

SONG of water

By

Shubhendra & Saskia Rao

See the Music,

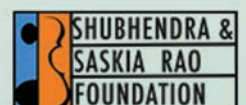
Hear the Paintings



KUNSTMUSEUM
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SONG OF WATER: Introduction

The lives and music of world-renowned musician couple Pandit Shubhendra Rao and Saskia Rao de Haas show how the cultures of India and the Netherlands no longer meet, but are intertwined in a beautiful relationship.

A protégé of Bharat Ratna Pandit Ravi Shankar, Pandit Shubhendra Rao has established himself 'not only as a master of his instrument but also as a thinking musician, constantly endeavouring to carry his instrument beyond conventional boundaries' and as 'a musical bridge across cultures.' Critics and connoisseurs have hailed him as a worthy successor to his Guru's tradition. His relentless service in promoting Indian music has made him a highly respected figure in the field of music and education across the world.

Cellist, composer and Author Saskia Rao-de Haas is acknowledged as a pioneer for creating a new instrument, the Indian Cello to Indian Classical Music. Flute Maestro Pandit Hariprasad Chaurasia speaks of his disciple Saskia as "someone who has been taught by God." and "everybody should listen to her music". Critics and audiences alike have praised her artistic depth and technical virtuosity. She has authored India's first ever music curriculum Sangeet4All and over 60,000 children have been informed and inspired by this unique curriculum. Her latest book on Indian Music history, Shāstra was recently released at the Asia Societies in New York and Houston as a part of the Jaipur Literature Festival.

From Carnegie Hall and on Broadway in New York to Sydney Opera House, from Edinburgh festivals in Scotland to the Salzburg International Music Festival in Austria, from the National Arts Festival in South Africa to the Beijing Performing Arts Centre — this Indo-Dutch couple have captured the imagination of audiences across the globe.

The New York Times describes their music as 'movingly meditative'. The Edinburgh Press writes: "a work of outstanding originality, conveying the fullness of an entire orchestra—a sound as evocative and rich as life's journey."



As composers, they have always been inspired by nature. In 'Song of Water' they take their inspiration from the universal source of life itself, Water. They explore the meaning of water in India and the Netherlands through the lens of artworks with subject matter that connects to the soul of each country: the Ganga in India and the sea in the Netherlands. Song of Water breaks the boundaries set by conventional art presentations: exhibitions in a museum and concerts in a concert hall. In Song of Water the audience will **see the music and hear the art.**

They will be joined by Shri Pranshu Chaturlal on Tabla and Tabla Tarang. Pranshu is the grandson of the legendary Tabla virtuoso Pandit Chatur Lal and has learnt Tabla from his father and Guru, Pandit Charanjit Lal. Today he is recognized as a rising star in the world of Tabla.

SONG OF WATER: The Program

Song of Water is a musical piece in 6 movements. Each movement conveys a different theme that connect the music with the paintings it represents. All Indian paintings are from the collection of the National Gallery of Modern Art and the Dutch paintings come from the collection of the Rijksmuseum, Kunstmuseum and Kröller-Müller museum (with thanks to **Dr Willem de Bruijn** and **Myra Park**). As a part of the Museum Night series in the NGMA, adviser to the museum **Ms Sujata Prasad** will conduct a guided tour of the museums current exhibition.

SONG OF WATER Movements:

1. Birth
2. Aqua Ostinato
3. Love
4. Celebration
5. Shoonya, stillness
6. Fury



SONG OF WATER IS PERFORMED BY:

Pandit Shubhendra Rao - Sitar
Maestro Saskia Rao de Haas – Indian Cello
Shri Pranshu Chaturlal – Tabla & Tabla Tarang
Actor and multi disciplinary designer Shri Oroon Das- Introduction to the art works



1. Birth



Ganga Avtaran | Nandalal Bose

Ganga plans to descend to earth. Fearing an apocalyptic deluge, Bhagiratha prays to Siva, in his divine manifestation as Trikaleswara. His prayers work. Ganga cascades over Siva's matted hair, and flows gently down to his feet.

The story of Gangavataran, replete in rich iconography, is the subject of acclaimed artist Nandalal Bose's celebrated 1939 mural that has been accorded pride-of-place in Hastantaran, a spectacular exhibition on the oeuvre of Nandalal Bose that is open for viewing right here at NGMA.

Descent of Ganga | Raja Ravi Varma

Also serving as an inspiration to this first movement is the Descent of Ganga, an Oleograph by Raja Ravi Varma, the early master of Indian modernism currently presented in Jaipur House as part of the exhibition titled Kshetrajna: The Illumined.



Music

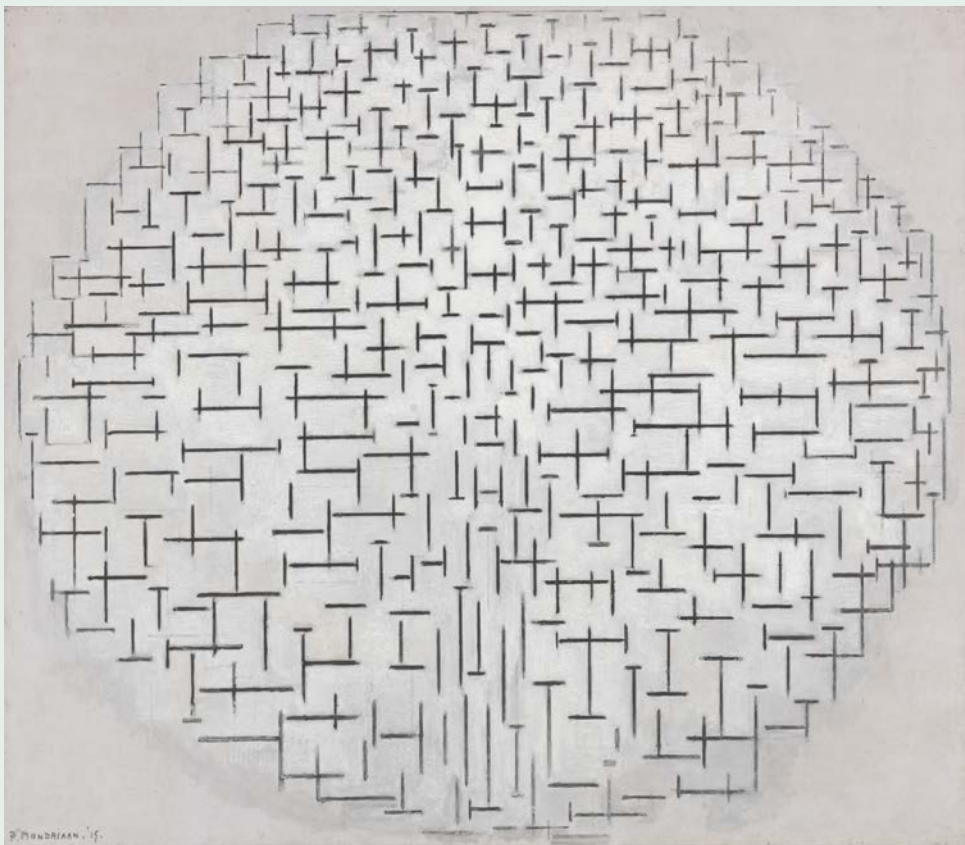
In the musical composition the evocative raga Bairagi Todi, a raga created **Bharat Ratna Ravi Shankar**, is explored to follow the narrative of the birth of Ganga. The piece starts with AUM, the divine origin of sound, and builds up to in a rhythmic pattern using the three Vedic notes played by the sitar on which the cello simultaneously explores the 5 notes of raga Bairagi Todi evoking the birth of Ganga. This musical interplay is followed by a rhythmic and melodic dialogue between the sitar and cello inspired by her capture in Shiva's manes and closes with Ganga flowing to the earth in a faster jhala rendition re-connecting with her divine origin.

2. Aqua Ostinato

Pier en Zee/Pier and Sea, (1915), Piet Mondriaan, Kröller Müller Museum

The second movement is triggered by this painting by one of the most influential Dutch painters, Piet Mondrian, who co-founded the De Stijl movement—an aesthetic of pure abstraction that values harmony, function, and simplicity—partly a reaction to the decorative excesses of Art Deco. The goal was to abstract perceptible realities into an elemental form of art.

The Pier and Sea here distills the beauty of the sea flowing through the pier. It evokes the hypnotic cadences of water rippling and dispersing along the wooden beams at the shoreline. The way Mondriaan has reduced the waves hitting the pier to patterns and lines, echoes the musical concept of an Ostinato. An Ostinato is a rhythmic and melodic pattern in music, repeating itself.



Music

In Aqua Ostinato the composers created 6 musical patterns, each with their own distinct identity. Each pattern starts in a full range and progressively reduces in tonal material akin to the way Mondrian depicts the waves in his painting with lines. The music also captures the white on the canvas—the all encompassing nature of the sea, moving through and past the black lines—with a careful arrangement of various complementary Ragas.

Composed for the Sitar, Indian cello and Tabla Tarang, Aqua Ostinato is an ode to the Dutch composer Simeon ten Holt and his stunning Canto Ostinato, and is set to a 10 beat-cycle to honour his iconic work. Tabla tarang employs differently tuned high tablas or *Dayans* to create different sonic registers such that the tabla becomes a melodic instrument in its own right.

3. Love

Kinderen der Zee/Children of the Sea, (1872) | Jan Toorop | Rijksmuseum

Though the painting pictured shows a lovely scene of little children playing with their toy boat, it contrasts their grim destiny. The eldest boy looks at the little ship that in adulthood he will work on burdened by the weight of responsibilities of caring for family in harsh circumstances. For centuries the Dutch people relied on the bounties of the sea for food and income.

Most of Jozef Israëls paintings depict the harsh realities of the lives of the fishermen, but he shows these scenes with love and compassion for his subjects that evoke similar sentiments in the audience.



Santhal women & Mother and Child | Jamini Roy

These paintings and their subject matter appears at an intermediate moment in the artist's trajectory when he had taken this first step away from his academic training and the Bengal School style, but had not yet fully absorbed the folk traditions of the pat painters of rural Bengal or their use of natural mineral and vegetable-based pigments.

A Santhal woman at the river with her water-pot – pausing, bending over to look at her reflection as she adjusts a flower in her hair, in the first painting; and a mother tenderly guiding her child in the second, are the first hints of stylization and simplification of figures that evolve in time, to his distinctive, sweeping angular and rounded lines – retaining but the essential emotion of the subject matter. The curvilinear posture of Sathal women as well as Mother and Child were in fact, recurring themes in the development of his oeuvre.



4. Celebration

Bild no. 33 (1915) | Jacoba van Heemskerck | Kunstmuseum

This painting by Jacoba van Heemskerck is, unlike her previous work, much more liberated.

Whereas she first derived greatly from cubism, opting for rigidity and order, Bild no. 33 displays a striking shift towards a more expressionist style.

Like her contemporaries Jan Toorop and Piet Mondriaan, she relies on vivid colors in her work. As an anthroposophist, Van Heemskerck believed that the use of striking and contrasting colors was the main way to capture the true spirit and emotion of the subject. The composition of this painting is skewed and unrealistic. However, it reflects a childlike carelessness and unbridled passion for painting. The sails of the ships wave triumphantly, creating a feeling of release and celebration.

She perceives the sea as a metaphor for the development of the human soul: the ships in the background are still fragile and small whereas the ones in the foreground are strong. The painter also expresses, according to her friend Marie Tak van Poortvliet, the 'unabashed celebration of free expression' in this work.



Boat | Amrita Sher-Gil

Echoing Jacoba's Sea with Ships, Amrita Sher-Gil's solitary, unadorned boat is seen untethered to the rather strict shoreline, against the depth of an abstracted world of reflections mirrored on the surface of the water. This early work, perhaps from her student years at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris in the early 30s, already heralds the artist's greatest artistic ambition: freedom to be and to express.

Music

The music of the third and fourth theme, Love and Celebration, is a continuous flow in Raga Manj Khamaj. The scene of love, and especially the love and compassion children evoke in the painter and audience alike, is the subject of the music. The music begins with an improvisation, *alap*, on the sitar showing the delicate vulnerability of love. The sitar then plays a strumming chord progression on which the theme of Love is played by the cello. A longing and sense of nostalgia is contained in this melody. The bridge to Celebration is made in a run through 3 octaves by the cello which announces a newly composed *dhun*, a folk like melody, in a celebration played by the sitar to the accompaniment of the cello and tabla. The *dhun* transits to a fast 16 beat cycle, *teental*, in which the artists celebrate playing music and instruments through fast improvisations and playing the Love theme in this new, celebratory musical setting and climaxing in a fast *tihai*, a pattern that is repeated three times.

5. Shoonya, Stillness

De Zee/*The Sea* (1887) | Jan Toorop | Rijksmuseum

This painting by Jan Toorop is a picture of the sea of Katwijk, where Toorop lived for a considerable amount of time. It seems that he was enchanted by the sea and wanted to translate the softness of the sea foam to the canvas. Here, his technique and play with pastels is reminiscent of the works of Vincent van Gogh. His use of the palette knife for this painting creates a depth and a tactile quality that makes you want to touch it. In the audience the leaves a sense of stillness best contained in the term, Shoonya, that part in oneself that is always filled with stillness.



Gaganendranath Tagore introduces a contemplative quality to his landscape predominated by vast skies, mighty rivers flowing into distant horizons and a pensive light. In this work he paints a row of trees and bushes standing as sentinels between the river and its bank, as if beckoning us to reach for its silences.

Music

The music of Shoonya is set to the meditative raga Bhimpalasi. It starts with a contemplative improvisation, alap, on the Indian cello followed by a melody on the sitar set to the accompaniment of a pizzicato, plucked, pattern on the cello and various tuned tablas showing the gentle flow of water and how it evokes a meditative state of mind and can induce Shoonya, the stillness that is always present within ourselves.

6. Fury

Vuurtoren in de branding/Lighthouse in Surf (ca. 1900-1907) | Hendrik Willem Mesdag | Rijksmuseum

Hendrik Willem Mesdag is well-known for his love and admiration for the sea. Many of his works showcase the different faces of the sea and a work by his hand had to feature in this concert. Though his seascapes mostly involved more quiet, idyllic beach scenes, this painting depicts the ruthlessness of the ocean. His quick brush strokes against the comparatively small man-made lighthouse expresses the ferocity of the waves against the coast. Here, the building looks insignificant against the wind-swept waves. The grey sky mirrors the depth and mysterious nature of the water and it shows us that, though we are the rulers of the land, we cannot tame the sea.



Nandalal Bose

Nandalal's masterful creation of depth and mystery in this moody watercolour of a night in the riverine landscapes of rural Bengal often seen in his prolific body of work—hides within its quiet—the unpredictability, instability, whimsicality, the unknowability of nature.



Music

The Musical piece Fury is set to the mysterious and haunting raga Simhendra Madyam. The piece begins with a free improvisation on the sitar avoiding the Sa (Tonic) and Pa (dominant) giving the listener a sense of unease. To the soft flowing, but slightly threatening pattern on the sitar, a gentle cello melody is placed. But the gentle melody is transformed to a more threatening and dangerous announcement of what is about to transpire. This movement is followed by a fast composition in 16 beats, teental, with improvisations on all three instruments to culminate into fast sections together and an explosive ending showing the strength and fury that water contains. The power of nature fills us with awe and respect.

Credits:

Song of Water was composed and conceived by **Pandit Shubhendra Rao and Maestro Saskia Rao de Haas**. Song of Water was made possible by the support of the **Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, the National Gallery of Modern Art in New Delhi, the Ministry of Culture of India, Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, Kunstmuseum in the Hague and the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterloo**.

Song of Water was curated in the Netherlands on the basis of the advice of **Dr Willem de Bruijn** by **Ms Myra Park**. The curators in India are **Shri Oron Das** with **Ms Meghna Vyas Arora**. Post concert, the guided tour provided by **Ms Sujata Prasad**.

We also would like to thank for their immeasurable support: **H.E. Marten van den Berg, Shri Adwaita Gadanayak, Mr Wicher Slagter, Ms Meenakshi Mahajan, Shri Deepak Samson, Modern Stage, Shri Sanjit Debroy, Ms Chandrika Raj** and the **entire team** at the **NGMA**.

The text for the program notes was written by: **Shri Oron Das, Ms Sujata Prasad, Ms Myra Park** and **Maestro Saskia Rao – de Haas**

