

Balancing Tradition: Indian Classical Instrumental Music and The Interest of Generation Z

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Abstract

Indian classical instrumental music has always been a respected art, built on many centuries of tradition, practice, and dedication. But today, a new group of young artists is shaping its future. These Gen Z musicians in India are curious, creative, and connected to the world. They are mixing tradition with technology, combining heritage with modern trends, and presenting ragas through digital platforms, while taking Indian classical music to international stages.

Spotify playlists to music festivals around the world, Indian classical instrumental music is reaching global listeners more than ever before. At the heart of this change is Generation Z — updating the style and presentation of the music while keeping its original values and roots alive.

The paper studies how young musicians are changing the way they perform, present, and promote Indian classical instrumental music, while keeping its basic elements like raga, tala, and improvisation. It also explains how social media, music streaming apps, and international festivals help this music reach more people around the world. By looking at how tradition and modern interests are balanced, the study shows that Indian classical instrumental music is growing and changing, but keeping its true identity.

Introduction

“When senior artists perform at all the sabhas it closes the door for the next generation, to keep Gen Z’s interest in classical music, to make every generation connect the dots, we have to keep things interesting. Otherwise, you lose them and they also lose; it works both ways.”, L. Subramaniam, the second highest civilian award, the Padma Vibhushan in 2025.

According to him, during the Margazhi Music Season, performances tend to be highly traditional, and audience numbers have declined compared to 30 years ago. The issue is not that existing listeners are leaving, but that new audiences with different interests are not being attracted.

Similar challenges were faced by Western symphony orchestras, which revived public interest by collaborating with popular artists and introducing diverse programs. This approach brought new listeners to classical music. In the same way, fusion works like Conversations by

L. Subramaniam have drawn fresh audiences to South Indian classical concerts. Therefore, thoughtful innovation is necessary to sustain and expand the audience base.

Such experiments are taking place nowadays by providing opportunities to the younger generation (Gen Z). As the result, Gen Z is giving new life to Indian classical instrumental music by combining traditional ragas with modern styles such as electronic, lo-fi, jazz, and hip-hop. This creative fusion is producing a flexible, cross-genre musical sound that appeals to diverse audiences. Young artists are also using social media platforms like Instagram reels and YouTube to make classical music more accessible and relatable. Through short

performances and digital content, they highlight emotional expression, originality, and a sincere connection to cultural roots, while presenting the tradition in a contemporary and engaging way.

Interestingly, several Indian performers who found success on America's Got Talent have been young artists — teenagers and Gen Z musicians who fuse Indian classical traditions with international musical influences. They uphold tradition with confidence while presenting it through a refreshed, contemporary lens. This seamless integration of legacy and experimentation has resonated strongly with global audiences. From soloists grounded in Carnatic training to instrumentalists who reimagine age-old ragas with innovative arrangements, these musicians serve as cultural emissaries of India's musical legacy on an international platform. Their appearances have sparked renewed curiosity and enthusiasm for Indian classical studies, extending beyond national boundaries to listeners worldwide.

Why is India's Gen Z so fascinated with ragas?

Today's world is full of fast-changing music trends and modern sounds. Because of this, many people once thought Indian classical music would slowly disappear. Some even believed it was old-fashioned, only for elite audiences, and not relevant anymore.

However, classical music has proved these ideas wrong. Instead of fading away, it has adapted and evolved. Musicians are presenting it in fresh and creative ways, making it more appealing to young listeners. Even though Gen Z is often seen as disconnected from tradition, many young people are now rediscovering and appreciating classical music. This revival shows that Indian classical music is timeless. It has the power to connect different generations and remain meaningful even in a modern world.

What is driving this growing fascination with the sounds of the sitar and tabla? The reason lies in the core nature of Indian classical music — its enduring quality. The phrase “classical music” suggests an art form that is not limited to any one period of time. Unlike songs that are closely tied to a specific trend or decade, classical compositions move beyond time, expressing feelings that connect with people across generations.

Ishaan Ghosh

https://youtube.com/shorts/ThJ1o9JUM_Q?si=Vm6-XIHOrn8VkUdO

This video showcases how a Gen Z musician is blending traditional and modern music: Artists like Ishaan Ghosh (24) are pioneering this shift, with his band 'Araj' fusing tabla with tech. Organizations like The Taal Tribe are also making the art form more engaging for younger audiences.

Rishabh Rikhiram Sharma

<https://youtu.be/WAfbGwP74Kw?si=eI7V3UXo5uf53wHH>

Young sitarist Rishabh Rikhiram Sharma at the age of 22 years. His fusions based on ragas are spreading globally.

The Fusion Movement: Redefining Musical Boundaries

The contemporary surge in Indian classical fusion represents far more than a passing trend; it signals a transformative shift in artistic expression. Emerging Gen Z musicians are recontextualizing traditional ragas by integrating them with diverse global genres, including trap and lo-fi rhythms, Western classical symphonic structures, as well as indie and ambient soundscapes.

Digital streaming platforms such as Spotify, Apple Music, and YouTube Music have played a pivotal role in amplifying this movement. Curated playlists—often titled “Indian Classical Reinvented” or “Fusion Lounge”—actively showcase these experimental works, granting young artists unprecedented visibility.

Unlike previous generations that depended heavily on traditional record labels, today’s musicians can directly access global audiences through digital distribution. This expanded reach has facilitated cross-cultural collaborations and generated professional pathways that were virtually unavailable a decade ago, positioning Indian classical fusion within a dynamic international framework.

Spotify data from the past two years shows that listening to Indian classical music in India has increased by nearly 500%. This growth is largely driven by young listeners, with over 45% of the audience on the platform being under the age of 25.

CNBC-TV18 caught up with young musicians to understand the appeal of classical music among Gen Z.

Expanding Career Pathways for Emerging Musicians

For students and aspiring musicians, this transformation marks a significant turning point. Indian classical music is no longer limited to traditional sabhas or academic platforms; it has entered a broader global arena. With access to digital production tools, social media networks, and worldwide audiences, young musicians now have diverse opportunities to shape independent careers.

They can establish themselves as digital creators who present classical music in innovative formats, cultivate distinct personal brands through performance and pedagogy, and engage in virtual concerts or cross-border collaborations. Additionally, they can explore avenues such as licensing their work to music sync libraries for films, advertisements, and digital media.

Recognizing this shift, contemporary music institutions are redesigning their curricula. Many academies now integrate classical training with modules in audio technology, digital marketing, and global music studies, equipping students with both artistic depth and professional versatility.

Conclusion:

Tradition Growing Through New Ideas.

Indian classical instrumental music is not disappearing — it is changing and growing. Because of the creative and confident approach of Gen Z musicians in India, traditional music is becoming popular, relevant, and globally recognized once again.

If students or parents are unsure about the future of classical music, the answer is simple: it has a strong and promising future. With the rise of modern interpretations of Indian classical music, young artists are not only protecting their musical heritage but also presenting it in new ways to audiences around the world.

In a time when music trends change rapidly and audiences constantly seek new and modern sounds; many would expect Indian classical music to lose its relevance. It has often been labelled as elite, old-fashioned, and disconnected from today’s generation. However, despite these assumptions, classical music has continued to prove its strength. True to its timeless nature, it has adapted and evolved, using creative approaches to attract and engage younger listeners.

Reference

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