

[Two Bambhoodhas](#)

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MUSIC

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Flautists Pandit Raghunath Seth and Steve Gorn set the stage for the transmission of tradition

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Over the last few years, the World Music Institute has presented many concerts of Indian classical music in New York. Their most recent offering, "Masters of Indian Music" at the Washington Square Church on March 25, 2000, presented Indian artist, Pandit Raghunath Seth of Mumbai, and American Steve Gorn of New York performing Hindustani music side by side to a sell-out crowd. The concert served to celebrate the artists' recently released CDs of classical flute music--Seth on the India Archive Music label and Gorn's Luminous Ragas on his own, Bamboo Ras Productions. Their synergy is typical of a little-known trend within Indian music.

It is by no means a new phenomenon for Western musicians to study Indian music. Once artists such as Pt. Ravi Shankar and Ustad Ali Akbar Khan brought Hindustani music to Western audiences in the 60s and 70s, something of a fad was begun among American and European musicians, particularly in rock and jazz genres already oriented toward improvisation.

Guitarists took up the sitar, drummers purchased tablas, and the beat went on. Shankar found himself teaching Beatle George Harrison and performing with classical violinist Yehudi Menuhin at the United Nations, while Khan opened a school of Indian music in the San Francisco Bay Area that is still going strong today. Gradually the fad has matured into a genuine interest. A number of Indian artists have spent time in residence in the music departments of Western universities, and several major institutions--the Rotterdam Conservatory in Holland, the Birmingham Conservatory, UK, and Maharishi University of Management in the US--offer full-time degree programs in Indian music. From all this activity, perhaps a dozen Western artists have reached a professional performance level in Hindustani music: Ken Zuckerman and Steve James on sarod, the fine sitarist Allyn Minor, vocalists Warren Senders and Stanley Scott, cellist Nancy Lesh and percussionists Peter Fagiola and Ray Spiegel. What is interesting, however, is the number of Americans who have mastered the bansuri, the bamboo flute of Hindustani classical music. These include a student of Pt. Hariprasad Chaurasia, John Wubbenhorst [HT January, 2000]; David Philipson, who studies with Pandit Nityanand of Haldipur; Leon Leiffer, a disciple of Pandit Devendra Murdeshwar and Steve Gorn, who is currently working with Seth.

Seth occupies a unique position in modern Hindustani music. He is best known as a classical performer, but there is much more to his musical life. He is equally well-known as a composer of light music, a diligent musicologist, historian and a craftsman who has helped to improve the construction of his instrument. He has produced major film documentaries about music. With all this, it is his status as a major exponent of the bansuri that secures his reputation; he has received many

awards for his work and has toured and recorded widely.

Seth was born in Gwalior, and received his early musical training in Lucknow. Having settled upon the bansuri as his instrument of choice, he traveled to Mumbai where he came under the influence of Pannalal Ghosh, the only significant exponent of this instrument in all of India at that time. Pannalal's great achievement was to found or revive a tradition of classical performance on flute, after a period of centuries when it was regarded as a purely folk instrument. But this still did not constitute a rigid school, or gharana, as exists with sitar, sarod or vocal music. As a result, flute performers have been freer to build a personal style. In Seth's case, he built upon what he had learned from Pannalal, adding various elements, both melodic and rhythmic, from existing vocal and instrumental traditions until he had achieved a fine blend of them both, forging a style through individual effort and imagination, something very few Indian artists attempt. In order to do this, he has had to overcome certain technical limitations with the instrument itself, adding a bamboo key to facilitate the correct rendition of certain ragas by allowing for a perfectly smooth glissando between the fourth note (ma), and the fifth note (pa), which is otherwise difficult to accomplish on the bansuri.

The relative freshness and openness of the bansuri tradition has also contributed to the popularity of the instrument among Western musicians. The older styles typically demand a strenuous and extended guru-shishya relationship that can be very difficult for a Westerner, unless he or she is willing to relocate to India for lengthy periods of time. Some bansuri students have done this, but others have been able to develop

their skills in different ways. Wubbenhorst continues his studies with Chaurasia through the Rotterdam Conservatory. Gorn has taken yet another approach. One of the most respected participants in the World Music movement, Gorn performs in a wide range of genres on soprano saxophone, clarinet and a variety of flutes. He has toured and recorded with jazz stalwarts Don Cherry, Jack de Johnette and Tony Levin and World Music artists Glen Velez, Krishna Das, Jai Uttal and Badal Roy. Gorn is widely known in the West for his creative blends of Indian and Western music. At the core of his style, however, and suffusing all he does, is a profound association with the bansuri tradition extending over three decades. It began on an extended trip to India in 1971 when he was introduced to one of Pannalal's senior disciples, Sri Gour Goswami. On extended visits to India during the 1970s Gorn studied under Goswami's guidance and, later, after Goswami's death, continued to work with the late Ustad Z.M. Dagar and Professor Deba Prasad Banerjee. Absorbing all that he could, Gorn went on to forge a unique personal style.

Since 1994, however, Gorn has been taking instruction from Seth. "This has added another dimension to my playing," Gorn reports. "I liked the fact that Raghunathji comes from the extended Pannalal Ghosh tradition, that traditional, vocal style. I have learned many wonderful compositions from him and tremendous inventiveness in developing taans [highly decorated, improvised melodic passages]. But most of all I was personally drawn to his sound--such a full, rich, warm sound on the flute. I really like that."

Above all, perhaps, from all his teachers, Gorn has learned the reverence inherent in Indian music. "Music is one of the

greatest aspects of Hinduism," Pandit Seth informed him. "For us, music is not mere entertainment; we play music to reach God."

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