

Distant Cousins, Conferring in Different Dialects

Sachal Jazz Ensemble Joins Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra

By **BEN RATLIFF**

NOV. 25, 2013

Jazz and Pakistani music aren't complete strangers to each other, as long as you relate Pakistani music to the rest of South Asian music. Think about John Coltrane playing "India" in 1961, and consider that some of the most promising or accomplished improvisers in the United States today — Vijay Iyer, Rudresh Mahanthappa, Rafiq Bhatia and the Karachi-born [Rez Abbasi](#), for instance — come from South Asian families. But musicians living in Pakistan and playing jazz, or something like it: that's rarer.

The Sachal Jazz Ensemble was developed by Izzat Majeed, a London-based businessman who runs a studio and production company in Lahore. He's determined to help the musicians of that city, those put out of business by the military dictator Muhammad Zia ul-Haq's crackdown on artists in the 1980s. Jazz is only one of his Sachal Music's projects, but it's been a popular one, especially since the 2011 album "Sachal Jazz." The studio issued a widely watched [video](#) of its musicians playing a version of Paul Desmond's "Take Five" in 2011, and earlier this year, Wynton Marsalis played with Sachal musicians at the Marciac Festival in France.

Finally, the Sachal Jazz Ensemble came to Rose Theater at Jazz at Lincoln Center on Friday and Saturday for a full-scale collaboration: seven Pakistani musicians with the 15-piece Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra.



Music From Pakistan The Sachal Jazz Ensemble, front, and the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra on Saturday. Credit Hiroyuki Ito for The New York Times

Saturday's show probably wouldn't be mistaken for any aesthetic cutting edge of jazz. But it aimed for linguistic common ground — rather than idiomatic — and used a repertory partly made of the Pakistani musicians' compositions, and partly from a canonical notion of jazz: Ellington, Jelly Roll Morton, "My Favorite Things," Lou Donaldson's "Blues Walk."

Mr. Marsalis is tireless, and very effective, in explaining the connections between different kinds of music around the world. In this concert he leaned hard on the idea of the habanera rhythm — common in one way or another in African, Antillean and new-world popular music — being one of those affinities. And so the two ensembles piled in on Morton's "New Orleans Blues," arranged by Victor Goines, of the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra, and they figured out a way to build the habanera rhythm together.

The Pakistani musicians, on the left, played on the beat with precision and intent; the Americans, on the right, played behind it. But there was enough flexibility and amassed sound to approximate something like the rolling feeling of swing.

One of the ways to use your ears in Saturday night's concert was to notice when and how well each side bent toward the other. The orchestra's drummer, Ali Jackson, getting light and quiet on his instrument and listening hard, was all-important to the process. But so was the Pakistani flutist Baqar Abbas, the Sachal Jazz Ensemble's clearest and most house-wrecking virtuoso, who bent and warped notes as an absolute matter of course rather than for effect. In one of the concert's best stretches, he traded solos with Ted Nash, from the orchestra, playing piccolo.

They got around to "Take Five," a song with another linking agent — its five-beat rhythm cycle, fairly common in Carnatic and Hindustani music. In a solo, the sitarist Indrajit Roy-Chowdhury stretched out in his own technique in a more jazzlike melodic improvisation. The technique was exact and contained, the tempo stately enough that every note could be heard.

Correction: November 29, 2013

A music review on Tuesday about the Sachal Jazz Ensemble and the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra, at Rose Theater in Manhattan, misidentified the sitarist who played a solo in "Take Five." He is Indrajit Roy-Chowdhury, not Hidayat Khan, who was originally scheduled to perform.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/26/arts/music/sachal-jazz-ensemble-joins-jazz-at-lincoln-center-orchestra.html>