

Kim Alswager on “Susurro”, University of Minnesota School of Music (final research paper)

A combination of flamenco, Indian classical, and contemporary music—evidently this must be some sort of “world music,” a global fusion of sorts, right? However, as one delves deeper, it is found to be not so much a fusion of “world traditions,” but rather a meeting of personalities, “a very personal reflection of three people’s musical ideas” (Sacha Silva, 2006). It is something with very few commercial considerations, music improvised and totally *natural*, breaking away from many of the stereotypes of the music industry today. These ideas describe a recent CD recorded and produced by Sacha Silva and Andrew Morgan, along with vocal collaboration by Munya B.—“Susurro.” In the following pages, I will explore how this all came together—the artists, the production, etc.—along with a comprehensive look at the musics involved, how they compare to other musics of this style, and what makes this a unique and refreshing musical artwork.

To begin, it is necessary to introduce the three artists who made this CD entirely themselves—Sacha Silva, Andrew Morgan, and Munya B. Sacha Silva, whose name titles the CD, brings the flamenco style music to the collaboration. He began his studies of flamenco guitar under Jorge Liceaga in 1998 and has since performed and accompanied dance classes in many different countries such as the US, Switzerland, and England, among others. However, guitar has been a significant part of his life since an early age, and he has studied styles such as classical guitar (under Andrew Mah) and has played bass guitar in punk, heavy metal, and jazz bands. It should also be noted that Sacha studied North Indian classical music while in college, which plays a significant role in this project. Andrew Morgan, who contributes the cello and some of the percussion, is both a performer and a composer. He began playing cello at age 4 and has since learned a wide variety of other instruments, including but not limited to guitar, Djembe, Oud, Middle Eastern percussion, and improvised electronics. He was a composition fellow at the Royal Academy of Music from 2004-2005. Finally, Munya B., whose full name is Sanghamitra Bandyopadhyay, is the vocalist of the group. She is originally from India, where she was trained vocally in North Indian classical music and also some semi-classical genres such as ghazals, thumris, and bhajans. Also, much like Sacha, Munya B. has a career outside of music; she is the Lecturer in Development Economics at Oxford University and an associate professor at the Indian Statistical Institute in India.

Having such distinct and different backgrounds, one would wonder how these three musicians came together, especially noting the fact that two of the three have primary professions outside of the music field. In an email interview with both Andrew Morgan and Sacha Silva, Andrew (2006) explains that he met Sacha in London while doing their post graduate studies. They were coincidentally in the same residence hall, and so came the beginning of “Susurro.” The song, “Susurro Part II: Silencio,” was actually the result of improvisation as an experiment one night in the dorms. This in a larger sense is one of the aspects setting this recording apart from the stereotypical music industry and other “global fusions,” as will be discussed in further detail shortly. Sacha and Munya actually met through the

channel of their other careers, later realizing their shared musical interests. According to Sacha (2006), it was at this point that “Sussuro Part I” and “Part III” were recorded, which the two actually wrote for a friend’s wedding. These were the only tracks written before the rest of the CD. So then, as three friends with diverse, but shared musical interests, they have always wanted to join forces and do a full CD, and that opportunity came in 2003.

So what exactly makes this CD unique, a “true global fusion,” as opposed to the industry’s version of “world music,” or as Sacha somewhat comically describes it, “background music that you light an incense stick to.” First and foremost, the CD was 100% self-produced, something that seems to be becoming increasingly uncommon in an extremely industrialized world. Also, one could almost say that the circumstances and setting in which the CD was recorded were very “pure” in the sense that they were very simple and natural; there was really nothing to take away from the music itself, like being behind a glass wall in a recording studio or in front of thousands of people on stage. Rather, the CD was recorded in Munya’s house in northwest London, UK. This surely must have provided for a very personable and comfortable location which would have taken away any extra pressure, allowing for the most genuine recording. Whether the choice of this location was due to funding or purposely done, I believe it turned out to have an extremely positive effect on both the music and CD as a whole. The recording was then mixed and mastered by Andrew, who has had experience in this field before, and produced by both Sacha and Andrew.

In the production of the CD, the marketing seems to have had caused the most difficulties for the artists. Not only is it simply a hard task for self-producing artists, but they also had to write something about the music and all the while make sure to avoid the “world music” label and other categorization problems. In writing something about the CD, Andrew made an interesting comment pointing out an irony that I myself had never considered and which I believe most recording artists do not either—“How do you describe with words something you choose to say without words?” (Morgan, 2006) Again, there is a certain genuineness that is often not seen in the music world; they weren’t trying to sell something with their words. Sacha, on the other hand, spoke of difficulties concerning the labels that are often attached to one’s music when trying to market it. He strongly dislikes the “world music” label and explains that “the album is really a very personal reflection of three people’s musical ideas and not so much a fusion of world traditions,” (Silva, 2006) also noting that their CD is different than the majority of world fusion in that “it’s not a situation where you can distinctly hear the separate streams...i.e. a flamenco beat with a sitar solo, then a guitar solo...etc.” These ideas are the basis of what makes this a “true global fusion.” I also note that I would like to be careful in my uses of this term, for I am in no way claiming this is a global fusion as it is according to the music industry, but rather I feel that this recording brings forth something new and more genuine than has been seen in traditional fusions. The natural aspect, which will be elaborated on, reveals much more what a “true” combination of different musics should be, instead of being something obviously manufactured. In addition, the whole intention of the CD was not even to necessarily make a product

that was “saleable” and they “had no long-term game plan in terms of marketing.” (Silva, 2006)

As for the music itself, “Susurro” combines the sounds of flamenco, the cello, Indian classical vocals, contemporary music, and other instruments such as the tabla. While this is a tremendously diverse combination of genres and musical instruments, they seemed to mesh well with one another, and it was “a very natural combination.” (Morgan, 2006). One of the big reasons for this is the fact that Indian singing and flamenco singing are very similar in many ways. In fact, Flamenco finds its roots in Indian music, along with Arabic and European Gypsy music. Between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, Spain was under Arab rule, and their instruments and music were adapted by Christians, Jews, and eventually gypsies. (<http://www.centroflamenco.com/history>, 2006) While it is difficult to distinguish the exact origin of flamenco even for historians, it is believed that these gypsies—as they were called in Spain; they referred to themselves as the Roma—were a group that migrated from Northern India across Europe over 1,000 years ago. (Richa Gulati, “The Fusion of Flamenco Natyam,” 2006) The combination of this group reaching Spain, the rule of Arabs, and influences from local Spanish traditions have shaped flamenco music as we know it today, and although there may be some fogginess surrounding where one influence begins and ends, Indian music has definitely had an effect on flamenco, and it is evident in both the rhythms and vocals.

Aside from the history of it all, though, the three artists themselves did a great deal to contribute to this natural feel, often without even trying (it should occur *naturally*, of course!). First of all, only acoustic instruments were used. In addition, they “didn’t bury the recording in layers of production like echo or reverb.” (Silva, 2006). As Sacha describes it, “There is a slightly ‘naked’ feel about it...but it brings out our collaboration even more.” This is very important because one cannot really question the truthfulness of the sound on the CD, unlike many mainstream artists who use technology to alter their voice, instruments, etc. Another aspect that I believe very much contributed to this was improvisation. Basically every track on the CD is improvised. All three of the artists were already very comfortable in this kind of setting so they “consciously avoided trying to plan too much in advance.” (Silva, 2006). They had a few sketches upon arriving for the recording session, but many were thrown out; as for the end result, and this is most fascinating and quite admirable, many of the final tracks on the CD were “take one.” Not only does this showcase the skill and daring of these artists, but it also provides the listener with a fresh and, as has been said many times before, *natural* sound. In improvising, they were also very flexible in their interpretations of their respective backgrounds, another very important contributor to the successful collaboration. One of the main reasons why many cross-culture musical fusions sound false and uninteresting is that “the people involved can’t look beyond their own styles and techniques, so it often sounds like a group of musicians battling for space.” (Silva, 2006) This was a very intriguing comment; the definition of *fusion* (in a musical sense) is as follows: “the merger, or resulting blend, of musical styles or elements from more than one tradition.” (Encarta World English Dictionary, 2006) The key word here is blend—blending implies a meshing of sorts, a mixing of two or more products to create one. Simply taking two distinct styles and playing them at the same time does not

necessarily create a fusion. “Susurro,” though, really unifies the different sounds because they “intuitively adjusted to each other.” (Silva, 2006) Yet, it is important to note that they did not lose the quality of individual sounds in doing so. Andrew, when asked what some of the most important aspects were for him in creating each song, his almost immediate response was “quality...and to have an integrity to itself.” (2006) There is a fine line between a sound where individual instruments are too isolated and a sound that is so blended that individuality is lost—“Susurro” seems to have found a happy medium.

Due to the flexibility of interpretation and the fact that the album was totally self-produced, though, one still might have questions concerning the quality and representation of the different cultural music. How much actually needed to be altered in order to blend the sounds? Does it have good quality in terms of their respective backgrounds? In order to clear up a few of these issues, I consulted Pooja Goswami, the North Indian Vocals professor at the University of Minnesota, who lived her whole life in India, having been trained classically there, in many different styles, for many years. She has also had much experience in musical fusions herself, having sung with various jazz musicians and a pianist from Siberia. Having played “Sol y Luna,” the first track of the CD, for Professor Goswami, one of her initial responses was that the Indian vocals would be classified as “light music,” and not classical. Her reason for saying this was mainly because Munya’s vocals do not follow the rules of rag—in general, the scale of Indian music—and there is a lot of freedom. Also, in India, this would not really be considered a fusion, but rather “Indi-pop.” (Goswami, 2006). This is a good thing, though, because, as stated before, I am calling this recording a “true global fusion,” but am very much trying to deviate from the standard conception of a global fusion and pointing out the unique aspects setting this recording apart. Professor Goswami then added that even though it was “light music,” it was quite evident that Munya is trained very well classically. According to Goswami (2006), her skill could be easily heard in certain aspects of her singing such as the ornamentation, something that takes a long time to really develop.

In addition to the interview, I listened to various recordings of flamenco guitar in order to make a few comparisons. One specifically, “Gypsy Passions: The Flamenco Guitar,” a CD by Rodrigo, a famous flamenco guitarist, provided some useful information. Not having any guitar or flamenco training myself, it was a bit difficult to catch minor differences and similarities, but quality wise, both Sacha and Rodrigo were very skillful. While surely a few things were altered in the mixing with cello and Indian singing, the substantial elements of flamenco went unchanged. For example, in both recordings there were some quick “ligatos” (picking of the strings with the left hand), and “picado” with the thumb. Because of the “dark” and “somber” mood of “Susurro”, as the artists describe it, the flamenco style is overall slower, but that is in the interest of the CD, not at the cost of quality.

The reasons why this CD is so natural, so different, and essentially a “true global fusion” are already very numerous, but not entirely complete. The most important reason of all, I believe, lies in the outlook and attitude these artists had in creating “Susurro.” Sacha, Andrew, and Munya made this CD a personal experience; they are three people passionate about music, and they were excited to put their

passions together to create something that they, and other people, could see as “beautiful...something to enjoy and think about” (Morgan, 2006). Sacha added to this, explaining what the “fusion” of this recording really was:

Music is such a personal thing...and when you meet people who understand what you are doing—let alone appreciate it and want to help you develop it—this is very exciting and rare. You want to put things down on tape; it's a natural occurrence. The fusion in 'Lullaby' isn't between Spanish guitar and Indian voice, but between Munya and myself—I can't imagine having done it with any other singer. Similarly, 'Silencio' is more about Drew and me than the instruments involved—he could have been playing the clarinet and me a Casio keyboard; it would have come out the same. (Silva, 2006).

This, I believe, is the key to what I have been describing as a “true global fusion.” This is not to say that the typical global fusion is wrong or false, but so often musical artists focus on producing something that is sellable, or they think too much about their individual sounds and the representation of their cultural music. Don't get me wrong, representation is important—music is so sacred to many cultures, and it is a part of life. However, when trying to bring cultures together, musical values and styles need to be somewhat shared. Also, it is common for musicians to lose that personal level when making music that will be put out into the market. They try so hard to express or create a message so specific, when really, the music will just do it on its own. Andrew (2006) described this perfectly—“The reason that I make music is because I find more meaning in sounds than I can create with words.”

Music is something that people internalize. It brings about reactions and stimulates thoughts that are not directly related to the notes being played, and it is a personal experience, a means to express oneself when it is too difficult to do so with words. The musicians of “Susurro” have not only realized this, but they have truly explored it and turned it into something that any person can listen to.

“Susurro,” by Sacha Silva, Andrew Morgan, and Munya B. is a “true global fusion.” Yes, it is a combination of music from different musical cultures—flamenco, cello, contemporary, and Indian vocals—but really it is so much more than that. Rather than a fusion of world traditions, it is a fusion of personalities, of the passion of three musicians for music. This is what sets it apart from what the industry labels as “world beat” or “a global fusion”—for the length of seven songs, cultural barriers are broken down, and music is created as one people, as friends and fellow musicians who simply have a passion for what they are doing and who explore that together, allowing the music to express itself, naturally.