

Guitar can be a magic medium

Calcutta, in more agreeable times, hosted global superstars and their work with abandon and discerning deliverance. From Marlon Brando to Loise Malle, from Marcel Marceau to Pete Seeger, from Pele to Maradona, from Che Guevara to Fidel Castro, this city has been the unlikely host of some of the planet's biggest names in arts, politics and sports. The city's legendary enthusiasm, more than made up for its lack of cosmopolitan niceties, says SAYANDEB CHOWDHURY

But in last two decades, with the gradual decline in its political, cultural and public life, the city's urban atavism is showing. No wonder the little bit of activity in the sphere of high Western Culture that India sees, only an atomic part of it reaches Calcutta. So when the Calcutta (yes, not Kolkata) International Guitar Festival was launched on Wednesday with some of the most gifted Classical Guitarists of the world scheduled to make personal appearances, it was immediately hailed and rightly so, as an event of global importance which has our own city as the host.

But the icing on the cake was the presence of Nikita Koshkin. Those who have heard his Usher Waltz, based on the iconic Edgar Allan Poe story the Fall of the House of Usher, know that Koshkin is not just another maestro of classical guitar but the definitive one at that and one who has single handedly changed the music scenario not only in the country of his birth Russia but has been a very influential composer-performer for a whole generation of musicians and guitarists across the world.

"I started composing almost the moment I finished learning my music", the portly and endearing Koshkin said, sitting relaxed on the stylish fourth floor foyer of the ICCR Rabindranath Tagore International Centre on Harrington Street. Scholars have said that composer-performers who write primarily for their own instruments plow furrows narrow but deep. And in this case Koshkin has been compared with both Paganini, who pushed the technical limits of violin as well as Chopin, who did the same for piano. Is Koshkin keen to expand the vocabulary of effects on the guitar? "I think there is a difference between me and say someone like Paganini. There was violin before Paganini and after. But

Pic: Sambit Saha



in my culture there was almost nothing as far as classical guitar was concerned. When I began playing, in the '70s, I had to effectively start from a scratch. So whatever I did, good or bad, it was considered a milestone. Had classical guitar had a tradition in Russia, my work could have been put into a continuum. But unfortunately it wasn't to be."

But it is not that he did not have influences. A big fan of both Stravinsky and Soshtakovich, he incorporated their work into his own. "Stravinsky and Soshtakovich yes and definitely Prokofiev and of course the great Tchaikovsky? They were seminal influences on anybody doing any work in serious music in my generation. They were everywhere. I learnt a lot from them" But then did he not also have a deep affinity for rock? "Of course", he said, laughing a hearty laugh. "You know rock music was looked down in the Soviet Union. It was considered a meaningless miasma. So for a long time it was difficult to get access to rock music. But finally when we did, we could hear the best of them: Beatles, Rolling Stone, Led Zappelin, Pink Floyd — the canon. I do

not listen to rock music anymore but if I do, I go back to the masters. Those of whom I started with. It's difficult to better them, isn't it?" But did you play ever? A laugh again. A big and really hearty one that pushed his eyes further into the well created by his big jaw and chubby cheeks. "You won't believe but I have a photo that shows me playing the drums at some fest with an earnest badge of Komsomol (Soviet youth organization) stuck right in the middle of my right chest. I laugh at the photo all the time. But yes, rock must have had some rhythmic influence on me and my music"

But then the Soviet Union was known for its earnestness, even if it came at the cost of its own citizens. "Well, they were different times and often difficult times but now we look at them from the prism of nostalgia. But one thing must be said. Classical music and other forms of high culture got immense support from the government. I have to hand it to them. See, mass culture needs no support. Mass culture has this hypnotic effect. But classical music, art, dance is serious and hence not always popular. So it needs support, which the government

gave. But after 1990, after another so called revolution, it changed radically. Classical music is now completely at the mercy of trends and appeal." Did classical guitar have the same fate? Is it now dependent on patrons? Koshkin sat straight and said thoughtfully, "Ironically this is just the opposite. Since classical guitar did not have much of presence or dedicated followers, it did not come under the gaze of the government. We never got written about. In the Soviet Union, unless you are on paper, you are nowhere. So for us the restrictions imposed on public life in general became overwhelming with no support from the government. We could not go to competitions, festivals or tours. We had no access to good strings or books etc. There was little scope to grow. In Russia now it's much better for us and perhaps as a sign of times, some of the top classical guitarists in the world, who have been winning competitions across the globe, are from Russia. I am so proud my wife is such an award winning guitarist and I can completely rely on her with my compositions."

From time to time Koshkin chatted

with the young French guitarist Gabriel Bianco, who joined the discussion and was sitting next to him. Gabriel had come down from the stage, having played, along with thirteen other international players, four compositions by city musician Debojyoti Mishra to great applause. Gabriel, said Koshkin, was one of his most favourite young players and who he wants to listen to if he gets a chance. In fact Koshkin's music, which includes many guitar ensembles and guitar works for both instruments and voice, has been performed by John Williams, the Assad Duo, the Zagreb and the Amsterdam Guitar Trios.

Koshkin who studied music at Gnesin Institute (Russian Academy of Music) as well as at the Moscow College of Music is also an esteemed teacher and repeatedly talked about how listening to younger guitarists gives him great pleasure and how he is looking forward, among other things, to listen to guitarists from this part of the world at the competition. Talking of local musicians, how does it feel to be in Calcutta and have the competition named after him? "Of course great. I never imagined that in India of all places they will name a guitar tournament after me. India has so many great musicians. In fact it created some buzz in Russia that an Indian competition was named after me. They were very impressed. Personally I think the performers of Eastern forms of music and culture are very very talented. And I am keen to see how the two forms, the two philosophies meet in the common genre of classical guitar. There can be magic. It just feels so great to be part of it all."

Compared to most from his country he speaks fluent English and has a happy air about his squat shape and wavy, salted hair. "You know I was in the US for four months at a stretch and spoke English all the time. Back in Russia, a local porter delivered my baggage at home in the middle of night. I woke up and in half sleep thanked him profusely in English. His eyes popped out. My wife jumped and whispered, 'you are in Russia... It was funny'."

But had he not been a performer what would he be? Someone threw the question at him. The maestro turned and smiled, "a composer, a serious composer", he said and vanished into the elevator. But did he leave behind strains from one of his famous guitar fugues? We thought as much.

interview

newsmakers



Sheila's rewarding jawani

Who can be the top newsmaker in India? That beautiful and eternal run-machine called Sachin Tendulkar? The big fat IPL tamasha-makers? The inglorious wealth-gatherers of Commonwealth Games? Or Nityananda, the Casanova Guru of South India? No. Yahoo! India has conferred the glory on Katrina Kaif, based on the number of consumer searches and top stories-hot topics count, Tendulkar and IPL merely follow her in the list. This star of Bollywood is surely making full use of her jawani-backed lull, even while not gyrating to *Sheila Ki Jawani* and similar numbers in films, in this nation obsessed with superficial splendour. Her personal life has contributed substantially in this popularity, for what is her beautiful youth without a man! Salman Khan gone, Ranbir Kapoor in? Are their bugs inside that stunning mid-riff? Why was she in the hospital then? She also ensured 'critical acclaim' by going slightly deglam in Prakash Jha's *Rajniganti*. Even if Tendulkar scores a thousand centuries, even if the last morsel of public money vanishes, even if Nityananda turns out to be as intrepid as Chengiz Khan, as long as jawani is with Katrina, she rules!

The rebel tamed

This week's regional topper was definitely Kanchan, the Maoist leader arrested by the suave sounding STF or Special Task Force. The way this event and its follow-ups were documented in the media makes for a really interesting story. When the question of Maoist movement and its evil leaders comes, the arms of the Indian state (police and paramilitary)—otherwise ridiculed and severely criticized—assume the role of tragic heroes doing their best. Suddenly the quotes from top cops start sounding intelligent, prescient and brave.



Their high-tech preparation to wage a war against the Maoists and catching their leaders dead or alive is narrated with the breath-taking qualities of a thriller. With great trepidation the connection of the Maoists with Isak Muivah and Osama Bin Laden is discussed, allowing the civil society to indulge in some much-needed fear. Then comes a rejoinder of how Kanchan is ideologically a direct descendant of Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot—and in practice like a petty extortionist who milks money from India's opulent tribal lands! Or may be a narcotic gang-lord. All this is subtly intertwined with the portrayal of the man hidden within Kanchan (Maoists are not human beings, surely). His mother is photographed, gloomy and disappointed, reading about his son's misdeeds. We are told that Kanchan's real name is Sudip Chongdar, he lived in a village of Garbeta, was a poet attending poetry festivals before he was moonstruck into becoming a Maoist. His 'normal' life of a wealthy peasant and small businessman in a deprived area is pitted against the abnormal life of a revolutionary fanatic. And the ultimate spice comes in the form of sexual licentiousness of Kanchan, he is said to have lived in with a hard-to-locate non-adult girl called Purnima. One rebel less, or is it?

'Cook'ing up a balanced meal

The British media is often gullible in their search for a sporting icon. Be it Michael Owen in football, Tim Henman in tennis, Graeme Hick or Alex Tudor in cricket, media hype and pressure was always a factor that made them deceive after flattering. We hope that doesn't happen to the talented young cricketer Alistair Cook, who made it to the headlines due to his exploits against arch-rival Australia in the ongoing Ashes conflict. Thankfully, his rise is steady and has soaked in jolts, not a meteoric or fairytale story.



Almost imperceptibly, inspite of being dropped from the England one-day side, he has scored fifteen test centuries. This number is more at his age, 25, than anyone except Sachin Tendulkar. And he has Don Bradman for company just below him. In the first two tests of Ashes, he has made 438 runs in nearly 1400 minutes of batting, a stupendous display of technique and patience. This includes a match-saving double century in Brisbane and a match-winning century in Adelaide. This classic test opener making big news reinforces our belief in pure principles of cricket, in an era of berserk speed and uncouth innovations in the game. Hope he doesn't meander into too much of a WAG-wielding, glitzy way. Anyway, a mediocre fielder and a slow scorer, he would never make it to the IPL. Good for him, can we say?

Bruni brew

India is a, well, lucky nation in receiving two of the hottest first ladies in the world successively. If Michelle Obama dances her way to Indian headlines, can Carla Bruni be far behind? Her rock-chick past, studded with charged amorous episodes, already ensured her distinctiveness as a First Lady. From then on, nude photos et al has kept her thick and going in the news world. Her free-floating, typically Continental radical ways is credited with making her conservative rightist husband, Nicolas Sarkozy, incidentally the French President, lean a little towards left and pro-third world stand. She has followed the path of some rich, liberated Western women in espousing the politics of gender and doing social work. Authorities in Iran called her a 'prostitute' because she criticised the judiciary in Iran for proclaiming that an adulterous woman would be stoned to death, followed by Al Qaida death threats, making her one delightful liberal brew! And after she lost her brother to HIV-AIDS in 2006, she has become very active in creating awareness about the disease and its victims. That remained



the focus of her India visit. She is the ambassador of Geneva-based Global Fund of AIDS. The media followed her in Delhi hospitals and forums in Mumbai. People gushed, assured that her beauty is not merely skin-deep. Hope she proves the same by influencing the French authorities to stop atrocities against ethnic minorities there. May charity begin at home.

Contributed by Agnibho Gangopadhyay

India today



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