

EDITOR'S  
NOTE

For five consecutive nights, Dhaka hosted the largest classical music festival on a single stage. The crowds grew in number – sometimes by the hour, definitely with every night, reaching a peak of 55,000 people. How, one wondered, was it possible to unite such a teeming mass, that too for something like classical music? A kind of music that requires pre-knowledge, that involves serious looking people playing oddly structured instruments for impossibly long hours in implausibly difficult knee-bending seated positions. Dadra Tal, Rupak Tal, Keharwa Tal, Jhaptal, Ek Tal, Chautalaa, Dhamar Tal, Jhumra Tal, Tintal – the technicalities can make anyone's head spin. Not to mention, one-liner 'lyrics' that are repeated infinite times.

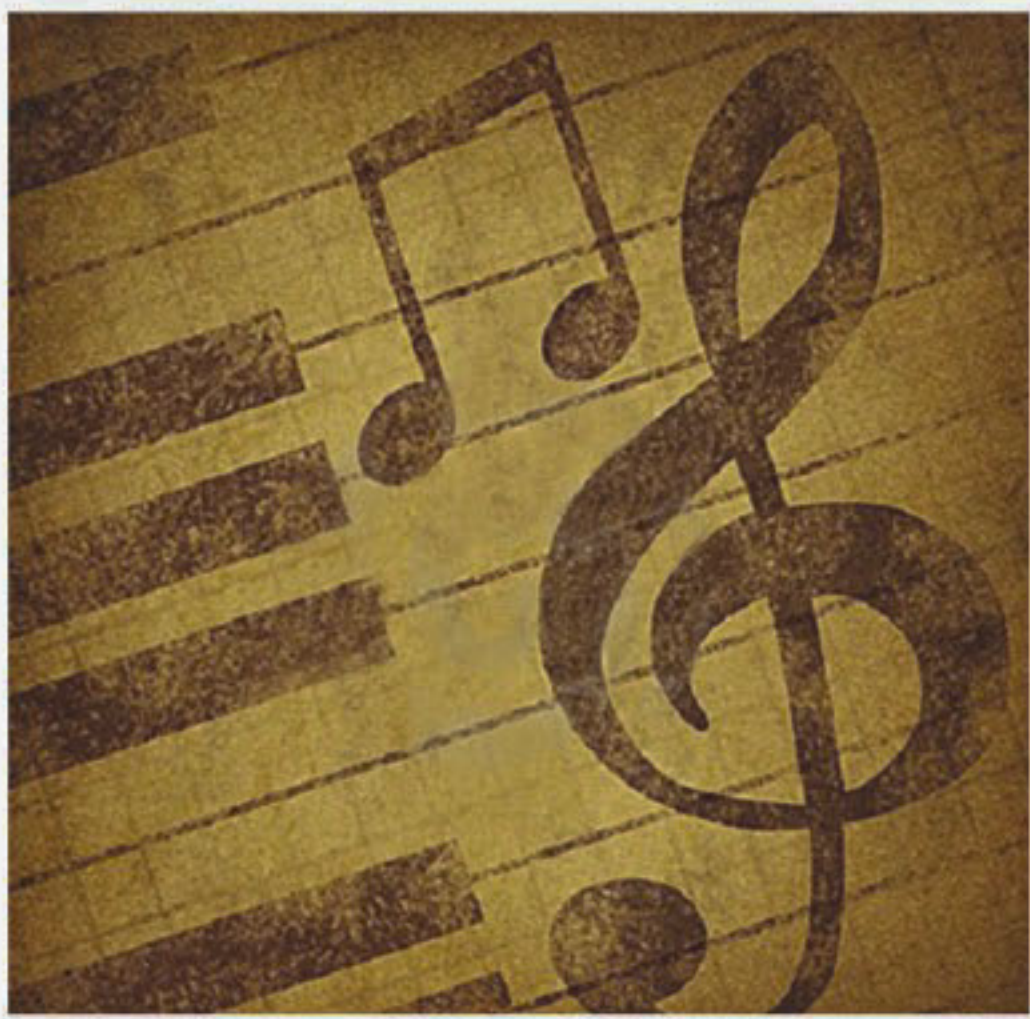
Walking around the venue, it begins to make sense. There are people listening with mesmerized expressions, others are watching from the food tent while eating pasta and *puchkhas*, some choose to be at the bleachers with friends and enjoy the ambiance. It is clear everyone has his or her own interpretation of how to appreciate a raga!

Puritans can argue that isn't the way to appreciate classical music. But, who's to say what IS? When a creative piece reaches out to you, when it resonates within you and you come away with the feeling of somehow being different for experiencing it, is that not appreciation in its truest sense?

Re-echoing this in a literary manner, today we have independent publisher Naveen Kishore's take on the art of making beautiful books, columnist Joe Treasure's argument for diversity in creative choices, Karthika Nair's poetic prose (or prose poem, depending on how you wish to interpret it!) and a nostalgic short story on connections by Ramanath Roy.

Experience it as you will!

MUNIZE MANZUR



## BEAUTIFUL BOOKS

Naveen Kishore

You don't make beautiful books. They exist. Already. In the air around you. The very air we learn to breathe. From the moment of our birth. Both acts of beauty; of aesthetics.

What we learn to do as we grow into the world is to recognize it. Through observing...this aesthetic. Hold it in the palm of our eyes; nurture it; make it our own. Not the *own* of ownership. Nor the hidden *own* of the possessive: This is 'mine'. I mean the ability that turns everyday presences of all that surrounds us into a thing of beauty. To be easily and simply shared with as many people as possible, through as many ways as possible.

It doesn't matter what it is. There is

an aesthetic in nature. As there is in the grimy squalor of a crowded urban city. It doesn't matter.

Create your own frames. Place the good and the indifferent or downright ugly into it. Shift it around. Use the space in a manner hitherto unseen. Let the objects relate to each other. Or not. Let them oppose. In a tense and edgy relationship between them.

What is important is the response. First yours. To this 'thing' of beauty you are in the process of creating. Then others. The ones who will receive it. View it. Hold it in their eyes. And hands. And hearts. And minds. Once you un-cage the bird, let it go into the world. To stand on its

own. And grow. And last – in our case as publishers and people of design.

The art and the craft of making something that lasts, lingers, resides inside us. Making beautiful books.

*Naveen Kishore is the founder of Seagull Books originally founded in Kolkata with branches now in London and Chicago. He is led not by the market, but by personal convictions and passions. He spoke at Hay Festival Dhaka 2014 about his publishing practice which undermines ideological dominance and counteracts intolerance. The above extract was a reading taken from his panel, reprinted here with his permission.*



## Diversity on the page, on the screen and in the studio

Joe Treasure

A headline in the *London Evening Standard* caught my eye recently: "BBC in race row." The Corporation has been getting a lot of bad press and I feared another damaging scandal. But as I read on, this one began to look like a storm in a teacup. The BBC was under attack "for casting a white actor in a role originally written as black for a new thriller." It seems the author of the new 5-part series *London Spy*, best-selling novelist Tom Rob Smith, was still writing the script and the identity of the lead character was fluid when casting began. The black actors who auditioned all lost out.

I can't help feeling sympathy for Smith, whose mind was probably on art rather than demographics, but I sympathise with the rejected actors too. In the novel I'm currently struggling with, a character I had thought was West Indian turns out to be Kurdish. Another I had conceived as a native Londoner has become a Hungarian immigrant. The cultural impact of these changes, outside my own head, is precisely zero. But perhaps the writer of a



high-profile TV drama has a wider responsibility. There are two distinct issues here: how will the diversity of modern Britain be reflected on our TV screens? And, what work opportunities will be offered to black, Asian and ethnic minority actors?

There's no doubt that white actors are over-represented in British TV drama. If you're inclined to blame the writers, you should probably start with Jane Austen and then move on to Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell and Anthony Trollope.

You might also blame a viewing public that seems to have a bottomless appetite for classic adaptations, lapping up weak substitutes such as *Downton Abbey* when the real thing isn't available. This includes viewers in America, where this kind of programme finds a lucrative market. The focus on the picturesque past keeps the British acting establishment busy dressing up in corsets and frockcoats but leaves thin pickings for minority actors.

Commissioning editors must

also take responsibility. The success of *Luther*, a crime drama that ran for three seasons between 2010 and 2013, and for which the star Idris Elba won a Golden Globe, demonstrated that viewers are ready for compelling stories about non-white characters. But we can only choose from what's offered. Speaking in June at the launch of Act for Change, a project designed to address the lack of diversity on British television, actor and writer Meera Syal made an eloquent plea for a fresh approach to a problem that people have been talking about, she said, for 30 years. So Tom Rob Smith's artistic choices take place in a broader context.

In some ways it's a relief to know that the changes I make to my own story won't affect anyone else's career. Meanwhile diversity is working for me. The south Asian character I've just introduced looks set to have a significant impact, unless the plot takes an unexpected turn – or I decide to make her Norwegian.

Read more of Joe Treasure at <http://joetreasure.blogspot.co.uk/>



## Samhāra\*

Karthika Nair

Step barefoot through the awning stretch a right hand to the stone floor carry its quiet to a forehead cup the heart in a palm watch dance for the first time watch dance for the last time the very last time blood draining flesh straining to reach the sky as they surge forth goddesses in blue and purple and ochre first one then twos and threes till they fill the eyes fill a horizon fill heavens with colour and light one sharp precise stroke after another spark constellations with the echo of a heel on stone floor anchor galaxies on crossed arms nudge the winter sun awake with the curve of a brow gather storms in their eyes erase thought girdle time birth that single fleeting moment when you feel alive.\*\*

\* *Samhāra* is inspired by the eponymous dance piece from Nrityagram, and was first published by Poetry at Sangam (2013).

\*\* excerpted from Merce Cunningham's definition of dance.

## Urmi

Ramanath Roy  
(Translated by Arunava Sinha)



Hello...  
May I speak to Urmi please!  
Urmi! Wrong number.

There was a click as the receiver was put down. I put the receiver down too. I dialed another number at random.

Hello...  
Is Urmi in?  
Urmi doesn't live here.  
Do you have her number?  
No.

Putting the receiver down, I dialed another number at random.

Hello...  
Is Urmi in?  
No.  
Where has she gone?  
To meet Shyamal.  
When will she be back?  
I don't know. Is there a message?  
No.

I put the receiver down. Who was this man? What was his relationship with Urmi? All I could make out was that they knew someone named Shyamal quite well. But why was Urmi visiting Shyamal? How old was this Urmi? What did she look like?

Once again I dialed a random number. Engaged. I dialed another random number. Engaged. Yet again I dialed another random number. This time it began to ring. This time, perhaps...

Hello...  
May I speak to Urmi?  
Wrong number.

Disconnecting, I dialed another number.

Hello...  
Is Urmi in?  
Hold on please.

A few moments later, a woman's voice:

Hello...  
Recognise me?  
Chhotomama?  
Wrong.  
Shiben-da?  
No.  
Meshomoshai?  
No.

Annoyed, I put the receiver down. I couldn't talk to Urmi as her uncle. I dialed another number. No, it wasn't engaged. I could hear the phone ring. But no one answered. No one at home. I put the receiver down.

A little later I dialed a different number at random. I needed Urmi. I had to have Urmi.

Hello...  
May I speak to Urmi please?  
Wrong number.

I put the receiver down. What was wrong? Had the name become very old-fashioned after twenty years? Weren't women named Urmi any more? What kind of names did women have nowadays in that case? But whatever her name, I had to have Urmi. I dialed another number at random.

Hello...  
May I speak to Urmi please?  
This is Urmi. Who's speaking?  
You don't recognise me, do you?  
Amiya?  
Yes.  
I guessed right. But your voice sounds different. So, why didn't you come yesterday?  
I was stuck somewhere.  
The children kept asking about you.

I didn't want to hear any more. I wanted a virginal Urmi, not Urmi the mother. Putting the receiver down, I dialed another number at random.

Hello...  
Urmi?  
Yes.  
Recognise me?  
Of course I do. You're very naughty. Why? What've I done?  
Shut up! As if you don't know. Honestly, I don't.  
Then you needn't know. Why?  
I don't know. Ring me later. My father and brother are both at home now. They'll come to know.  
When should I ring?  
In the afternoon. No one will be home.

Urmi put the receiver down. I heard the sound.  
I put the receiver down too. But what number had I dialed? What use was the number anyway? This Urmi had nothing in common with the one twenty years ago. Her voice was different. She used to speak differently. Her language was different. What was it like? I didn't remember. But I'd know it if I heard it. That was the Urmi I wanted.  
I began dialing at random again.