

When Influence Meets Origin

Tracing Indian Classical Roots in Western Flute Repertoire

Allison Asthana, DMA and Amrutha Koteeswaran, DMA

This lecture-recital traces how the Hindustani (North Indian) and Carnatic (South Indian) classical traditions inform three contemporary works for Western flute. In each piece, these traditions are not decoration but structural DNA. Composers Reena Esmail, trained in Hindustani music, and Asha Srinivasan, trained in Carnatic music, write from lived fluency in two musical systems. Tonight's performers approach the works as scholar-practitioners seeking to honor both origins.

Pathways of Desire (2024)

Reena Esmail

I. Unfurl

II. Elapse

III. Surge

Allison Asthana

Dancing, Still (2023)

Asha Srinivasan

Nadiya(2017)

Amrutha Koteeswaran

Reena Esmail

Amrutha Koteeswaran, Flute

Allison Asthana, Alto Flute

Both Hindustani music and Carnatic music share some foundational ideals. Both have roots in Hinduism, with vocabulary being derived from Sanskrit and adjusted for each region. Raga (Hindustani) or Ragam (Carnatic) is a framework of pitches, characteristics, and melodic motifs. Both Hindustani and Carnatic music have different organizations of the Raga/Ragam, though there are many overlaps between both, with one Hindustani raga having a Carnatic counterpart. A tala/talam is a repetitive rhythmic cycle.

Both traditions are taught primarily by ear, regardless of vocal or instrumental teaching. Ornamental techniques (Gamak/Gamakam) and artistic freedom are prioritized, albeit in different ways. The pieces selected showcase how each tradition's stylistic language is incorporated into Western flute idioms.

Reena Esmail, Pathways of Desire

Reena Esmail trained at Juilliard and Yale, and in Hindustani music in India; she is the founder of Shastra, an organization connecting Indian and Western classical communities. Pathways of Desire was commissioned in 2024 by the Flute New Music Consortium for unaccompanied flute. It is built from a rotating set of Hindustani ragas — Pratiksha, Megh, Puriya Dhanashree, and Vachaspati — each transposed freely across the three movements rather than fixed to a single tonic, a distinctly modern compositional choice.

The three movements trace a clear arc. I. Unfurl is marked "Push and pull" — unmetered, beginning painfully slow. II. Elapse is "Desolate, spare." III. Surge alternates "Urgent" and "Langorous" tempi, driving to a fff climax. The piece highlights the free nature of Hindustani music, incorporating the style of unmetered and free improvisation within a raga.

Asha Srinivasan, Dancing Still

Asha Srinivasan is an Indian-American composer and Associate Professor at Lawrence University who integrates Carnatic rhythmic cycles and melodic forms into a Western concert idiom.

Dancing, Still was commissioned by the National Flute Association for its 2023 High School Soloist Competition. It is a reimagining of the materials and structural design of her 2003 work Alone, Dancing — the first piece in which she explored ways to integrate her Indian musical roots with her Western compositional training. The composer describes it as a celebration and reflection of her past, present, and future composer self.

The work follows a programmatic narrative that carries over from that earlier piece: a figure awakens with a lazy dance, moving arrhythmically as if in a dream, then dances to a strange meter with an imaginary partner — at first steady, then frenzied, whirling as if out of control before collapsing triumphantly to the floor. That shifting relationship to pulse, from unmeasured freedom to a driving off-kilter meter, is where the Carnatic sense of rhythmic architecture meets the unmetered opening of the program

Reena Esmail, Nadiya

Nadiya means "rivers" in Hindi, and this is the confluence piece: Esmail imagines two streams intersecting, tripping over and flowing into each other. It is built from a composite of two Hindustani ragas, Jog and Vachaspati, deliberately blended with their Carnatic counterparts.

Listeners who caught raga Vachaspati inside Pathways of Desire will hear this closing duet quietly gather up a thread from earlier in the program.

Esmail's own notes ask the two players not to align except at barlines — "this piece requires a great deal of trust" — so what you hear is closer to a conversation than a rehearsed duet. A note on instrumentation: Nadiya exists in several guises (Esmail's published score is for flute and cello, and her catalog also lists a flute-and-violin version). Its conversational, non-aligned structure travels well between them; tonight it is performed in an arrangement for flute and alto flute.



Learn more about
Amrutha's research!

Thank you!!



Learn more about Allison's
research!