



Mihir Gupta and the Musical Revolution



Mihir Gupta as an innovative composer and teacher was never widely publicized, in his life time. But those who are patrons of classical music traditions or musicians themselves fondly cherish their memories of him.

Mihir Gupta was more popularly known as “mastermoshai”, among his students. He was born in a family steeped in the traditions of Indian classical music. His father, Shri Jnanendra Nath Gupta was a virtuoso music teacher and his grandfather, Shri Akshoy Kumar Gupta was a well known *khol* player. Mihir Gupta began his music career at the tender age of five under the able guidance of Shri Kesto Mitra. Later, he also received *talim* from Shri Sunil Dutta, who was a

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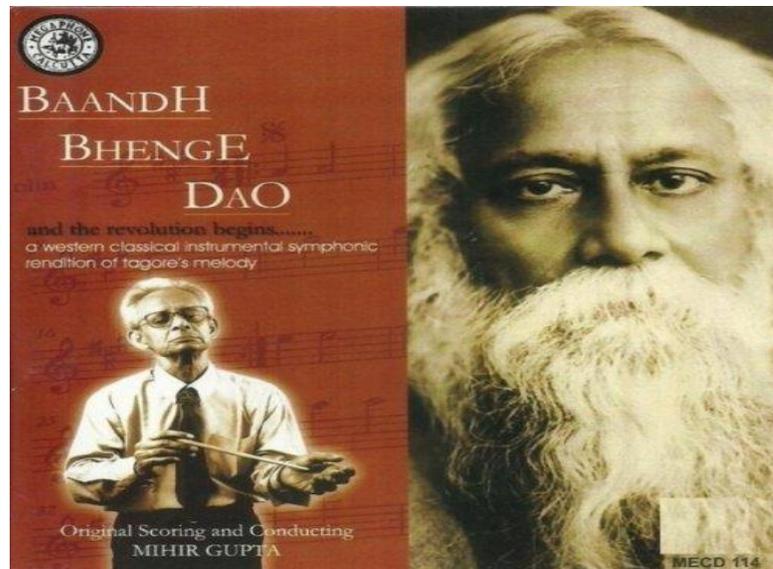
disciple of Ustad Gulam Ali Khan and from Chote Khan Saheb, the renowned *sarangi* player based in Kolkata. In his college days, Shri Gupta was intensely involved in the musical activities of the Indian people's Theatre Association (IPTA) and his verse compositions received much admiration. The year 1959, was particularly significant in Shri Gupta's life as he then started performing regularly in the Folk Entertainment section of the Information Department of West Bengal. However, soon enough he left for Chennai and joined the cine music world there only to return to Kolkata as the Vice President of the Calcutta Cine Musicians Association. It was much later in life, in 1962, that this musician actually started taking lessons in Western classical music under the guidance of Professor Joseph Naskar. Yet continuing with his passion for Indian classical music, he performed a violin recital at the Joydeb Sangeet Sammelan in Silchar in the presence of eminent musicians like Ustad Bahadur Khan, Tanima Thakur and others. Thus proficient in both Indian and Western classical music, Shri Gupta became associated with renowned music directors like Pankaj Kumar Mullick, Salil Choudhury, Satyajit Ray, Hemanta Mukhopadhyay, Sudhin Dasgupta and others. However, given more time to teaching and being associated with the Calcutta School of Music, and Calcutta Foundation Orchestra for quite some time, he became more interested in the Western classical music. His mind gradually turned to innovative patterns of music. Like Ray, his choice of Western classical music in the main was because Indian classical instrumental music is largely a solo performance. There is no space for orchestration or variations in harmony in Indian classical music as in Western classical music to produce the dramatic effect or to render the conflict of emotions.

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*The music album, **Bandh Bhengey Dao**, 2008*

<https://mio.to/album/Mihir+Gupta/Baandh+Bhengey+Dao+%28Instrumental%29+%282008%29>

The music album, *Bandh Bhengey Dao*, 2008, is not the kind of ‘fusion’ that we find in bands galore these days. Mihir Gupta himself had said that there has been no mixture in the scoring and no improvisations. This album is unlike the con(fusion) or the mix and match between the Western pop or Rock traditions with the Indian colloquial strains or folk tunes. This is surely no Indipop and no band music neither. This is also different from the music produced by interlacing Indian Classical with Rock, Jazz or Western Classical music. Moreover, Mihir Gupta himself had argued that an attempt at yoking together two different cultural traditions of music through improvisation and indiscriminate mixing often produces a jarring sensation or a cultural confrontation rather than effecting a fusion. ‘Fusion’ music itself is rather elusive a term and Shri Gupta chose to call his album, a ‘cultural experimentation’, which strives to attain sublimity

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in its aesthetic principles of art. Using Western classical symphonic patterns to recreate the meaning of Tagore's songs and in not diluting the tune or the temper of the songs, Mihir Gupta's album is surely an unprecedented contribution to the world of Western classical music. As a purist, Mihir Gupta's renditions of Tagore's songs in Western classical symphonic style are re-interpretations of Tagore's melodies. He interprets the words, the tunes, the atmosphere of the songs through the symphonic style ; yet Tagore's songs do not lose their copyright over their tunes. The melody of the songs remain alive like the burning wick of a lamp casting a spell of light and shade of symphonic strains to provoke the imagination of the listener and consider re-interpretations. At best, Mihir Gupta's renditions of Tagore come very close to *tone poems*. However in a tone poem, a narrative is set to musical interpretation. But Shri Gupta here undertakes a more daunting task of reinterpreting existing musical strains in a western classical cultural tradition. His endeavour as he had stated in conversation with Mr Subhasish Dey, has been 'to express the theme of each song through music, which would be easily comprehensible to the universal listener. The foreign listener, without any knowledge of Bengali would be able to decipher its meaning and eternal character'. As a discerning composer of such musical experimentation, Shri Gupta has chosen the Tagore numbers with care. He has chosen those melodies which are reminiscent of the influence of western traditions of music.

About this album, Mihir Gupta had said : 'My desire to make Tagore accessible to the general masses of the world transcending barriers of language, has led me to choose the instrumental form, i.e. instruments used in western classical orchestra'. Particularly interesting is his imaginative rendering of the first song in the album : 'Álo amar Alo'. The symphonic effect produced by the musical strains recreate the sacred hour of Christ's birth. The song gathers meaning in Gupta's interpretation, with the break of dawn in the moment of divine celebration. While Tagore's melody rings out clearly, the orchestration of musical strains surrounding the

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main melody, create the theme of choir music sung on the occasion of the divine moment. The second number is , ‘Ha-re-re-re’, where Gupta employs western techniques such as *col legno* on the violin to produce the onomatopoeic effect of the flapping of a bird’s wings in its acute desire for freedom. The effect of a sudden shower is created by the *bowed tremlo with mute*, the sound of the thunder by the use of *tympani* and the bird’s cry through *harmonics*. In the song ‘Ámi chini go chini’, he has used the music of the harp and violin to create the feel of the vast expanse of the seas. Nature imagery in all the ten songs in the album is translated into musical language to appeal to any listener’s emotive sensibility through rich sensuous understanding. Musical rendering of the mood and words of the song like, ‘Ácche Dukkho, acche mrittu’, is done by using only the ‘G’, string on the violin. The effect here is rather Keatsean, suggesting that music as an art form can translate that ‘Beauty is Truth’, - that joy and woe, birth and death are a continual pattern of existence. Last but not the least, the last number in the album, ‘Baandh Bhenge Dao’, the title song in the *twentieth century modern harmony* is a musical experimentation to recreate the mood of revolution against that which is undesirable, unaesthetic, unprogressive and the cul-de-sac of blunted sensibilities. It carries Mihir Gupta’s ultimate message of demanding aesthetic appreciation from his listeners, especially those of the younger generation.

****This article is written jointly by Jayita Sengupta (Editor, Caesurae) and Subhasish Dey (violinist, composer, music teacher at the Calcutta School of Music).***