

maximum India

Friday, April 15

Grades 6–9

11 a.m.–12 p.m.

Curriculum Connections: History and World Cultures
National Standards for Dance: 2, 3, 5 & 7



Ragamala Dance, Photo by Ed Bock

About the Program

The music and dance of India provide students with a window to the vibrant culture and traditions of one of the world's largest countries. As part of the Kennedy Center's *maximum INDIA* festival, **Ragamala Dance** introduces students to *bharatanatyam*, a traditional dance form from south India. Combining virtuosity and aesthetic beauty, the dancers, accompanied by live music, demonstrate how basic body positions, rhythms, gestures, and facial expressions are woven into each piece. Acclaimed sitar and cello duo, **Shubhendra Rao** and **Saskia Rao-de Haas**, perform their own compositions blending European and Indian styles and also perform with Ragamala Dance. Rao-de Haas will show how she adapted the western instrument, the cello, to create the 'Indian cello' the only such instrument in existence.



India at a Glance

India, in South Asia, is home to more than one billion people, making it the second most populous country in the world (behind China) and the world's largest democracy. The nation gained independence in 1947 after 190 years of British control.

It is also the seventh largest nation by geographical area. India's land includes the Himalaya Mountains, fertile farmlands, desert and tropics. It sustains more than 60,000 animal species. It boasts stunning architecture, from ancient Buddhist temples to the Taj Mahal, one of the world's most recognizable buildings. The nation's capital is New Delhi but the largest city is Mumbai on the western coast. In fact, the city of Mumbai also has the second largest population in the world (behind Shanghai).

The official and most spoken language in India is Hindi but there are more than a dozen other officially recognized languages and 3,000 dialects. Many people also speak English.

The major religions of India are Hinduism (more than 80 percent of the population practices), Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism and Jainism, among others. The culture, one of the world's oldest, has given us expressive dance and music, theater, yoga, colorful fabrics and tapestries, intricate crafts, spiced foods, and unique performances on stage and film that mesh words, music and dance.

Dance and Music of India

Bharatanatyam

From the earliest days of Indian culture, there was music and dancing—and the love of both continues to this day. Dance is believed to have been created by the gods for the enjoyment of people. When dance was first introduced there was only one style, but because of the vast cultural diversity in India, eventually five distinct classical dance styles emerged from the different regions of the country. One of the oldest dance forms, hailing from southern India, is *bharatanatyam* (pronounced BUR-uh-tuh-NAHT-i-yam). This popular classical dance began some 2,000 years ago as a religious ritual, performed only in Hindu temples during festivals and celebrations. However, since the 19th century it lives on in modern times as an expressive dance form performed on stage.



Dance and Music of India, cont.

The name *bharatanatyam* combines four Sanskrit (an ancient Indian language) words: *bha* for *bhava*, meaning expression; *ra* for *raga*, meaning melody; *ta* for *tala*, meaning rhythm; and *natyam*, meaning to dance. The technique of *bharatanatyam* has two aspects, *nritta* or abstract dance, and *abhinaya* or expressive dance. The dancers stamp out complex rhythms with their bare feet and use very detailed movements, or gestures, especially of the hands and face, to tell narratives inspired by mythology, epics (long poems about heroic deeds), and religious stories. Music is important for supporting the rhythmic and melodic aspects of the performance, and dances are usually accompanied by a small ensemble featuring a vocalist, a melody provided by an instrument like a violin, and rhythms created by drums and cymbals. In this performance, the musicians accompanying the Ragamala Dance are Lalit Subramanian, Rajna Swaminathan and Anjana Swaminathan.

Ragamala Dance Company

Founded in 1992 and based in Minneapolis, Minnesota, Ragamala Dance maintains *bharatanatyam*'s rich tradition while also carrying it forward into the 21st century. Its artistic directors (mother and daughter) Raneer Ramaswamy and Aparna Ramaswamy travel to India every year to study their craft from Alarmel Valli—widely considered the leading advocate for *bharatanatyam*. Fusing the ancient movement vocabulary of *bharatanatyam* with contemporary ideas, they create new dances and maintain old traditions.



Ragamala Dance, Photo by Ed Bock

Classical Indian Music

It is believed that the music of India is one of the oldest unbroken musical traditions in the world, in addition to being one of the most complex and complete musical systems ever developed. The origins of the system are rooted in the *Vedas*, the ancient scriptures of Hinduism. Classic Indian music features characteristics that clearly distinguish it from classic Western music: strong melody, steady note (drone) rather than harmony, different groups of notes and many rhythm patterns, improvisation, and different instruments tuned differently. The sitar is one of the most famous Indian musical instruments. It is recognized for its great resonance, which stems from sympathetic strings. Sympathetic strings are auxiliary strings not directly played by the performer; rather their sound comes through the tones played on the main strings. The sitar has a long hollow neck and a pear-shaped, gourd resonating chamber. It has two bridges, the large one for the main playing strings and the smaller one for the sympathetic strings. A sitar can have 21, 22 or 23 strings. Like dance, though, music is evolving as musicians build on tradition to create new patterns and sounds.



Shubhendra Rao on sitar, Saskia Rao-de Haas on Indian cello

East Marries West

Husband and wife musical duo Shubhendra Rao and Saskia Rao-de Haas are forging new directions in their compositions. Their music fuses Indian and European traditions through the unusual instrument pairing of a sitar and cello. Their work is inspired by different folk traditions from around the world, as well as the endless possibility contained in the realm of rhythm. When performing, much of their music is improvised. By shaping a unique and active communication between their two instruments, the duo merges East with West. In fact, they have highlighted this new musical custom by naming their project *East Marries West*. Shubhendra Rao had his first lesson from the world-renowned sitar maestro, Ravi Shankar, at the age of three. He spent his youth accompanying his teacher in diverse performances until he became a master himself. He now travels the world as a celebrated soloist, in addition to performing with his wife. Born in the Netherlands, Saskia Rao-de-Haas first learned to play the cello in the European style when she was eight. She continued her studies at the Conservatory of Rotterdam, specializing in Indian classical music. She quickly realized the constraints her traditional cello posed when playing in the Eastern style, so she actually invented a brand new instrument, the Indian Cello, which cultivated her growth as a performer of the music of India. She has become a leading soloist in the world music scene on top of her innovative work in the *East Marries West* project.

The Indian Cello

Saskia Rao-de Haas' Indian cello is slightly smaller in length than the Western cello but wider in breadth. It has a novel neck with a special bridge that allows for five strings instead of the standard four, as well as 10 additional auxiliary strings for the same kind of resonance heard in a sitar. The resonating strings are attached on the body of the cello in a diagonal line from the top right to the bottom left, and it actually has a very practical tuning system. By making these changes to her cello, Saskia Rao-de Haas is able to play classical Indian music instead of the Western classical music that cellists normally play.



Indian Cello, Photo by Saskia Rao-de Haas

What to Watch and Listen for

- the traditional costumes of handwoven silk (called *saris*), jewelry, dramatic eye makeup, and red coloring on hands and feet, which better highlights their movements and gestures
- the half-seated position (with legs bent and knees and feet pointed outward) from which many movements start in *bharatanatyam*
- how the dancers become different characters
- the variety of rhythms created by the music and the stamping of feet
- the different styles of sounds that can be created from the sitar's many strings being strummed together
- how the cello sounds close in tone to the human voice

Instructional Activities

- Study clips of the dancers and try to identify the traditional gestures they use to evoke different meanings. Think about what gestures you would create for the same objects and emotions.
- After watching the performance write a journal entry about how the dance and music made you feel. Share and compare what you felt with your classmates. Consider how you would describe Indian dance and music to a friend who has not seen it.
- Research Eastern string instruments and compare them to Western string instruments. Create a table outlining their similarities and differences.
- There are five distinctive styles of Indian dance. You have learned about *bharatanatyam*, so now explore the other four forms. How does Indian dance compare to other styles of dance you know?

Internet Resources

- Kennedy Center ArtsEdge's *maximum India* webpage: artsedge.kennedy-center.org/students/kc-connections/maximum-india
- Kennedy Center Explore the Arts' *maximum India* video archive: kennedy-center.org/explorer/videos
- Ragamala Dance's official website: ragamala.net
- Saskia Rao-de Haas' official website: saskiarao.com
- Shubhendra Rao's official website: shubhendrarao.com/home.php
- Indian Government's official website: india.gov.in
- Indian Council for Cultural Relations' website: iccrindia.net
- Indian Ministry of Tourism's travel website: incredibleindia.org

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