

The *Santoor* Maestro

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Bach, Beethoven, Mozart and Verdi are considered exclusive legacies of the West.

The general perception remains that only Western musicians can do justice to their music. It would seem that the traditional eastern music, using instruments like the *Sitar* and the *Santoor*, *Sarangi* or *Tabla* can only be properly played by the musicians of the east. There seems to be a modicum of snobbery existing among musicians on either sides of the equator, each group thinking that only they can play *par excellence* their own music. It would therefore be a novelty to come across a European playing the *Santoor* to perfection as it would be unusual for an easterner playing Mozart's flute concerto with complete finesse.

The *Santoor* is a hundred stringed traditional Kashmiri instrument. It is considered to be a typically sub-continental instrument and there are not many people in the world who can play the *Santoor*. However unfamiliar it may be for a European to play the *Santoor*, listening to Dr Bee Seavers strumming notes on his *Santoor*, is nevertheless an enlivening experience.

Unlike most musicians or perhaps as the perception goes, Dr Bee Seavers is a PH.D in ethnomusicology; a study of different cultures and their languages, with special emphasis on the music of the sub-continent. He plays many instruments including the guitar, piano, bass cello and lots of other ethnic instruments. A multi artist, he is a composer, writer and filmmaker. Initially Dr Seavers was a Jazz musician, but a visit to India changed his entire outlook towards music. At a concert he heard the *Santoor* maestro; Shiv Kumar Sharma and new instantly that he had discovered his element —

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the *Santoor*. For a period of time he stayed under the expert tutelage of his guru; Shiv Kumar Sharma, learning the technique and the music of the *Santoor* and he has never looked back since.

That was twelve years ago. Today Dr Bee Seavers is a virtuoso in his own right: a German playing with total command over an instrument that is not really considered to be the forte of Europeans. He represents the rare combination of classical sub-continental music with modern western influences. His

technique on the *Santoor* and his interpretation of classical sub-continental music is quite unique for a European musician.

Talking about his experiences as a *Santoor* player, Dr Seavers remarks, "Indians and Pakistanis appreciate any European who goes to great lengths to learn their cultural music yet there is a certain lack of acceptance on their part if they feel that the foreigner is playing their traditional instrument better than their own people." Cultural snobbery, according to Dr



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Seavers is responsible for the lack of integration and interaction between various cultures. "Europeans think that their culture is by far the most superior and has a lot to give. What they do not realise is that the East is also rich in culture and tradition and has a lot to give too." He laments that the sub-continent is becoming estranged from its traditions and is looking to more and more western influences and therefore it is losing touch with its rich heritage. Talking about the popularity of Eastern music in the West, Dr Seavers remarks; "the modern music of the West; pop, rock or reggae is simple to understand, but is not profound whereas eastern music is deep and meaningful but is difficult to comprehend. Therefore in Europe there is not an interest in eastern music among the younger generation."

When asked why the *Santoor* and why not some other sub-continental instrument Dr Seavers gave a rather philosophical view of his love and fascination with the *Santoor*. The *Santoor*, for Dr Seavers represents purity. The beautiful virginal sound of the instrument fascinates him and touches his musical soul. And of course it is a challenge for him because very few people have mastered the *Santoor*. Dr Seavers views the *Santoor* differently from most people. Most people consider the *Santoor* a very restrictive instrument because of its sensitivity to weather conditions. Dr Seavers does not seem to mind the tuning it requires before every new raag. "Santoor is like friendship, you need to make a few changes here and there in order to make it more interesting", he says. Traditionally *Santoor* has a hundred strings, though Dr Seavers likes to play with more strings than a hundred for more strings give the instrument more versatility.

Dr Seavers improvises a lot and also composes his own music for the *Santoor*. The technique of the *Santoor* was not very difficult for him to learn because of his Jazz background. "However, learning the raagas, finding the right constellation between notes was a

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little difficult to grasp", he reminisces.

Even in raagas, Dr Seavers has adopted a style of his own. He refuses to stick to the traditional timings of the raagas. "It is so boring to wait till midnight to play a midnight raaga or to wait till the morning to play a morning raaga." But he does stick to the typical octaves and the notes of the raagas. Dr Seavers has already made four records of his own compositions on the *Santoor* and plans to make many more.

Music for Dr Seavers is more mystical and less spiritual. "When people cannot comprehend the mysticism of music, they term it as spiritualistic." He connects mathematics and music together as both require a precise methodology and sequence. Again music (any kind), for Dr Seavers is not

exclusively the province of a certain culture or a country but it is universal and there for everyone to gain from.

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The concert was a mixture of the classical and the traditional. Starting with the mesmerising raaga, *Aheer Bherween* and then going on to a Dogri folk tune, which Dr Seavers dedicated to the people of Kashmir. Next was a demonstration of Dr Seaver's skill and mastery over his instrument. He played one of the most difficult of raagas, *Kirwani*, a Carnatic raaga. Next came raag *Chandra Konse*, a midnight raaga connected to the family of *Maalkonse*, the raag which brings rainfall. Dr Seavers started off with a long *alaap* and then playing with eleven beats went on to sixteen beats. The last raaga was a folk tune which Dr Seavers dedicated to his mentor, Shiv Kumar Sharma.

It was indeed heartening to note that a foreigner has gone through enough trouble to learn the art of the sub-continent and takes pride in the culture and the music of the sub-continent. In the West the people are leaning more and more towards eastern and sub-continental culture, it is disappointing to note that we as a people are straying from our heritage and our culture. It would be a gladdening experience for Pakistanis who take pride in their heritage to see everyone getting the same joy out of our music.