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Global Beat Fusion: Philip Glass to Cinematic Sufis

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Few names raise eyebrows in the music world as Philip Glass. A constant innovator and diverse composer, the man's work ranges from the obscure to well-known and beloved projects, most of those in the broader public eye thanks to film scores, including the highly influential *Koyaanisqatsi* and the award winning composition created for *The Truman Show*.

String quartet [Brooklyn Rider](#) pulls from one of his lesser known cinematic works, *Bent*, a beloved theatrical piece focused on three homosexual men fighting persecution in pre-Nazi Germany turned into a film in 1997.

Opening disc one of the double-album, *Brooklyn Rider Plays Philips Glass* (Orange Mountain Music), the eight movements are exquisitely rendered by the two-violin/viola/cello group that initially made its mark on the gorgeous 2008 collaboration with Iran kamancheh master, Kayhan Kalhor, *Silent City*.

The quartet follows with six pieces from "String Quartet No. 3," originally written for the Kronos Quartet for the 1985 film *Mishima*. Based on the life of the Japanese Nobel Prize author Yukio Mishima, Brooklyn Rider's interpretation of Glass's tense, melancholic vision (Mishima committed ritual suicide by sticking a sword in his stomach in speaking out against his government) is a cathartic and delicate masterpiece. The group's work on two chamber pieces also composed for Kronos, "String Quartet No. 4" and "String Quartet No. 5," is equally delightful. Once again, these four young musicians are proving themselves to be among the most fearless in the classical world today.

I've talked with Brooklyn Rider violinist Johnny Gandelman on a few occasions. He is not confined to classical music; his tastes are rather broad, which helps explain his quartet's hunger for experimentation. Gandelman is also acutely aware of the necessity of grassroots promotion and community support. He started In A Circle Records to keep fellow musicians playing and producing, releasing the exceptional Silk Road Ensemble album, *Off the Map*, which received a Grammy nomination in the tellingly titled Classical Crossover category.

His latest release is by solo guitarist [Jon Mendle](#), *L'Infidèle*. The subtitle, "18th century music played on 11-string

Archguitar," tells you this is not your ordinary acoustic music. The 12 songs come from three composers -- Adam Falckenhagen, Carl Philip Emanuel Bach and Sylvius Leopold Weiss, whose "Entrée" you can watch below. Suffice it to say, the entire album is as stunning and textured as this performance.

From the classical world of cinema and performance, we travel a half-day by airplane to a completely other form of movie music: Bollywood. Today associated with flashy pussycat dolls and pimped-up pop stars, there is still a strong connection to roots music in the film industry. The two-disc collection, *Sufis at the Cinema* (Times Square Records), covers the past 60 years with a healthy emphasis on qawwali, the focal and vocal sound of Sufi culture.

Mohd Rafi, most famous for his '70s era funk-drenched Bollywood sound, is fascinating alongside Balbir on 1958's, "Aaj Kyon Humse Parda Hai." There is a strong distinction between devotional qawwali, and the mainstream-oriented filmi version, which you can hear on the dramatic but amazing contribution by Lata Mangeshkar on 1960's "Teri Mehfil Mein Kismat Azmakar" (which you can watch below).

Undoubtedly, the most famous Sufi name on the planet, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, makes three appearances on this 25-track collection. "Haq Ali" is a shortened qawwali, though true to traditional form the song features only vocals, handclaps, harmonium and tablas. Ali Khan is pure fire on this version, from the 1981 film *Nakhuda*. When he returns in the late '90s, two songs recorded shortly before his death are the side of Nusrat you don't need to hear. His collaborations with the likes of Michael Brook and Eddie Vedder were exceptional ambassadorial fusions with masterful artists; this electro-Indian sound is the product of a direction that Bollywood didn't need to go, but did.

Fortunately, this compilation ends in the 2000s, and both tracks by the Wadali Brothers are solid (albeit "Darda Marya" is a bit overdramatic). Nusrat's nephew, Rahat, who has scored big in the film industry lately, closes this fine collection with the gentler, ballad side of qawwali, on "Mann Ki Lagan" and "Jiya Dhadak Dhadak Jaye." These do not represent Rahat's finest musical moments either, but what can we expect from the movies? They were never intended to be real life, and when dealing with the enormous budgets and over-the-top story lines of Bollywood, we can't expect them to be. Disc One is a classic; on Two, pick and choose.

Bollywood may be India's biggest musical export these days, but the classical tradition is still going strong, especially when the land's premier artists seek new forms of collaboration. For example, consider Scotland: It is not surprising to learn that [Scottish Chamber Orchestra](#) conductor David Murphy is a huge fan of Ravi Shankar, given his recent work with master sarod player [Amjad Ali Khan](#).

On *Samaagam* (World Village), the two men have created a masterful work akin to Pandit Shankar's work alongside Philip Glass and Yehudi Menuhin. Not that this new recording is sonically similar to those exceptional records; the comparison lies in the idea of weaving Indian and Western classical music together, which Ali Khan and Murphy have nailed on this 16-track album.

The first three songs are shortened versions of traditionally played ragas, including a gorgeous rendition of the popular "Bhairavi," as well as the well-known "Bhupali." Twenty-three minutes in begins the thirteen movements of "Samaagam," where Ali Khan delicately blends his sarod into a rapturous serenade of strings. Murphy has taken close notes at what to do when bringing these cultures together; in the end, all the musicians have together created a record of great value and beauty.

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