



## Classical Gypsy Francesca Cassio performs at the intersection of Western and Indian classical music. It's a harmonious blend

AVANTIKA BHUYAN

**T**HE DUSK IS just setting in; it is the ideal time for listening to Raga Yaman Kalyan. The evening assumes an ethereal touch as this grand raga is harmoniously blended with traditional Italian blues. For the 41-year-old Italian artiste, Francesca Cassio, these two styles of music are two sides of the same coin. After years of practising both Western and Indian vocal music, she has found common points in terms of musical modes, rhythms and instruments in both these musical forms. "This is especially true for Italian folk and Rajasthani *lok geet*. For instance, in South Italy we have exactly the same instruments as the *moorchang* and the *algoja*. I used these in my concert at Jodhpur Riff this year to show how fluently Italian music chimes with Indian instruments," explains Francesca.

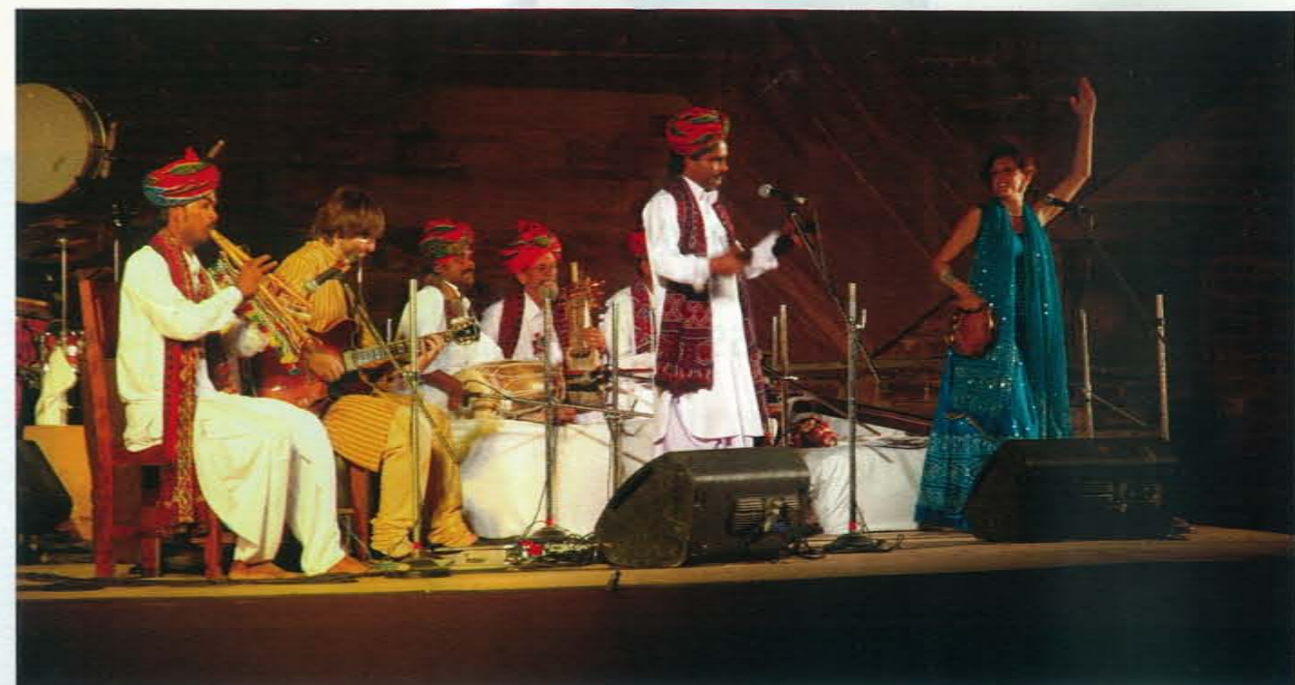
Her fascination with Indian classical music began years ago when she first heard a recording of Ustad Rahim Fahimuddin Dagar. The strains of *dhrupad* played on her mind, and in 1995 she decided to do her PhD in the genre's vocal techniques. Francesca wished to learn the style from the master himself and took the next flight to India. Her meeting with Ustad Saab opened her mind to different styles of Indian classical music and she soon found herself immersed in the world of *thumris* and Rabindra Sangeet. "When I started learning *dhrupad*...from Ustad Rahim



**FUSION DIVA** Compositions are specially written for Francesca to incorporate her Indo-Italian style of singing

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Fahimuddin Dagar, I realised that Rabindra Nath Tagore too had composed a lot of songs in *dhrupad* style. Also, another revelation was that *gurbani* too followed the same technique," she says. After extensive research, Francesca found out that *dhrupad* was



**INDIAN OR ITALIAN?** Traditional Indian instruments like the *moorchang* and *algoja* have been used by Francesca in traditional Italian compositions

the dominant genre of Indian classical singing during the time of Guru Nanak and that's how glimmers of *dhrupad* can be found in *gurbani* as well.

She soon began to realise that improvisation in Indian classical music was possible the same way Italian Jazz and Blues were being improvised upon. In order to achieve that, Francesca needed to strengthen her base in Indian vocal music. So, she enrolled for a PhD programme in ethnomusicology at Banaras Hindu University. That's where she came under the tutelage of Girija Devi and began to learn from her the romantic genre of *thumri*. "My stay in Banaras was a life-changing experience. The guru-*shishya parampara* instils a sort of discipline in you that is very critical to a performer. The guru goes beyond this life; the *sadhana* that you learn from him or her dictates not just your music but your behaviour in life," says Francesca.

At the age of 41, having spent half her life in Europe and the other half in India, she feels a sort of equilibrium that was missing earlier. For her, music is her prayer and prayer is her music. She has now settled down in Jodhpur, Rajasthan, where she works as a music and management director with CRN Productions—an organisation that invites artistes from around the world to India to participate in an exchange of ideas, music, dance and culture. "I was

a lecturer of Indian music in Italy and a lecturer of Western musicology in India. I feel like a *tirthankara*, crossing the river from one bank to the other," philosophises Francesca.

Her unique Western vocals, infused with an Indian flavour, have caught the ear of several musical organisations. A soloist in contemporary musical ensembles, Francesca has interpreted compositions that are written specifically for her. She regularly performs and records for Italian National Television, theatre, radio and cinema. Stalwarts like Robert Miles, Luis Bacalov, Eddi Powell, Paolo Vivaldi and Roberto Laneri have created special compositions for her unique Indo-Italian style of singing.

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Currently, she is working with CRN Productions to make Jodhpur the Flamenco capital of the world. She and her team have found a very interesting Indian connection with this Spanish art form. "According to some recent theories, Spanish Gypsies mi-

grated in the 12th century from the deserts of Rajasthan towards West Asia and Europe and then settled in the Balcanic area and in Spain. DNA tests prove their common origin. There are also some common words, like *pani* [water], that are shared by the nomadic tribes of Rajasthan, especially Kalbeliyas, and the Gypsies of Spain," elaborates Francesca. Through this project, she is trying to work on common cultural roots in terms of melodies and rhythms. "In India, we have the *taal* system, and in Flamenco they use the *buleria*, which is a rhythmic cycle in 12 beats. Back then it must have been very easy for Indian Gypsies to pick up the *buleria* as a *taal*," she adds.

As of now, she is content teaching Western students who come to India to learn more about Indian classical music. She wants her work to be a bridge between Eastern and Western cultures, deepening the knowledge of both traditions to bring about a mutual understanding. In Francesca's opinion, music is a very important expression of cultural meanings and approaches to life. Learning about each other's musical languages is like understanding varied dimensions of life. She has dedicated her life to music, with *raga* and *taal* being her true soulmates. "I have not got married as I have given my life to music," says Francesca. ■