

## Ode to the Orient

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*East Asia's talent and resources came to the fore when musicians, painters, dancers and poets from around the world met at Jindo in South Korea recently. ANIL SRINIVASAN writes on what made his experiences unforgettable.*



Making music: A mix of melodies.

On and on we drive, the liquid moonlight illuminating the path ahead of us. It is frigid, cold winds blowing at us from every direction. These are paths that no one we know has traversed. These are villages no Indian has ever been in. These are faces tucked into a corner of our world, blooming and smiling at two strange men from a different world. The only truth we hold close to us is the music we both make, and we marvel at how far it is literally taking us. After eight hours of bitter cold, 18 hours away from home and everything we hold dear, we arrive at a lonely mountaintop. Everything is suddenly gleaming, and the contrast is too much for two travel-weary Indian musicians. Burnished copper

vessels, shiny steel surfaces, glass and concrete, Oriental fountains and frozen blocks of winter ice offer an oddly disjointed, surreal landscape to a sudden burst of strange men and women with equally strange ways of expressing themselves. Both of us run into the rooms we have been provided, turn out the lights and drift into a deep sleep. Already we know that this is going to be the sort of experience that comes once in a lifetime.

Indeed, Sikkil Gurucharan and I are very fortunate to be chosen to participate in a very special residency entitled "The Exploration of Colour" along with 40 other musicians, painters, dancers, poets and festival organisers from around the world at the National Traditional Arts Performance Centre in Jindo, South Korea. Jindo is a small island off the southern coast of South Korea, and is nearly 300 miles away from Seoul.

The project was conceived by the Korea Arts Management Service (KAMS) which worked in association with the India-Korea (InKo) Centre, Chennai.

Cut off from other mundane distractions and sequestered with other souls of a similar disposition as ourselves, we did what we were expected to, and more. We played, composed, created, argued and learnt tremendously. We discovered ourselves and what we must strive for artistically. Most importantly, we were made aware of the limitless possibilities of East Asian music, the potential it offers for collaborative projects and the urgent need for the cultures of South and East Asia to engage in more meaningful dialogue. Attuned as we are to the artistic standards, material promise and outcome expectations set by the West, we are in danger of losing out on a vital, culturally intelligent association with our Eastern counterparts.

### Totally alien

Indeed, Gurucharan and I felt more alien in Korea than we ever have even in remote parts of Europe or North America. Linguistic divides, cultural diversity and an equally old and hoary past sets the countries of the Far East at a distance even from us in geographically closer India. There is nothing "borrowed" here, no easy English translations of traditional material, no showiness and no urge to pounce on exotic India. The traditional Korean artist is proud of who he is, and makes little effort to either dilute or categorise his work to suit foreign sensibility.

For two weeks, we were made to live with and work alongside brilliant artists, choosing our own groups and staying within these groups to create performance-worthy repertoire combining multiple cultural and aesthetic influences. Highly sceptical and entirely unaccustomed to the idea of approaching musical performances in such an ad hoc manner, I formed a love-hate relationship with this residency that underscored my experience throughout. Today, a month after the residency concluded, I am happy to stand corrected on my earlier reservations.

### Master musicians

Working with master musicians Won Il and Benjamin Taubkin among others made me aware of the mindboggling leaps in compositional templates musicians have taken elsewhere. Using his skills as a traditional Korean flautist, Won Il creates minimalistic music. To me, it was like taking traditional calligraphy and turning it into sound. Each sound is deliberate, and sounds almost cacophonous in isolation. Little by little, these allegedly random notes shape themselves into a discernible pattern. In another composition, he uses sounds as mere punctuations against a sustained silence. Taubkin is more nuanced; overwhelmingly warm as a person, and accommodating as a musician. A jazz pianist from Brazil, he brings in the moving bass and the polyrhythmic flavour into his work. When he begins to play, a group of Korean musicians join in on instruments like the gayageum (horizontal 12-stringed instruments played by plucking on the strings), geomungos (similar to the gayageum) and the piri (double-reeded flute-like instrument). The effect is like watching an Akira Kurosawa film: stark contrasts and turbulent weather wrapping themselves around a finely textured central theme.

In our group, Yeo Joo Yoon, an acclaimed and highly talented drummer and dancer inspired us to grow bolder with our expression and "seek the dance" in our melodies. A talented cellist joined in and provided bass accompaniment to our song while a versatile accordionist and Moroccan singer textured our composition so differently that we suddenly found ourselves afloat in musical paradise, revelling in the universe of possibilities. And all this alongside a traditional gayageum player who brought in Korean folk music into an already heady mix.

When the two weeks came to a close, we realised that the true exploration had happened inside ourselves. It accomplished what we both badly needed; a physical, musical and aesthetic distancing from everything we were used to. In stretching the limits of our own imagination, we have emerged bigger for the experience.

### Asian Collective

We floated the idea of an "Asian Collective", an omnibus group of Asian artists who can meet, commune and work together on a systematic basis and exchange musical ideas and learning. The idea has taken root and is already burgeoning into a surfeit of potential collaborations and project, not all of which involve either Gurucharan or myself.

The need for the East to connect within itself and create a more culturally intelligent and cohesive whole is urgent. The treasury of intellectual and material resources that East Asia holds at this moment in time is considerable and potent. The East will truly rise only in unlocking these treasures and using them judiciously.

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