

# philharmonia orchestra

## **Guitarist Craig Ogden and Leicester-based sitar player Roopa Panesar in conversation.**

### **Craig Ogden, guitar**

So what is that on your finger there?

### **Roopa Panesar, sitar**

I'm actually wearing a wire plectrum called a *mizrab*, and we wear it on the first finger to do all of the plucking.

### **Craig Ogden, guitar**

Right, because one of the things that really defines classical guitar is the fact that we grow our fingernails for the purpose of plucking the strings. I mean that sounds really good.

### **Roopa Panesar, sitar**

That's quite nice.

### **Craig Ogden, guitar**

I've had a problem fingernail through the last year, and I've hunted around for various options and this might've...

*(He plays extract on guitar)*

But you couldn't play all the things we do with just the one. That's amazing.

### **Roopa Panesar, sitar**

Yeah, yeah, thank you.

### **Craig Ogden, guitar**

It's incredibly tight!

### **Roopa Panesar, sitar**

It is quite tight, yes.

### **Craig Ogden, guitar**

Does it permanently effect your...

### **Roopa Panesar, sitar**

It has, yes. Over the years the finger tends to change shape to cope with wearing it all the time..

### **Craig Ogden, guitar**

The concerto I'm playing with the Philharmonia starts...

*(He plays extract, strumming)*

with strumming. Is there an equivalent sort of effect? You can strum with the one finger?

**Roopa Panesar, sitar**

We strum with the one finger.

*(She demonstrates on the sitar)*

**Craig Ogden, guitar**

Wow. Because to do that we use all three of the fingers.

*(He demonstrates on the guitar)*

So how do you play rapid scale type things?

**Roopa Panesar, sitar**

Yeah, I mean we have a similar, sort of, we're moving along the left, with the left hand on the main string. But instead of moving across the strings, which you do in guitar, we tend to do all of the melody, most of the melody on this one string.

*(She plays the sitar)*

**Craig Ogden, guitar**

That's amazing the amount of movement in your first finger, cos we avoid too much of the moving.

**Roopa Panesar, sitar**

Moving consecutively, yeah.

*(Drone)*

So most of the training in sitar initially does involve practising scales you know, to become used to basically moving across this one melody string.

**Craig Ogden, guitar**

What would a starter scale be?

**Roopa Panesar, sitar**

The starter scale would be the natural, what we call the *sargam*. So it's equivalent to the *sol-fa* basically.

*(They play the scales)*

That's right. Yeah, so we would just basically grind those in the beginning.

*(She plays the scale)*

**Craig Ogden, guitar**

I can barely comprehend that.

*(He tries to play the scale with one finger)*

And you use your second finger at the top.

**Roopa Panesar, sitar**

Exactly.

*(He tries to play the scale with one finger)*

**Craig Ogden, guitar**

Oh no! That's brutal. That's so the total opposite of we do.

*(He plays the scale with all fingers.)*

Do it there in one position without moving the first finger. But that's amazing that you can do that. How quick do you ever have to do that sort of thing? I mean that was fast!

**Roopa Panesar, sitar**

Yeah. It can get a lot faster. So you know there's usually a progression in the performance. It starts off extremely slow with what we call an *alap*, an introduction which is played just by itself; I'm just playing with the drone in the background.

*(She plays an extract.)*

It can be slower. But it's basically a note by note progression where you're expanding and showing the melody, or what we call *raga*, the melodic framework. Then it builds up in pace and then we introduce composition, where a tabla player would be keeping a time cycle for us.

**Craig Ogden, guitar**

Does that equate to anything in Western music? When you say *time cycle* I think *bar* probably. Is that the best equivalent?

**Roopa Panesar, sitar**

It's similar, because we look at things in a cyclic way, so for example a very common time cycle is called *Tintal*, a 16 beat time cycle, and it's treated as four bars of four. Yeah, so a composition for example if I was to play a very basic thing in sixteen beats, I've even got an iPod application which can play the *tabla* for us.

**Craig Ogden, guitar**

Oh right! *(Laughs)* Who needs people!

**Roopa Panesar, sitar**

But if I demonstrate.

*(She demonstrates)*

So that just repeats itself and then as we progress, then we start to improvise, but the cycle is the fixed thing which gives us the reference, when to come back to one.

*(She plays on the Sitar)*

But it would build up, build up, and we would enter a section called the *jhala*, where we're basically using the drone strings to create rhythmic patterns.

*(She demonstrates)*

**Craig Ogden, guitar**

Amazing! You make the right hand look effortless. It looks like a fairly gentle up and down, but the left hand looks phenomenally virtuosic and spectacular to watch. It's the sort of thing that we classical musicians would spend hours in practice rooms, and I'm sure you do exactly the same, but just the methodically beating out those skills.

**Roopa Panesar, sitar**

Definitely, and I mean even the right hand, I mean thank you very much for saying it looks effortless.

**Craig Ogden, guitar**

You had this kind of really relaxed smile.

**Roopa Panesar, sitar**

I've practiced that! But it is actually very difficult but obviously with time, like yourself I mean you know you execute the most difficult of things, but it's taken you a lot of time.

**Craig Ogden, guitar**

Yeah, it's a lifetime spent acquiring those skills.

*(Drone)*

The nice thing about having that drone going is that it's in D, and the first movement of the piece the *concerti de Aranjuez* that I'm playing is in D, so it starts there.

*(He plays an extract)*

So by there, when it ends up here, with an E minor chord, then our traditions part company. Because I guess one of the defining thing about Western Classical music is it roams through keys and harmonies as it's key tool for creating variety and interesting character. But it's the same things but in a different way.

And then the very famous, the most famous piece or movement from the concerto is the...

**Roopa Panesar, sitar**

I'll just switch that off for you. *(She turns of the drone in the background)*

**Craig Ogden, guitar**

*(Laughs)* the tabla in the corner, that's fine! It starts in B minor and moves through various keys. And then there's the...

*(He plays short extract)*

That would sound great on sitar.

*(They play together)*

Yeah. Great ears! Spot on.

Rodrigo has managed to write incredibly characterful and varied openings. This is really evocative. I have to say, it starts *piano* and is incredibly hard to do that, really quiet. At the beginning of the piece you're always a little bit nervous at the beginning of the concert. And a real annoyance for me would be to miss one of the chords. So you end up with...

*(He demonstrates)*

And then the slow movement with this very famous...

*(He plays short extract)*

And that has a little drone from the double basses, and then a beautiful melody from the cor anglais. And then, that's great variety as well. So I don't know, I think as you were saying, anyone who's familiar with and enjoys Indian classical music, I wouldn't perceive any barrier at all in terms of going to appreciate a Western classical concert, anymore than I would in coming to see you play, which I will make a mission of doing now.

**Roopa Panesar, sitar**

Thank you! I look forward to seeing you playing the Concerto.

**Craig Ogden, guitar**

Can you come to this concert?

**Roopa Panesar, sitar**

I will definitely come.

**Craig Ogden, guitar**

Oh brilliant, that'll be fabulous.

**Roopa Panesar, sitar**

Definitely, thank you.

End