

GOOD NEIGHBOURS

ADVANCING REGIONAL INTEGRATION, COOPERATION
AND ENGAGEMENT IN SOUTH ASIA

Harmonizing relations: Platforms for music in South Asia

by Nitin Koshi

#OneSouthAsia

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Radios, speakers, smartphones and television sets across the South Asian neighbourhood crackle with tunes from Bollywood, the Hindi film industry. Coke Studio Pakistan, a television programme, strikes a chord with millions of viewers through live studio performances that meld contemporary Western, Sufi, bhangra and classical music from the region. Across South Asia, people go about their day-to-day lives with a folk or film song on their lips, distinctive to their native language.

South Asian music, despite its diversity in styles and instruments, intrinsically connects

its people. But being a musician in the region is not easy, especially for artistes outside the film industry. Many of them face similar challenges: limited funding, lack of public exposure, and a dearth of training, infrastructure and facilities. Others experience social or political pressure, such as a ban on musical instruments in Afghanistan while under Taliban rule in the late 1990s.

Still, over the last few years, there have emerged more musicians making a living by playing non-film music; more venues in South Asian cities showcasing live music;

and more live-music festivals—providing local talent a stage to perform. The South Asian Symphony Orchestra (SASO) and South Asian Bands Festival provide platforms that give ear to talented musicians from the region while helping bridge political divisions and build understanding within South Asia.

South Asian Symphony Orchestra: A baton for cooperation

A symphony orchestra comprising South Asian musicians was conceived of in 2013 by Nirupama Rao, a former foreign secretary of India, in conversation with Viswa Subbaraman, an American orchestra conductor of Indian origin. Well-versed in diplomacy — having even served as India's ambassador to China and Sri Lanka — and music as well, Rao envisioned a South Asian orchestra that could be a unique platform for dialogue, cultural synergy and understanding among youth in the region.

Following a few years largely in academia, in February 2018, Rao began fine-tuning her musical vision by helping bring eight musicians from India and two of the South Asian diaspora — including Subbaraman — in concert with the Symphony Orchestra of Sri Lanka. Their performance, titled *Music Beyond Borders*, in Colombo, marked the island nation's 70th anniversary of

independence. Five months later, Rao and her husband, Sudhakar Rao, a former chief secretary of India's Karnataka state, registered the South Asian Symphony Foundation¹ in Bengaluru, Karnataka's capital city. This laid the groundwork to establish SASO. In August 2018, the foundation organized a five-day music workshop in Ooty, a hill town in India's Tamil Nadu state, where instructors from India and Sri Lanka guided a dozen young musicians from Afghanistan, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka. The vibrant musical and cultural interplay at the workshop moved the foundation to finally start putting together a South Asian orchestra that would perform eight months later.

After a week of relentlessly rehearsing side-by-side, an ensemble of more than 70 musicians with familial roots in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka debuted as SASO on April 26, 2019 in Mumbai, India's commercial hub. The performance, titled *Chiragh: A Concert Beyond Borders*, was an eclectic mix of South Asian and Western classical music. It featured indigenous instruments, such as the timpani, matka, tumbaknari, rubab, santoor and tanbur, alongside traditional orchestral sections. The concert commemorated the lives lost in terror attacks that took place five days earlier across Sri Lanka.

Rao is confident that strengthening music education in South Asia can be instrumental to help "promote democratic

values and reject terrorism and extremism.” SASO teaches its members to listen, not just to sounds but each other as well. Understanding, inclusiveness and cohesion builds between these musicians as they rehearse together, in pursuit of a shared goal – harmony. On achieving this aspiration, the orchestra — like South Asia — can be greater than the sum of its parts.

Assembling the orchestra took considerable effort. The foundation invited musicians to audition for the orchestra based on recommendations, and by scouring ensembles and music institutions, in South Asia and abroad. Many of these artistes rendered performances via recordings for selection as logistical and infrastructure constraints limited in-person auditions. The foundation had difficulties obtaining visas for some of the selected musicians. A group of Afghan musicians faced flight cancellations, transit delays and soaring ticket prices after the Pakistan government closed its airspace for flights to and from India following airstrikes by the latter in Pakistan in February 2019.

“Putting so many new people together in a room and creating a team from all over South Asia has been a fascinating experience... It is also really interesting in the breaks to see them interact with each other and ask each other questions about where they are from, how they play, the type of technique they use, and what their

instrument is – all the standard things we do as musicians. You soon begin to realize that it doesn’t matter where you come from. Simply being a musician gives you a common language and basically a common nationality of music”
– Viswa Subbaraman, conductor of the orchestra’s inaugural concert.

Nivanthi Karunaratne, a U.S.-based horn player of Sri Lankan heritage, points out that the orchestra helps bridge communication barriers. Recalling SASO’s debut performance, Karunaratne says, “One of the Afghan musicians came up to me after the concert, chattering away, and hugged me tightly. Her smile conveyed everything our lack of a mutual language couldn’t.”

SASO’s inaugural concert was not financed by governments, but by Indian donors and corporate sponsors, making it a unique initiative of, by and for the people. Cross-border investment could build the foundation’s finances, while increasing the interest of India’s neighbors in the orchestra.

The foundation seeks to nurture promising young musicians of South Asia by organizing music workshops, master classes and lectures. It intends to take SASO across South Asian cities, and the rest of the world as well, thereby providing orchestra members valuable experience in public performance. The orchestra offers a rare opportunity for musicians

that often remain marginalized in local communities, especially in Afghanistan, Bhutan and Nepal. This includes some students of the Afghanistan National Institute of Music² (ANIM), which aims to improve gender equality in music training in Afghanistan and has nearly 60 percent of its students coming from economically-disadvantaged families. A dozen students of ANIM, which receives some support from the World Bank, played at SASO's inaugural performance. Since its debut, the orchestra has performed in Bengaluru to commemorate the 150th anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi's birth.

Over time, the foundation plans to build a repertoire of indigenous South Asian music, in the form of a songbook that will comprise 30 folk and popular pieces, arranged for orchestral performance. It commissioned two orchestral works, *Bhadke*³ and *Hamsafar: A Journey through South Asia*⁴, that were performed by SASO at its debut, alongside compositions by Beethoven, Bizet, Brahms, Mozart, and Puccini, among others. *Bhadke* is a rearrangement by Kamala Sankaram, an Indian-American composer, of *Shola jo bhadke*, a classic Bollywood song. Meanwhile, *Hamsafar: A Journey through South Asia* is an arrangement of eight popular songs from the region, by Lauren Braithwaite, a British conductor teaching at ANIM. The commissioning of more such orchestral works could help South Asian composers flourish, while helping preserve the region's musical heritage.

The symphony of peace amongst people is perhaps impossible to ever complete, but SASO plans to continue playing to this tune, exemplifying what can be achieved via harmonious co-existence between South Asians.

South Asian Bands Festival: All aboard the regional bandwagon

In April 2007, the eight member nations of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) launched an initiative⁵ to promote regional unity through cultural interaction. A few months later, the first SAARC cultural festival was launched. It showcased South Asia's diverse art, apparel, food, handicrafts, textiles, folklore, theatre and even music — a three-day outdoor SAARC Bands Festival was organized by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, an autonomous body under the Indian government, India's Ministry of External Affairs, and Seher, a cultural organization.

“The government had asked us to make SAARC more popular among the general public, especially youth. The idea was to bring people closer, so that they could connect with their South Asian neighbors and take in the spirit of SAARC”
—Sanjeev Bhargava, the founder of Seher.

“Music, dance and art had long been the preserve of the elite. Shows were accessible only to a select few in restrictive venues. Cultural events need to be within easy reach, free and for the masses,” reasoned Bhargava. The organizers lined up bands from each South Asian nation and had them perform at Central Park, in the heart of New Delhi, India's capital city. They estimate about 3,000 people gathered here as inherently South Asian sounds blended with traditional and Western styles of music. “Watching musicians from eight countries play, the audience began to identify with them. The audience saw the similarities in aesthetics, beliefs, cultures, languages, thoughts and music,” Bhargava added.

A second music festival of South Asian bands, planned for November 2008, was postponed in the wake of terror attacks in Mumbai during that month. The festival eventually took place in February 2009, but did not include a band from Pakistan amid strained India-Pakistan ties. The event was renamed the South Asian Bands Festival and relocated to Purana Qila, an imposing stone fort founded by the Mughal emperor Humayun in the 16th century in New Delhi. This was the first rock concert held at the fort, which until then had only hosted classical dance and theatre performances.

Pakistani musicians returned for the next South Asian Bands Festival, in December 2009. Hereon, the event was held

annually and its line-up was expanded beyond musicians from each South Asian nation; a band from a SAARC observer country, namely Myanmar, South Korea, and France, was included every year from 2010 to 2014. The audience also grew. Organizers estimate the festival drew more than 10,000 concertgoers in 2014. Despite this popularity, the festival of South Asian bands has not been held since then amid a lack of political will and scarce funding. Festivalgoers, however, did fill the grounds of Purana Qila for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)-India Music Festival in 2017. More than 20,000 people attended the three-day event, where they heard bands from India and the 10 member nations of ASEAN. Although the musical instruments and amplifiers are now silent at Purana Qila, the good music and goodwill created at the festival of South Asian bands assures that efforts to restart this annual event would receive resounding support from audiences and musicians.

Listening, watching and interacting with bands from other countries gave these audiences and musicians a sense of the hopes, beliefs, frustrations and aspirations shared across South Asia, thus making the festival a rich cultural experience. Camaraderie developed among musicians at the festivals. Many of these artistes joined in with other bands as they performed. Some friendships even led to later musical collaborations. Each festival brought a hundred or so musicians on the

same stage, giving several of them their first opportunity to perform abroad. For others, the festival marked their first time in front of a large audience. “Our trip to India is very important. It is an experience and a turning point in our professional career. The SAARC event has given us the exposure and opportunity to share our music with the rest of the region,” said Siddique Sohrab of the Afghanistan-based Aryan Band after performing at the 2007 festival. The Aryan Band played again at the February 2009 festival, relishing the rare international platform for Afghan musicians. Some festival musicians also performed at the presidential palace in New Delhi and local venues during their visit to India.

Many musicians featured at past festivals voiced messages of peace and unity, and embodied the spirit of regional cooperation at these events. “If we can be musical ambassadors for our country and spread the message of peace, joy and hope, that is what we actually aim for. Music cuts through all barriers,” said Soundarie David Rodrigo of Soul Sounds, an all-women choir from Sri Lanka, after they performed at the February 2009 festival. “We need to have this more often, in every SAARC country,” said Faisal Kapadia of Strings, a now-defunct Pakistani band, after performing at the first festival, in 2007. Another member of Strings, Bilal Maqsood, rhetorically asked at the 2009 festival, “What can be more beautiful than Indian bands and Pakistani bands playing on the same stage?”

Resuming the annual South Asian Bands Festival can go a long way towards building regional understanding and social cohesion, especially among the performers and spectators. Similar regional music events could be organized even in other South Asian countries with funding from various sources, including corporate sponsors and multilateral organizations. Holding a festival at one of the region's many heritage sites would also draw global attention, generate tourism, and ensure the site lives on as part of the contemporary cultural heritage of all South Asians.

Conclusion

SASO and the South Asian Bands Festival are by no means the only platforms for music from the region. Amid the technology-driven surge in smartphone usage, the key to South Asian hearts may just be hidden in their music playlists, driving many to tap digital-media platforms and audio-streaming services. Other endeavors go a long way too: the Border Movements Residency, a fellowship programme, takes South Asian musicians each year to Berlin, Germany's capital city, to network, produce music and perform for up to 3 months; and DesiHipHop, a US-based digital-media company, offers artist management, record-label operations, and music-based applications, to propel South Asian hip hop beyond co-option into film. However, the focus of

SASO and the South Asian Bands Festival towards bringing South Asian musicians to perform on the same stage makes these initiatives highly noteworthy.

South Asia's rich and varied traditions of music are deeply rooted in the diverse lives of its people. The region's music

mirrors its society, tells stories, expresses emotion, shares ideas and acts as a form of historic record. Promoting regional platforms for music can protect these traditions from neglect while helping the South Asian community connect, and, in time to come, sway them to the beat of the same drum.

Endnotes

1. <https://symphonyofsouthasia.org/>
2. <https://www.anim-music.org/about-us>
3. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mVsDFEtcgWE>
4. <https://symphonyofsouthasia.org/articles/listeners-corner/>
5. <https://saarcculture.org/saarc-cultural-centre-mandate/>

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Series Editor

Mandakini Kaul is Senior Regional Cooperation Officer, South Asia Regional Integration and Engagement at the World Bank.

Editor

Nikita Singla is Consultant, South Asia Regional Cooperation at the World Bank and is Associate Director at New Delhi-based Bureau of Research on Industry and Economic Fundamentals.

About the Author

Nitin Koshi is a freelance writer and editor based in New Delhi. He has worked with The Economist Group, The Hindu, Himal Southasian, The India Today Group, The Indian Express and The Financial Chronicle.