

Asia-Europe Cultural Festival Podcast Series Transcript

Podcast #2: Vignesh Melwani

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Grey Yeoh

Hello and welcome to the Asia-Europe Cultural Festival podcast series, a new initiative by the Asia-Europe foundation (ASEF), where we speak to artists from Asia and Europe, who have been involved in our festivals in the past. My name is Grey Yeoh and I am the Project Manager with the Culture Department here at ASEF. And I'm also the host of this podcast series. I am a Malaysian man in my 30s with mid-length black hair, and I use the he/him pronouns.

A little bit about the Asia-Europe Cultural Festival to set some context. The Asia-Europe Cultural Festival is a public arts festival, which celebrates the artistic expression and cultural diversity from Asia and Europe. The festival serves as a platform for showcasing brilliant artistic endeavours, while offering a stage for dialogue and knowledge sharing among the arts and cultural communities from the two regions. The Asia-Europe Foundation, in partnership with the European Union co-organises this annual festival.

As mentioned at the top of the episode, we will be delving a little bit deeper into what makes a cultural festival tick, the people at the very heart of it, the artists. And I will be speaking with a few artists who have been involved in our festival in the past few years. Today, we will be speaking with Vignesh Melwani, a musician artist based in Barcelona, Spain. Vignesh. Welcome to the show.

Vignesh Melwani

Thank you, Grey.

Grey

Let's start off by you telling us about who you are, what you do. And yeah, just a little bit of your background.

Vignesh

So, my name is Vignesh Melwani, I'm 27 years old. I'm from Barcelona, Spain, of Indian parents, although I'm born here in Spain. I happen to be a singer, musician. Currently, I'm publishing my first album, which is an album called 'Improvivals'. It's like a gathering of songs that were born from improvisations and different moments of intimacy where I found in sitting on the piano, and improvising, singing and playing the piano, kind of reflection of my inner world. And this kind of felt like the most honest and first project that I could actually portray.

Grey

Vignesh, maybe you can start by sharing with us how did you get into this field of, you know, making music? What was your background? Did you train as a musician? What was your practice, like?

Vignesh

As I said, my family is Indian origin, although they've been living in many parts of the world. And now there's been more than half of their life here in Barcelona. As something that is already part of Indian culture, music is very rooted in the daily practice, not just listening, but also singing. And given my case, also, there's a spiritual environment has had me singing since I was very, very, very, very young. And having this on a weekly basis, I just started to develop my musical ear.

At some point, someone saw that I was kind of playing songs on the piano by ear without having any training. So, they recommended me to start learning music properly. So, I started at the age of seven to learn classical piano. That brought me to the conservatory to study classical piano. Currently, I'm still

actually doing my last and fifth year of the higher conservatory in modern and jazz vocals. Having also done a course in Hindustani vocals at the KM (Music) Conservatory in Madras, or Chennai in India. And of course, I mean, I'm in Spain now. So, the Spanish music, Mediterranean music, Catalan Music has always been surrounding me. And I've always been surrounded by musicians going to jam sessions. At some point, I started doing concerts and I ended up at the Asia-Europe Cultural Festival at some point, which I'm really happy about.

Grey

That's really amazing. I think, you know, you spoke a lot about your background with an Indian ancestry in practice that really inspire you, but also a lot about, you know, your Spanish upbringing and how the two blend together. Maybe talk to me a little bit more about how those two parts of your identity actually translate to your work. You mentioned some of the music beats Carnatic music that you also mentioned about this Spanish influence how did you think that these two actually form your music making identity?

Vignesh

It's not that common that being from Indian descent and other foreign country that you preserve the culture or you preserve the language. But fortunately, and I'm just saying as a personal opinion, on my case, I'm quite grateful that my parents really brought me up with that culture, with the language, I was surrounded by that music. I had grown singing in many languages, actually, not just Indian, not just Sanskrit, which is the most common language used for bhajans, but also Spanish, also Catalan. I already developed intercultural way of doing music. Having grown with so many cultural references, like not just Spanish, not just the whole North American industries, influences in music and films, but also Bollywood, you know.

So there's always been a lot of creative inputs, lots of musical artistic inputs, surrounding me, I think that really shows in something that I'm really interested in personally and artistically, which are the gamakas. Gamaka are how, when you sing, you do some other intonations. In Western culture, when you sing a melody, usually the melodies are more kind of straight lines more linear, how the harmonies had become a goal for the Western music. So, the focus has always been in the melody. And that's the case of Indian music. So, it happens to me that I've always grown singing in our Indian way, but in Spanish language or in Catalan language, and then having to fit into the moulds of the conservatory is what I've studied. It was always like, a little clash you know, but then I will just adapt.

When I had to play classical piano, that was one mindset. But slowly, slowly, I just started to realize that there is a way to gather all of them. And precisely this project that I've recorded 'Improvisuals', is for me, like a very nice summary of all these influences, in just one way of doing the songs. Like the songs that I've recorded in this album, just like the same songs that I had portrayed in the Asia-Europe Cultural Festival, last November. It's really significant culturally for me, because it really gathers all these influences in one, and I really feel identified with them in my cultural diversity.

Grey

That's really fascinating to hear you explain a little bit about your process. And you mentioned the album 'Improvisuals' at the last Asia-Europe Cultural Festival. Do you mind talking to me a bit about your experience at the festival and what was the reaction of the audiences?

Vignesh

Sure festival, just wanted to mention that I was lucky not to go alone. In this festival, I went with double bassist and singer called Carla Gonzáles Ferrer. She's a Catalan musician who works in many different bands have many different styles. But she really vibrated with these gamakas, I was telling you know. She had also been to India before studied a couple of weeks of Indian music. And when we got to know each other more musically, we kind of really connected and I really felt that this project, at least in the in the live performances, needed that base language, that musical language that she could actually add in. So, we actually portrayed it as a duet, and it was really amazing.

[excerpt of 'Pa dha ni dha ga pa' plays for about 20 seconds]

Vignesh

And then the festival was a completely amazing experience as well. Having the first chance to portray my music out of the country, out of Spain, you know, was kind of like feeling home because I've already had the chance to feel connected to worldwide diaspora, you know. I have actually family in Singapore, I have family in Hong Kong, I also have family in the States, you know. And I've already felt like it's not just that I'm Spanish or Sindhi or Indian. I do feel like a world citizen but it in this case, I really feel Barcelonean, its word that I feel really summarizes properly.

And yeah, the experience at the festival was amazing for that reason really felt like home. And the reactions were really nice, especially some people that have listened to Western music before and they really felt connected or Asian music, not to say Indian, really amaze them. Especially, actually the Executive Director of ASEF, Toru Morikawa had the most warm feedback. I'm like, really thankful for what he came to me and said. He was like, amazed on how to mix the western classical piano with Indian singing. And I really felt grateful to have been able to portray this music and that it was so fit to the cause of this festival.

Grey

That's amazing. Can you talk to us a little bit about your album? You know, I know that you said that a few of the music pieces have now been turned into a full-fledged album. Tell us a little bit more about this album.

Vignesh

So, the album's name, first of all, 'Improvisuals' comes from a word that I invented when I was a teenager studying classical piano, which is the word improvisualization. So it's a mix of improvisation and visualization, right. As a singer, I've always thought that singing is my interpersonal communication tool. But the piano, although I sometimes I don't like to consider myself a pianist, piano is for me, like a intrapersonal communication tool. Works as a mirror for me to kind of view more clearly my inner world in an abstract way, not in a figurative way, as we say, here in Spain.

And in the same way, in the past years, with many things going on now the pandemic happened. Many pieces were born out of the same process. Singing and playing the piano. This album is a gathering of seven pieces out of all these improvisations that I might have done, which were different moments throughout these two, three years, where I would just sit on the piano, do an improvisation, and maintain the piece just the way they were born. Which is actually a way for me all to, to be very honest to myself. And as I said earlier, it was the most honest music that I could actually share. This just felt the most honest thing that I could do. And that actually gathered all of these together.

So, the album actually is recorded more like in a solo way to maintain that intimate way in which the pieces were born. In one piece, which is the single that was first published on the 3rd of March [2023], which is called 'Pa dha ni dha ga pa'. I of course had to at least in one piece, get the collaboration of Carla González Ferrer. Because after all, the live concerts are done in a duet with her and she's already part of this project in a very deeply rooted way.

[excerpt of 'Pa dha ni dha ga pa' plays for another 30 seconds]

Grey

We're coming to the end of the recording now. And I wanted to ask you a question about the wider Asia Europe cultural relations you know you being a person who has both Asia and Europe you embody that that two cultures. So, I wonder what you thought about what's going on with Asia and Europe today? What are your thoughts and do you think you know we should either maintain or whether we should increase connections between the artists from Asia and Europe?

Vignesh

Totally. Actually, during the festival, I was asked a similar question. And this very first thought that came into my mind was, of course, regarding my field, which is music. Because of geopolitical reasons, the main musical industry is based in North America's music, which also is a whole mix of cultures, after all. It has the European and African and American culture gathered together. And that has become quite of the basis of the musical industry.

But at the same time, for my personal backgrounds, I really feel there's a lot of rich and diverse music being done from people that connect musical influences from Europe and Asia, not just me, but many more others. In the sense, I of course, need to mention one of my main musical references, which is Nitin Sawhney, is a London-born musician, but his parents are also Indian. And of course, his way of doing music has always gathered this.

And in a more bigger terms, I happen to actually connect with, with ASEF, naturally through Casa Asia, which is a Spanish institution that we have in Spain, that dynamises has lots of relations with Asia, creates activities to get the Asian culture more known here in Spain. But at the same time, connecting Asian descendant people with local population. As for example, in activities like the choir of Casa Asia. I happen to be the piano player of this choir that already has 10 years of history. And I'm just mentioning this as a very particular case, right. But seeing how people from all different backgrounds, not just Spanish, not just Asian, singing different songs in Chinese, in Hindi, in many different languages, also, in Catalan, also other songs. I just feel that this is kind of the way that we should kind of mingle and share with each other, our cultural backgrounds without the hierarchy, that geopolitical frame has set.

And so of course, I feel that the Europe Asia Culture needs to strengthen a lot, but also kind of changing this hierarchy that has, unfortunately been for geopolitical reasons for our post-colonial reasons. Yes. Does that answer your question?

Grey

Yeah, it does. Vignesh it was really lovely to speak to you today about your work, your background, your identity, you know, and thank you so much for being on this episode of the Asia-Europe Cultural Festival podcast series. We will share the Spotify link of your album. Congratulations on launching it.

Vignesh

Thank you, Grey.

Grey

And listeners do keep a lookout for our next episode of the podcast where we will speak to yet another artists who was involved in a festival in one way or another. This is Grey Yeoh, Project Manager at the Asia-Europe Foundation Culture Department signing off. Thank you for listening and goodbye.