specific raga pitch collections and contour patterns can be quite different, as can the *talas*, although there is also overlap; and there are differences in performance practice.

Composers in the West have long been fascinated by Indian music, as with any music with origins outside of Europe, although access to actual, versus hearsay, examples was scanty until the modern era. Jonathan Katz in the *New Grove Dictionary* article on India writes, “The roots of Western awareness of Indian music (never extensive before the late years of British rule) may be found in the late 18th century. Until then, apart from some rather random observations (mainly of dancers) by travellers, there was little serious interest among Europeans.” The “Orient” as a whole was scarcely more a real place to many than the legendary Prester John’s Ethiope. For example, the “Indies” of Jean-Philippe Rameau’s 1735 opera-ballet *Les Indes Gallantes* encompassed an island in the Indian Ocean, rightly enough, along with locales in Persia (!) and Peru (!!!!!). With greater communication and travel—and of course eager imperialism, especially that of the British Empire in 19th century—it became increasingly possible for serious-minded European composers to delve more deeply into various regional musical traditions. Often enough, artists’ reactions to this awe-inspiring bounty far outpaced the ethnocentric bigotry of the academic sociologist, and, ideally, helped to undermine those prejudices. Notwithstanding greater access and comprehension of these traditions, reconciliation of artists to the complexities of Indian music still ranges from superficial (a little exotic monody in a scale with an augmented second) to intense immersion, necessitating extended study and practice as well as development of relationships with master Indian classical musicians. The four composers on the present program are arrayed toward the latter end of the spectrum, each with his own personal cultural take on Indian musical ideals—so the listener should bear in mind that this music isn’t intended to *sound* like traditional Indian music.

Vineet Shende (b. 1973)
Naimittika Pralaya

Vineet Shende, an associate professor at Maine’s Bowdoin College, grew up speaking Marathi, Hindi, and English, living in Chicago but with frequent travels to Pune, about 150 kilometers from Mumbai in the Indian state of Maharashtra. He had the unusual experience of musical study with his mother, a singer trained in the Hindustani tradition, and also took up the guitar, playing both classical music and rock. He

went on to study at Grinnell College in Iowa, Butler University in Indiana, and Cornell University in New York. His teachers have included Steven Stucky, Roberto Sierra, Michael Schelle, and Jonathan Chennette. Along the way he won an ASCAP Morton Gould Young Composer Award, and has received several other grants and recognitions. In addition to his classical music pursuits, he maintains his rock solid music chops by playing guitar in a mostly '80s cover band.

Along with the guitar, Shende began playing sitar, working in India with the virtuoso Ustad Usman Khan. He has said that, for a time, his training in Western music led to his "seeing Indian music through Western classical glasses," but working artistically with elements of both traditions has led to clarification of each, while allowing him to pursue his personal expressive ends. His music has been performed by the Portland (ME) Symphony Orchestra, Aeolian Chamber Players, National Symphony Orchestra, and Cassatt String Quartet, among others. His big song cycle *Three Longfellow Poems* for soprano, double chorus, and orchestra, was commissioned by the Portland Symphony, and then premiered by the PSO in April 2008. Shende is a member of the Boston Modern Orchestra Project's Score Board.

Shende's new orchestral work *Naimittika Pralaya*, dedicated "to Gil Rose and the Boston Modern Orchestra Project," was written mostly in 2010 and completed in April 2011. It takes its title from the concept of large-scale cyclic time in Hindu cosmology, the alternation of existence and non-existence; the term itself refers to the latter, a chaotic stasis, the sleep of Brahma. Shende's tone poem is a musical reflection on the destruction of the existing world prior to, and the beginning of, this cosmic era: destruction followed by repose. Musically, the piece combines both Western and Indian elements. The orchestra is an entirely Western one, string orchestra with prepared piano (not a common pairing). For both piano and strings, there are standard techniques and extended, advanced playing styles, resulting in a very wide timbral palette including sounds made in the strings of the piano, string glissandi, wide vibrato, interesting pizzicato effects, and others. The composer also calls for a retuning (scordatura) for second violins, second violas, and first cellos, and some of the harmonies are meant to evoke the resonance of a sitar's open strings. In the pitch realm, we find both the equal-tempered scale (necessary for a typical piano) and the Just tuning used in Indian music, which closely matches the natural harmonic system. This results in slight microtonal variances between the scales. Shende uses (but not exclusively) pitch collections based on (or in complement to) the ragas *Megh Malhar*, *Dipaka*, and *Lalita*. The composer's comments on his piece are below.

Naimittika Pralaya is my musical response to passages from chapters three and four of the Vishnu Purana, texts that describe the dissolution and rebirth of the universe. The piece is divided into five sections, all of which correspond to a different aspect of this process. In the first, "Rudra":

"...The eternal Vishnu assumes the form of Rudra, the destroyer, and descends to become united with all of his creatures. He enters into the seven rays of the sun, drinks up all the waters of the world, and causes all moisture, whether in living bodies or the soil, to evaporate; thus drying up the whole earth."

This section begins with all strings pulsing independently across a large range while five heterophonically related solo lines play in counterpoint. As the world becomes desiccated, bass- and mid-range solo and accompaniment lines slowly evaporate, leaving only "dry," vibrato-less harmonics playing in the highest possible range.

In the second section, Vishnu assumes the form of the serpent Śeṣa, whose scorching breath "reduces the world to ashes.... A vast whirlpool of eddying flame spreads to the upper atmosphere and even to the realm of the gods, and wraps them too in ruin." Here, I use pitch material derived from Dipaka, the "Fire" raga set in fast, swirling, texturally juxtaposed patterns.

Vishnu then breathes forth heavy, multi-colored clouds, called "Samvartta" (section three) which: "...resembling vast elephants, overspread the sky. Some are black as the blue lotus; some are white as the water lily; some are a brilliant bronze; some azure, like the sapphire; some are of the fierceness of red arsenic, some are indigo and speckled orange, like the wing of the painted jay..."

To depict these advancing and receding clouds, I created pulsing harmonies whose fundamental pitches and rhythms are the frequency of their corresponding colors in the visual range, but mapped into the audio range. For their actual harmonic content, I relied on my mild form of synesthesia in which different types of chords make me “see” different colors.

In the fourth section, “Vrshti Gît” (“rain song”), I use an extended technique in which the melody (derived from the monsoon raga Megh Malhar) is fingered and bowed normally (on the “bridge-side” of the instrument) while the accompaniment is simultaneously plucked (on the “nut-side”) thereby creating two different pitches from the same string. The prepared piano, meanwhile, starts hesitatingly, and slowly gathers strength, ending the section in its imitation of a tabla peshkar. Finally, in the last part, Vāsudeva, in which the spirit of Brahma awakes and recreates the universe, the textures of the opening section reappear, but in reverse and now informed with raga Lalita, the dawn raga.

Evan Ziporyn (b. 1959)

Mumbai

Evan Ziporyn, clarinetist, conductor, and composer, is a longtime member of New York’s Bang on a Can collective and Kenan Sahin Distinguished Professor of Music at MIT. From childhood he had virtually no musical boundaries, an attitude that has led to his remarkably inclusive catalog of works. His composition teachers included Joseph Schwantner, Robert Moore, Martin Bresnick, and David Lewin, and he also studied piano with Christopher Oldfather and clarinet with Keith Wilson. While attending Yale University, he heard a recording of gamelan music, triggering an interest that has been central to his music ever since. After performing as part of the Oakland, California-based Gamelan Sekar Java (later becoming its director), he traveled to Bali for further study with Wayan Suweca and I Madé Lebah. He would return to Bali on a Fulbright Fellowship. Ziporyn earned his master’s and doctoral degrees from the University of California–Berkeley working with Gérard Grisey and Andrew Imbrie. In 1987 he performed as clarinetist on the first Bang on a Can Marathon, and in 1992 became a member of the BOAC All-stars, with whom he continues to work regularly as performer and composer.

After moving to Boston, Ziporyn founded Gamelan Galak Tika for the performance of traditional and contemporary gamelan music and hybrid projects combining gamelan with other kinds of performance groups, including Western orchestras. Two of his previous orchestra works, *Hard Drive* (2007) and *War Chant* (2004) were premiered by the Boston Modern Orchestra Project, which recorded several of his large ensemble works for the Cantaloupe label. His latest large-scale work is the opera *A House in Bali*, which brings together gamelan musicians and Balinese dancers and actors with the Bang on a Can All-stars and Western singers in a staged music drama with video, based on the Canadian composer Colin McPhee’s memoir of Bali. The opera was premiered in Bali and has been performed in Berkeley, Boston, and at the Brooklyn Academy of Music to great acclaim. Upcoming projects include a full concert of his music at the Rockport Chamber Music Festival in July, and an evening-length piece being developed in collaboration with the Kronos Quartet.

Ziporyn wrote his new tabla concerto *Mumbai* for the tabla master Sandeep Das, a member of the multicultural Silk Road Ensemble. The ensemble had earlier commissioned the composer to write a piece for tabla, the Chinese pipa, and string quartet, resulting in his *Sulvasutra* (2006). Das and Ziporyn both enjoyed the collaboration, and the piece was toured extensively and recorded. Approached about the possibility of arranging *Sulvasutra* for larger ensemble for Sandeep Das to perform, Ziporyn took the opportunity to propose a completely new concerto for tabla and orchestra, involving Gil Rose and BMOP via a grant from Meet the Composer Commissioning Music/USA.

Although there are notation practices in Indian music, performance is learned almost exclusively by ear and through practice. Ziporyn, who was already comfortable using description and demonstration with Balinese musicians and who had also studied Hindustani music, worked with Sandeep Das quite closely in preparing the tabla part for *Sulvasutra*, extending the composer’s own knowledge of the tabla’s

character and capabilities. *Mumbai*, the new concerto for tabla, percussion, and string orchestra, builds upon that experience and on the relationship between the two musicians.

In Indian music, the tabla's correlation to the melodic instrument (or voice) is not one of accompanist to soloist, and the tabla is certainly not meant to be a strict timekeeper. The *tala* pre-establish the metrical possibilities of a given piece. Working in tandem with rhythmic patterns is the tabla's wide range of dry to resonant sounds. Ziporyn says the soloist here has "complete freedom and no freedom"—the underlying rhythmic structure is intricate and inflexible, but the nuances and specifics of Das's solo part are up to the performer. He is backed up by a full percussion section, and both are set against a string orchestra, a harmonically resonant body.

Mumbai is a memorial to and meditation on the terrorist bombings in that city in November 2008, a devastating event in India's recent history. The piece is in three movements, each taking its name from Hindu concept of Vedic cleansing fires. The first, "Garhaptaya" ("Household Fire") relates to Mumbai's activity before the bombings, and is associated with Brahma, the creator. It begins with tuned bowls; an active percussion section establishes rhythmic patterns, while the strings play a shifting scrim of sustained harmonies. The tabla soloist enters after about three minutes. Strings move from sustained chords to add rhythmic interest via small, rapidly repeating mostly diatonic scale fragments in different states of phase.

A free cadenza for the soloist transitions to the second movement, "Ahavaniya" ("Sacrificial Fire"), linked to the destruction of the attacks themselves and associated with the god Shiva, the destroyer. Rhythmic canons are set up in percussion, and slow melodic patterns are established in the strings. The final movement, "Dakshina" ("Ceremonial Fire"), dwells on the aftermath of the attacks, associated with Vishnu, the preserver. Its aspect is primarily lyrical, highlighting the strings.

The bombings and their relatively minimal notice in the Western news media led Ziporyn to consider the wider implications of the "war on terror." From the worldwide outpouring of sympathy and compassion for the United States following September 11, 2001, many of the defensive actions of the US and other countries have largely served to alienate the world's populations from one another yet further. *Mumbai* is an artist's act of acknowledgement and solidarity.

Peter Child (b. 1953)

Shanti

Peter Child was born in England and began his composition studies at age twelve with the respected composer Bernard Barrell. He began his college studies at Keele University, but received an exchange scholarship to an American school eight time zones away—Reed College in Oregon. He has largely remained in the US ever since. After getting his bachelor's degree from Reed, he studied Karnatic music in Madras and went on to receive his PhD from Brandeis University. His other principal composition teachers include William Albright, Martin Boykan, Jacob Druckman, and Seymour Shifrin.

Although Child's study of Karnatic (South Indian) music strongly affected his direction as a composer, that influence was largely subsumed into his broader expressive language, evident only in certain details of technique. Child has written music for a variety of ensemble types, from computer music to orchestra and chorus, with a particular penchant for vocal works. These include the hour-long *Reckoning Time: A Song of Walt Whitman* on a libretto by Alan Brody; *Three Songs of Longfellow* for women's chorus and orchestra; *Louisa's War* for narrator, chorus, and orchestra, and *A Song of Liberty: A Blake Cantata*. He has worked closely with a number of ensembles, among them the Lydian String Quartet, the Albany Symphony (composer-in-residence, 2005-08), and the Lontano ensemble in England; he is currently composer-in-residence with the New England Philharmonic. He is culturally inquisitive, with an interest in literature and other cultures: among his works are a "Rhapsody on Kazakh Themes" for violin and orchestra and a chamber opera, *Embers*, based on a Samuel Beckett play. He has recently also been involved with studies in the relationship between music, language, and cognition. Lontano recently released their second CD of his music.

Peter Child approached this commission from the Jebediah Foundation with particular seriousness and commitment, hoping and intending that the result would mark a new phase in what has already been a significant life as a composer. This required not only the development of the specific new technical and aesthetic details outlined in his comments below, but also that he work his way through several other outstanding compositional commitments. *Shanti* became the first of his major works to engage in such an integrated fashion with his interest in Karnatic music. This is the first of his pieces to be performed by BMOP, which was enlisted in this project from the very start. *Shanti* is about thirty-seven minutes long.

The composer has written the following comments on his new work:

The titles in my new orchestral piece Shanti point to emotional meanings in music, and especially the indefinable, compelling quality in our experience of music that transcends and underlies its specific, narrower moods and characters. While in the west we tend to characterize that larger, transcendent emotion in terms of "awe" and "sublimity," in Indian aesthetics it is shanti: peace and tranquility.

This piece had a long gestation period. It stems from my studies of South Indian classical music (Karnatic music) on a Watson fellowship, 1975-76. During that year I studied singing with Sri B. Rajam Iyer, one of the great Karnatic singers of the last generation. I learned about the melakarta scale system during that time, but as the system is theoretical and surprisingly formal, while my own studies were practical and orally transmitted (learning by imitation and example in the traditional Indian one-on-one, teacher-disciple fashion), I took relatively little interest in the melakarta then. I returned to it recently, however, as part of my extensive preparation for the present piece.

*The melakarta, which took its present form in the 17th century, is what in modern, western terms might be described as a set of pitch permutations generated according to a set of formal rules. The system contains the 72 scales ("melas") that are the basis, or scalar substructure, of South Indian ragas. (A raga is much more than just a scale; it also implies specific melodic patterns, ornaments, intonation, mood, and character.) For the present piece, I adapted the melakarta system and used it to generate the pitch materials of my new work. For example (taking my cue from the formality of the system) I combined it with other more conventional systems of modern western pitch permutation (transposition, inversion, retrogression, and rotation), and in that way generated variants of the melas. Similarly, all of the chords ("triads," "seventh chords," "quartal harmonies," etc.), were generated from the new scales. In the end, I had an extensive library of scales and chords that were new and idiosyncratic to my emerging piece. It is this library that is the basis of the harmonic and melodic structure of *Shanti*, a pitch world that I found to be fresh, innovative, and creatively inspiring.*

*As the title implies, however, the scale system was not the only Indian influence that was adapted to this piece: It is also based upon the traditional Indian conception of aesthetics known as the navarasas. This conception originates in the ancient Natya Sastra, a treatise on music and dance attributed to Bharata (I dusted off my yellowing, awkwardly translated copy from Madras, 1976, to review the theory). The basic premise is that music and dance evoke eight essential aesthetic emotions, or "rasas": The ninth, shanti, was added by Abhinavagupta in the 11th century, and is now considered to be the most important and fundamental aesthetic emotion of all. Each of the movements of *Shanti* takes the name of one of the rasas, which also determines its expressive world: "Adhbhuta" (wonder, awe), "Karuna" (compassion), "Bhayanaka" (fear), "Hasya" (humor, laughter), "Veera" (valor, heroism), "Raudra" (rage), "Shringar" (love, eroticism), and "Shanti."*

I am extremely grateful to the Jebediah Foundation for the commission that made this work and premiere with BMOP possible.

John Foulds (1880-1939)

Three Mantras

The English composer John Foulds was the son of an orchestral bassoonist, and himself became an orchestral cellist, joining the Hallé Orchestra at age twenty. He was a prolific composer from childhood and made composition his profession in his late twenties. Having gained experience as a cellist in theater and pops orchestras, Foulds was most successful as a composer in that same realm, becoming one of England's most popular composers for the stage. Like Dvořák and Bernstein, Foulds found that his more popular works overshadowed his serious compositions.

Foulds, like his countrymen Delius and the esoteric Holst, was fundamentally an English Impressionist. He was to some degree an experimenter in the Ivesian vein—albeit not to the same degree, and mostly for the sake of sharpening the details of his sometimes-exotic tone pictures. His works include many of geographic/cultural inspiration, in particular the very popular *Keltic Suites* and *Lyra Celtica; Hellas*, and the “Impression of Time and Place No. 1,” *April-England*. He wrote *A World Requiem* to commemorate the world's sacrifices in World War I; this was performed annually during the mid-1920s with performing forces numbering in the many hundreds.

Foulds's interest in the music of India led to the ambitious opera project *Avatara* (which the composer defines as being related to a deity's manifestation on earth), begun in 1919, long before the composer had traveled to the region. He finally made the trip in 1935, and was made director European Music for All-India Radio in Delhi. He died of cholera in Calcutta in 1939.

Foulds's opera is now lost; the *Three Mantras*, Opus 61, completed in 1930, were written originally to act as preludes to the opera's three acts and may give some indication of the music's character. These are essentially tone poems in three different moods for full Ravelian—or Holstian—orchestra; a wordless women's chorus may also be used. The first Mantra is the Mantra of Action: Vision of Terrestrial Avatars, and as expected the music is quite active, joyful, and colorful. Certain percussion sounds and qualities of melody indicate the composer's preoccupation with Indian music, but ultimately that origin is obscured by this music of great character worthy of a Hollywood (but probably not a Bollywood) film. The gorgeous second movement is the Mantra of Bliss: Vision of the Celestial Avatars, marked “Beatifically.” Here, the cyclic stacking of pitches to form a largely steady-state harmonic world is perhaps a clearer tie to Indian practice. In the intense finale, Mantra of Will: Vision of the Cosmic Avatars (marked “Inexorable”), Foulds gets closest to his model, using only the seven pitches of a specific raga (C, D-flat, E, F-sharp, G, A-flat, B-double-flat) in mostly linear (i.e., raga-like) fashion, but with Western-type chord construction. (Without knowing the raga it is hard to detect whether Foulds is aware of using *celan*, as opposed to scale fragments.)

This was not Foulds's only Indian-oriented piece but is perhaps his purest. The *Three Mantras* languished after the composer's death, receiving what is believed to be the first performance in a recording session by the London Philharmonic Orchestra under Barry Wordsworth. The first concert performance took place in March 1997 in Helsinki, given by the Helsinki Philharmonic under Jurjen Hempel.