

There are more per-capita dance recitals amongst the diaspora than in the homeland

Dr. Kanniks Kannikeswaran

Internationally renowned music composer, educator and scholar



PROFILE

Dr. Kanniks Kannikeswaran, is an internationally renowned music composer, educator and scholar, known for his sustained contribution to music and community in the United States for the past 25 years. His recent music video 'Rivers of India' featuring Bombay Jayashri and Kaushiki Chakravarti has received widespread acclaim and viral viewership. He is credited with creating a 'new sound' based on Indian ragas with polyphonic choral and orchestral arrangements. Kanniks is regarded as a pioneer of Indian American Choral music and large scale symphonic musical productions based on Indian ragas. Kanniks has taught music at the College Conservatory of Music as an Adjunct Faculty and has collaborated with various celebrated entities such as the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, the Dario Fo Choir (Netherlands), the NUS Symphony (Singapore), the Gundecha Brothers, Lakshmi Shankar, Mallika Sarabhai and others. He is a recipient of several awards including the Distinguished Alumnus Award from IIT Madras.

INTERVIEW

As a musician and a scholar, how do you see the journey of India over the last 75 years?

The post-colonial nation-state India was birthed from one of the world's oldest civilizations in 1947 amidst a turbulent partition and a 358 Mn population that has grown to 1.4 Bn in 75 years.

And, India has successfully led its phenomenally diverse populace with stable leadership through earthquakes, tsunamis, droughts, floods and massive pentennial electoral operations and just regular governance with daunting logistics.

And India also manages to produce the worlds largest body of skilled software professionals, entertain the world with a mega film industry, bring Commonwealth Nations to a halt with Cricket, win Oscars and Grammys, stay connected with the diaspora in the field of Classical Arts, touch the world with soft power in the areas of Yoga, cuisine, etc.

The recent accomplishment of immunizing more than 25 million people on a single day in the face of humanity's greatest modern day contagion bears testimony to the spectacular journey of the modern nation-state of India.

Please tell us how Yoga is a unifying factor and its relationship with spirituality

Today, the word 'yoga' is part of the global vocabulary. You see yoga studios throughout the world. We even have an 'International Yoga Day'. To the world at large, yoga is a collection of 'postures', 'exercises', 'mindfulness' and 'breath control'. But there is much more to yoga.

Yoga is one of the 6 darshanas- that illumine our way of life in the dharmic tradition. Yoga is a state of being in 'Union with the absolute truth

of existence'; yoga also represents a means to reach that state. Yoga is one of India's greatest contributions to the world; you see detailed expositions of ashtanga yoga in the ancient works of Patanjali (sanskrit) and Tirumular (Tamil), and the presence of yoga in several religions traditions such as Shakta Tantra, Shaiva Sidhanta and more.

In grossly simplified terms, yoga provides a means to become a better person, to go beyond differences, to the ideal of oneness.

All-night gatherings centered around Yoga, celebrating Maha Shivratri globally in streamed video broadcasts consumed on intelligent phones by millions all over the world is clearly an indicator of the mass awareness and impact of yoga and meditation.

How can the Indian Diaspora play a key role in India's Development?

I was in a gathering, up close with President Abdul Kalam where I heard him remark thus, 'The greatest contribution that you (the Indian diaspora) can make to India is by living life as exemplary citizens and serving your country of citizenship to the fullest'.

We the diaspora, are seen all over the world; we participate actively in the local democratic progress and we make contributions to our communities; we look at India with nostalgic memories of everything that is precious, that is not readily accessible to us today. We also see some ancient art forms die in our lifetimes, simply waning away from the lack of support.

As an educator and artist, I feel that we have a responsibility to be part of initiatives that support the arts; to support the restoration of monuments, to contribute towards the

preservation of knowledge of indigenous art, medicinal and healing systems. The diaspora invests and is part of India's capital growth; it is also important to contribute to the indigenous knowledge-base and to artists and artisans particularly during the era of this pandemic.

How does Sanskrit have an unbroken relationship with Indian Culture?

As revealed in a simple Google search, "Extant manuscripts in Sanskrit number over 30 million, one hundred times those in Greek and Latin combined, constituting the largest cultural heritage that any civilization has produced prior to the invention of the printing press".

Sanskrit has a pan Indian presence and a continuity across millennia. Literature in Sanskrit is not localized but has originated in various parts of India. There is a large shared vocabulary between Sanskrit and other Indian languages. The Sanskrit vocabulary in various fields such as yoga, classical music/dance, astronomy etc. has its regional variations in the vernacular.

And there is a history of citations, references and acknowledgement. Every medieval work acknowledges prior works written in Sanskrit. Basic knowledge of Sanskrit enables one to get a much better grasp of the Indian geography and the Indic knowledge systems.

If we were to name a few of the contributions that India has made to the global community of nations, what would they be?

The biggest contribution of India to the world is through its diaspora, a large population of over 18 million spread throughout the world, with a strong presence in technology, medicine, academia and the hospitality industry. India's contribution to the growing knowledge economy is significant. The world is closer than ever before thanks to Information Technology and it is no secret that the Indian diaspora and

the large pool of talent in India have played a key role in this sector.

India has for millennia been a culture that has regarded knowledge as an incomparable asset. With her deep-rooted indigenous teaching-traditions, the soft-power presence of India is seen everywhere. Yoga, Ayurveda and holistic healing, music and entertainment are examples of India's soft power.

Apart from these, the phenomenal immunization effort of over a billion people and the management of mega-human events such as the Kumbh Mela are demonstrable case-studies that the world will continue to learn from.

How does your video "A song of Rivers of India" create awareness about water conservation?

Two thirds of the human body is nothing but water! All great civilizations have sprung on the banks of great rivers. I have captured the spirit of veneration for rivers since Vedic times, in this song in raga Yamuna Kalyani in a seven beat cycle representing the seven sacred water bodies 'sapta sindhavah' with the names of 51 rivers from all over India. There is music inherent in their names! We were lucky to get leading singers Bombay Jayashri and Kaushiki Chakravorty and their sons to lend their voices to this song.

This video makes the point that rivers are a precious resource and that mindless exploitation of water resources lead to drastic consequences. It is important to know our rivers by name and to acknowledge their current status and to support efforts to restore them to their pristine state.

The video has been praised globally for its musical and artistic value and the power of its message. It has gone viral and we hope that it will fulfill its mission of creating awareness! For

now, it has led to several discussions and possibilities. In the works are a few other videos along similar lines.

What are your observations on the Indian Performing Arts scene in the past 75 years?

The growing diaspora population is hungry for culture and spares no effort in imparting awareness of the arts to their offspring. There are more per-capita dance recitals amongst the diaspora than in the homeland. Mega festivals have even transferred the paradigm of 'competitive learning' to the field of arts. In the pre-pandemic golden era of Indian performing arts, artists were always touring the world, performing and teaching. The pandemic has overseen the remarkable adoption of the virtual instruction paradigm in the performing arts and even the growth of teaching franchises. It was unthinkable some 20 years ago, that an earnest seeker in Midwestern United States could learn music from a Pandit in Sangli or from a Vidwan in Thanjavur.

Indian music is an ancient art; 'raga' based music is about individual self-expression. The western world produces music in 'concert' with several parts being played together at the same time. The past 75 years have seen the growing use of Indian ideas in western ensemble music, thanks in no small part to the ambassadorial contributions of Pandit Ravi Shankar; examples include operas such as 'Satyagraha' by Phillip Glass or the 'Flowering Tree' by John Adams; both being considerably more nuanced in their understanding of culture as compared to Raj era efforts such as the 'Bayaderes' or 'The King and I'. Besides, there is a growing number of diaspora composers and artists with degrees in Western Performing Arts, making a mark.

What are your observations on the growth in the Indian entertainment industry and its impact in the west?

Bollywood is the stuff of legends all the way from the popularity of 'aawaara hoon' in China in an older era through the success of Rajnikant blockbusters in Japan to the foot tapping success of 'Jai ho'. The success of a film today is even being measured by its performance in the diaspora. From an era where the diaspora struggled to watch Indian films on pirated VHS tapes and relive the nostalgia of India, there are movies galore in multiplexes even in smaller cities in the United States. OTT releases have altered the paradigm of filmmaking and the measures of success. The huge diaspora market for reality shows, the presence of diaspora entrants in shows, and the flamboyant tours and shows have literally built a seamless global 'desi' audience that celebrates India across time-zones and datelines.

Do you see more of India in films and television?

There are innumerable successful films based on Indian themes; Gandhi in 1984 beat several records. 'British Raj' flavored films such as 'Passage to India' and even such films as 'Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom' have given way to modern era themes. The presence of successful Indian origin actors and directors (e.g. Dev Patel, Manoj Night Shyamalan just to name a few) is on the rise as is that of the success of sensational and distinctly Indian themes such as 'Salaam Bombay' and 'Slumdog Millionaire' as well as the visually stunning 'Life of Pi'.

And finally, there is a growing representation of the Indian diaspora in OTT series, some stereotypical, others growingly nuanced and even a full series on the life of an Indian American protagonist.