

Cultural Passport: Demystifying Traditional Indian Music and Art

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Abstract: South Asian music and art is flourishing in State College, in large part due to efforts by the Society for Indian Music and Arts, founded by Shri Arijit Mahalanabis, and Dr. Stephen Hirshon, Professor of Art History who are bringing accomplished artists, composers and musicians from around the country, and world to Centre County.

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Over the past twenty years, the traditional arts of South Asia have slowly but surely started to take root in the cultural milieu of State College, Pennsylvania, giving a voice to the aesthetic that has shaped and formed the history, culture, aspirations, and philosophy of the South Asian people. Ancient origins notwithstanding, these classical Indian arts continue to allow a consciousness of expression that, at its core, remains utterly universal and human.

In Centre County, these arts have come to life through student organizations like the Society for Indian Music and Arts (SIMA) and the concerted efforts of people like Professor of Art History Dr. Stephen Hirshon and Shri Arijit Mahalanabis, exponent of Indian classical music, musicologist, and teacher, who has championed the propagation of India's rich and vibrant art forms. Last fall saw a celebration of these arts in *Birth of the Painted World*, an exhibit curated by Dr. Stephen Hirshon that featured indigenous paintings of the *Warli* tribes, and *Virasat* (legacy or tradition), an Indian music festival that showcased performances by SIMA's students.

Be Still. Listen. Like you, the Earth breathes.¹

Warli art is practiced by a tribe of around three hundred thousand people who live on the outskirts of Mumbai, India's teeming metropolis in the western state of Maharashtra. They speak a language that has no written form, yet their paintings evoke a deep sense of being and belonging. Central to the Warli tradition is the essence of womankind and the idea that women are the center of the universe. For thousands of years, women of the tribe have painted on the terra-cotta walls of their huts as a form of invocation and blessing, marking ceremonial occasions like festivals and marriages. Characterized by a deceptively simple style that is based on circles, triangles, and squares, Warli paintings are steeped in symbolism and convey a sense of harmony between nature and humans. Painted entirely in white—a pigment made from a mix of rice dough, water, and gum resin—this *joie de vivre* and synchronicity between people, animals, and trees are seen in the circular formations and stylized figures as they sing, dance, draw water, tend their fields, and live their everyday lives. This artistic vision of life and movement came to the HUB Robeson Galleries at the Pennsylvania State University in the form of paintings from the collections of Sanchi Gillett and Gallerie AK by Jivya Mashe—the leading master of Warli painting—as well as paintings by his sons Sadashiva and Balu Mashe, his grandson and granddaughter, and other Warli artists. The collection, encompassing 110 paintings and photographs, was the first major retrospective of Jivya Mashe's works in the United States. Although rooted in history and tradition, these paintings exemplify the need for balance and sustainability with nature, with each other, with our communities, and within ourselves, a message that is as relevant today as it was in the past.



Warli Exhibit (Photo credit: HUB Robeson Galleries)



Warli Exhibit



Warli Exhibit

Music and Dance as a Grammar for Expression

Music, it is said, has a singular power over the human spirit, a power that transcends intellect, boundaries, and languages. It is uniquely “both completely abstract and profoundly emotional” (Sacks 2007).

The Society for Indian Music and Arts (SIMA) began in Seattle in 2007 as the brainchild of its founder, Shri Arijit Mahalanabis, as a way to disseminate traditional South Asian performing arts, encourage dialogue between the artist and the audience, and provide a platform for students to become active participants in the artistic process through workshops, concerts, and classes.

Ever since the inception of the student organization at the Pennsylvania State University in 2014, SIMA has grown strength to strength, supporting a thriving community of artists, students, faculty, and the wider community in discovering the dynamic and expressive traditions of music and dance in South Asia. SIMA is home not only to professional artists, but to complete beginners and those curious to learn more about this beautiful form of expression. The diversity at SIMA is apparent; students attending the weekly music lessons on campus range in age from nine to fifty years and have varied educational backgrounds in disciplines such as art, education, engineering, physics, computer science, economics, and statistics.

Over the past two years, Penn State SIMA has attracted internationally acclaimed scholars, performers, and practitioners of Indian music to State College. Some of SIMA's first concerts included performances by [Pts. Rajan and Sajan Mishra](#), foremost exponents of *Khayal*², a form of north Indian music popular for its improvisational nature and interplay between melody and rhythm; [Dr. Karaikudi S.Subramanian](#), a celebrated ninth generation *Veena*³ player; [Smt. Anupama Bhagwat](#), one of India's leading *Sitar*⁴ players; and [Shri Arnab Chakrabarty](#), a highly acclaimed *Sarod*⁵ artist. In addition to inviting artists to perform, SIMA also facilitates workshops on the different styles of music rendered by the visiting artists. Last year, these artists included [Pt. Uday Bhawalkar](#), renowned singer of *Dhrupad*⁶—the most ancient form of north Indian music—which is known for its gradual melodic development and poetic, meditative style; [Smt. Aditi Kaikini Upadhya](#), an accomplished vocalist of the Agra Gharana⁷ who is widely recognized for her contributions to scholarship and pedagogy; and [Pt. Satish Vyas](#), recipient of one of India's highest civilian honors, the Padmashree, and *Santoor*⁸ maestro. Through visits by such artists, among others, SIMA strives to foster active engagement between students and the performer and create an atmosphere of learning and critical thinking about musical issues. More recently, SIMA has also included classical Indian dance in its core activities. At the Warli exhibit, a workshop led by Smt. Ranjana Phadke, noted *Kathak*⁹ dancer, introduced an enthralled audience to the rhythmic, nuanced movements and the subtle facial expressions integral to *Kathak*, a dance form that can be traced back to the storytellers—or *Kathakars*—of ancient northern India.

SIMA (Photo credits: Bhushan Jayarao)



Students and their Guru (teacher) during SIMA's second Happy Valley music festival, Virasat, held at the Flex Auditorium, HUB, fall 2015



SIMA's Guru (teacher), Shri. Arijit Mahalanabis, performing at SIMA's student recital, Kahat Hai Sanjhrang, held at Schwab Auditorium, fall 2014



Visiting artist Pt. Uday Bhawalkar performing at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Centre County, spring 2015



Visiting artist Pta. Aditi Kaikini Upadhyaya performing at a house concert in State College, summer 2015



Lecture demonstration by visiting artist Dr. Karaikudi Subramanian at the Music Building, summer 2014



Visiting artists Pts. Rajan and Sajan Mishra performing at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Centre County, spring 2014



Visiting artist Shri. Jay Gandhi performing during SIMA's first Happy Valley music festival at the Eisenhower Chapel, Pasquerilla Spiritual Center, fall 2014

Cutting across religions and social strata, Indian music and dance have captivated audiences with the spirit, ideas, and imagination of its compositions for thousands of years. Unlike arts that have evolved in other cultures, traditional Indian music and dance provide a unique grammar for expression. Like a language, one can say anything about anything using this grammar. But, unlike language, this grammar allows one to express to the fullest degree that which language can never capture. Every time you witness these arts being unfolded in front of you, you witness a great artist extending the grammar of the art. You witness its progress and its growth. With *Virasat*, its annual music festival, SIMA sought to showcase just this. Over the course of three days, it brought together SIMA's top twenty-one students from around the country and world to share their artistic vision with State College audiences and with each other. Performances included a *Kathak* dance recital, expositions of *Dhrupad* and *Khayal*, and instrumental music of the flute (or *Bansuri*), Hawaiian guitar (or *Mohan Veena*), *Tabla*, and *Sitar*.

Virasat (Photo credits: Bhushan Jayarao)

Students performing during SIMA's second Happy Valley music festival, Virasat, held at the Flex Auditorium, HUB, fall 2015

For those who had never heard Indian classical music, it was a chance to experience a new grammar of expression, one that is unhurried, deeply moving, but also meaningful at an intrinsically human level.



Esha Zaveri is a PhD candidate in the dual-doctoral program in agricultural, environmental, and regional economics, and demography at the Pennsylvania State University. Her primary research interests are in environment and development economics, with a particular focus on climate change impact and adaptation, agriculture, water resources, and migration. More broadly, her research tries to understand how economic behavior interfaces with the natural environment using interdisciplinary tools drawn from the fields of hydrology and the natural sciences. Her current research explores the effects of changing precipitation patterns on irrigation outcomes in India and policy implications for agricultural production and water infrastructure projects. Esha is also a former president of the Society for Indian Music and Arts at Penn State (SIMA).

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Endnotes

¹ Kelsey and Kim (2012)

² Imagination or contemplation

³ Ancient stringed instrument

⁴ Plucked instrument

⁵ Indian lute

⁶ *Dhrupad* is contracted from "*Dhruvapada*," meaning melodically fixed composition.

⁷ The Agra Gharana is a school of music whose lineage can be traced back to the reign of Akbar, the third Emperor of the Mughal dynasty, during the sixteenth century.

⁸ Hammered dulcimer

⁹ *Kathak* is derived from the Sanskrit word "*Katha*" meaning story.