

THE MUSIC OF BELONGING

Composer Sandeep Bhagwati of Concordia University and Jian Ghomeshi, author, musician and radio host, discover that identity is fluid, and so too is the beauty in a song

As a child growing up in Germany, Sandeep Bhagwati would not sing a song as he heard it. “I would always invent counter-melodies.” Same when he learned the piano. “I was bored with the pieces that were presented to me and I made up other pieces I would like more.” Today Professor Bhagwati, Canada Research Chair for Inter-X Arts at Concordia University in Montreal, is a composer of international renown who is creating new forms, perhaps even entire new realms of music.

The term Inter-X arts began as a kind of joke — he was trying to say that interdisciplinary art forms cross every sort of boundary. Boundary-crossing is a deep part of his life. His mother is from India, his father from Germany. And crossing boundaries is at the heart of his music, and of his research into the creation process behind the making of music.

Borders in music are breaking down, a reflection of a growing comfort with diversity in a connected world. Jian Ghomeshi, a musician, CBC radio host and author, says the new-wave band Talking Heads was an early influence on him, “and there they were in the 1980s fusing what has been called world music with pop music. If that was the anomaly or exception just three decades ago, I think it's much more the rule now.”

Professor Bhagwati and Mr. Ghomeshi will be featured in the Concordia University Thinking Out Loud conversation series on creativity, held in partnership with The Globe and Mail. Their session, on March 25, will



Composer Sandeep Bhagwati of Concordia University: “There’s no tradition for what I live or experience. You always have to riff off the moment.”

explore how music relates to personal and cultural identity.

Mr. Ghomeshi, like Professor Bhagwati, was an immigrant, a child of Iranian parents who moved to Canada from England when he was seven. After the 1979 Iranian revolution, he felt tempted to deny where he was from, a pressure he talks about in his just-published memoir, *1982*. “One of the places I found salvation was music,” he says.

David Bowie was another early influence. “A song like ‘Changes’ is kind of a love letter to people who feel like they don’t really belong to any particular crowd. Bowie was in his own way saying: ‘be different, that’s okay.’”

Today, the music he admires is made by artists who blur the lines between genres. “So many different kinds of music are so accessible online,” he says. “You’re an indie rock band in Barrie — it’s easy to begin incorporating sounds you’ve heard from the Caribbean or Africa.”

Professor Bhagwati combines

genres in new ways; his childhood sense of play, of unwillingness to simply follow along the music at hand, is still evident in his amazing range of musical forms and combinations. He has composed music theatre and opera, orchestral and chamber music, choral and vocal music, electro-acoustic and multimedia/performance music. And he came up with a new kind of musical score he calls a “comprovisation.”

It’s a piece that breaks down the barriers between a formal composition and improvised music. In reality, he says, the two types of music are not as distant as they seem. Most improvisers have a plan, and many people who perform composed works improvise their interpretation “according to the evening.” But, he asked himself, “what if a composition could count on improvisers who can make up their own music at the proper moment or in the proper way that benefits others? “Comprovisation relies on

improvisers but connects them. There are some scores where there’s not a single note written down, but the score is a kind of network of ideas, a network of relationships. ‘Now listen to the trombone and play something that fits to the trombone.’ ‘Now listen to the drums and play something that’s a counter-rhythm to what the drums play.’”

Comprovisations express the spontaneity and self-invention in his own life crossing national borders. As a boy with an Indian name raised in Germany (“teachers always remembered my name, so there was no way to play hooky unknown”), and later as an adult living in many lands, “there’s no tradition for what I live or experience. You always have to riff off the moment and that happens at all moments.

“It’s the same in Indian music. Indian music is called improvised but it’s not true. The musicians actually know most of what they’re going to do. The only thing they don’t know is what the audience is

like, and so they adapt their playing to the evening mood, to fit it into something larger than themselves. And that again is something I very much sympathize with as a person.”

In Montreal and in Berlin, Professor Bhagwati is developing ensembles of international musicians, each of whom come from a different music tradition, from Berlin electro-techno to Bulgarian folk to Inuk to Korean. “When I grew up we were told that there are many music traditions that are mutually almost exclusive,” he says. “That piqued my interest to find out what rules governed the conception of beauty or rhythm or a good musician. I set out to question the rules that music, or art in general, is made by, and then to see what happens if I tweak these rules.”

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To register for the talk by Sandeep Bhagwati and Jian Ghomeshi, visit concordia.ca/talks. The event is free but spaces are limited.

JUST TALKING The new global music

As the lines blur between genres and countries, musicians are improvising their way to songs and sounds never before conceived of

Q: How does a comprovisation express what a composition or improvisation cannot?

Sandeep: It can express the spirit of community. It’s a kind of symbol of society as it should be, an ideal society, where everybody can have a say and yet there are rules connecting people and there’s a system they can rely on. A comprovisation will always be exactly the right music for the right moment because it happens in the space with the audience and fits to that moment. It couldn’t happen any time else or anywhere else.

Q: What have you learned in bringing together musicians from different cultures, and different musical forms?

Sandeep: They have a totally different way of conceiving music, and we spend a lot of time trying to find out how to could make music together. It’s very fraught with misunderstanding, but it’s very rewarding. It has real potential. It’s always in the process of being remade and, as in research, you’re never finished. There’s always something that you haven’t thought of or something that could be done better or some aspect that you had to ignore in order to achieve a goal, like playing a concert. But after the concert it pops up and says, ‘what about me?’ And so you have to see about that.

Q: Where is global music headed over the next 10 to 50 years?

Sandeep: Slowly the preconceptions that people had about what is high art and high music, and popular and non-popular music, are breaking down. Nothing is really popular in the sense it was in the 50s, where 80 percent of the population listened to some-



thing. Everybody has so many options. We have a very dynamic music environment where no one actually knows what is the most hip or the coolest kind of music. It becomes very personal, and that offers many exciting possibilities for even marginal music, like the music that happens through research or calls itself New or Avant-garde. It’s not marginal anymore in the sense that everybody else is almost as marginal, if you look just at the market share. I’m very curious to see what comes out of that.

Q: How does living in Quebec relate to who you are, and the kind of music that interests you?

Sandeep: I was very excited when I came to Montreal because of its crossover quality. From afar it looked like a city in which many nations, many cultures, many ideas cross. Through the English-French situation people are in constant re-evaluation of their own situation. It is a place of constant negotiations between all the immigrants who live here - and all the different locals. I was very excited about how this would play out in culture. It’s really an interesting model for a global city for me.

Sandeep Bhagwati, the Canada Research Chair in Inter-X Art Practice and Theory at Concordia University, is a composer, theatre director and media artist whose compositions and comprovisations have been performed all over the world.

Q: What draws you in today in the music world?

Jian: I’m really inspired by the openness of young artists today to go in creative directions that are unbounded by expectations of what you need to do to have a hit song, what you need to do to be liked. Even bands that are now considered mainstream are aggressively pushing the boundaries.

Q: Such as?

Jian: When I first heard Arcade Fire in 2004 when that first album *Funeral* came out, the greatest impression it made on me was, ‘wow, you can do this?’ I just saw *Broken Bells* play. It’s really eclectic, and that freedom that so many young artists feel today is something that I’m actually kind of jealous of.

Q: How different is that from when you were a young musician?

Jian: Even in alternative circles when I was a kid, there were strict ideas about what you did if you were a punk artist. A lot of those parameters have been broken down.

Q: Where do you see global music headed?

Jian: It used to be kind of anomalous when we heard different sounds fused together. In fact, not only was it anomalous but in pop music it was sometimes derided. People talked about Paul Simon appropriating African music, rhythms, to create *Graceland*. I think within contemporary popular music there are fewer divisions. There’s



less sectarianism. The lines blur, and there aren’t rigid definitions of what genre is expected to be played. You have the profound example of Angélique Kidjo. In the globalist music that she makes you can’t identify any particular country or place the sound. Those divisions that were such a big part of our identity as Gen-Xers, for example, have ebbed. It’s not surprising now for kids to have Usher and Pharrell and Zeppelin and something from *Broken Bells* and something operatic all sitting on shuffle in their iPod.

Q: How has Toronto changed since you were young?

Jian: As diverse a city as Toronto was in the 80s, it wasn’t what it is today. Certainly for a kid of Iranian background, I did not have the community that would exist here today for me now. The community is also to be found online; you can find your place of inclusion. In terms of diversity and my ethnic coming out of the closet, I would want a world that looks a lot more like Toronto does today than it did when I was a little kid.

Jian Ghomeshi, the host of the daily cultural program Q on CBC Radio One and TV, has written a memoir, 1982, told through the songs and musical moments that changed his life.