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Freedom within discipline

Sitar and zitar player Niladri Kumar turns music director, composing for Bollywood flick Shorgul and Kannada film Niruttara

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Young musical maverick Niladri Kumar has done it all – played classical music with greats like his father Karick Kumar, Zakir Hussain, and Pandit Jasraj, collaborated internationally with maestros like John McLaughlin. He's invented a five-stringed electric sitar called zitar, cut private albums. He's played his instruments for Bollywood biggies like A.R. Rahman, Vishal Bhardwaj, Shankar-Ehsaan-Loy on tracks in films like *Dil To Pagal Hai*, *Romy and Miso*, *Omkar*, *Dhoom 2*, *Bahubali*. This fifth generation sitar player has taken the next step and turned music director. He continues to innovate, with his maiden project. In the news is the track 'Tere Bin' for the Hindi film *Shorgul* where lawyer and former minister Kapil Sibal has penned lyrics, and underprivileged girls from Mumbai have sung the chorus for this Anirudh Singh song. In Bengaluru to launch the music for Kannada film *Niruttara*, he chats with *MetroPlus*. Excerpts:

Whether it's the sitar or zitar you're playing, what does your music mean to you?

At different times, at different places, playing for different people, it means different things. I don't know how I would feel if I didn't have the medium of music to express myself to the listener. If I'm playing for myself, when I'm alone, that's a different zone altogether. Lot of music-lovers would hear that zone. This is mostly difficult. The great Annapurna Devi, daughter of the great Ustad Allauddin Khan Sahab, was once asked by someone if they can sit in on her riyaz. She very bluntly and beautifully conveyed the message – she said riyaz is like taking a bath. You're cleaning your dirt away. It's not a good thing to come and listen and see. I agree – it's a very personal space. If you reach a level in life where audience and you are connected in such a way that you have the freedom to do what you want, that is the supreme stage of connectivity between a musician and his audience.

Why did you take up music direction in films?

This is the eventual path to reach, if you're working in the field of film music. That's where you have freedom to do what you want. I have worked as a musician (playing both the sitar and zitar), arranger, and ideator. My journey gave me the idea that you will always remain a musician at heart and you will think as a musician. But, it's important in today's time and age that you translate the music to reach out your voice through a medium to the masses. The best medium is films, fortunately or unfortunately. I didn't have the time or the mental space to run behind someone to bag a project. Whatever work came by, I did it. My producers may have things to say about my 'not-so-accommodating' attitude –

I'm not sure.

What was your experience composing for Apoorva Kasaravalli's Kannada film *Niruttara*?

I have to mention these two producers of *Niruttara* as out-of-the-box producers. It's not easy to come by producers who give you space. And sometimes for a music director, just the glint in the producer's eyes when they hear a song is impetus enough to take it somewhere. I got it in abundance in Bhavana and Arvind Ramanna. I treated each song individually and the album covers various genres – from hardcore-classical to the metal-rock gamut in keeping with the characters in the film, who are musicians. There are seven songs, and each has a story to tell on its own, but also works as an album.

Are there others playing the zitar?

Yes, but what happens in our country is that it's difficult for people to give credit. A lot of people are playing the electric instrument, which is essentially the zitar. When I started playing it, I received a lot of opposition. But more than that, they were stunned. I faced both reactions. Eventually it took 10 years to convince people that something is working in this route. It's great to see a lot of musicians picking this route.

They are rechristening them, but the essential principle is the same. I called mine the zitar for two reasons – the sitar can't get smaller than this, and it can't get any louder than this. The last alphabet is Z, and it's an inversion of the S!

You've collaborated with the likes of John McLaughlin. What do they come looking for in you when they seek a collaboration? Is it the Indian sound? Your musical capability?

With different people, different needs come. It's not for the exotic nature of the Indian instrument. McLaughlin is probably the greatest ambassador for Indian music in the West, through his collaborative work, whether for legendary bands Mahavishnu or Shakti. He probably is more deeply in love with Indian music than many Indian musicians. He understands the nuances. At the same time his perspective of Indian music will be very different because his exposure is different. When he looks at Indian musician, he's probably not looking at anything – he's open, firstly, if you're looking at anything specific, it means you're closed. I feel these great people come with an openness, and when they see a direction it's going in, they have the greatness to follow in that direction. They don't have a pre-fixed notion in the philosophical sense. When collaborating practically, of course there is a certain structure and note-phrasing. But the philosophy behind this structure is fluid and open. Only great masters like them have shown the path. It's a little bit like our raga music – it's that freedom within the discipline.

(Read the full interview on www.thehindu.com)

MAKING THE CONNECTION Film is one of the best ways for music to be heard, says Niladri. PHOTO: SUDHAKARA JAIN

