



Ancient Music Unites Faiths and Cultures Through the Centuries

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By Anna De Cheke Qualls

All of us have had some sort of connection to music. And concerts have always been the crossroads where different people gather to hear sounds that speak to them. A kind of organic diversity soup, you will.

And yet, prejudice between groups has existed from time immemorial. Hindustani classical music, dating back to the 12th century, and its philosophy have always been pluralistic. Steeped in a tradition of religious, cultural and ethnic convergence, this music has been fundamentally diverse and open to influences from other cultures and practices. While observing its own traditions of the *raga* (melody), the *tala* (rhythm) and improvisation, Hindustani classical music has embraced, over the centuries, Bakhti, Sufi, Sikh and Buddhist compositions, as well as musical traditions outside

the Indian subcontinent.

Since its inception, Hindustani music has been taught and passed on through oral tradition and the *guru shishya parampara* – the one-on-one guru or teacher to student apprenticeship. So for the greater

community, its unifying effect has come from the vicarious contact with the music. And this is what Dr. Samia Mahbub Ahmad ('05 PhD, [Sociology \(https://socy.umd.edu/\)](https://socy.umd.edu/)) believes. As a classical vocal musician and teacher for more than 20 years, she has seen Hindustani classical music transcend boundaries. “Hindustani music, when pursued thoughtfully and methodically, can be a powerful unifying force. It does so with its inherent fluidity among the multiplicity of lingual, religious, cultural usages and practices where convergence emerges out of diversity,” says Mahbub Ahmad.

In fact, there is research that supports music as a means of reducing prejudice. It is in the confines of what communications experts call intergroup contact. One group, led by [Dr. Jake Harwood \(https://comm.arizona.edu/user/jake-harwood\)](https://comm.arizona.edu/user/jake-harwood) of Arizona State University, experimented with intergroup musical collaboration. Generally speaking it was found that “musical contact is a promising prejudice-reduction tool.” Moreover, “when people perform music together they are temporally bound in multiple ways. They are not just 'spending time' together, they are sharing time in a very specific, synchronized, and coordinated manner. Their physical movements are highly correlated, and they share an identity of purpose that is coordinated at the level of milliseconds. Such coordination requires high-level communication between the performers.” (2016, Harwood)

And Mahbub Ahmad knows what this means. Over the years, she has joined forces with various individuals and groups in the States and abroad. As a performer and as an educator, she has engaged with the [Maryland State Arts Council \(https://www.msac.org/\)](https://www.msac.org/), the Smithsonian Institute, the Strathmore, the Montpelier Arts Center, the [Gandhi Memorial Center \(http://www.gandhimemorialcenter.org/\)](http://www.gandhimemorialcenter.org/), American University's [Osher Lifelong Learning Center \(https://www.oli-dc.org/\)](https://www.oli-dc.org/), and beyond. For her work, she has won several awards and has performed for Archbishop Desmond Tutu and former President and First Lady Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter.

While living in South Africa, Mahbub Ahmad met acclaimed African musician Ismail 'Pops' Mohamed. He specialized in traditional African vocals and instruments. And while he never trained in Indian music, he was fascinated by it. “I remember Pops telling me ‘I have a collection of [African] compositions in which ragas may possibly be traceable.’ He wondered if I could help him identify the ragas hidden in his compositions,” recalls Mahbub Ahmad. “It was fascinating that as his compositions unfolded, so did the ragas: Bhoopali, Yaman, Bhairavi, Bhimpalāsri,” she adds. This exercise stretched over the following few months culminated in a joint musical project called Braids which married Hindustani classical music with traditional African instruments. Subsequently, Braids was accepted by Grammy winning producer, Jim Wilson, and published via his Tulku compilation series. These collaborative experiences galvanized Mahbub Ahmad's belief in the inseparability of diversity, and unity fundamental to Hindustani music, and catapulted her into other collaborative ventures with the visual arts, dance, and the spoken word.

While such exposure and partnerships are part of a musician's life, Mahbub Ahmad is just as content

retreating to her studio each day. It is a room filled with floor cushions, her tanpura, harmonium, tabla, books, and a large image of the Rebel Poet of Bengal Kazi Nazrul Islam, her native Bangladesh's national poet. He was an activist, a Muslim, a singer and songwriter – qualities Mahbub Ahmad quietly embodies.

Twice a day, she removes her shoes in this 'sanctuary,' sits down on her favorite seat, and practices. She turns on the drone, and starts out with the lower octaves. Then Mahbub Ahmad chooses a raga. Her voice is beautiful and moving. "The raga then takes on a life of its own as I expand on it, while moving methodically through the different rubrics. Continuous melodic and notational improvisation is typical within the raga structure, while moving from low to high octave," she explains. "Hindustani classical music renders emotion [*rasa*] through the subtlety of the music. The music may express a range of moods be they romantic, gentle, uplifting, or solemn. The artist becomes both creator and creation through this music," adds [Srimati Karuna](http://www.gandhimemorialcenter.org/leadership/) (<http://www.gandhimemorialcenter.org/>), Director of the [Gandhi Memorial Center](http://www.gandhimemorialcenter.org/) (<http://www.gandhimemorialcenter.org/>), a place with which Mahbub Ahmad has had an ongoing relationship.

And when this music is live, performers include a vocalist or principal instrumentalist, a tabla artist, a tanpura player, and in the case of a vocal performer, and when available, a harmonium, eshraj or sarengi. Within the traditional polyphonic structure of the raga and tala, there is tremendous extemporization depending on tempo, style, inspiration and the performer's own imagination. The sounds stir the listeners through enduring and ancient vibrations. Some people observe this experience with eyes closed, others quietly tap to follow the music, while the rest watch. "If someone comes from the audience and says they felt transported, then that's it. That's their gift, that's my gift, and maybe that's common ground," says Mahbub Ahmad.

In this music, the aesthetic is the first layer because maintaining beauty is important. And for the music to be genuine and true to its ecumenical roots, the performer has to be more than a performer. They have to embrace its fundamental values of a peaceful coexistence. "This music speaks of the global aspects of life, of humanity in totality and of the *vasudaiva kutumbakam* - the global family, and divine spirit that pervades all of us," remarks [Padmashree Vidushi Sumitra Guha](http://www.sumitraguha.in/default.html) (<http://www.sumitraguha.in/default.html>), one of India's premier vocalists and Mahbub Ahmad's teacher.

But equally important is that this music be a vehicle of finding a meaningful identity. "We are not divorced from our surroundings, the politics and the socio-cultural environment. The reality is that I am an immigrant, and a Bangaldeshi-Muslim-American. It is my hope that through this music, I can guide others to a place of oneness and understanding," says Mahbub Ahmad.

And in her experience, there is no apparent conflict between the philosophy of Hindustani classical music and Mahbub Ahmad's Muslim faith, nor her choice to pursue music over academe. The three

inform each other and all are forms of inspiration. She prays five times a day, has performed the Hajj and has devoted her life to universal understanding through music. “They are just different manifestations of the same source, and both live together in my life,” says Mahbub Ahmad.

More information about Dr. Samia Mahbub Ahmad can be found [here](http://www.samiaclassicalmusic.com/index.cfm) (<http://www.samiaclassicalmusic.com/index.cfm>).

(Photo credit: C & C Photography)

Harwood, J., Qadar, F. and Chen, C.-Y. (2016), *Harmonious Contact: Stories About Intergroup Musical Collaboration Improve Intergroup Attitudes*. *J Commun*, 66, 937–959. doi:10.1111/jcom.12261