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OPPOSITES ATTRACT:

Hindustani Slide Master Debashish Bhattacharya

Melds Tradition with Innovation

BY ANASTASIA TSIOLCAS

Debashish Bhattacharya is a man comfortable with all kinds of seeming incongruities. How else to explain a musician who, though born in India's far eastern city of Kolkata, made his mark on the world playing *Hawaiian* slide guitar? And how else to understand an artist who passionately defends eons of tradition while at the same time urges technology ever forward?

Those polarities dissolve in conversations with this energetic and warm virtuoso. Through discussion, and by witnessing his superb performances, one begins to understand that those elements which may appear so superficially incompatible actually make a great deal of sense in the context of Bhattacharya's background. Of course, those marriages of opposites are also the result of his extraordinary enthusiasm, impassioned creativity and technical virtuosity.

Bhattacharya had an auspicious beginning as a child prodigy. Born in 1963 to parents who were accomplished vocalists and with musicians in the family for generations, he began playing Hawaiian steel guitar as a three-year-old ... and started out on a full-size model. His father had received the guitar as a present, but didn't play it himself.

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Curious, Bhattacharya began playing, and quickly developed proficiency; in fact, he made his broadcast debut on All India Radio at the ripe old age of 4.

This might seem odd: how would young Indian musicians of any era be likely to pick up a Hawaiian-style guitar? In fact, by the time young Debashish picked it up, the instrument had already been well-established in India for decades, and especially so in Bhattacharya's hometown of Kolkata, the city formerly known as Calcutta. The guitarist explains: "In 1929, a Hawaiian guitarist named Tau Moe traveled to India and stayed in Kolkata for seven years. While in India, he played for people like Winston Churchill, Albert Einstein, Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore."

In fact, Tau Moe initiated a mini-craze for Hawaiian-style guitar in Kolkata. Bhattacharya filled in the story: "Some youngsters in Kolkata started playing the instrument as well, performing contemporary European songs and even *Rabindra sangeet*, which is the revered and extremely popular Bengali tradition of setting Tagore's poetry to music," he said. "And from Kolkata, the slide guitar quickly traveled to other Indian cultural capitals, like Benares, Patna, Delhi, Bangalore, Chennai (Madras) and Mumbai (Bombay)." Over time, then, the steel guitar has been transformed into an instrument perfect for playing Indian classical music, much as another "foreign" instrument, the violin, had earlier.

Recently, Bhattacharya had the chance to repay Tau Moe for his legacy by creating a whole new genre within Indian classical music. "In 2004," Bhattacharya recalled, "Tau Moe invited me to perform in Hawaii, and friends there brought me to the University of Hawaii's residence program. While I was in Hawaii, I played a tribute to him, and we gave a concert at his residence. I'm really fortunate that I got a chance to meet this gentleman in my search. I left Hawaii that June, and on June 25th he passed away. So it's been 75 years since Tau Moe's arrival in Calcutta," Bhattacharya noted, "and in those 75 years the guitar has been adapted and adopted in our culture in many ways."

Debashish Bhattacharya and his Trinity of Guitars: a 24-string hollow-necked *chaturangui* (in front) a 14-string *gandharvi* behind and a small 4-string *anandi*, which means 'bliss' or 'joy.'

Bhattacharya's parents were his earliest teachers. Like generations of musicians before him, the guitarist learned the rudiments of Indian classical music through an oral tradition; he started out by singing rhythmic patterns and scale tones in a system called *sargam*, akin to the Western solfège system, which teaches the basic outline of a given *raga*. (Raga literally means "color" or "passion." While often compared to a Western scale, it isn't the same thing. Rather, a raga encompasses and dictates the notes themselves, the modal structure, the notes' relationship to each other, the ascending and descending pattern to be used, characteristic movements, and – not least importantly – the piece's emotional mood.)

From that foundation, Bhattacharya quickly learned traditional compositions for various ragas, and how to improvise on those compositions. By the time he was 6-years-old, he was learning Western notation and Western-style guitar playing, and also studied with a relative, Haradhan Roy Chowdhury, who played sitar and the bowed instrument called the *esraj*. By 9, Bhattacharya was keen to mimic the sitar and esraj on his beloved guitar, and he shortly began formal studies of the sitar with Pandit Gokul Nag. With this swirl of various instrumental and vocal colors surrounding him, it wasn't surprising when he began trying to evoke all these sounds on his Hawaiian guitar.

Debashish Bhattacharya first heard his guitar guru, Pandit Brij Bhushan Kabra, in 1983 when the older musician was giving a performance on All India Radio. (Both



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the terms *pandit* and *ustad* are honorifics meaning “teacher” or “master”; the former is given to artists from Hindu backgrounds, while the latter is assigned to Muslim musicians.) “I was attracted to the way he performed the *alap*,” Bhattacharya noted, speaking about the introductory section of a traditional raga structure, in which the soloist explores the notes of the raga in a slow and unmetered way. “He had such a tranquil and devotional style of playing,” Bhattacharya observed.

Brij Bhushan Kabra also provided Bhattacharya with a link to another great musical lineage: he in turn was playing under the guidance of a legendary *sarod* player. Through that connection, explains Bhattacharya, “Ustad Ali Akbar Khan is then my grand guru.”

Bhattacharya and Brij Bhushan Kabra first met in 1984 via an introduction made by Bhattacharya’s other guru, the renowned vocalist Pandit Ajoy Chakraborty. The younger guitarist had already received acclaim and was well on the path to innovation: by the time he was 21, he had received the President of India award and had already invented one new slide guitar called the *chaturangui* (more on that later). Despite those impressive accomplishments, Bhattacharya decided that the time had come to pursue intensive study with Brij Bhushan Kabra.

“Living with my *panditji* was almost like being in a hermitage,” Bhattacharya recalled, “especially after hav-

Bhattacharya plays a chaturangui, the first instrument in the “trinity” of guitars he had invented.



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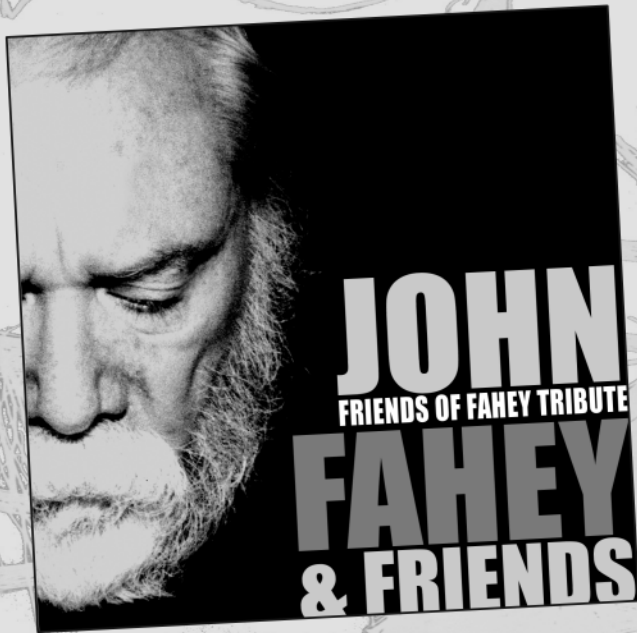
ing been born and brought up in the cultural warmth of Kolkata, where there was so much music and so many activities at home with my parents.”

The cultural and logistical transitions were hard as well, the guitarist admitted; moving across the country from the far eastern state of Bengal to India’s very western-most state of Gujarat was in many ways as though the young artist had emigrated to a different country. “Leaving my language, my

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food habits, friends, fans, gigs ... it was complete surrender to my guru," he mused. "It was leaving my first gurus, my parents and my very young siblings. And, for my family, I was also the bread-and-butter earner. So they sacrificed, too."

Given those realities, Bhattacharya was understandably apprehensive, but he blossomed under the structure of the traditional *guru-shishya parampara*, the "teacher-student lineage." That tradition entailed that the younger musician became a part of his guru's household and family. "My guru and *guruma* (my teacher's wife) took care of everything," the guitarist explains. "They never allowed me to bring money from home."

Bhattacharya's living arrangements meant that he was surrounded by music all the time. "Living with my guru, I practiced and studied somewhere between eight and 16 hours a day," he recalled. "Usually I would practice between 8 p.m. and 5 a.m., and in the afternoon as well. And study included listening to and learning new ragas, analyzing raga structure, talking with my guru, and composing myself."

Over time, various Indian instrumentalists had tinkered with the construction of the slide guitar to make it even more appropriate for the sounds and styles of the sub-continent, and Brij Bhushan Kabra was no exception. "He plays the Gibson C-400," said Bhattacharya. "His idea was to evoke the *rudra veena*, the very traditional hollow-necked fretted instrument with two gourd resonating chambers at either end. So instead of having six guitar strings, he put on three main strings and added *chikari* (sympathetic) strings in the back to play with the thumb. But I felt that these three strings weren't adequate ... the guitar loses the courage of the *mandra saptak*, or the lower register."

Bhattacharya has also been a guitar experimenter. "Since childhood, I thought that the 'voice' of the guitar should be Indian," he said. "So I experimented a lot over the years. I thought that our guitar should be hollow-necked, like our *sitar*, *sarod*, *sarangi* and *veena* instruments. I created a hollow-necked guitar in 1979; it was the first model of the instrument that I called the *chaturangui*. It has the tonality and performance quality of the guitar, plus those of the sitar, sarod, violin and rudra veena. That's where the name comes from ... *chatur* means 'four,' and *ang* means 'attributes.'"

After making more tweaks like adding more reverberating strings, Bhattacharya's final version of the *chaturangui* was completed in 1984. It was to be the first instrument in Bhattacharya's "trinity" of new guitars he has invented.

"In 1992," Bhattacharya continued, "came the second guitar, *gandharvi*, which is a fourteen-stringed guitar. I found that when a musician glides on two strings together, the notes have increased sustenance. It actually sounds like a

twelve-string guitar, but also has the tone of the traditional bowed *sarangi* instrument, which is tragically almost a lost instrument in our culture. It's such a sad situation. I feel very, very blessed when my *gandharvi* also brings out that *sarangi*-like cry. The name refers to the sound of *gandharva loka*, the world of celestial beauty, where earth and sky meet."

The last instrument in the trinity brought the guitarist back full circle to the steel guitar's Pacific roots. "In 1997, I was traveling in Hawaii," the guitarist recalled, "and I was playing with many Hawaiian guitarists and ukulele players. I was in the mood to experiment with a smaller, four-stringed-style instrument, and the result was the third guitar. It sounds like a cry of joy from a baby, and so I named it *anandi*, which means 'bliss' or 'joy,'" Bhattacharya concluded happily.

During a complete concert, Bhattacharya plays each of the guitars, in turn, to create an arc of moods and tonal textures. "Whenever I play the trinity of guitars," he shared, "I play first the *chaturangui* for 45 minutes or an hour-and-a-half, for the first half of the concert; it is ideal for North Indian instrumental styles, such as those of the *Maihar gharana* (school), which is the tradition of Ustad Allauddin Khan and his son, my grand guru, Ustad Ali Akbar Khan. Then, in the second half of my program, I play the *gandharvi* for another 45 minutes or an hour, and then I always add in the style of south Indian classical music. Finally, when it's

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time for a light classical song like a *thumri* or for a folk tune, I take anandi on my lap.”

Bhattacharya observed that in retrospect, he sees the creation of these three new guitars corresponding to three different phases of his life. “During the time the *chaturangui* evolved, I was studying singing in the Patiala and Gwalior styles as well as playing guitar,” he recalled, and so the connection which his innovative creation has to the traditional instruments which inspired it – and, in turn, their evocation of the gliding qualities and rich resonance of the human voice – were an essential link to his vocal studies of the time.

“The *gandharvi*,” Bhattacharya continued, “was designed and built during the time when I became attracted to Karnatic (South Indian classical) music. But at the same time, the *gandharvi* evokes the colors of flamenco guitar, and the tonality of Middle Eastern instruments like the *oud* and the *zither* called a *qanun*. And the *anandi* was developed when I became a father. Finally, I could realize the clean and innocent tone of a baby, who gives sheer joy, vibrating energy and happiness.”

These three instruments are on superb display on last year’s album for Riverboat Records, called *3: Calcutta Slide Guitar*. It features Bhattacharya in mesmerizing performances of Ragas *Basant Mukhari*, *Tilak Kamod*, and *Mishra Shivananjani*, with *tabla* accompaniment by his younger brother, *Subhasis Bhattacharya*. After the album’s critical success, the guitarist anticipates another busy season ahead; he will be touring the U.S. and Canada this fall, along with brother *Subhasis* and their sister, the vocalist *Sutapa*. He is also working on a follow-up album.

While Bhattacharya is a technical innovator, he is eager to preserve the traditional ways of teaching and learning which have sustained Indian classical music for centuries. He fears, however, that the next generation of musicians may not be able to sustain the *guru-shishya parampara*, with the physical proximity, emotional openness, and mental discipline that this centuries-old method of learning requires.

“My own students have a different perception of the teacher-student relationship altogether,” he observed wistfully. “They may not be willing to leave their parents or what they are doing to stay with me, without having expectations other than just being my disciple.

“Materialism and sponsorship come in the way of studying music today,” he asserts.

Aanandam

SO!
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Composed and Arranged by **Debashish Bhattacharya**
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Translating as “Joy,” “*Aanandam*” is based on “*Raga Mishra Shiva Ranjani*,” and features *Debashish* playing his original slide ukulele, the *anandi*. Capturing the peaceful, romantic mood of the source piece, *Debashish* makes the hollow necked instrument sing with both joy and sorrow over the six-beat rhythm of the *tabla*. “*Aanandam*” leads off *3: Calcutta Slide Guitar*, *Debashish*’s 2005 album featuring original compositions performed on his *Trinity of Guitars* (Riverboat #1036; available from World Music Network, 6 Abbeville Mews, 88 Clapham Park Rd., London SW4 78X, U.K.; Ph: +44-20-7498-5252; Web: <www.worldmusic.net>).

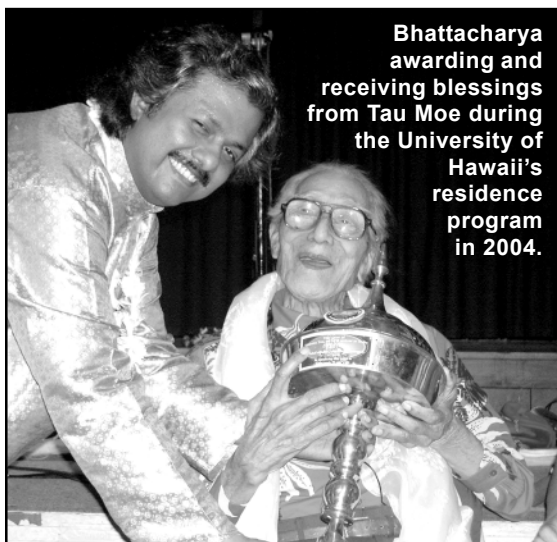
“Learning this art from a famous guru is generally viewed as a shortcut to fame and glory. But as both a disciple and a guru myself, I realize that both student and teacher have to have an unconditional, loving relationship towards each other. My gurus treated me like more than their sons, and they are more than fathers to me.”

It is this philosophy that is at the center of the guitarist’s own school in Kolkata, called *Bhattacharya’s School of Universal Music*; it’s a residential school for both Indian and foreign students. “*Raga* is not a material thing,” he mused. “It is a realization ... an expression of life. I teach the same way my own gurus did, and our school provides support to the students who can’t afford to buy a guitar or supplies. By supporting our students,” he said emphatically, “I believe we can support the existence of Indian classical music in our society. This is my religion.”

The balance between tradition and evolution is another tenet in *Bhattacharya*’s musical religion. “My entire life,” mused *Bhattacharya*, “has been spent in service of making

a bridge between the golden treasure of Indian *raga* tradition and the wonderful future of the global village.

“For me,” he continued, “tradition and evolution are equally important. Tradition does not live in the Pyramids, or in the Taj Mahal. Tradition cannot survive without evolving in a dynamic way that responds to the current times and to contemporary society. It leaves no room for complacency. And every day, the music gains more dimensions as it is performed in new places, in front of new audiences.”



Bhattacharya awarding and receiving blessings from Tau Moe during the University of Hawaii’s residence program in 2004.

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