

April 27, 2007 ISSUE

A Primer on Current Asian American Music?

Asian American rockers find solidarity on Eugene Song's collection, *Compilasian*. APA breaks it down.

SEE MORE

Raising Hairs: Yundi Li at the LA Philharmonic

Armed with technical brilliance and cosmopolitan charm, Yundi Li classes up the LA Philharmonic.

SEE MORE



Dr. L. Subramaniam, India's most famous violinist who performed at UCLA's Fowler Museum.

The God of the Indian Violin

By [Jennifer Knapp](#)

Dr. L. Subramaniam takes the best of both worlds as he combines the violin with Southern Indian classical music. He stays true to form in his performance of Carnatic music while celebrating what Western contributions have to offer to such an ancient tradition.

On Friday, November 5th, The UCLA student association and SPICMACAY--the Society for the Promotion of Indian Classical Music And Culture Among Youth--organized a wonderful musical event in which Dr. Subramaniam performed various pieces of Carnatic, or Southern Indian classical music (which is not to be confused with Hindustani or Northern Indian music). Accompanied by Mahesh Krishnamurthy on the mridangam drum, Subramaniam touched the soul with his sound and rhythm.

The two took their music from minimalistic and simple to wild and untamed. Even those unfamiliar with Indian music can appreciate the skill Dr. Subramaniam showed in his concert, using unbelievably rapid strokes and taps across the violin strings. With his skill at combining eastern and western styles, there are times when one forgets that he or she is listening to Indian music. Other times one forgets he or she is listening to a violin. His skill with musical fusion comes out--as one closes his or her eyes, at times one believes they are listening to Vivaldi, other times, an Irish fiddle, then with just a slight change in technique, the pluck of a sitar. He combines the violin perfectly in Carnatic music with all of its complicated rules and structures without losing the unique tone and quality of the violin. By retaining the beauty of both unique musical expressions while creating a whole new sound with their combination, he earns the title "God of the Indian Violin."

[View Past Issues](#)

[Authors](#)

[Discuss APA](#)

[About the Magazine](#)

[Contact Asia Pacific Arts](#)

[Support Us](#)

[RSS Feeds](#)

[Podcasts](#)

Subscribe to the APA Newsletter

First Name:

Last Name:

Email:

Latest APA Performance

- [Asian Americans for Kenny G](#)

The audience reflected the music itself. Some wore saris, others wore Western clothing. Yet everyone was there to listen to Carnatic music. While sitting in the audience, I heard the excitement of some young musicians in front of me. For students of Indian classical music, a performance by one of the most famous Indian violinists is nothing less than a dream come true. The harsh reality was exposed, however, when one of the girls asked them what they could do with their studies. In other words, was there any work? The trio shyly shook their heads no, but this did not take away from their love of Carnatic music. Such passion is what attracted Dr. Subramaniam to not only study music but to experiment with it and broaden its range to appeal to those who otherwise would have no interest in Indian music.

Both musicians had wonderful stage presence as they expressed deep connection with the music. They played back and forth with one another through professionalism, artistry, and humor. Krishnamurthy's faint smile as he played the mridangam captured the audience's attention as he invited everyone to feel his music as he played. He appeared as if he wished to get up and dance himself were he not responsible for creating it. Such expression made both musicians a pleasure to watch on stage.

Mastering this type of music is no easy task and requires nothing less than a lifelong commitment of study and hard work. Carnatic music is an ancient and advanced system of music and is based on a rational division of the octave resembling older Western music based on the natural scale. However, unlike Western music--in which the absolute pitch of each note is specified--the Carnatic system is based on a relative positioning of the notes, relative to a reference pitch provided by a drone instrument, a Tambura, or an electronic Sruti box. Carnatic music is also based on melody. A specific set of notes in the ascending and descending scales defines a raaga and the music is set to a rhythmic pattern called taala. The raaga is a complex system. A raaga is specified not only by a set of notes, but also by precise gamakaas (shifting of the frequency of those notes) and specific chains of notes for that raaga and emphasis of certain notes. A typical concert piece consists of a lyric set in a specific raaga and taala, forming a skeleton. The musicians embellish this with detailed improvisations. Before each main piece, a portrait of the raaga is presented as an aalaapana. This is followed by a rendering of the lyric, which is interspersed with improvisations. These improvisations, however, must be made within the strict confines of the raaga and taala.

Dr. L. Subramaniam, violinist and composer, began studying this challenging and complicated music at the age of six. He has mastered the violin and taken the instrument to new heights, and has established it securely in the world of Indian music, making it no longer strictly a Western instrument but an Indian one as well. He credits much of his skill and inspiration to his father, Prof. L. Lakshminarayanan, whom he also calls his guru. Dr. Subramaniam has popularized Carnatic music in the west with the violin. His fusion brand of Indian music has closed the gap between East and Western music. He has received his Masters in Western music theory and has experimented with Western classical music, jazz,

and both Southern and Northern Indian music. He has composed music for various films, including *Salaam Bombay* and *Mississippi Masala* and was the featured soloist for Bernardo Bertolucci's *Little Buddha* and *Cotton Mary* of Merchant Ivory Productions. He has been called "the god of the Indian violin" as well as "the emperor of the violin." These are pretty high standards to live up to, yet after listening to his music, one can easily see how he has earned such praise.

When asked just how Western and Eastern music complement each other, Subramaniam answered that music is basically seven notes that differ only in their ornamentation. It is this ornamentation that reflects the culture. He went on to explain that the violin added much to Carnatic music, being such a complex instrument.

"The violin automatically broadens your range," he further explains as one could go fast, slow, smooth, or staggered. But it is more than just the flexibility of the violin that drew Subramaniam to this instrument. While crediting much of his interest to his father, he explains that the violin adds a unique sound to Indian music. As for studying Western music, he explains that this mostly helped him in composing music. It helped him break music down in a different way and see it in a different structure when orchestrating a musical piece. While his studies neither changed his love of Indian music nor his style, they helped him see his music in a different way, adding to the complexity of his music overall.

Remembering back to the trio of musicians, watching Dr. Subramaniam with admiration, I asked him what young people could do these days should they wish to pursue a career in music. In the face of budget cuts, especially in music programs, many young people faced a challenge in achieving their dreams in the music world. Dr. Subramaniam noted how interesting it is that many cultures take pride in their deep roots in art and music but made no effort to continue that tradition. For aspiring musicians, first, he suggests to work hard. Perfection does not come without hard work. Next, he suggests that each musician look into themselves to find out what they want. Do they want to perfect the art of music or do they want material success? Each goal requires a different focus.

For most of us, classical music is synonymous with stagnant. It is a musical form that is beyond our realm of appreciation and left only for the elite to genuinely appreciate. Not so with Dr. Subramaniam's music. He has not only adopted but embraced the Western violin, thus broadening the sound of Carnatic music. It exemplifies how cultural exchange does not always have to "taint" or "corrupt" but rather, it may help an art form or cultural expression evolve. Dr. Subramaniam is famous not for breaking the mold of Indian classical music. On the contrary, he remains very true to the art form. And as a result, he is most famous for what he puts in the mold and how he can make this century-old tradition still sound fresh and modern.

<http://www.spicmacay.com>

Date Posted: 11/19/2004

Asia Pacific Arts is a bi-weekly web magazine • © UCLA Asia Institute.