

**NITIN SAWHNEY**  
**THE IVOR NOVELLO ESSAYS**  
**THE EVOLUTION OF THE COMPOSER/SONGWRITER**

As a composer/ songwriter I've always believed there's a line running a delicate balance between expression and communication. On one extreme of expression you have pure catharsis – Music spawned from bizarre catatonic visions, strummed over ridiculous time signatures as an extra two fingers up at the world. On the other extreme of communication you have commercialism in all its vulgarity - Popularity at any cost – the soulless progeny of some reality TV nightmare – Vacuous music designed to infest the most resilient corners of your mind with discordant hooks too catchy to ignore.

Unassumingly, in between the two outermost points of that line, resides the aspiring artist, highly stressed by record company deadlines, desperate to sip at the "Holy Grail" - an alluring vessel that promises both artistic credibility and commercial success - A cup within which the elixir of fulfilment guarantees that compromise submits to independence.

A small number of artists have managed to achieve that dream as it takes a great deal of skill and luck to navigate the unforgiving depths of both critical and popular recognition, let alone personal integrity. Those who have retained their identity and integrity, whilst achieving universal acclaim, financial success and enduring popularity, almost inevitably become legends. From Bob Dylan to Bob Marley, The Beatles to Radiohead, Ravi Shankar to Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, Mozart (posthumously) to Ennio Morricone, the chosen few have managed to get the balance just right.

Now, technological progress has created a double- edged sword for potential new musical icons. On one hand, the advance of online facilities such as "youtube" or "myspace" has made the search for abiding talent far more manageable in contemporary Britain and across the world. On the other hand, the unprotected borders of cyberspace threaten to leave creative artists with their hard-earned rights in tatters.

To put this all in perspective, since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, European composers have evolved from a status historically equivalent with performers to a position elevated by the development of music publishing and copyright protection laws. Nowadays, even if you are not signed to a major publishing

company, such as EMI or Warners, Independent publishers or, ultimately, the Performing Rights Society can protect your rights.

Although composers from many parts of the world – India for example – still lack those basic rights and make their living directly from commissions alone, composers globally have enjoyed a vast improvement in their fortunes over the last century or so. The rise and astronomical success of the recording industry has had much to do with those fortunes. However, over the last decade, the evolution of new media along with the faltering kismet of record companies have inspired many composers to look further afield than the traditional outlets for musical expression.

Composers are now looking to break through time-honoured boundaries rather than conform to them. Musical genres themselves are becoming increasingly irrelevant in the online renaissance. Against the open floodgates of downloadable or streaming possibility, it is too restrictive for composers to cling on to dogmatic definitions of genre-based categorization.

Those who think of themselves purely as Jazz, blues, reggae, dubstep, drum and bass, soul, hip hop etc. artists find themselves competing for commercial attention with some of music's greatest legends. This is far more so as back catalogue becomes readily available online. Innovation and versatility are the new demands on modern writers.

Of course, the perception that musical genres are pure in the first place carries little artistic validity. Many musical categories are inventions of convenience designed to box artists into an inescapable corner for easy packaging. Even the notion that classical music, for instance, is a pure concept in isolation from the commercial world has become increasingly redundant. It could be argued that modern classical icons such as Shostakovich owed as much to the film world and popular music as he ever did to Mahler, Berg or Mussorgsky and staff notation is necessarily commonplace across a range of musical forms worldwide.

Similarly, categories in the pop world pay little heed to cultural dynamics. In the late 90's I found myself being labelled as an "Asian Underground" artist by journalists and retailers alike. My argument that reducing multicultural creativity to a fad or fashion was a myopic perception, bordering on racism, largely culminated in my album "Beyond Skin" in 1999. Ironically, when that album received a mercury nomination in 2000, I found the album segregated from the other nominees and placed under "World Music" in the racking of a well-known retailer. When, unannounced, I asked the shop manager why my album wasn't placed with the other nominees he replied stubbornly "Nitin Sawhney sells out of World Music" and walked away.

Such frustrating events subsequently forced me to reconsider my approach to music.

Within the last few years I've found myself progressively writing predominantly orchestral music for international films, television, videogames and other albums as well as dance projects, symphonic commissions and theatre. Each experience is about language – developing unique soundscapes to represent ideas – psychological or emotional exploration of frequencies, wherein expression and communication coexist at a point of desired equilibrium.

The development of specific language is indeed a focal point of compositional technique and such a technique perhaps demands a symbiotic relationship with the outside world. I would argue that experience and social engagement provide far greater nourishment for the imagination than creative solitude. A few years back I found that having a Dj residency at "Fabric" was as musically constructive as any amount of time I have spent in isolated piano or guitar practice.

The fact that many composers, classical or otherwise, spent a great deal of their childhood either practicing or dreaming on their own makes them unlikely collaborators. However, given the potency of music as a language it has the same storytelling power of any film. Actually when it comes to orchestral commissions, for instance, I often make the analogy of commissioner as producer, composer as scriptwriter, conductor as director and orchestra as the assembled cast, instilling emotion into the veracity of each line through the conviction of their performance. In this respect composers, however isolated they may be, are part of a collaborative process.

In the world of popular music, collaboration, even between composers, is commonplace – From Lennon and McCartney to Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff of Philadelphia International, there are countless examples of songwriters working together. Recently, the BBC Electric Proms have based their events on encouraging collaboration, culminating in evenings such as Africa Express, where musicians from Africa jammed at Camden Roundhouse with pop icons of the western world.

Such multicultural collaboration has always excited my imagination.

When I was a teenager I remember my enthusiasm at the idea of Yehudi Menuhin and Ravi Shankar's collaboration on the 1967 album "West meets East". The very fact of its existence was a deep revelation of possibility as I had such a strong interest in both western and Indian classical music.

Poignantly, I was privileged enough to compose a piece a couple of years back with Ravi Shankar's daughter, Anoushka, where we explored the relationship between western harmony and Indian raag in an orchestral piece called Charu Keshi Rain, which we performed at both the traditional BBC Proms in 2007 and the Electric Proms last year. That collaboration was perhaps one of the most fulfilling of my career to date.

My appetite for such alliances has only increased over time. Working with the international choreographer Akram Khan on "Zero Degrees", Complicite's theatrical director Simon McBurney on "A Disappearing number " or writing songs with Paul McCartney, Imogen Heap and Natty on my last album have also been personal highlights. This year and next I look forward to further collaborations with the London Symphony Orchestra, The Royal Opera House, Ninja Theory, Deepa Mehta and Salman Rushdie, amongst many others.

For me, these partnerships are nourishment for my adamant belief that the holy grail of integrity with commercial success lies in recognising the capacity of music for evolution. Ultimately, music is the language of humanity – capable of offsetting the nationalistic political boundaries of a turbulent world through its universal expression.

Unfortunately, most composers I know are, by nature, pretty introspective. For me too, the art of composition used to be a solitary affair – With the outside world as an unwelcome distraction.

But now... the world has changed. Internet piracy, the credit crunch and dying record companies bring new pressures to bear on dreams of compositional autonomy. Composers are being forced to accommodate a new outlook, where safe bets are yesterday's dream.

At a time when unlikely nations and governments are being forced together in a bid to stem the tides of global recession and social instability, innovative musical collaborations may likewise hold the key to that elusive holy grail. New possibilities for composers to reach across oceans to embrace the work of fellow writers, or other interdisciplinary artists around the world, may be the answer to breathe new life into the art of composition and, for the angst-ridden songwriter huddled in the corner of his/her bedroom, perhaps even the art of living itself.

**'Taken from /an excerpt from the Ivor Novello Essays published by The British Academy of Songwriters, Composers and Authors in association with PRS for Music. The Ivor Novello Awards took place on Thursday 21<sup>st</sup> May. Further essays can be viewed at [www.basca.org.uk](http://www.basca.org.uk)**