

Jonathan Mayer

Upon meeting Jonathan Mayer approximately five years ago, I was excited for two main reasons. The first of these being that he is the son of my musical hero, John Mayer (creator of Indo-Jazz Fusions). Secondly, that in my mind, he is a perfect example of a British born musician playing the Indian sitar – a living example of someone who has transcended the 'East meets West trap' as I call it.

In my on-going mission to de-mystify the world of Indian music and further the development of British Asian music, it frustrates me to observe that East continues to meet West – almost as if the two had never met before! This fascination with bringing these two worlds together (and therefore inadvertently keeping them apart!) has created a glass ceiling that few musicians have managed to penetrate.

The underlying conspiracy that 'Indian instruments can only be played properly by Indian musicians' has resulted in the current situation, where it is widely considered by Western music students that learning to play Indian instruments and music is 'too difficult and complicated'. This is partly due to the absence of standardised and accessible methods of teaching.

For me, this album is a breath of fresh air. It contains innovative works and new sitar performances, the likes of which I have never heard before – from Bach compositions to exciting new pieces for sitar – sometimes without a melodic centre or drone. Although these choices of compositions could be considered blasphemous to the Indian classical fraternity, the resulting music is beautiful and refreshing.

At last, the sound of the British sitar emerges!

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Photo taken at Hermitage Gardens, Moscow, Russia †



Photo courtesy of SPNM

Thanks to Kuljit Bhamra, Andy Bratt, Peter Bromley, Mitel Purohit, Nick Staines, Kenny Wheeler, Bernard Wystraete

† First Hand Records has not been able by reasonable enquiry to ascertain the identity of the owner of this photograph.

FHR09



JONATHAN MAYER
SITAR



WITH
KENNY WHEELER, BERNARD WYSTREATE & MITEL PUROHIT

Jonathan Mayer – Out of Genre

When one thinks of the sitar it is usually assumed that North Indian classical music is the only genre to be taken seriously when played. On the contrary, the sitar has evolved from the Persian tanbur and South Indian veena and therefore by its very history is an instrument created through diversity. Even today the sitar is changing and the modern instrument that is played now is only 100 years old.

Yet with an ever evolving instrument comes a very protective tradition, and rightly so as the decline of North Indian classical music has been sharp after the heady heights of the 1960s/70s. Modern fusion tends to rely heavily on Indian classical repertoire and few Indian musical exponents have attempted to take an Indian instrument out of its comfort zone. 'Out of Genre' relieves the sitar of its comfort zone.

1 **Johann Sebastian BACH** (1685-1750)
Sonata No. 1 in G minor for Solo Violin, BWV 1001: I. Adagio (arr. Mayer)

This *Adagio*, written in 1720, is the first time Bach's music has been recorded on the sitar. The slow tempi of the *Adagio* allow for extensive meend (glissando) while remaining faithful to the original. There are many hurdles to overcome in performing Bach on the sitar, none more so than the many harmonic changes that challenge the tonal base of D that most sitars are anchored to, as seen in this arrangement.

Mention must be made to the veena player Punya Srinavas who performs technically brilliant if not straight renditions of Bach's music. Srinavas hopes these performances will help the veena gain acceptance as a universal instrument, reflecting my similar intentions for the sitar in 'Out of Genre'.

2 **Jonathan MAYER** (1975)
Rag Jhiddu

The melodic structure of this rag was formulated by my father just days before his death in 2004. The unusual structure of this rag incorporates both *Ni shuddh* and *Ni komal* (leading note and dominant 7th) in both ascending and descending motions. The tal is *char tal ki sawari* (11 beat cycle).

3 **String of Pearls**

The octatonic scale has always been thought of as a Western creation first appearing in the compositions of Franz Liszt. However, there is evidence of this being of considerably earlier origin, specifically from Persia in the 7th century AD. 'Zaf ef Kend' translates as 'String of Pearls', the theory being that two scales (pearls) are joined together. The main feature of this work is the lack of tonic substance in the opening section, which is completely different from a classical Indian performance where *Sa* (the tonic) is established before any other note is introduced.

4 **Jonathan MAYER / Kenny WHEELER** (1930)
Joning

Kenny worked with my father back in the 1960s in the Indo-Jazz Fusions recordings and this sees a reunion of Mayer and Wheeler. The piece is based on *rag bhairavi* with extensive solos. Kenny plays both trumpet and flugelhorn.



Photo taken by Will Unwin

5 **Johann Sebastian BACH**
Partita No. 3 in E Major for Solo Violin, BWV 1006: III. Gavotte en Rondeau (arr. Mayer)

Written for an instrument tuned in fourths, again this Bach piece, from 1720, posed many difficulties. Although the sitar has 20 strings (*Maihar gharana* configuration) the performer generally only frets on one string, which poses a problem when executing large interval jumps.

6 **Bernard WYSTRAETE** (1942)
Abida

This piece is dedicated to the singer Abida Parveen, one of the foremost exponents of Sufi music and features the wonderfully haunting sound of the bass flute. Bernard and I toured India in 2004 with the ensemble Solistes Français.

7 **Jonathan MAYER**
Whole Again

Once again a mode thought of as a Western phenomenon, the whole tone scale, or *rag sahera* is of Eastern origin. Most interesting for the Indian performer is the ability to shift the *Sa* and implied harmonic changes throughout.

8 **Johann Sebastian BACH**
The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book 1, BWV 847: Prelude No. 2 in C minor (arr. Mayer)

This piece, written in 1722, consists of two lines of music which, on the whole, are played simultaneously, thus creating a problem for the sitar, an instrument where only one main line of music can be played at the same time. In this recording the problem was dealt with by over-dubbing a separate sitar part.

9 **Capo-Lo**

Featuring electric sitar, modified for me by Mo Clifton in 1998, who specialises in the design and manufacture of electric stringed instruments. Capo-Lo incorporates funk, jazz and rock influences. The use of wah-wah pedal again helps transport the sitar out of genre.

10 **Jonathan MAYER**
When it Rains

The pygmy sitar is a newly invented instrument which I was fortunate enough to be given. Its timbre is quite different from the sitar, incorporating the body of a bouzouki and the bridge of a sitar, yet its tuning and fret technique are quite similar. *When it Rains* features both pygmy sitar and standard sitar with zither-guitar and Fender Rhodes accompaniment. This is the first recording of a pygmy sitar to appear on CD.

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Jonathan Mayer studied sitar under Clem Alford, Wajahat Khan and Subroto Roy Chowdury and has had training in Maihar, Senia and Etawah gharanas. Yet his musical grounding is in traditional Western classical music, beginning with the study of violin and piano from an early age. He later studied composition under Andrew Downes and his father, John Mayer at Birmingham Conservatoire of Music. Jonathan has collaborated with many artists such as The Orlando Consort, Noel Gallagher, Sir Paul McCartney, John Wilson, Hawkwind, BBC Concert Orchestra, Erich Gruenberg and Future Sounds of London. He has recorded many CDs and been broadcast on radio and TV worldwide.