

How did Bridge of Dreams come about?

Like many musicians before me, I am entranced and excited by the possibilities of exploring links between jazz and Indian musical traditions. My main (very rudimentary) formal training in Indian classical music has been in South Indian music with mridangam maestro Guru Kaaraikkudi Mani in Chennai and wonderful vocalist/sitar player Sarangan Sriranganathan in Sydney. This experience helped me understand certain things about raga and tala that definitely helped in this collaboration, but my musical contribution to Bridge of Dreams is more from my perspective as a jazz musician.

I have been friends with Hindustani tabla player Bobby Singh for many years and have had many wonderful opportunities to play with him. During tours of Ben Walsh's 'Fearless Nadia' with Bobby in Australia and India in 2012 and 2013, I got to know and work with Aneesh Pradhan and Sudhir Nayak. I discovered that we all shared a passion for deepening the exchange of ideas between jazz musicians and Indian musicians. Whenever we had a spare moment we would meet in one of our hotel rooms to play music to each other and discuss creative ideas. This was very inspiring.

I was lucky to visit Mumbai in 2014 on a Churchill Fellowship and undertake an exploratory creative development period with Aneesh and leading Hindustani singer Shubha Mudgal. We loved this experience and hoped to collaborate on a project at some future time. That was the genesis for this project. Shubha and Aneesh are extremely accomplished, experienced and versatile performers and composers. Shubha is a renowned singer and composer in a number of genres including khayal and thumri, as well as Indian pop and fusion. Aneesh is an acclaimed practitioner of Hindustani music, having studied with illustrious tabla maestro Nikhil Ghosh. He is also Bobby's guru.

Another group of musicians I hold in very high regard, and have had the privilege to work with are Sirens Big Band, led by double bass player Jessica Dunn. Several years ago, I was very pleased when Jess asked me if I would be interested in composing a major work for them. So many things about the Sirens' philosophy and worldview reminded me of Shubha and Aneesh's. I began to imagine how incredible it would be to combine Shubha's extraordinary voice, Aneesh's incredible tabla playing and Sudhir's virtuosic harmonium playing with the Sirens' glorious big band sound. We discussed a number of ideas, and I suggested this collaboration with Aneesh and Shubha. It was a hugely ambitious project to undertake, but Jess and the band enthusiastically accepted the challenge and we have been very working hard on it for several years now.

Sandy Evans

What language is Shubha singing in?

Shubha sings in a number of different languages in this project.

The lyrics for 'Arms of Imagination' are from a poem in Urdu by a contemporary poet, Gauhar Raza, who is based in Delhi.

'Dharti Ke Darbar' is a traditional text in a mixture of Hindi and Braj bhasha.

The lyrics for 'Joyous Rain' are in Urdu and were written by a 19th century poet Upadhyaya Badri Narayan Chaudhari. (Shubha has used only a single couplet from a much longer poem in this song.)

The lyrics for 'Ya Kareem' and 'Deepening of the Red Sun' are by the 15th Indian mystic poet, Kabirdas. His writings have influenced Hinduism's Bhakti movement (among others).

Kabir wrote in a mixture of many old dialects of Hindi and that is why his language is referred to as khichdi (a mixture) or sadhukkadi – the informal, mixed language used by wandering sadhus.

Shubha explains why she is drawn to his texts: *'For me, what is important is that many of his verses are relevant even today. His fearless denouncing of communal violence and disharmony, his protest against the orthodoxy of religious rituals, and his overarching message of peace is as relevant today as it must have been centuries ago'.*

There are no lyrics for 'Beam, Arch, Suspension'. The vocables used in this piece are typical of a 'tarana'.

'Aji Jaaiye' and 'Imagining and Longing' are in Hindi.

The recitation that Aneesh and Bobby do in 'Tabla Spiral' is called Padhant and is a vocalisation of the bols (or strokes) used in tabla playing. They always learn to say what they play.

Is Shubha singing ragas?

Most of the vocal melodies in Bridge of Dreams are derived from ragas, but I'm not sure Shubha would class them as ragas in the Hindustani classical sense. Nevertheless, there is a strong influence of raga in the vocal melodies and in the harmonium solos.

e.g. 'Arms of Imagination' is in a raga called Jog which has both a major and a minor 3rd. Shubha describes 'Ya Kareem' as having shades of the raga Abhogi.

'Joyous Rain' is mostly in raga Yaman (similar to the Lydian mode).

The vocal and harmonium sections in 'Beam, Arch, Suspension' are in the raga 'Patdeep'.

'Aji Jaaiye' is in the raga Kirawani.

Acknowledgements

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About the project

Award winning saxophonist Sandy Evans leads a brilliant collaboration between leading Australian and Indian musicians. Featuring 22 artists on stage, this is a glorious exchange of ideas between Australian jazz and the rich Indian musical palette.

Featuring the sublime voice of internationally-renowned Indian singer Shubha Mudgal, the stellar energy and excitement of 17-piece super-collective Sirens Big Band; the sophisticated rhythms of one of India's finest tabla players, Aneesh Pradhan, performing alongside Australia's preeminent tabla player, Bobby Singh; stunning solos from harmonium virtuoso, Sudhir Nayak and breathtaking improvisations from Sandy Evans – this is a once in a lifetime opportunity to hear the very best in contemporary music created by culturally and gender diverse musicians.

In the space between two worlds, magical, colourful and musically thrilling things happen.

Musicians

Shubha Mudgal - Voice, Composer, Co-Musical Director
Sandy Evans - Saxophone, Composer, Arranger, Musical Director

Aneesh Pradhan - Tabla, Composer, Co-Musical Director
Jessica Dunn - Sirens bandleader, Co-Musical Director
Sudhir Nayak - Harmonium
Bobby Singh - Tabla
Ross A'hern - Sound

Sirens Big Band

Saxophones

Laura Corney (alto, soprano, tenor)
Melissa Mony (alto, flute)
Harri Harding (sopranino, tenor)
Ruth Wells (tenor)
Phillippa Murphy-Haste (baritone, clarinet, bass clarinet)

Trumpets

James Power
Ellen Kirkwood
Claire Hollander
Louise Horwood

Trombones

Rose Foster
Alex Silver
James Greening
Carla Dobbie
Nick Barnard (bass trombone)

Bass - Jessica Dunn

Piano - Zela Margossian

Drums - Ali Foster

Percussion - Claudine Field

The lyrics & their meaning

‘Arms of Imagination’

Lyrics by Gauhar Raza
The poem is a tribute to differently-abled people.

Meray khayaal ki baahein athaah samundar hain (times 2)
The arms of my imagination are like an infinite ocean

ye saare gham ko jahaan kay samet sakti hain
Capable of holding within their comforting embrace every pain that the world has known

Meray khayaal ki baahein athaah samundar hain (times 2)
The arms of my imagination are like an infinite ocean

naheen jo aankh to ehsaas ban gai hai nazar (times 2)
If blind, the ability to feel transforms into sight

ye din ko, raat ko, taaron ko dekh sakti hai
and experiences the joy of day, night and the stars

Meray khayaal ki baahein athaah samundar hain
The arms of my imagination are like an infinite ocean

naheen jo haathon mein harkat to gham naheen hai mujhe (times 2)
If the hands are unable to move, I do not grieve

mere khayaal to duniya sambhaal sakte hain
Confident that my imagination can rule the world

Meray khayaal ki baahein athaah samundar hain
The arms of my imagination are like an infinite ocean

naheen jo pairon mein harkat to gham naheen hai mujhe (times 2)
If the feet are unable to move, I do not grieve

mere khayaal to parbat ko naap sakte hain
Because my imagination permits me to scale the mountains

mere khayaal ki duniya ki hadd naheen koi
The world my imagination inhabits has no limits, no boundaries

mere khayaal mein saari zameen basti hai
My imagination covers every corner of the earth

kisi se zyaadaa naheen hai, to ye yaqeen bhi hai (times 2)
If not more than others, I say with conviction and belief

kisi se kam naheen mere khayaal ki duniya. (times 3)
That no less than others is this world of my imagination.

Dharti ke Darbaar’ (trad)

‘Dharti ke darbaar naubat baaj rahi hai
In Mother Earth’s darbaar (court), the naubat drum plays on

Baaj rahi hai ghanghor
The sound of the naubat is mighty and intense

Phool rahi hai phulwaari
The garden bursts into bloom

Champa maur rahi hai
The champa (flower) is taking bloom

Maruwaro mehek rahyo hai
And the maruwa (flower) is fragrant

Mata ke darbaar naubat baaj rahi hai
In the court of the Mother, the naubat plays on

‘Joyous Rain’

Lyrics by Upadhyaya Badri Narayan Chaudhari

‘Imagining and Longing’

Lyrics by Shubha Mudgal

Jaage se ujaale, uneende se andhere
A light that is bright and awake, a darkness that is sleepy and yawning

jaage se ujaale, khwaabon se bhare ujaale
Light/radiance that is bright and awake, and full of dreams

khwaabon se bhare ujaale, ummeedon se bhare ujaale
Light/radiance that is replete with dreams and hopes

ujaalon ki chaadar pe jad kay khwaabon ki bootiyaan
On this sheet of light, I will add some motifs made of dreams

andheron pay chadhaa doon main ik ujali si chadariya
And over the darkness I will lay in offering my bright, ornamented sheet of light.

‘Ya Kareem’

Lyrics by Kabirdas

Ya Kareem, bal hikmat teri, khaak ek soorat bahuteri
O Kareem, the merciful, I bow to your wisdom. From the same dust you create countless faces.

Ardha gagan bich neer jamaaya, bahut bhaanti kar nooran paayaa
You are able to plant water in the middle of the skies, and find light/radiance in every direction.

Avaliya aadam pir mulaana, teri sifati kar bhaye divaanaa
The most wise and saintly of men, auliya, pir, Maulana, lose themselves singing your praises.

Kahe Kabir ya het bichara, Ya Rab ! Ya Rab ! yaar hamara
Says Kabir as he contemplates, O Lord ! O Master ! you are the one I love.

‘Aji Jaaiye’

Lyrics by Shubha Mudgal
‘Aji Jaaiye’ is written in a retro Hindi film song style (a bit tongue in cheek) and arranged with both Cuban and klezmer influences. It’s a song about a lover’s argument. This argument is depicted musically between the clarinet and the trombone.

(Note from Shubha: We are cringing while we write this translation, because it sounds like a witness report filed at the police station. Please note that the overall tenor of the song is mischievous and flirtatious)

Sthayi

Go on now, don’t give me any more of those silly old excuses

1st Antara

Why did you promise to meet
If all the while you only intended to go back on your promise?
Your promises are false, and your intentions suspect,
And so is your promise of romance

2nd Antara

What’s with your betrayal and your flirtation?
No longer do you enjoy any credibility with me
I too can play a clever hand at this old game
I’ve played my hand, now let’s see who emerges the victor

These are transliterations and translations of some of the texts, as well as some other background information. Please note that Shubha and Aneesh apologise for the English translations, but I have found them very helpful to get a sense of the meaning of the songs. We hope they will enhance your enjoyment and understanding of the music.

‘Deepening of the Red Sun’

Lyrics by Kabirdas

Baalam aavo hamare geha, tum bin dukhiya deha
Beloved, come to my dwelling, for without you, my body suffers and is in pain.

Note from Shubha: ‘Metaphorically, in Kabir’s poetry the human body is a dwelling made of the five elements (Earth, Fire, Water, Ether and Air) in which dwells the Truth.’

‘Deepening of the Red Sun’ is in a very slow 14 beat tala called Jhumra that Aneesh taught me. I wrote this melody one morning when I woke up in Mumbai after a very vivid dream about death. The image of death in my dream was very joyous and quite powerful, somewhat like a wedding. Just after I wrote the main melody that morning, I received an email from Tony (my husband) saying that the mother of a student of mine had passed away. I was very close to this family and knew that the mother had been battling cancer for many years. Tony went to the funeral while I was still overseas. That day I took the melody in to Shubha and Aneesh and Shubha seamlessly sung the lyrics by Kabirdas to the melody I had written.

‘Tabla Spiral’

The title for this piece, and some of the musical ideas came from a discussion between Aneesh and myself where Aneesh described the rhythmic approach in Indian music as being like a spiral. It struck me that this also described a lot of the cyclic aspects of jazz music.

Tabla solo compositions have a lot of structural and expressive elements, some of which are incorporated into this composition. One unusual feature of this project is that we have 2 tabla players playing together (Aneesh and his disciple, Bobby). Aneesh decided to tune the tablas a 5th apart for most pieces (one player in Ab, one in Eb). In ‘Tabla Spiral’ I created a chord sequence where Ab is always the top note of the chord, although it moves through different tonal centres. Harmonically I wanted to expand upon the simple harmonic language used in a lot of Indian-jazz collaborations. My idea was that the piano sequence would be a harmonic version of the nagma (a melodic line played repeatedly on an accompanying instrument such as harmonium) used during tabla solo pieces. There are many other ways in which the tabla language is incorporated into the Big Band music in this piece.

‘Beam, Arch, Suspension’

I used drawings of 3 different bridges to create many aspects of this his composition:

- a suspension bridge: the Chakzam bridge south of Lhasa, a very beautiful bridge constructed in 1430 with cables suspended between towers, and a planked footway below
- a beam bridge: the Lake Pontchartrain causeway in Louisiana, the longest continuous bridge over water
- an arch bridge: the Sydney Harbour Bridge of course!

I traced drawings of these bridges on to manuscript paper and used the drawings to guide various architectural, melodic and rhythmic elements of the piece, as well as decisions about register and orchestration. I was struck by how incredible the feats of engineering are that go into making actual bridges. This has a parallel with the skill, knowledge, resources, effort and goodwill that go into making the kind of metaphorical bridge in this project!

Shubha Mudgal | photo
by Raghav Pasricha



Aneesh Pradhan | photo
by Kartik Rathod

Sandy Evans, Bobby
Singh | photo by Karen
Steals



Recording available

Bandcamp bandcamp.com or

Rufus Records rufusrecords.com.au

