

# BRUNCH

15  
YEARS OF  
BRUNCH  
2004-2019

[ THE MUSIC SPECIAL! ]

## BRINGING COOL TO CLASSICAL

MULTIPLE GRAMMY-WINNING GUITARIST **SHARON ISBIN**  
ON HOW HER FIRST BRUSH WITH INDIAN CLASSICAL MUSIC  
HAS CHANGED HER LIFE FOREVER!

SHOT EXCLUSIVELY FOR HT BRUNCH AT THE ROYAL OPERA HOUSE, MUMBAI

*"Indian classical music has long pieces, whereas a Bach or a Beethoven has a defined sense of enclosure"*  
— Sharon Isbin



PLUS! **AMAAN AND AYAAN ALI BANGASH** ON STRADDLING TRADITION WITH TODAY

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*"I had to break through many glass ceilings: as a classical guitarist and as a woman classical guitar player. I had to convince composers to write for me!"*  
— Sharon Isbin

[ THE MUSIC SPECIAL ]

# ONE DIRECTION

WHEN GRAMMY-WINNING CLASSICAL GUITARIST **SHARON ISBIN** WORKS WITH **AMAAN AND AYAAN ALI BANGASH**, EAST AND WEST NO LONGER SEEM LIKE OPPOSITES

Text by Ananya Ghosh

Photos shot exclusively for *HT Brunch* by Prabhat Shetty  
at the iconic Royal Opera House, Mumbai

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If you ever meet Sharon Isbin, classical guitarist, multiple Grammy-winning musician, and founder and director of the guitar department at New York City's The Juilliard School, here's a tip. Never shake her hand.

"I'm so sorry, but I have to take care of my hands," says the classical guitar legend. "I play entirely with my fingertips and fingernails, and once, a music conductor almost squashed my hand during a handshake. If a classical music conductor is unable to realise how important my hands are for my music, I don't expect most people to understand it. So as a rule, I avoid handshakes."

In India on a three-city tour called The Peace Tribe with Amaan and Ayaan Ali Bangash, Sridhar Parthasarathy and Vijay Ghate, Sharon says she's been listening to Indian classical music since she was 18 years old, but never imagined she'd collaborate with anyone in this field, leave alone perform with them in India.

"It still feels surreal," she says. "It is a true pinch-me moment for me. In fact, I actually cancelled one of my US concerts to be here, something I have never done before."

## OPPOSITES ATTRACT

In a way, this collaboration has been 10 years in the making. Sharon met sarod maestro Amjad Ali Khan and his family nearly a decade ago and they have been

friends ever since. "Around six years ago, Amjad came up with the idea for a collaboration, and I immediately said yes," says Sharon. "But since Indian classical music is mostly an oral tradition and I can't work without a written composition, it took him some time to pen down the notations for me. I finally got the first draft this November and here I am! We have two tours of the same kind planned for the US after this, and then we intend to record it."

Sharon is not new to collaborations, having worked with artists like Steve Vai, Laurindo Almeida, Nancy Wilson, Larry Coryell, Stanley Jordan, Herb Ellis, and Steve Morse, but her work with The Peace Tribe has been a very different experience. For one thing, the combination of sarod and classical guitar is not easy to achieve. "You have the metal strings of the sarod being played with the plectrum, and the nylon strings of the guitar being played by fingertips and fingernails. It was intriguing to watch Ayaan and Amaan use the long fingernails on their left hands to produce pitches on the sarod, with a coconut shell as a plectrum in the right hand, whereas I have frets on the guitar for pitches and use long fingernails on my right hand to strike the strings," she says. So, the sound each instrument produces is very different from the other.

Sharon found Sridhar Parthasarathy's mridangam fascinating, was bowled over by

Shawls, Kashmiri Kani

Make-up and hair: Rashmi Shastri



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"Indian classical is mostly an oral tradition and I can't work without a written composition..."

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Vijay Ghate's tabla, and had her mind blown by the experience of playing with an ensemble of all Indian classical musicians. But she also found familiar reference points in the performances. "I often collaborate with jazz musicians who improvise," says Sharon. "I also enjoyed adding embellishments to my part in raga style. It reminded me of how I add embellishments when playing Bach and other 18th century baroque Western classical music, as musicians are expected to do in the baroque style of the time."

The difference between the Indian classical music tradition and the Western is conceptual, says Sharon. "Indian classical music has long pieces. You are taken on a journey. It is a very expansive state of consciousness, whereas a Bach or a Beethoven piece has a clear and defined sense of enclosure," she explains. "But I always found Indian classical music very meditative. I think I connected with it also because I have studied transcendental meditation and have been practising it since I was a teenager."

Before coming to India, she made it a point to listen to recordings by Amjad Ali Khan, Ayaan and Amaan Ali Bangash. "They are so creative, artistic, masterful, energetic and moving! The music maestro Khan

has composed for us is sheer genius, successfully interweaving our varied musical, spiritual and artistic traditions with mystical beauty, grace and great emotion," she says.

But since she didn't have much time, she learned these pieces by ear rather than delve into the basics of Indian classical music.

### STRINGS ATTACHED

Life turned out differently from what Sharon had aimed for as a youngster. The daughter of a scientist, Sharon was fascinated by rocket science, but when her entire family shifted to Italy for a year, she found herself inadvertently attending classical guitar classes.

"My brother wanted to learn the guitar and Aldo Minella, a big name in classical guitar, was teaching in Italy," she laughs. "My mom took both of us to his class, but the moment my brother realised that the music was not rock and roll, he bailed". So to experience the unique opportunity, she stepped into her brother's shoes. But a year later, science became her passion, and she was soon building model rockets and launching them from a nearby field. But when she won a competition that gave her the chance to play with the Minnesota Orchestra, her life changed.

## MEET MULTIPLE GRAMMY-WINNING SHARON ISBIN

Born in St. Louis Park, Minnesota, Sharon Isbin became the first classical guitarist to win a Grammy in 28 years in 2001. She won a second Grammy in 2010. An hour-long documentary, *Sharon Isbin: Troubadour* was made on her musical journey in 2014.

Till date, she is the only female classical guitarist to have won a Grammy.

Today she has played with nearly 200 orchestras and commissioned pieces by composers like Joan Tower, Ned Rorem and John Corigliano. "I had to break through a lot of glass ceilings, first as a classical guitar player and then as a woman classical guitar player," says Sharon. "I had to work hard to convince composers to write for me. Now, I have more than 60 compositions written for me."

Like her guitar skills, Sharon's patience has become legendary. The story goes that she diligently followed up with John Corigliano for eight years to get him to write one composition for her. "I had met him at a party and then randomly ran into him at the post office one day. There was a long queue. I thought the most obvious thing to do while waiting in the post office queue with John Corigliano was to ask him to write me a piece for guitar and orchestra!" Sharon laughs. "I asked him and he said that it was an interesting idea and that I should call him, and so I called him every year for eight years! Finally, I got to know that he liked dramatic concepts and I worked out one he liked. And I got what I wanted."

### HOLY COW!

Now back in New York, Sharon is mighty pleased with her experience in India. She vividly remembers a reaction from a member of the audience in Delhi. "When the show ended, a man in the front row clapping and yelled out to me with joy: 'No matter how fast the others played, you kept up with them and went all the way!'"

It was great to get such appreciation from the audience, especially since I worked dozens of hours in the last week to learn the music at full speed using special techniques with my fingers to match the effect of plectrums on sarods," she says when we connect with her a few days later over email.

But no India trip for a Westerner can end without a mention of the Taj Mahal and cows. "On my last day, en-route Agra, I spotted a cow!" chuckles Sharon. "Of course I had to pose for a photo with them!" she says.

## "BEING CONSTANTLY TOLD YOU ARE WHAT YOU ARE BECAUSE OF YOUR FATHER IS A PAIN!"

### DESPITE THE COMPLICATIONS OF TRADITION AND THEIR GHARANA, HERE'S HOW THE BANGASH BROTHERS KEEP IT RESPECTFUL AND KEEP IT COOL...



As string instruments, the sarod and the guitar are cousins at some level. But much as Amaan and Ayaan Ali Bangash are excited and awed by the idea of collaborating with Sharon Isbin, they are somewhat challenged by the actual musical pieces.

That's because the Indian classical music tradition is primarily oral, which leaves room for improvisation, while the Western classical music tradition is written. So to accommodate Sharon, the scores developed for the trio have all been written out.

"Nothing can change," says Ayaan. "Though you have windows to improvise, the take offs and the landings are predetermined. Even so, it isn't easy for Sharon either. She has new sounds all around her."

The Bangash brothers are known for their experimental approach to Indian classical music, but now they are more in tune with the idea of fusing different musical traditions cleanly than with jamming. "We

## "I WORKED DOZENS OF HOURS TO LEARN [INDIAN] MUSIC. I USED SPECIAL TECHNIQUES WITH MY FINGERS TO MATCH THE EFFECT OF PLECTRUMS ON THE SARODS"

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Amaan: "Yeah, I am on the dating scene..."

Ayaan: "I'm married, so I'm not on Tinder!"

Ayaan: "You are a commitment phobe bhai! You should totally get married. My kids are six, they need cousins to play with..."

On Amaan: Jacket, Shantanu & Nikhil; jeans, Diesel; shoes, Vintage Boots Lucchese

On Ayaan: Jacket, Shantanu & Nikhil; jeans, Diesel; shoes, Gucci

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want to try the Western approach to fusion, where the score is written with a plan to improvise," says Amaan. "It is not a jam."

Ayaan makes their idea of fusion clearer. "It is about creating a bouquet of flowers where the beauty and fragrance of each flower adds to the entire experience," he says.

## LET IT GROW

At 41 and 39 respectively, Amaan and Ayaan come across as more introspective than they used to be. "Music is not just learning the notes and doing your *riyaz*. You need to see the ups and downs in life. Your personal experiences add the X-factor to your music," says Ayaan.

They're finding their own voices, but they are yet to emerge from beneath the tall shadow of their father. "We are immensely proud of our father and we love him to bits. But being constantly told that you are what you are only because of your father is a pain," says Amaan.

Ayaan explains: "Although we had a very normal childhood, our school teachers would say things like, 'Ayaan, we expect a certain kind of behaviour from you. Remember whose son you are'. This was quite overwhelming. I got cautious about everything."

Amaan admits that his lineage may be why he remains a bach-

elor. "It often creates a problem," he says. "Suppose I meet some interesting girl at a party, I can't approach her because one, she might think that I hit on girls often, and two, she might think that because I am Amjad Ali Khan's son I must be arrogant. So whatever I do, I always have my dad's name attached to me!"

He recounts an incident where he asked a girl on their fourth date where she saw the relationship going; she snapped that she didn't have to make a decision in a hurry just because he was Amaan Ali Bangash, Amjad Ali Khan's son. "I was like whoa! What just happened?" says Amaan. "I still have no clue how and when my dad came into the picture that day!"

"But bhai should totally get married! Now my kids are six years old, they need cousins to play with!" laughs Ayaan.

"Arre, I have been wanting to settle down for the longest time, but things never work out!" scowls Amaan. "It is getting a bit lonely. I am really hoping that I will connect with someone soon."

**"I WAS TOLD, 'AYAAN, WE EXPECT A CERTAIN KIND OF BEHAVIOUR FROM YOU. REMEMBER WHOSE SON YOU ARE'. IT WAS OVERWHELMING..."**

**—AYAAN ALI BANGASH**

## AN EASY Q&A WITH INDIAN CLASSICAL'S COOLEST DUO

### One crazy fan moment...

**Ayaan:** I got a lot of hate mails when I got married to Neema.

**Amaan:** (Sarcastically) Yeah, of course he did! Apart from girls writing letters to him in blood, sending torn images of his face, and pictures with demon written on it.... The only thing left to do was some voodoo on him!

### Are you on Tinder?

**Ayaan:** I am married!

**Amaan:** Erm...no. But I am on the dating scene. In fact, I've been wanting to settle down for the longest time.

**Ayaan:** You are a commitment phobe, bhai. You get cold feet!

## ROCK YOU LIKE A HURRICANE

The brothers don't behave like stereotypical classical musicians. Still, since they represent the seventh generation of the Senia Bangash gharana, they created quite a ripple in the Indian classical music scene when they decided to become television anchors in a talent hunt show in 1999. "We were told we were bringing shame to our gharana," says Amaan.

The irony was that by stepping into the more popular spotlight, the brothers learned more about their own heritage of music. "We met people like OP Nayar, Laxmikant Pyarelal and such greats. We heard so many young talents during the show, that we sat up and began taking our *riyaz* far more seriously. And also, finally people started calling us by our names!" laughs Ayaan.

That experience held them in good stead, because music evolves, and trolling is always available. "The only advice I ever give young musicians is, live your life. Don't get affected by criticism and don't get swayed by praise. *Apna time ayega*," says Amaan. "But work hard every single day while you are waiting."

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