

# Indo-American Chord

*David Trasoff is an American who has devoted nearly 30 years of his life to Hindustani classical music. The noted sarod player, music teacher and ethnomusicologist is also a regular visitor to India. On a concert tour here recently, he spoke to Romain Maitra about his training, his research on Hindustani classical music and his guru, Ustad Ali Akbar Khan:*

**What brings you periodically to India?**

After 30 years of involvement with Hindustani classical music, I still need to come here for my musical inspiration every year. I also come for concert performances. I need to know what the people here feel about my rendition of classical Hindustani music. At this stage in life, I feel I've got something to say, in terms of my music. Coming to India also gives me an opportunity to spend time with the musical community, especially in Kolkata and Mumbai, and also to listen to what other musicians of Hindustani classical music are doing.

**How did you get interested in Hindustani classical music?**

When I was a graduate student in molecular biology in 1972, a friend took me to Ustad Ali Akbar Khan's sarod performance in California. I had not heard anything like that before. The following year, I joined Khan Saab's Ali Akbar College of Music in San Rafael in California and was directly taught by him. After being in touch with him for a few years, I realised that there was a musician in me all along but I hadn't recognised it.

**Anything special about the way he teaches?**

Khan Saab taught, as he still does, all classes including the beginners. Even during my years as an advanced student, he would say, "I want to teach beginners because they learn better than you advanced fellows who don't learn anymore." One of his great teachings is that it's more important to understand the depth of a single note — and how we can find everything in it — than to learn to play many notes well.

The courses in Hindustani classical music are divided into vocal and instrumental classes and everyone, even a student of tabla, has to take vocal classes. However, his courses have no beginning and no end. I have taken classes for 30 years and if I still go to the beginners' vocal class I would learn so much just from hearing him teach a particular composition or a raga.

**You also had training in western classical music.**

Yes. After seven years at the Ali Akbar College of Music, I went to the California Institute of Arts for academic training in western classical music. I found that although my training had so far been in Hindustani music, my skills were very

advanced compared to those of my peers from western classical music, even though most of them were fine, trained musicians in their own right. I also found that my training had a universal application even in apparently unrelated musical systems like those of gamelan and African music.

**What was your doctoral research in ethnomusicology about?**

I examined the historical development of Hindustani instrumental music, with a particular focus on sarod, upto its present form. I also examined how the world of ideas influenced and shaped Hindustani musical styles and performances. A question that is often asked is whether Indian classical tradition was influenced by western music during the colonial period as was the case in the fields of visual arts and literature. Although Indian classical music, I think, was much more resistant, it did undergo a major transformation during that period. I tried to demonstrate how the influence of western ideas about music shaped the Hindustani classical music of the 20th century.

**Would you give an example?**

Influential intellectuals in the field of Indian classical music such as Raja

Surendra Mohan Tagore in Calcutta and Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande in Bombay attempted to impose western musical ideas like rationalisation and systematisation. It was indirectly a part of the general imposition of western ideology which viewed Indian culture as degenerate.

## Q&A

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Ustad Allaiddin Khan, for example, who had a profound training in Indian classical music but also understood western classical music, delved into the Dhrupad roots of Hindustani classical music and incorporated Dhrupad style into sarod and sitar performance and later into other instruments like flute, guitar, and santoor.

**Did you know that there was a great deal of resentment in Kolkata after the city's greatest musician, and your guru, Ustad Ali Akbar Khan, left India for the US several decades ago?**

Yes, over the years, Khan Saab has often been criticised about the amount of time and effort he has spent teaching in the US. But we should remember what he has achieved. He has succeeded in transplanting this music to a new home. I now feel that Hindustani classical music is my music and that I can present it as such. Second, his work as a teacher (thousands of students have passed through his college) and a great performer has done so much to popularise Hindustani music throughout the world as one of humanity's greatest musical gifts. At 82, he continues to hold his regular classes. In fact, attendance in his college has swelled in recent years, demonstrating the growing interest in Indian classical music in the US.