

***\*Hello, Sandeep! It is wonderful to meet you again through this interview. Could you please briefly introduce yourself to the readers of Korean gugak magazine 'LARA' ?***

I am a composer, conductor, stage director, academic researchers, and poet. I live between Berlin (where my wife and children are) and Montréal (where I am a research professor at Concordia University) - and I often travel to India, where my father's family lives and where I have many musical friends. My practice embraces a large spectrum of different traditions and ways of making music: I am trained in what one could call the traditional avantgarde, but I have worked in many different contexts, from live computer music to Indian art music, from opera to works for children, from Chinese music to rock and techno, from theatre music to public sound installations. I also write about music a lot, both as a researcher and thinker, and as a new music popularizer for radio and newspapers.

***\*I heard you were born in India. When and why did you move to Germany?***

My mother is German, my father Indian – she moved to India after their marriage and I was born in Bombay (as it was called then). When I was five, in 1968, both my father's career and my mother's health made our family move back to Germany. So all my schooling happened in Germany – for my studies I went to Austria (at the Mozarteum Salzburg) and in Paris. Living between India and Europe is still very important to me.

***\*I am curious why you started your music career, especially composition.***

My mother was a gifted piano player, there was always a piano around. And my father had an ear for tunes - and an accordion. But no one we know was a professional musician. In high school I co-founded a guitar/rock-band ('Macbeth') and we had a few gigs, but never amounted to much. I loved Emerson Lake & Palmer, Pink Floyd, Iron Butterfly, Jethro Tull, Alan Parsons Project, Novalis and such bands of the time. At the same time, I discovered classical orchestra music and started to read scores. I went to a rural school, and we did not have music lessons until 10<sup>th</sup> grade. But then a young teacher arrived, Peter Cziupka, and he introduced us to the music of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I was hooked, and started to write string quartet movements and even a dodecaphonic cantata for the graduation ceremony. I was a good student and could have gone into mathematics or medicine or history. Music was actually my only weak subject, my piano playing was dismal. So I thought I should challenge myself and tried to get into Salzburg: I thought I would give it one shot - and if rejected, I would study physics or maths. Miraculously, they accepted me, not because of my amateurish performance or my non-existent knowledge of music theory or history, but only because one examiner thought that my three or four compositions showed real promise. Without this teacher, Rolf Maedel, I would not have become a composer, I believe. Maybe I should be thankful to him, but - maybe also not. I sometimes wonder how my career as a physicist would have turned out...

***\*I want to know more deeply about your music. Please introduce your main works.***

I have written a lot, and very different things, so it is hard to narrow it down. But I would say (and mistrust me in this judgment) that the following works are the most interesting: “alaam al mithral” my 2<sup>nd</sup> string quartet, a meditative, introspective long cello melody with accompaniment by the upper strings. “Atish-e-Zaban” for six voices a cappella, a one hour long vocal work on the political poems of Urdu poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz - a vocal work that tries to bridge the voice sounds and styles of Indian and European singing, and has been performed all over the world many times by the Neue Vocalsolisten Stuttgart. “RASAS” for large ensemble, an orchestral cycle of over 200 different pieces, extending over many hours (still in progress). “Ramanujan”, an opera about the great Indian mathematician, performed to great acclaim at the 1998 Munich Biennale. “Inside a Native Land” for solo trombone and 8 orchestra groups around a concert hall. “Miyagi Haikus”, written after the big tsunami of 2011, a score for any instrumentation, 17 haiku compositions that can give rise to very moving improvisations, and finally “Native Alien” a piece for soloist (any tradition and instrument), interactive score and improvising computer music software: the computer listens to the musician improvising - and then constructs a symphonic work live, creates a score based on these improvisations that the musician then can use to delve deeper into his own playing - and then change the score etc. Currently, I am writing a grand cycle more than 30 pieces for piano solo called “Musik der Irrungen” (music from wanderings) - for pianist extraordinaire Moritz Ernst.

***\*You seem to have diverse backgrounds, considering that you were born in India and have lived in Germany and Canada. Please tell me your story about the root sources of your music and musical identity.***

My musical identity is that I do not have one. I do not feel at home in any one style: I somehow am a familiar stranger everywhere I go - I call this the condition of the “Native Alien”. My training is in western art music, and I most of what I write and do still refers to the value system and the aspiration of the post-war avantgarde. But other than many of my contemporaries, I do not think that avantgarde music making is a particular kind of style, or sound, nor a direction towards a certain utopian ideal of music. I think having an avantgarde mindset is a way of looking and experiencing the world always in a mode of “what if” - what if we could change our habits of listening, what if we could do things differently than we do them now. To be able to do this, I have to learn and listen to a lot of very diverse music - and learn to love it.

***\*In my personal perspective, your music focuses on improvisation. Is there any special reason for this?***

Actually, I also write a lot of music - I really like to invent new types of scores, too. But yes, I work a lot with improvisation. Why? I read somewhere that 90% of all music making in the world is improvised. I would think it foolish of me as a music creator to not explore this way of making music. Even as a child I loved improvising much more than learning the pieces my teachers wanted me to learn. Scores are like recipes - they can be great, if you have all the right ingredients, the proper tools and - the right climate. But if you do not - would that mean you cannot react with music to it? On another note: I do

not believe in the existence of entirely free improvisation – in fact, I think every improvisation has at least 75% convention in it, if not more. And every performance of written music has at least 10% improvisation. As a music creator, I would like to be able to consciously think about and shape this relationship between written or unspoken convention and the unforeseeable moment and context of performance. I call this awareness not improvisation, not composition, but – comprovisation, a fluid mix of the two.

***\*It is seen that you have great interests in traditional instruments and music of diverse countries. What aspects of these attract you? And what are the potential impacts of tradition in contemporary and modern music scene?***

Do you never ask yourself: what if the musical revolutions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had not happened to the culture with the most powerful army (Europe), but to other equally rich music cultures. What would a truly Korean, and Indian, a Chinese, a Iranian or a Mandingue avantgarde even sound like ? Maybe we will find out in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Many people think of traditional music as something that must be preserved against change. I think change is inevitable – especially in today’s global economy and the mass-displacements of millions of people, things and ideas across our planet. In many of the big cities today, excellent musicians of all cultures exist side by side. I love to bring them together: whether they are trumpeters or guzheng maestros, khayal singers or haegum virtuosos, jazz cats or Techno DJs. When we work, I try to find out how all these different feelings, techniques and ways of thinking music can commune with each other – and how their differences can create the kind of positive friction and liberation, alienation and inspiration that the western musical avantgarde once had sought, too.

***\*We performed together twice (Native Alien in Oct./Reframing in Dec.). How did you feel about our performance with Haegum?***

From the first sound I heard, I loved the instrument, and was fascinated by the very versatile way in which you played it. When you engaged with the Native Alien computer software, you reacted quite naturally to the strange and wonderful sounds coming from the software - I heard a lot of potential in this collaboration, and I hope we can take this piece up again one day, for a proper concert or recording. And your residency with the Ensemble Extrakte was extremely rewarding for us all. Apart from your beautiful sound, you also brought a discipline and a clear understanding of our work, and pieces you played with us are very dear to my memory.

***\*You performed with other Korean traditional instruments (Daegeum, Gayageum), too. What do you think is the distinct characteristic of Korean music?***

For me, as a outside listener, the most interesting things about Korean music are: its radicality of expression – my first real exposure to Korean music was the movie *Seopyeonje* by Im Kwon Taek (I think I saw it 1996 when I was living in Paris), and its depiction of Pansori changed my feeling for music forever. It is one of my big life dreams to

collaborate with a Pansori singer on a new kind of Pansori piece ! Then – the love of empty space, silence and isolated sounds - and how this emptiness can become tense with energy, something I appreciate in Gayageum music. But I also am fascinated by the magnificent heterophony of Court Orchestra Music, especially by sounds of the Piri and daegum. As someone who has worked a lot with Indian drummers, I am really interested in the more stretchable idea of rhythm in Korean music, how rhythm does not seem to be a measure of time, but of musical energy. I realize that all of the above may be a total misunderstanding on my part – if so, my misunderstanding has been quite creative: my mixed East Asian and Western orchestra work “warnings written on the wind”, first performed in Berlin in 2013, for example, could not have been written without my fascination by Korean Court Music.

***\*You are creating and performing your works in Montreal, Canada and Berlin, Germany. Are the contents and methods of your works different in both places? or are they similar?\****

In Montréal, I have my own university lab and research funds to explore new softwares, hardwares, technologies etc. for music. So my works there often use technology in novel ways. For example, I am currently developing a body-suit-score that would allow musicians to walk around in a city in a loose formation – and yet be totally coordinated by a score that they can feel on their skin ! In Berlin I cannot do such work, and I have no access to local funding. So I usually write my music there, and I actually do not interact much with the German new music scene. The one exception is Ensemble Extrakte, the inter-traditional ensemble in which you had this residency last December: these musicians are my closest musical friends in Berlin, and we actually make music together not so much for money, but for the sheer pleasure of playing together in such an unusual setting, where no one of us is at home, and all these master musicians come together to learn from each other.

***\*What is the advantage of doing music in Berlin?\****

In Germany, music is the most important art. It has very high social and artistic status. Everything that happens in music in Germany, especially new ideas, approaches and formats, is noticed by many knowledgeable people. It is widely discussed – and supported financially. I find this kind of climate for new music to be unique in the world. No wonder so many composers and musicians from all over the world want to live in Germany. I sometimes joke: Germany is to experimental and new music what Hollywood is to mainstream cinema – the place with the most attention and the most money. And a lot of it is made by musicians who live in Berlin, even if they premiere it elsewhere. In other words: when one is in Berlin, one has the feeling that one can already hear the music of future. This feeling may be erroneous, but it is very strong...

***\*How do you create a performance with 'Ensemble Extrakte' ?\****

We start with the musicians: every musician brings their personality and tradition and skills into the project. We rehearse, improvise, try out collaborations. Often, I then

condense some of our explorations into a score. Then this score –which can be an mp3 file, or a drawing, or an animated movie! - again becomes a point of departure for new versions. Sometimes, I bring a score that I wrote for a very different ensemble and we try to re-invent it for the musicians of Extrakte. Towards the end, a few days before the concert, we focus more on the pieces that came out of this creative process. All this often takes many days of day-long rehearsals – in many ways, we do not rehearse like a music ensemble, we rehearse more like a theater company or a dance ensemble, where every musician's history and sonic richness can come an important element in our music.

***\*As a composer, what kind of music would you like to write? And as a music director, what kind of performance or concert are you planning to create?***

Well, as I said above, a new Pansori piece would be wonderful. With my ensemble in Montréal, we are now developing a musical process around the idea of the Griot – the West African poet-musicians that acted as a connector between kings, gods and the people. We are thinking about how we can come up with a way that would make the music we invent also a connection between political questions of our time, spiritual challenges, and the everyday concerns of people today. For the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the New Music Society in 2017, I am developing a new music theatre piece for 20 musicians and 20 dancers and circus artists who will engage the audience to move with them and always follow the action, to never sit still. And finally, I am writing a solo-opera for one singer and an orchestra of robot instruments that surround her and are her virtual musical shadow, again for early 2017.

***\*Lastly, are there any comments and words you would like to leave for Korean musicians and 'LARA' readers?***

I have a great love for Korean music, movies, poetry – and food ! But - I have never once been in Korea. I hope it will be possible one day. And then I would gladly talk to the readers of LARA in person, listen to their music and show them some of mine...