

Singing Along to Benaras's Classical Music Traditions

A first-timer in the holy city gets an intimate taste in four cosy neighbourhood cafés.

FOOD + DRINK

UTTAR PRADESH

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    The Brown Bread Bakery, Anshuman Maharaj and Ram Mishra entertain patrons on the sarod and tabla respectively. Photo by: Jerry Boeki

In Benaras, music is everywhere.

It trickles out of the gently lapping waves of the Ganga, from the city's 84 *ghats* and the chaotic streets choked with autorickshaws, motorcycles, cows; and from the ancient houses that have accommodated generations of musicians. Hindustani music is one of the city's most time-honoured traditions; chances are there's an exponent in nearly every family. For the aficionado versed in every alap and raga, Benaras offers abundant cultural enrichment, from the Sankat Mochan Music Festival and Dhrupad Mela to Ganga Mahotsav, which are among the more popular concerts held here. But to the uninitiated listener, these gatherings could feel daunting and even monotonous. Not to mention, tickets to the more high-profile evenings sell out in advance.

During my maiden trip to the city a few months ago, I was struck by how steeped its classical music culture was. I was sojourning there as a volunteer, helping curious backpackers navigate their way around. On many of my aimless walks through its winding gullies, I acquainted myself with the city's cafés that always seemed to be teeming with tourists.

For a newbie, these are ideal venues to experience classical music. Amidst a steady throng of hippies and hipsters, most cafés offer intimate live music evenings for free. The musicians here are more accessible, the small venues are informal and exude the feel of your own private concert.


Ganga Fuji Restaurant

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Jugalbandis between Bipin Mishra and Pandit Anil Prasanna are a big hit with diners at Ganga Fuji. Photo by: Harry Boeki

People come to Benaras because it's old and that's the charm. Nobody wants to see new things here. So we give our guests a taste of old Hindustani classical music," says Kailash Prajapati, owner of Ganga Fuji restaurant. Its homely vibe derives from a cosy set-up consisting of a basement arrangement that accommodates guests and a mezzanine floor that turns into a makeshift stage for two musicians.

Along the white-tiled walls of the café are framed paintings of Benaras with notes from travellers. Prajapati, 55, started the café in 1988 and two years later, it was hosting daily live Hindustani classical performances. One of the Ganga Fuji's stars is Bipin Mishra, 65, who has been playing the tabla here for 22 years. Mishra's family has a longstanding connection to the café as his older brother performed here before him. Flautist Pandit Anil Prasanna, 35, is his father-in-law. The latter has been performing here for five years. Prasanna and Mishra hail from families devoted to music and seamlessly incorporate the orthodox with the new. Their repertoire includes ragas like Shivranjani, Rupak, and Pahadi. Listeners who can catch Prasanna's plaintive rendition of "Aaoge Jab Tum" from *Jab We Met* are in for a treat.

Ganga Fuji's popularity with Western tourists is well known. It is reflected in the food, which includes Spanish and Japanese fare—some are recipes shared by visitors from these countries. Try the *egg yakisoba* (stir fry soba noodles with egg) and *om rice* (omelette and fried rice, topped with ketchup). Prasanna and Mishra, too, contribute to the cultural mash-up, often training westerners in classical music when they are not belting out the high notes.

D 5/8, Vishwanath Galli, Kalika Galli, Lahori Tola (Near Kashi Vishwanath Temple); 9839614340; open 8 a.m.-10.30 p.m.; live music 7.30-9 p.m.

Monalisa



Monalisa café is occasionally empty on sultry summer afternoons. Photo by: Harry Boeki

Come evening, though, and the rooftops ring with Nandlal Mishra's exuberant tabla performances. Photo by: Harry Boeki

Opposite Brown Bread Bakery is one of the oldest cafés in the Bengali Tola neighbourhood. Sheetla Prasad Upadhyay, who often lures passers-by to Monalisa with his sonorous “namaste,” started the restaurant-bakery in 1994. Between 1997 and 2005, he organised musical evenings at a nearby temple. After that stint ended, he stopped coordinating concerts. But in a bid to continue what he started, he introduced daily Hindustani classical performances at Monalisa last year.

Every evening, the café reserves its rooftop space for Mishra's stylings. Visitors relax against snug purple mattresses, lit by amber bulbs, in an atmosphere tinged with the fragrance of sandalwood incense. Audience sizes don't matter to the musician; he wishes for more rapt ears though. “I left school quite early. I am where I am only because of my *riyaz*,” says Mishra.

To ensure the proceedings never sag, he keeps his playlist versatile—pure classical renditions mingled with bhajans and ghazals. The best moments in his day are when he can immerse himself in Teentaal, a taal that he believes listeners enjoy for its simplicity. Monalisa is a Benaras fixture and the perfect spot to watch the city's ambling rhythms. The menu is hearty and homely with staples like apple pie, Korean kimchi fried rice, and wood-fire pizzas.

Bangali Tola Road, Pandey Ghat; 9451557533; open 7.30 a.m.-10.30 p.m.; live music: 7.30-9 p.m.

Sparrow Café



Sparrow Café is among the relatively newer cafés in Benaras. Photo by: Harry Boeki



The café's quirky, sunny vibe is reflected in its varied musical nights. Photo by: Harry Boeki

Sparrow Café feels inviting at the very first glance, with soothing off-white walls, upholstery in quirky ethnic prints, and a spacious front porch. It has also adopted a unique approach to live classical music by crowdsourcing some of its performances. Unlike other cafés, the roster of artists here is dynamic. Musicians can either collaborate with local artists or independently perform at the café. In addition to this, there are henna art workshops, experimental gigs, documentary movie nights, and painting workshops. Artists typically take centrestage in the foyer of this bungalow-turned-eatery. “These events become a place for people to interact and make new friends,” says 28-year old owner Sakshi Shrivastava, who did her masters in international business from Banaras Hindu University (BHU).

What will also please bohemian souls is Sparrow Café's food, especially the vegan options such as coffee with fresh coconut milk, and falafel served with hummus and tahini. On a regular basis, a set of 11 musicians perform here alternately, about five times a month. These performances are usually planned around auspicious Hindu days such as *Ekadashi*, *Purnima*, and *Ram Navami*.

One of the 11 regulars here is flautist Mohan Dubey, 26. Dubey comes from a family of doctors, lawyers, and engineers but his interest in music led to a detour and he trained in the Prasanna gharana of vocal music. The youngster has also studied the Vedas from BHU. Now he offers lessons in flute and the Vedas to those interested.

Although entrenched in the Indian classical milieu, Dubey also feels at home with western classical music. “Local visitors love the Indo-Western fusion style of music while foreign tourists prefer pure Hindustani classical because of its novelty,” he says.

Dubey has a penchant for preceding his acts with ceremony and his enthusiasm for setting the stage sometimes supersedes his performance. “I can play an alap for five hours, without even hitting the first note of the raga. I am quite happy with that,” he says.

Assi Ghat Road, Near Dumrao Park Road; 7080453798; open 7.30 a.m.-9.30 p.m.; live music 7.30-9 p.m.

Brown Bread Bakery



Brown Bread Bakery is known for its authentic organic menu.
Photo by: Harry Boeki



Performances by Anshuman Maharaj and Ram Mishra are one of the big draws of the bakery. Photo by: Harry Boeki

Eleven years ago, Michael Schmid, a German, hosted a handful of local artists in his organic café as an impromptu gesture. Since then the music has never stopped. The BBB's daily evening concerts are as integral to the establishment's appeal as its selection of in-house bread and organic cheese, sourced from all over India. Schmid moved to Benaras from Berlin in 2002 and set up the café in 2005. In its current avatar, the BBB is a three-storeyed guest house with an indoor café on the ground floor and one on the rooftop. For the last seven years, visitors frequenting the café are treated to the enchanting *jugalbandi* between Anshuman Maharaj, 32, and Ram Kumar Mishra, 34. Maharaj plays the sarod while Mishra accompanies him on the tabla. Maharaj, a seventh generation practitioner of the Maihar, Seniya and Benaras gharanas, has played across India and Europe, while Mishra, from the Benaras tabla gharana, belongs to a lineage with 14 generations in music. Artists from prestigious gharanas don't typically deign to perform at cafés but for Maharaj, it is a form of riyaz. "We love playing for audiences who understand Hindustani classical, but it's more fun to introduce it to first-timers, especially foreign tourists," says Mishra. Both men enjoy improvising, depending on the nature of the audience. Connoisseurs will be pleased that they know their way around a Charukesi or Puriya Kalyan raga but the musicians are not averse to modern influences. If the occasion demands, they can just as easily switch to songs from *Dikwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, complete with Hindustani inflections. At heart Mishra, who also plays the *mohanveena* and *pakhavaj*, is a purist. But Maharaj has convinced him to give up some of his strictures and play lighter tunes. "I had to convince Ram to play here because he's such a purist, but I think he enjoys it now," says Maharaj taking a friendly jibe at his friend.

Arpura Road, Pandey Ghat, Bangali Tola; 9838888823; open 7 a.m.-10 p.m.; live music 7.30-9 p.m. All proceeds from the café go to Badi Asha, a non-profit run by Schmid and his life partner Nicole Seregni.



Chandni Doulatramani is trying to hide somewhere on the fringe, swapping between the roles of an independent journalist and a writer. These days she can be found loitering around the streets of Calcutta, eating jhaal muri and thinking up stories to tell.

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