

Guitar and Sitar: Melodious Cousins

MUSIC IS music, but there has always been a great difference in the emblematic sounds of Western and Indian classical music. But what you may not realize is how closely related many of the instruments that comprise these two breeds of music are. Just as we humans have evolved from the same species of primitive beings, thus did all of our many musical instruments evolve from the earliest, most rudimentary forms of sound-making.

That said, which of these instruments do you prefer – the guitar or sitar? There really is no comparison, right? Well think again. The fact that the words guitar and sitar rhyme is not mere coincidence.

When one thinks of a sitar, one thinks of Indian music. The lush and harmonious reverberations of a sitar may conjure up varied images of “exotic” India. The guitar is a much more global instru-

ment, making its appearance around the world in many different styles of music – rock ‘n’ roll, pop, country, jazz, blues ... the list is endless.

There are several different kinds of widely played guitars ranging from acoustic to electric guitars. There are other instruments related to the guitar such as the mandolin, ukulele and even the banjo.

But it is safe to say the sitar is one of a kind. It may not be one of the most popular and common instruments merely because it is not so global and also because it takes years of study to attain mastery. In comparison with the many great guitarists in the world, few have attained mastery of the sitar. Sitar playing is truly an all-encompassing craft that requires much patience, skill and knowledge. Of course, this is true of mastering any craft.

The guitar can be enjoyed at a much more common level. Strumming a few simple chords can bring out the beauty of the

instrument. It is a simple instrument to experiment with and to self-teach. Many teenagers around the world long to furiously rock with a band, their guitar in hand. It always amazes me how a kid with only a few lessons, or even some spare time, can navigate the strings, frets and fingerings of a guitar to strum a favorite rock guitar riff. This is not surprising given that the guitar is one of the most commonly played instruments, along with the piano.

Although I may be downplaying the guitar, please understand that acquiring a mastery of this instrument truly rivals that of the sitar. Although these two instruments may look similar, they are very different. Thus, the way they are played also looks very similar, but yet again, the technique is very different. Both embody that characteristic twang of a plucked and fingered instrument, utilizing their hollow bodies for the resonance and amplification of sound from the strings. The

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THE BOSS: Bruce Springsteen performing in October 2004 in Madison, Wis.

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Geeta Bhatnagar-Novotny



MAJESTIC: Indian country music singer Bobby Cash, a.k.a. Bal Kishore Das Loiwai. His first album was "Cowboy at Heart."

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mechanics of the sitar are much more intricate though. The sitar employs an intricate network of melody, sympathetic and drone strings, plus corresponding tuners and much more.

But are the guitar and sitar directly related in the enormous international musical lineage of instruments? Many countries claim to have invented the guitar. There is much documentation about the guitar having its

roots in Spain. But let us get to that "rhyming coincidence" – the instruments' naming has something in common.

It is said the sitar comes from the Persian word *sehtar*, *seh* meaning three and *tar* meaning strings. The guitar, on the other hand, is said to have its roots in *guit*, similar to the Sanskrit *sangeet*, meaning music, and *tar* again a widely attested root meaning chord or string. Give or

take some linguistics, and there you have the sitar and guitar.

Although the guitar and the sitar have visited each other's continents, the sitar has most definitely permeated American pop and rock music. George Harrison, the lead guitarist of The Beatles, has been credited with being the first Western musician to play a sitar on a pop record. Harrison studied with Ravi Shankar after becoming intrigued with Indian culture and music. Many American pop icons have used the sitar in their music since.

Since my column explores the realms of Western classical music, you may ask how the guitar fits in. Well, just listen to CD recordings of great classical guitarists. Yes, there are classical guitarists, such as Andrés Segovia, Narciso Yepes and John Williams. The famous classicist Christopher Parkening has recordings such as "Parkening

plays Bach" and "Parkening plays Vivaldi." Do these composers ring a classical bell?

The guitar has its roots in Western classical music. These roots stem from the popular early instrument called the lute. To hear a professional classical guitarist play, you would think you are listening to two or more guitarists playing simultaneously. That is how complex playing classical guitar is. To watch and to listen to these artists is truly awe-inspiring.

The art of playing classical guitar far exceeds the skill involved in playing pop, rock and even jazz and blues. Many classical guitarists perform solos in concerts, with orchestras and accompany other instruments. Although classical guitar playing is not the convention, it is truly the zenith of guitar playing. I urge you to listen to a good classical guitarist, and I'm sure you will agree with me.

WITH the guitar, the left hand executes the fingering and the right hand controls the creation of the sound positioned over each of the six strings. This is done with the thumb and the first three fingers of the right hand.

* The length of a classical guitarist's fingernails plays a paramount role in the playing. Playing requires the player use a combination of contact with the fingernails and with the fleshy part of the fingertips for picking or playing the string. This requires careful shaping and use of the fingernails of the picking hand. For instance, the left-hand nails must be cut very short. The right-hand nails must be perfectly rounded. The edges of the nails must be finely smoothed so no extraneous noises can be heard while the fin-

gernail slides over the strings.

There are different kinds of guitars:

* The 12-string electric guitar that has pairs of strings tuned in unison.

* Electric guitar that has a semi-hollow to solid body and requires amplification for sound.

* The bass guitar, which matches the tuning of an upright string bass used in the string section of an orchestra.

* The classic guitar can also be the same as the acoustic guitar. This is a hollow-bodied wooden instrument and has six strings; the higher sounding three strings are nylon, the lower sounding strings have a nylon center with some type of metal winding.

* Its body is a major determinant of the overall sound variety for an

acoustic guitar. The guitar top, or soundboard, is a finely crafted and engineered element often made of spruce, red cedar or mahogany. This thin piece of wood, strengthened by different types of internal bracing, is considered to be the principal factor in determining the sound quality.

* The majority of the sound is caused by vibration of the guitar top as the energy of the

vibrating strings is transferred there. * The body of an acoustic guitar is essentially a resonating chamber that projects the vibrations of the body through a sound hole, allowing the acoustic guitar to be heard without amplification. The sound hole is normally a round hole on the top of the guitar.

* The main purpose of the bridge

on an acoustic guitar is to transfer the vibrations from the strings to the soundboard, which vibrates the air inside the guitar, thereby amplifying the sound produced by the strings.

* Price is often a good way of determining the quality of a classic guitar, but this may not always hold true. You should have a professional classical guitarist with you to help you select an instrument.

* When purchasing a classic guitar, do not choose one with a laminated top. This gives the guitar a lifeless, muted and tinny sound. If you are just starting out, you should get a good quality beginner's classic guitar with a carrying case, a music stand, a music lesson book, a footstool, a tuning fork, a metronome and a tuning crank.

Intriguing Facts