

# Desi composes a forgotten colonial musical heritage

STAFF REPORTER

New York

It would be beyond anyone's wildest imagination to envisage a connection between Appalachian music and classical Indian Sanskrit music from India from the early 1800s.

Cincinnati based visionary musician, composer and musicologist Kanniks Kannikeswaran shared several interesting stories on this topic recently.

"200 years ago, when the British colonized India, many tunes from Britain went to India with the bands of the East India Company. Muthuswamy Dikshitar, one of India's foremost composers in the Karnataka music tradition wrote Sanskrit lyrics to some of these tunes. The result is a genre of music that is neither Indian nor western yet both," he said.

Some of the very same tunes that went with the East India Company also arrived in the United States with the early immigrants. The musicians that play them on dulcimers and other western folk instruments are (justifiably) not aware of the fact that these tunes

exist in India with Sanskrit lyrics.

"Very little is known about this genre of music" says Kannikeswaran, although there are 39 such compositions that exist. Roughly one in 12 compositions of this 19th century composer is based on a Western tune."

This topic has been at the core of Kannikeswaran's research for the last three years. Kanniks has painstakingly deciphered the tunes from various sources going back to the early 1900s and has recorded each one of them with Indian voices and Western (largely Celtic) orchestration.

The recording features Kanniks' (then) 12 year old daughter Vidita accompanied by a fiddle, some flutes, the English horn, the dulcimer, a Celtic harp, a trombone and lots of keyboards, the Celtic bodharan and the Indian veena. Her (then) 7 year old sister Sukhitasang the harmony on some of the tunes.

"The Celtic instrumentalists were astounded that tunes such as Lord McDonald's reel were actually sung with Sanskrit lyrics in South India", chuckles Kanniks.



Kanniks Kannikeswaran

Indeed, it is fascinating to know that O' Carolan's planxy, Rakes of Mallow and other such tunes have South Indian counterparts in the classical idiom.

The lyrics of these compositions are in Sanskrit and are addressed to various deities adorning the temples that the composer Dikshitar visited.

Kannikeswaran has shared his research on this topic at various venues in the United States, India and also in Singapore. His recent trip to Singapore featured him as the producer and director of 'Colonial

Interlude', a musical theater production depicting the life of composer Dikshitar in colonial India.

Kanniks passionately shares his knowledge regarding the life and times of Dikshitar, the wealth of his creations, the temples that he visited, the happenings on the Colonial front and more.

Kanniks also shares his discovery of this genre, and his love for this music that goes back to his childhood when he used to listen to his great grandfather play these tunes on the fiddle in the 1960s.

Children of the Indian diaspora just love this music. "It is both western and Indian at the same time and it pretty much reflects the nature of the diaspora".

Leading musicologists have described this album as a collection to be owned and cherished by every musician.

Kanniks has earned awards for his research from the Music Academy, Madras, India. His presentations have always elicited a great response from audiences. Some of the tunes revived in his album are now being taught in schools in Chennai, India.

Kanniks looks forward to sharing this knowledge with the rest of the world. "This legacy from the 19th century is a great illustration of Indian culture's ability to be open to ideas from around the world, absorb external influences and create something uniquely new and Indian in the process.", says Kanniks.

Kanniks is more than a musician and a composer. All of his musical projects are consistent with his vision of building community by celebrating commonalities across cultures. He is the pioneer of the Indian American choral movement and has founded Indian community choirs in several cities in the US. His magnum opus 'Shanti - A Journey of Peace' performed with a cast of over 250 was the talk of town in Houston for weeks and is to be performed in the near future in Tampa and Minneapolis.

His full fledged musical theater production depicting the life story of Dikshitar was performed in Singapore recently. Kanniks has been teaching Indian music at the University of Cincinnati as an Adjunct Faculty since 1994. He is also a visiting artist at the University of South Florida.