

art focus – music and goddess – ranjit makkuni (sacred world)

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Chants, *ragas*, notes and sweet melodies from wind, percussion and string instruments play almost simultaneously inside the vast interiors of the National Gallery of Modern Art, Mumbai. But it is not cacophonous. Rather there is harmony in the eclectic mix. It is more the unusual for me, for it is an effortless amalgamation of technology, music and art, and of the traditional, modern and spiritual, to create a seamless expanse of personal experience.

The few hours I spend wandering through the gallery are akin to an inner awakening and new understanding—of the fundamental nature of sound, and hence music, and its usage as a tool over time immemorial to connect with the sacred feminine. Something, I for one, often take very much for granted without delving into too deeply.

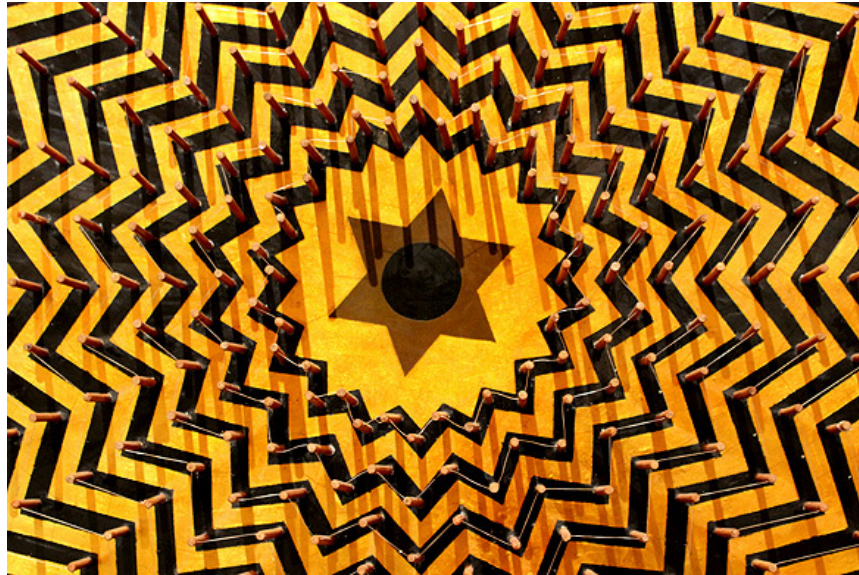
The museum project Music and Goddess is the creative expression of Ranjit Makkuni, an international multimedia artist, [trained sitar player](#), and director of the design think tank, [Sacred World Research Laboratory](#), and his team of specialists. His interactive art, consisting of electronic installations, digital images and performance recordings, deconstructs the enigma associated with Asian music and its spiritual connotations.

The showing commences with point zero: The Vedic science and physics of sound. In physics, sound is defined as a vibration that spreads as an audible mechanical wave of pressure and displacement, through a medium such as air or water. The Vedas take it one step further.

Anahata nada, the most subtle cosmic sound according to the *Upanishads*, is believed to be experienced during the highest state of meditation. This sound is referred to as “unstruck” because it is not caused by any external vibrations, nor can it be heard by the ears, mind, or even the psyche. When sound, conversely, takes its tangible sensory form, it becomes *Vāk* or *Vāc*, the Sanskrit word for “speech”. Personified, *Vāk* is a goddess. In Hinduism, she is identified with *Saraswati*. The Vedas explain that the audible sound (*Vāk*) closest to the unmade sound (*Anahata nada*) is “aum” (*om*).



***Anahata nada*, the “silent” sound believed to be experienced during *Samadhi*, the highest level of meditation**



Sound waves from the first audible sound at the beginning of the universe

Makkuni, thereafter, takes the viewer through a chain of introductions to Asian female deities related to music, dressed in their local finery. I meet muses, celestial angels—*Apsara*, *Kinayi* and *Kinari*, and compassionate goddesses who listen to our prayers, including *Saraswati* and her equivalent *Thurathadi* in Burma...



A flower in the name of the sacred feminine



Celestial musicians, Thailand

The magic starts to unfold when interactive installations using touch, pull and movement, forge sound into cycles of melody and rhythm. The concept of a cycle is central to the Asian experience of thought and consciousness. Completion of a cycle results in the *Sama*, symbolizing beginning and re-beginning. When translated to the realm of sound, the rhythmic framework of clusters of notes with varying levels of intensity (controlled by the viewer in this exhibition), creates music.

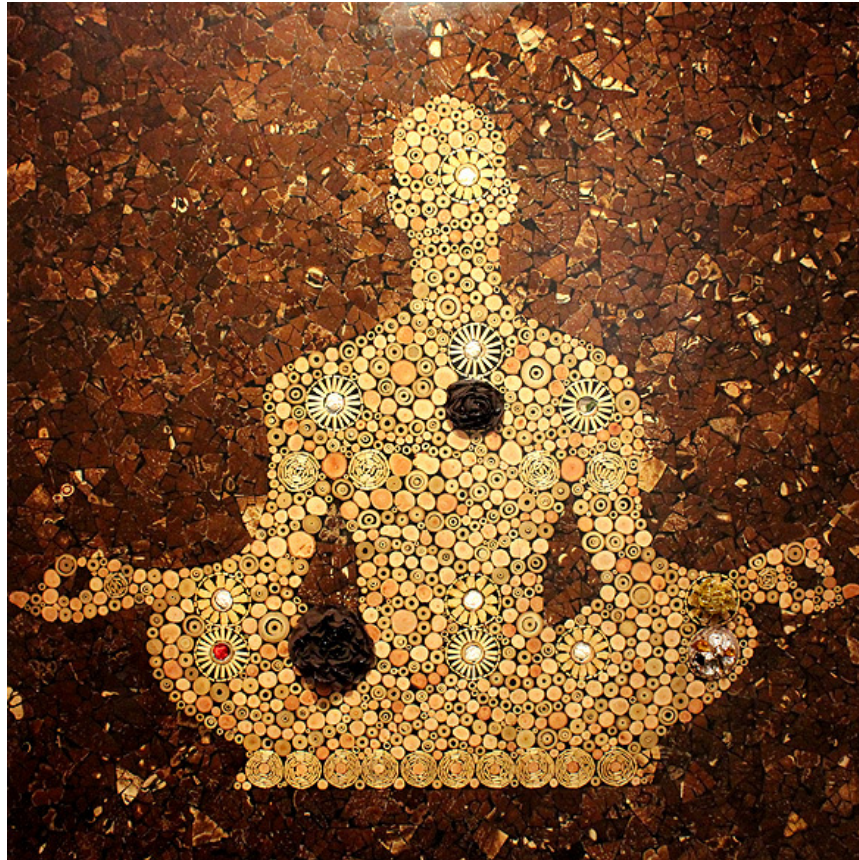




Interactive installations explore the creation of music; Right: Detail of Sitar, Traditional and modern musical instruments made from nature—wood, bamboo, goatskin—reconnect with the spiritual in nature

Music has forever been an integral part of the spiritual, and as his grand finale, Makkuni merges the two, wherein every interaction on the part of the viewer cascades into a chant, *raga* or *shloka*. Tie a ribbon around a pagoda, or lift a bell, and incantations echo in the vast domed area. Place some beads in a monk's bowl, and prayers get told. Blow into a set of flutes and sweet melodies are set afloat.

The cycle of music and goddesses of music is, thus, completed.



From music to goddess: I want... I want... I want... Stilled through the chanting of "Aum"





From goddess to music: Temples in Asia have been an inimitable source of music for millenia through its mantras, bells and the sound of coins donated to monks



Music and Goddess is on display at the [National Gallery of Modern Art \(NGMA\)](#), Fort, Mumbai from 28 October to 7 December, 2014 from 11 am to 6 pm. To maximise participant experience, NGMA has sound engineering students from [The Media Tribe](#) volunteering as guides. In addition, live performances and talks are being held in the premises by Indian Classical dance maestros. Special tours exist for underprivileged children as part of the gallery's outreach programme.

Note: This post forms part of my blog's [The Prodigal and Art series](#) which explores Modern and Folk Indian Art.