

Shruti Kumar

S2E9: REFLECTING ON MUSICAL SELVES

28th February, 2021.

This week Declassify welcomes on board a guest that is quite remarkable and someone who reflects much of the spirit of the podcast – interdisciplinary practices, cross-genre listening and collaboration. Shruti is a composer, producer, and conductor from Los Angeles. Her work has spanned the film/tv, pop, and concert worlds, and she often finds herself involved in projects that mix genres and experiences. She has worked at Hans Zimmer's Remote Control Productions and collaborated with artists including *Alicia Keys*. Her work has been used by/for The National Geographic, The United Nations, The Late Show with Stephen Colbert, and the 2016 Summer Olympics. In fact, Shruti hosts her own show "Let's Shake On It" centered around bringing together esteemed and diverse musicians in conversation and collaboration in hopes of increasing transparency in the music industry and eliminating genre. And In March 2020, Shruti founded Sound Travels, a remote hire platform and educational resource to help musicians during COVID and beyond. In this episode, Shruti and Victoria examine what it means to make music that expands and breaks the mold of classical, and how we can make music new, exciting and imagination together.

Victoria Pham

Hello hello! Welcome to our second last episode of Declassify for this season, I can't believe how quickly it has all gone past. This week I welcome on board a guest that is quite remarkable and someone who reflects much of the spirit of the podcast – interdisciplinary practices, cross-genre listening and collaboration. And I'm pleased to introduce composer, conductor and producer, all the way from Los Angeles, Shruti Kumar. Shruti's work has spanned the film/tv, pop, and concert worlds, and she often finds herself involved in projects that mix genres and experiences. She has worked at Hans Zimmer's *Remote Control* Productions and collaborated with artists including *Alicia Keys*. Her work has been used by/for The National Geographic, The United Nations, The Late Show with Stephen Colbert, and the 2016 Summer Olympics. In fact, Shruti hosts her own show "Let's Shake On It" centered around bringing together esteemed and diverse musicians in conversation and collaboration in hopes of increasing transparency in the music industry and eliminating genre. And In March 2020, Shruti founded Sound Travels, a remote hire platform and educational resource to help musicians during COVID and beyond. And with that, I have to say thank you so much for, for writing to me, and for joining me today for the live recording.

Shruti Kumar

Thank you for having me. I'm so excited.

Victoria Pham

Well, mean, reading your bio, you started playing piano so early. Did you always know that this was kind of the trajectory you're going to take? You're going to continue pursuing music?

Shruti Kumar

Absolutely. Not actually. So I can't my parents are Indian. They're from India. And so I'm first generation American and in our family. We didn't have any Western classical music in our vernacular, you know, so I just, I barely remember starting piano. And I guess the story is that I was I went to a show with my parents, I think they might have taken me to see Harry Belafonte or something. They're big music fans, but they took me to a show and I really wanted to play the piano, I saw someone play it. And it was sort of begging them for lessons. So I think it all started out. Casually, they thought, oh, we'll centre to some lessons, you'll have fun. But it got pretty serious pretty fast. So I enjoyed playing piano a lot. I practised a lot. I think also in my family, there was a mentality of if you want to do something don't half assed it, you know, go 100%. So I did practice a lot. I enjoyed it. It was never a prescribed trajectory for me, though, until I sort of entered the conservatory system. So I started when I was four. And then when we moved to Baltimore, I started going to Peabody Conservatory, which is a part of Johns Hopkins in Baltimore. And that's where I started, sort of very seriously studying piano and also music theory, and choir. And you know, there was a whole second school that I had, basically. And then, when I was in middle school, due to a lot of things I was studying with a teacher, that was really great, but I got a hand injury and had to relearn my technique and all this. I ended up taking lessons in New York and entering the Juilliard pre college programme, which was essentially, that was really another school so I had regular school during the week and then Juilliard on the weekends. Even as I tell you all of this, it's very hard for me to remember starting, or remember any part of my life where music wasn't a part of it. So it's always a very interesting question to me. Did you always want to be a musician? The answer is no. But I also don't remember any part of my life where I wasn't a musician, that's not in my memory. So

almost it was like growing up with another limb music was a limb. So as I was going through my awkward middle school years and high school years, you know, I was doing it alongside music, music was just part of my life, you know? And then after High School I ended up doing a dual programme with Juilliard, I continued there. And also I went to Columbia for economics and math. And, you know, at that point, and we can talk as much or as little about this as you want. But after, you know, so many years of very intense piano performance, I was getting a little bit burnt out on the performance side, also feeling restless, in my relationship to the music I was playing. And actually I started composing. When I was very young, too, because I was feeling restless as I was practising my teachers would always joke around that I would come in having practised but then I put practice in air quotes. But then I would come in with some piece I had written instead, because I didn't like this idea that you had to play something the same way. People had been playing it for years. And also keep in mind that when I went home, and we were listening to music at home, I wasn't only listening to Bach, Beethoven, Chopin, like I was also listening to a lot of Indian music, and a lot of rock and pop and things that my parents loved as well. And then I grew to love. So it never was, for me, the only kind of music I was imbibing. But the way that I was playing was often you know, as serious as I got with it, my teachers that were always a little bit sceptical of how adventurous I was with my playing. So then, after all, that I kind of segwayed into composing and continue to do that more, instead of piano in college while studying econ. And then, after college, even for a second, I thought I was gonna go continue my economic studies. But at the end, I, I knew that if I didn't pick music at that point, when I really got to that crossroads, I knew that if I didn't do music, I would regret it. Because by then, I had moved downtown in New York from Uptown, and I was doing more experimental shows and playing in bands. And, you know, the more I kind of got out of what traditionally is called classical music, the more I realised there was a bigger world out there for me, and I kind of wanted to explore that more. So that's a roundabout ways that my life and music has been very roundabout.

Victoria Pham

It's amazing, though, that you managed to merge all these different sound worlds together, as well as pursuing completely to two different study, which I can identify with, because I also did the kind of jewel thing when I started out in my tertiary studies, do you think encountering all the different topics and different groups of people outside the music world when you were doing those two degrees, gave you a bit more of like a foundation to be able to move your practice into more composing. And I also know you're a conductor, as well as a producer.

Shruti Kumar

All of these, by the way, the last three words you used, producer and conductor have only been applied to me in the more recent years of my career. So composer was the main composer arranger for a long time, especially after I sort of stopped playing piano, and I stopped being considered a concert pianist, you know, I kind of put that in a little box and kept it to the side for a while. I do think, for me personally, that my experiences outside of music, and have allowed me to get into other communities of different types of thinking, or whatever, that have made it easier for me to be confident enough to mix my sensibilities and take jobs that maybe once upon a time when I was in conservatory would have felt like selling out in quotes, you know, there was a lot of, you know, when I was a kid, I don't, I used to have a fear of telling people that I liked pop music, or a fear of telling people that I wanted to do something different, especially in conservatory. So I think getting out of that bubble for a while, gave me some

confidence and freedom, as well as great collaborators. I think that you know, you never know who you're going to meet, where you're going to meet and what kind of thinking they're doing and how we're all going to mix it together. And I do think one of the greatest joys of my life wandering around all these areas of music has been who I've met and who I've gotten to work with. And then that also all led to all these different jobs that I took from composing, to arranging for records then producing records and then conducting when I tried to sort of bring together the orchestra and record sensibilities, you know, pop sensibilities together.

Victoria Pham

No, I totally understand. And I completely resonate with you saying, Oh, when I was younger, I was a little bit afraid of telling people that I like pop music because I always felt that way. In fact, this is gonna sound like the silliest thing. But when I was in my first year in the conservatory, conservatory, when I was 18, I was afraid to tell people that I liked really like popular classical music, like I was afraid to tell people that I liked Chabot, jack nine, because that was too mainstream.

Shruti Kumar

Absolutely, absolutely. There was a bit of that too. I'll never forget there was I must have been eight or nine years old in the elevator at Peabody and there was a graduate student in the same elevator as me and I just remember her saying this line I'm allergic to Brahms. And I just struck me as being so crazy, you know, as a little kid hearing this much older kind of like, respected student who is in the same building as me say a sentence like that I've never forgotten it. It's just stuck with me that that was this very casual thing that she yelled out in an elevator. I was like, why I didn't get it. I was too young. I didn't realise it was an oil to like Brahms.

Victoria Pham

I still don't understand. Well, I mean, you touched on collaboration there is that something that was encouraged in the Conservatorium system that you that you were in in Juliet, or something you found once you stepped down into more industry in production and doing your own thing?

Shruti Kumar

I think it really came. So I mean, I was a pianist, I wasn't in orchestra. So that was always something I was a little bit jealous of as a kid, that I had to be alone and practice room for 10 hours, and everyone else got to go play together. So I really did enjoy chamber music in the performing side for a while. And that was sort of when I realised also that being in a room with others was important to me, I think that was also one of the big reasons aside from how I was performing and what I was allowed to do at the piano. I also didn't like how solitary The piano was so. So I quickly tried to find any way to collaborate, I would write for choirs, I started composing for the groups that I couldn't be in, that was sort of my entry point into making friends there. And also getting to be around more people. So I was like, Okay, if I can't play piano with these people, I'm going to write music that they can sing or perform. And I am incredibly grateful that I had access to these kinds of groups in conservatory as a kid, I, I might have taken it for granted them. But having that experience of getting to work with other musicians, as a composers, very young has been something that I think has become a very important muscle for me to use. As I wander through writing, even now, even so, producing a lot in my computer. It's the thinking of how my musician friends would play it, if they're not playing it, you know, has become a very big part of

my writing process. But I will say that collaborations have become a bigger part of my life, working on songs and producing records and live shows, and, of course, film scoring. And I guess it started now that I'm saying this in college, I used to write a lot of theatre as well. So when I was sort of backing away from classical piano, and still composing in my, we used to call secular college. But non musical school like Columbia, a lot of my friends love to write theatre, they were words, writers, and actors and performers in that sense. So I used to write a lot of music for theatre, and then a lot of musical theatre. And I think working in theatre specifically was really the point in my life where I started to value collaboration, and, and understand sort of the magic in it. Surely the magic of theatre, I mean, the way things, these big shows came together with all of these moving parts, it was sort of a rush for me, a very challenging rush, but, but I do think that there's a lot to learn from the theatre. So after that, I went downtown after school, as we say, and I ended up after choosing music getting my masters at NYU in film scoring, because I thought that scoring for film was kind of a nice balance of theatre, but writing more of the music, experimental music that I like to write to a narrative story, and also getting to work with a production team. So I thought, you know, this is kind of make sense for me to do this, all the things I love, in one job, what could be more magical than that. So I did go get my masters there. But while I was there, I started to miss a little bit of my quote, unquote, classical roots. And I was around a lot of players again, because I was in grad school. And I was starting to get introduced to more experimental and adventurous, quote, unquote, classical composers, who were very inspiring to me, I studied with Julia Wolf, so one of the founders of being in a can. And she I think, single handedly changed my whole perspective, my relationship to classical music and what it means to live in that world, and what kinds of possibilities can exist. And also, you know, a whole world of composers that were working, you know, across, I think, at back then they were calling it alt classical or something, but they were working with singers, and they were working with bands that were new and Indian getting popular, and there was all of this exciting, sort of pop, classical fusion happening, I think, between 2009 to 2011 in New York Downtown, and that got me really excited. So while I was focusing on film scoring, it was also an amazing time for me to write with choreographers do bring strings, string groups in with singer songwriters in bigger venues do live scores to picture. I mean, it was a really fun time to sort of see that a lot of people were feeling like me, essentially in wanting to try a lot of crazy things. And it was sort of my testing years, and then I moved to LA. And I knew that if I had to pay my bills, I had to move somewhere where there were more jobs at the time, seems like getting employed here was easier. And I worked at a big studio for a while, which was a big learning because it was very opposite from any kind of musical world I had been a part of in New York, it almost felt for a second, like, oh, wow, that part of my musical life doesn't even gel with my musical life in LA, all of a sudden, it became sort of embarrassing to admit that I had gone to conservatory here, you know, people here, you know, it's a totally different kind of scene. Or it felt that way when I first moved here. So I worked in a big studio for a while then I went freelance and and I think navigating just simply getting jobs and being able to pay my bills was the main way that I started saying yes to all sorts of different projects that ended up being amazing for me, I worked at a film composer studio, where I met someone who produced records, who asked me to do the orchestra parts for pop records, which led me into record land, which then got me interested in producing because it all felt the same to me, you know, I think there's a part of this brain if you keep it open, that allows you to sort of use the same muscles wherever you go. It's all music, right? It's all writing. And I think, simply out of necessity of feeling like, maybe I wasn't fitting in some places or taking jobs, then I learned that I liked a lot of different things, too, you know, it wasn't so bad. So a lot of people are surprised, like, how do you manage all these different kinds of musical lives. And I'm like, to

me, it kind of all feels the same, it feels like, you know, I open up a project, my process is very much the same depending on the day. But nothing feels not aligned. To me, it all feels very aligned.

Victoria Pham

He's I know, I suppose we have a tendency to want to put things into compartments or boxes, or to make these distinctions really clear when they kind of all blend together as one big creative output.

Shruti Kumar

Absolutely. I think that's a huge thing in collaborations to how we choose who we work with. A lot of people feel like, Oh, they're too different from me, we can't make music together. And so much of my life in recent years has been to prove that wrong. I'm like, wow, the more different someone's background is, the more different their musical sensibilities are, the more exciting the collaboration is. And imagine what you can make. A lot of people are very scared to mix certain Sonic sounds together and also scared to get out of their comfort zone. You know, I think a lot of it just comes from, we're also used to get getting put in boxes, as you said, I think, I hope I tried to push everyone that I work with, and I tried to push myself as well, to really always kind of get out of my comfort zone, I learned something incredible. Every time I make music with someone, I never have made music before, you know, and I think I'm wandering now a bit.

Victoria Pham

All makes sense, because having listened to a lot of your music and look through all your repertoire, it's all really diverse in times in terms of expose if we're going to talk in traditional terms in terms of genre or instrumentation, but there's still a thread through it, not just because you're the one person who developed it, but there is a sound world that is yours, whether or not it's acousmatic music or some electronics and produced works, as well as I will contemporary classical music. It's been a

Shruti Kumar

long time since I've used these words with my music, but it's also really nice to hear that you're finding a thread. For a lot of years, people told me to pick a lane, you know, they're like, be careful. Do you want to be a composer? You want to be a producer? I mean, not to mention when I was playing piano, do you want to be a pianist? Or be you want to be a composer? Now do you want to be a theatre writer or a film writer or a producer like pick a lane because you're gonna end up losing out and I really feel strongly that I haven't lost out I really feel it's important eight just to get work that you keep an open mind to the kinds of work that you're open to but then also, I don't know, I feel way more enriched, having done all of them. And I don't feel I mean, maybe it's a longer road for sure, you know, to be taken seriously. The pragmatically, in in the industry, you need to build credits. And if you're splitting all your credits across a lot of different projects, then you may seem under qualified for some things when you might not be you know, so it's been a longer horse race in that respect, but definitely artistically very fulfilling.

Victoria Pham

Because of this, the centre of a practice like yours is that it's still all sound based and it's still on music base doesn't matter what direction you're taking.

Shruti Kumar

Absolutely, absolutely. Yes. And I've learned so much from my collaborators. I've learned so much from players. Every project I do, no matter big or small the takeaway has always been how much I have learned from the people on my teams, from engineers, to producers, not music producers, but the people producing events or, you know, film directors, my gosh, directors I learned so much from it's all a big mishmash of learning if you receive it that way. Of course, not without its hardships, but every profession has them. And I'm whether we were to talk about film music or producing or classical music. I mean, everyone has their laundry list of challenges, of course. So I don't know if you wanted to talk about any of those because I could wander out about any one of these branches and talk about perceived challenges.

INTERMISSION I

Victoria: For our first intermission is the first of Shruti's singles for her album. This is the work 'SALT' produced and composed by Shruti and features the London Contemporary Orchestra conducted by Hugh Brunt. The work is driven by many takes on defining 'salt': as an abundant edible crystal compound; an adjective once used to mean lustful or lascivious, now taken as down-to-earth, coarse, embittered, or sassy; and with gravity, the 1930 Salt March (also known as the Salt Satyagraha or Dandi March), which was an act of nonviolent civil disobedience in colonial India led by Mohandas Gandhi — a moment in time that directly inspired this piece's presentation and form. For the full list of credits for performers and artists, please refer to the podcast description.

Victoria Pham

I'd be happy to analyse I suppose, because the podcast is focusing on chatting about classical music, which is quite broad when I'm thinking about it. But I suppose your experience is interesting, because you've decided to back away from classical performance, and then move straight into composition. Was that partly so that you had a little bit more agency in terms of the music you are creating, perform 100 100%?

Shruti Kumar

I think, again, I just have these vivid memories of slogging at the piano and getting really excited to play a Mozart concerto in a competition or something and getting feedback. Like, why are you playing Mozart? Like it's Chopin? Why are you taking these performative risks with your playing? You know? Yes, I do understand in conservatory, there is a need to learn the traditions and the rules and all this stuff. But it was very frustrating for me as a kid. So clearly, I didn't like having to play exactly like all the recordings I had heard before, you know, if I'm going to play a piece that's existed for centuries. Why should I copy everyone who's played it already? 100 times? What am I providing? What am I bringing to the table, just playing it the same way as everybody else? You know, it felt very illogical to me actually. It's like, what what art is in this now, of course, there's a magnificent amount of art and then I, and a lot of hard work. But I think that was just the moment. Those were the moments rather, where it was clear that writing new music that I could play, in a different way, was kind of my way out of that. So I still live at a keyboard every day. But yes, I have more agency over the sounds I can make. And in general, I think a lot of the music I write is very driven by trying to stretch sound as much as possible, what kinds of sounds can we get today? How do we? How do we test the limits of our listening today.

But in regards to backing away from classical music, I never felt a this is interesting, because I don't often think about it chronologically like this, but I never felt a specific break. But I do describe it as I broke up with classical music. And I've come back to it, you know, but I don't remember a moment where it was like, this isn't happening for me anymore. It kind of just happened gradually, as other musical projects started to outweigh my performance, my piano performance. But interestingly enough, in recent years, I felt very nervous. You know, as I went into film, scoring in production, or ever to even approach my classical communities, again, I sort of felt like, Okay, I had I had broken away, and nobody would want it to be seen with me at this, like internal dialogue being like, I made my choice. That's totally not true. Because as it turns out, in recent years, doing live performance, especially and starting to conduct, it's gone full circle. I'm back in touch with a lot of my friends from Juilliard, who are now a lot of them in LA playing in scoring sessions. And I feel like the younger generations are really much more open in a way that I didn't learn that they were when I was sort of doing my own thing in LA. But now everyone's doing such amazing, incredible things. There's a little bit more institutional backing for experimental, quote, unquote, experimental now I'm saying, not totally traditional work and projects. So it feels like there is a growing exciting community of people really pushing the needle forward in the classical conversation. But yes, class, the word classical every time I'm saying it out loud. Now, I don't want to be Miss, representing what I'm saying because it's a tricky word. Right? As you know, the word classical is has many meanings for people depending on where they're coming from and what their association is with it, which I think is one of the big problems is the definition of the word classical, actually, and it's a two pronged issue because it's a creator issue, and it's an audience issue. I talk about this a lot with my friends here as we're trying to make this music that we make quote unquote, more accessible and that's not I think we put too much Wait on the writing, we know we're not giving listeners enough credit. I think a lot of us be like to make our music more accessible, we have to change our sensibilities, I more think we have to change our definitions of what we're calling classical, and make events that are more accessible to wider audiences. So it's a it's not the word branding is coming to mind, which is the wrong word. But I do think since larger institutions play a big role in how classical music is sort of handed out to the world. You know, there's a lot of it happens with curation. And you know, what these classical quote unquote classical umbrellas are hosting under their umbrella, and how they're programming it so that, you know, younger audiences, or any audience really should feel like they're not going somewhere where they're not welcome. I guess, I don't know if I'm making sense now. But it's a very complicated, multi tiered issue. And that's why I often avoid using the word classical. Even when you release music, now, it's almost impossible on distribution to, in your metadata data, put classical music and because it's such a contentious genre, for streaming services, even though because like nobody knows what to do with it, it's really interesting.

Victoria Pham

No, I know what you mean, because it feels static. Somehow the word classical, it always implies that it's something very traditional. That's happened 300 years ago that we've maintained, but as you say, branding, but an image of what people expect from it being I don't know, Beethoven by the three B's, or Brahms. And it doesn't feel as dynamic as it actually is. Because there are so many living practitioners, whether they're performers or composers and conductors.

Shruti Kumar

incredible world of composers right now and performers and a lot of cross. Like a lot of amazing companies that are mixing choreography and music and film and and some sort of multimedia in that sense, multi art, multi art experience is that are happening now. And again, I'm seeing it's all in the messaging a little bit. That's a big part of it, I think, and also who we allow to be part of the conversation. You know, thinking back on when I was a kid, I wished that some of my more Indian sensibilities were not just written off, I had a composition teacher once that took his eraser to my music a few times. And instead of asking why I had written notes I hadn't written, he would just be like, Here, give me give me your music. And he would take the eraser and erase it and then fill in something else. I remember that really vividly, actually, and this was this was at Juilliard when I was in middle school, and it was, I just sort of accepted it. But it was also awful in a way, because there's not enough inclusion of other musical styles in what we're calling tradition. I mean, if we're just talking about how long this music has existed, I mean, there's been music all over the world that's existed a hell of a lot longer, you know? Like, what are what are our, you know, now, I had to say western classical all the time, I've said it my whole life. Because when I go to India, I have to say this, I do western classical piano, you know? I mean, it's a very complicated, like, how many words do we need? It's almost frustrating in that sense. How are we defining classical? Is it how old the music is? No, not anymore. Is it how I mean, I don't even know what people mean anymore. So I'm always sort of afraid to be like, I'm reading classical music. I feel like I am. Because of my history. I feel like that's where my history is, put me. But if you don't mean old music, what do you mean, that's why everyone says neoclassical, an hour old, classical, or I do think, interestingly, as I'm thinking this through is you one of our most beautiful assets is the orchestra. You know, I think, to people who are not familiar with classical world, when they see an orchestra, they will assume classical, you know, and I think orchestra, especially now, there's so much to be done with an orchestra that's so accessible, people are excited about orchestra, as you know, there are younger orchestras now, you know, orchestras are having a sort of a renaissance themselves, I feel, and doing you know, even if you look at some of our bigger orchestras in America, the programmes and the calendars are just wildly different from what they were even five years ago. You know, I think it's really important though, that we start including musicians from all musical backgrounds to perform their work in these institutions and homes because that in and of itself, is erasing any kind of assumption of what kind of musician someone is, and I think this is definitely I have to I would be remiss to not point out racial implications here. Just it's unnerving, I think in the UK Nathan Sani. I'm sure you know who that is. He wrote this amazing I think it was actually a thread of tweets but, but I'm not sure about how he always felt like he had to prove that he was a classical pianist, you know, just and it's something that I'm not always comfortable talking about. I was definitely the only Indian in at Juilliard at the time I was there, maybe one or two, never thought about it never addressed, it kind of just ran with it. But there is a there are a lot of assumptions that are being made in the classical world, or from people outside, I can't tell, I can't tell if it's how the classical world is, and it's projecting, and then other people are running with these assumptions. Or if it's, you know, we can't tell anymore. But I think there is a big, big responsibility on us right now, if we have the power to do it, to make sure we are programming diverse musicians. And I don't just mean that race and gender wise, although I firmly sort of believed that if we expand the kinds of music we allow in our institutions, it will inherently hopefully be diversifying the artists involved across races and genders as well. So I, these are very loaded topics. And I feel like I'm seeing a lot of crazy words in one sentence, but, but I do really feel that way. I mean, I think programming and platforming and messaging, and also from the artistic side, not being afraid of mixing sounds and mixing genres. You know, in my whole, I have a

radio show, where I bring into artists from very wildly different musical backgrounds. So like, maybe somebody isn't known to be an EDM DJ, and somebody else is known to be a violinist. And I bring them in conversation together. And then at the end, we make a track together. And at the beginning of the conversation, they're like, We would never work together. And then by the end, we make something really cool together, you know. So it's just kind of proving or dispelling the notion that we have to stick in our lane. I think getting out of our lane actually is the way to make especially the classical world a little more, quote unquote, accessible again, all these words are feeling they're already frustrating me, you know, I'm sure you have this too. Like when you talk about classical music, it makes your mouth hurt a little because of all the

Victoria Pham

all the baggage that comes with classical music,

Shruti Kumar

like I had to justify everything I'm saying that's like, and I don't mean it like that. I mean, it like that, you know? Crazy, it's like, why can't it just exist? And, you know, I know so many musicians now that are so happy to be just making music and having fun and and explore what we can do. And I guess when we bring the word classical into the conversation, it always becomes a little more dense, you know? And, yeah, I mean, just thinking back on my own life and conservatory, which was a significant amount of time, really shaped my own relationship to my own music, you know, I had to also leave classical world to a little bit, embrace the music that I liked and wrote, because those institutions didn't teach some musical sensibilities that I also grew up listening to, you know, and like to put it bluntly, like, Indian stuff and pop stuff or anything I grew up in Baltimore, you know, there was a lot of different stuff that I liked that was sort of dismissed. In my conservatory instead of disgust. I think it should be discussed, not dismissed people. And that's why I teach now I teach students and I love it. I'm I didn't expect to teach but it's a recent development. And one thing I'm big interview is making sure that my students bring in music. I never say anything's wrong. I always ask why. I feel like you people should be emboldened to make whatever art they want to make. It's their expression. But they have to be able to explain their choices. And I think, at least when you're teaching because we have to learn why we're doing the things we're doing and learn the fundamentals. So I'm not saying abandon all rules, but I'm saying, never teach them in a way that's implying that a student is wrong. I think that's really damaging. And something that happens a lot in classical conservatory and in training. We're told oh, you know, we're so afraid of making mistakes. I always joke like, I'll all I want to do is be able to improvise with my friends. I'm so jealous of my jazz friends. You know, I have this paralysing fear to this day of playing a note that doesn't sound good. These things are so ingrained in us, you know, this is wrong. This is right. I think that is a very damaging thing for an artist. And, you know, I have to think at some point back hundreds and hundreds of years ago, it wasn't like that. Like they were all messing around too, right at some point down the line. Somebody decided, this is where we stopped making. This is where the rules end. And this is where we start teaching them forever. And we're never gonna like mess around again with music. I mean, you have to wonder where that started to. Like when was the deciding point where it's like, from this year and back are the rules that we're gonna teach forever for, like forever more, I just don't understand.

Victoria Pham

I don't understand either because it like sets such an untouchable bar. And maybe that goes back to what you mentioned before you talked about oh, do I need to play Mozart, the way I have heard in all these recordings, maybe, because we're confronted with this, like massive library of perfect, perfect recordings of classical music that set the bar and we feel like we need to replicate that performance, who decided that was perfect? Exactly,

Shruti Kumar

I get it, I get a lot of amazing historians that have studied how the pieces were originally performed. But as a composer, actually, even in my record that I'm making now are about to release. It feels like I'm still making it but I have realised that I really enjoy writing pieces that can be interpreted multiple ways by players. And this may be directly correlated to my own experience as a player. But the notes in the scores, and the expressions are all meant to be interpreted in multiple ways. So I want the performer to also be a part of the life of the piece. And I don't want it to exist in perpetuity as the same thing over and over again. So it's been fun to engage, you know, I, this record that I have coming out not in terms I did I started working on in earnest when I was in the UK, and unbelievably grateful to have the ones in contemporary orchestra on it. Who conducted you brought amazing players, incredible, incredible players who are also I think, in the UK, really pushing the needle about the conversations around classical music. In fact, I think this conversation is happening a little bit more in the UK. And it really lit a fire under me, so to speak, when I was there, because I realised there was all this exciting stuff happening where you are, and I didn't feel a part of it in America. So. So since I've been back, I've been trying to find that balance here as well. But in this record, I had been wanting to make a record like this for a long time. And it sort of addresses a lot of what we talked about, I wanted to prove to myself more than anyone else that I could make a cohesive record that tapped into all the kinds of music that I like, be it orchestra, or, you know, Indian drums, or musical theatre piano or some, you know, since or singers that I've worked with rappers that I've worked with, it was really important to me to try to experiment myself with genre, you know, everyone says you have to make an album has to sound kind of the same. For me, this album is very hard for me to put a genre on it even in the releasing and the technicality of it, it's very difficult for me to assign the genre, because every track is very different. But I do believe there's a thread like you said earlier, where from beginning to end, you will be able to follow an arc and it has to be that way. Because I lived that arc, you know, I, I you know, starting there's, there will be some very classical sounding piano on it, there will be some experimental piano on it, there will be orchestra, there will be beats, there will be since there will be singing, there will be you know, a bunch of stuff. But it's all stuff that I have lived. So there has to be an arc. And I'm sort of tired of being told that I have to do one project at a time I was like, let's just see for myself, especially during the pandemic, when I had to use my brain somehow to stop myself from going mad. I was like, let's see if I can do this. And in the UK, I found it to be a better place for me personally, to sort of launch it creatively because a lot more people seemed to be less scared of doing something like this, or they didn't question question me as much. I think that has to do with a lot of things. I think, in America, or the US rather, I shouldn't say America. There's less funding for the arts. So I think everything is a lot, there's a lot more red tape here. And that also leads to a lot of risk aversion. In institutions and in creating art and funding it. I think, something that you guys have that we don't is that funding culture, you know, in Europe and the UK, and therefore, more confidence in exploring, because there's more resources for you guys. So I think that is the sort of the bigger part of that equation. But regardless, I started that record there and salt the single that's already out, that is just DLCO and my electronic brain the notes in

that are almost comically, like, do whatever you feel like, what does this word mean to you express it the way you want? And I feel like I had conversations with the conductor and he was like, I love this. But are you sure? Like yeah, because I want it to there to be some individual agency for the players in the conductor. But also, as an ensemble, they're gonna breed that piece and played the piece differently depending on how they all interact with each other. I wish I could show you the score, but we're just talking. Of course, I have some more technical expressions in there. But a lot of the notes are this phrase play emphatically or timidly or in protest, or, you know, and that could mean so many different things people communicate verbally so differently. So I wanted to sort of explore that nuance in communication, through music without words. And I'm pretty happy about it. I also, I'm happy with how they played, I'm like, wow, I didn't even know it could sound like that. That's amazing. That's part of the fun, you know, and that's something that I couldn't have done. When I was a kid in conservatory, I couldn't have played something totally differently, and had someone go, Wow, that's amazing. You have to hope that someone like Mozart would love it too. You know, it's like, I didn't know my music could sound like that, you know, they weren't boring people. These were fun people are so we were taught. Um, but yeah, so that's part of the joy of this record. And also the collaborations. And it's, it was challenging for sure, because we did it during lockdown. And people were all over the world. sessions were remote. And it mixing sounds that people are used to is hard. It was hard for the collaborators. It's hard for me, sometimes we you know, we, but then once we kind of nailed it, it felt so good. Like, oh, we can do this, we can make Sonic space for a lot of different elements that may not live together otherwise, you know, and engineering is also being around Engineers has also given me a lot of perspective on how we can make sounds better. And I think engineering and tech technology are things that classical world is also a little bit resistant towards now. Not as much when we were kids and in school. Yes. And I think introducing technology and engineering and recording techniques as a part of a creative process instead of something separate from your performance, I think, also changes the bounds of what classical music can be and who's attending and who's involved. You know, sorry, again, I'm rambling. I could talk about this for hours. So

Victoria Pham

no, it's interesting, actually. You actually just touched on something I didn't even think of this question until you start talking about engineers. What the kind of forgive me this is probably a sign of my own ignorance. But I never really thought of until I was reading all your work and listening to salt, the single that's coming out as well as reading about the album before it is released in spring. Correct.

Shruti Kumar

The album is released in spring. Yeah, salt is already out. And then I have another single coming out. February 18. Music features an amazing singer, songwriter, poet, performer nation good. So if you guys haven't heard her, she is incredible and so inspiring to me, as an activist and an artist and a musician and a writer, all the things anyway.

INTERMISSION II

Victoria: For our first intermission is the second single from Shruti's album, released just last week, is the counterpart to her first single, SALT. This is 'Last Call' composed and produced by Shruti with lyrics by Zimbabwean-American sing-songwriter Shungudzo Kuyimba. This work delves into the

obsession with searching for meaning in every thought. For the full credits list of engineers, musicians and artists, I'd encourage you all to check out the podcast description.

Victoria Pham

Well, I was I realised as I was in New York, that it never occurred to me that I could make a record as a composer without like, a close collaboration with one ensemble where it's like all the string quartets I've ever written out of my lifetime or, you know, things like that. It never occurred to me that you could just go out there and make a record.

Shruti Kumar

I don't know why that wasn't a thought for me, to be honest. I think it's because I've been the way that I make music now is so mishmash, there's a lot of different things I'm thinking about when I'm making music now. Um, but then when I started talking to my friends in quote, unquote, classical world, again, I can't say it without the quote unquote, because they were surprised. They were like, you know, I mean, there is the thread. The LCBO is this thread. I mean, they did a remote session with me, and they are in almost all of the tracks, whether resampled or just in their performance. But I did start thinking about this recently how, as composers when you're thinking about the recorded final results, instead of the live final result, there's a whole nother dimension to composing which people are starting to incorporate in their live performances too, right. We see a lot more electronics and mic placement. That's different on stage. Now orchestras are mixing up where they're sitting. I mean, it's really exciting time, right? We're like, oh, I can sit on the other side of the stage. That's cool. But I do think that because my creative process is so much about recording, especially now and less on stage. It just never crossed my mind that that was something that people don't do as much in composing. They usually have their pieces played over and over again and then yes, and then Samba will record their work. It is interesting to go this route backwards. because, I mean, I did write the live parts for players, you know, and I kind of knew whom, who I wanted to play. And I had been inspired by all of the players in my record for years, if they're not great friends, they're people that I've listened to a long, long time. So, you know, that element was not last, but it was an ensemble that I sort of wheeled into being with my brain. It wasn't an existing ensemble, but I hope that more composers do it. I mean, it's so possible. And I think, without being bound to a existing ensemble, you might write something totally different. And then when you're figuring out how to perform them, it's a fun adventure. Like, Oh, what am I am I gonna bring my rig on stage? Am I gonna have someone playing glass bottles? I don't know. We'll see. Do I have to bring all my sense onstage to do I have my strings players using a pedal board? I mean, all saying, saying all this stuff in any other part of music besides classical isn't weird.

Victoria Pham

Yeah, it's just classical.

Shruti Kumar

But I can tell even tell we're doing a zoom now. And I can tell just by your face, sometimes I'm like, Yeah, I mean, but it's not a classical conversation. I do think in London, it's happening way more, though. And in the UK, it's happening way more. So I was sort of always surprised when I was walking around there and be like, I have a crazy idea for a show. And they'd be like, That's not that crazy. Like, I

would have to convince so many people in the US that some of the ideas that I had were worth doing and in the UK just seemed like it was so much easier to get things greenlit. Is that your experience,

Victoria Pham

or? It is. Back in Australia, we also I think we're in the same kind of funding rut as the one you're describing in the States. And also, it's very conservative, it's big country with only a handful of orchestras. And because everything comes is spread apart geographically. So we don't really have these kind of centres for art. So anything in the experimental scene is kind of in the fringe in the big cities. And then there's not very much funding for it. And then when I moved to the UK about two years ago, I was also surprised by that they have so many new music festivals. And also the proximity to Europe means that there's a lot of even more new music festivals or places where it's totally normal to mix disciplines, which in a way it should be because it's all it's all art, as opposed to different, right.

Shruti Kumar

I have some really good friends from graduate school who went to Sydney Conservatorium. And I remember when I first met them, and these are dear, dear friends of mine, they got to NYU. And we went to go to Carnegie Hall to see thing I can, or Julia, what a piece by Julia Wolf. And I was so excited by it. And my friends who were just newly out of the Sydney conservatory experience, could not wrap their heads around that everything they wanted was so traditional. And it's funny because I felt like I had had my time to sort of become more adventurous, and they had just arrived and they were so traditional. I feel there's no other way word for but now they're now they've really, you know, they were totally, I do that, I was like, wow, I had no idea.

Victoria Pham

I went for the city con as well. So I know exactly what you're describing. And you know what another thing was, I was very lucky. And I moved to Paris first. So I did some music study in that in that city, which in my mind, I imagined it to be really traditional for some reason, because that was where the Paris Conservatory music and they study harmony rigorously, which I do want to take that away from them. But at the same time, they encourage so much collaboration between different departments really weird ensemble combinations and forced us all to work together. So there was an understanding that you could as a musician, work with the composer, which was something I was lacking in Australia. And then at the same time, they have air cam, which is the middle of the city, which has all the music, tech development and things like that. And there's space for experimenting and developing and making mistakes in a way that I didn't have at home.

Shruti Kumar

So important. It's so important to have space to make mistakes. I mean, so many points in my career, even calling myself a producer and like being comfortable engineering myself and all these things came from this really inbuilt fear of being bad at something in front of people. That's got to be from my piano performance days. I don't know what it is where it's like, I'll never forget the one piano recital I had where I missed a note. Like, the world had ended. I was so young teacher, I'd be like, Okay, you have another recital tomorrow. It's fine. Just move on. It is an insane thing to have that fear that we grew up with, if it's if it's from a young age, and I mean, that may not be everyone. Maybe some people aren't like that. Some of my idols when I was growing up, really I remember they made a lot of mistakes, but

they sounded so good. And I'm sure my teachers didn't like these players, but I certainly did because they weren't having more fun after that. But yes, I think in future if we teach or we around students or younger composers and players, just, first of all stopping using the word mistake, yes, I guess if you're playing classical music you play a wrong note. But I think these words are the way we speak about the stuff and, and how it makes the student feel. It's really important to consider all this stuff. And especially for composers, I think we should entirely take out the word mistake and just ask why. Why did you do that? Or what what were you thinking when you did that? You know, there should not be the worst mistake ever applied to a younger composer anybody's music really?

Victoria Pham

Well, like operating in the realm of counterpoint anymore? Oh,

Shruti Kumar

my goodness, parallel fits. I love parallel fits. Fine. Sue me. Sometimes I have to use them. It's beautiful. Oh my god. I had a theory teacher when I was in high school. I remember having all these memories now fear of God we used solfege and like the French system dandelo. And in theory, like the beginning, he would always make us build these chords, but like really fast at the beginning of the class, use it if you're outside. Luciano Pavarotti is smoking a cigarette. And you can't name this chord in moveable DOH. Immediately, you'd all just be like, terrified at 9am on a Saturday. Is he gonna pick me today to do this? Oh my goodness. Yes, I think if we can eliminate some fear across the board, I think that is a big word, eliminating fear and encouraging exploration. Like what other music is gonna have people do stuff like that, you know, put them on the spot. You no one wants to feel like they're being put on the spot. I mean, I almost it almost classical music to me now thinking through it with you feels like when an athlete might feel like they're going through a dancer or something. And it as opposed to other musicians, it is much more performance based in that sense, like competitively performance based, then a lot of my friends who did not do the classical route, you know, so it's like, when you describe your memories, it sounds like you're talking about sport, right?

Victoria Pham

No, it doesn't like the discipline and rigour of it that that is taxing to one's self esteem that's associated with classical music. Well, now I'm saying classical music. I don't know what to call it anymore. I've been saying art music, maybe we've

Shruti Kumar

been we say new music. I say new music a lot. I'm the new music space is what I often have to use when I'm like, I want this to live in the new music space or the new music world. It's at least what we say here. But

Victoria Pham

you would describe it I have this. I don't know, this is a horrible memory or slightly funny memory. I went to go see an orchestra perform in Australia. And they were performing alongside Wynton Marsalis his jazz band, because they were doing some of these compositions which involve improvisation plus a more traditional orchestral set. Yeah, there's a bit towards the end of the the fourth movement, where the conductor started just selecting classical musicians when the orchestra to spontaneously

improvising was just silence, and it was just so uncomfortable. And Winton would fill in the gaps awkwardly. I felt so terrible for those musicians because that fear just hit them immediately. You could tell

Shruti Kumar

you can tell it, you'll see it in their faces as soon as they think they're going to be randomly called up to play something they haven't practised. Yeah, it's terrifying. I mean, I remember I was in choir for a long time to in high school, and my choir teacher, he would do this thing where he would make everyone sing the same chord progression, you know, in the choir, and then he would point to someone, they would have to improvise over it. And I remember begging me begging him, don't pick me, don't pick me. And he's like, What are you talking about your entire life, his music, you're gonna be fine. And I was like, no, no, you can't pick me. I'll die if you pick me. And then he finally picked me. It was very fun. But he said, I saw like, you were tearing the pure terror on your face as he started to get like, he started laughing. But it was really fun. And I'm glad he forced me to do stuff like that. But it's crazy for the amount of hours we spend at our instruments that we're afraid to play them when we have. Exactly every single note. Yes.

Victoria Pham

Hopefully that will change.

Shruti Kumar

I know, I already see a changing I do feel like there's a it's been a long time since I've been back to my conservatories. But what I'm seeing coming out of there and what from just talking to my friends who have also grown up in their musical world, it does seem like things are changing. I think they need to change more in terms of representation. And when I say that I I mean it in all senses the world word sorry, all senses of the word, styles, race, gender, etc. I think that there's still some obvious gaps that are all linked, I feel like if we fix one or all of these problems, they will also fix each other. I just think that risk aversion, a fear of change, all these things are gonna eventually hurt classical music, and we're gonna stop using the word and we're gonna start calling it new music, and we're gonna find new spaces, and people are going to be afraid of having their music played at the bigger halls and stuff like that, because they don't want to be associated with something that's exclusive, you know? So it's really important that we make it more inclusive. Yeah,

Victoria Pham

I suppose. Do you have any pieces of advice for anyone who's looking to make that change or change their practice in the way you have merging all the genres and, and your past musical skills into one?

Shruti Kumar

Yes, very well put. If I could, I don't know, if I had everyone is different. So I don't know if I have advice for a younger composer, because I think everybody's paths are valid. So if I could tell myself when I was younger, something though, maybe it would be to be less scared of embracing everything that I like, musically speaking, I feel like I was often in settings where I would sort of hide a part of my musical self, in order to fit in to that particular group for years, you know, be it conservatory, be it a pop recording session, be it something else, you know, there was this need to sort of not embraced all of

my musical selves when I was at the creative table. And therefore, I think I lost some time, not really fully expressing myself or bringing as much as they could have to any one of these tables. So I think, you know, don't be afraid of liking everything that you'd like, musically, especially, especially if you're coming from classical world, definitely like everything, and listen to everything, and be open be open to musical experiences, because you never know where they're going to lead. And in my case, they kind of went full circle. So their years in the middle where I thought I would never, you know, be around classical spaces again. And now that's a big part of my life. So, and I love it, you know, so I, I think, if there's any way you can possibly eliminate any kind of fear, it's so hard imposter syndrome is always real. In any part of music, not just classical music. Being an artist is hard. It's a lot of yourself every day. So the more you can allow yourself to explore and branch out and get out of your comfort zone and collaborate, collaborate, collaborate, all the things we've been talking about, I think, only good things can happen. And what's the worst thing that's gonna happen, you're gonna do something you don't like, and it'll you'll move on. But you learn a lot. And you can't learn anything by just kind of staying in a box, someone else put you in. Don't let people put you in a box.

Victoria Pham

I wish I also knew when I was younger, and reminding myself it's one of those things where every couple of years, you're like, Oh, my God, I'm doing that habit, again,

Shruti Kumar

of absolutely every. It's amazing, you know, even now thinking of myself two years ago, I'm like, Why was I so scared of that it was the best thing that I ever did. And it will continue to be that way. Probably that's just part of the gig. But it's important to remind each other and also just, you know, community, what you're doing now is your show, encouraging discussion, bringing people together. You know, more people are aligned with you than you think, especially in the music world. So reaching out to people sharing experiences, making music together, these are things you know, I think, for a long time actually coming from Conservatory I was afraid to write in the room with someone else. Maybe that's because I was so used to practising piano by myself all the time or composing by myself and then going to the rehearsals. So it took me a long time to get comfortable being in a studio with someone else and playing and writing together and is the best thing I've ever done. I'm so grateful that I can do that now. But again, these are things that if we can tell ourselves younger, to be more open to and adventurous with, you know, yeah, get in the room with someone else and try to make something with them without you have to be not perfect all the time. You can't. You cannot be writing something and feel like you're 100% Nailing it the whole time. So do that with someone else watching. Get out of your own head. Yeah,

Victoria Pham

all of these things. You build your community through collaborating. So

Shruti Kumar

100% 100% I could honestly talk about this stuff for hours and hours, but I'm sure she's

Victoria Pham

great. I say thank you so much. Like it's given me so much to think about and you're like so full of energy. So you've woken me up, which is amazing.

Shruti Kumar

Well, it is morning here for me and I'm waking myself up.

Victoria Pham

That's true. And I quickly mentioned everyone to listen out for your album when it drops

Shruti Kumar

late. Oh, of course. Yes. Yes. Next angle on February 18. Yes, amazing. Thank you for having me. It was a real pleasure. I love getting a chance to think about this stuff over and over again and remember new things, figure out new things. It's always a joy.

Victoria Pham

Thank you so much for being on. Thank you. Anyways, if anyone wishes to check out more of Shruti's upcoming article, do check it out at the link below and take a listen to the two singles in full if you can, Salt and Last Call. Thanks again to you all listening and I will catch you all next time for the Season (and series) finale!

**SALT (feat. London Contemporary Orchestra)' - released Dec 17 2021
attached is the press release associated with some info -**

Composer/Producer: Shruti Kumar
Conductor: Hugh Brunt
Recording Engineer: Fiona Cruikshank
Mix Engineer: Eva Reistad
Mastering Engineer: Heba Kadry
Guitar: Brandon Walters
Sitar: Bishi Bhattacharya
Synths: Shruti Kumar
Electric Bass: Emily Retsas (@emilyretsas)
Artwork: Anna Azarov & Ellie Pritts (@annaazarov & @elliepritts)

'LAST CALL (feat. Shungudzo)' - to be released Feb 18. (unreleased mp3 attached)

This is the second single I'm releasing and an answer/partner to my first '*SALT (featuring the London Contemporary Orchestra)*' (also attached) -- listening to them together is the goal to merge or broaden audiences that might show up for one element and leave interested in another. But they have lives separate from each other as well!

This is the first couplet of several on the album that show different musical interpretations of the same themes -- aiming to mix/eliminate genre as a cohesive factor in an album project.

This record has been cooking over the past few years and all the tracks on it have been sewn together from years of my performances, recordings - multiple remote sessions in different cities over lockdown, and brings together such an awe inspiring group of musicians -- a whirlwind and a lot of creative jumps. Excited to see how it all flies the nest.

Credits for LAST CALL:

Composer/Producer: Shruti Kumar
Lyricist: Shungudzo Kuyimba
Featured Artist: Shungudzo
Songwriters: Shungudzo Kuyimba, Shruti Kumar
Vocal Arranging: Shungudzo Kuyimba
Engineers: Fiona Cruikshank (Church Studios - London), Eva Reistad (EastWest Studios - Los Angeles), Shruti Kumar
Mix Engineers: Vira Byramji, Shruti Kumar
Mastering Engineers: Alex Sterling (Precision Sound), Heba Kadry
Musicians--
Vocals: Shungudzo Kuyimba
Conductor: Hugh Brunt, featuring the London Contemporary Orchestra
Additional Violin: Stephanie Matthews
Additional Viola: Marta Honer
Additional Cello: Ro Rowan
Electric Bass: Emily Retsas
Guitar: Brandon Walters

Sitar: Bishi Bhattacharya
Drums: Aaron Steele
Percussion: Hal Rosenfeld
Piano: Shruti Kumar
Synths: Shruti Kumar
Electronics: Shruti Kumar
Sampling, programming: Shruti Kumar

Artwork: Anna Azarov & Ellie Pritts

technology at NYU's Clive Davis Institute. She hosts a show on dublab "[Let's Shake On It](#)" centered around bringing together esteemed and diverse musicians in conversation and collaboration in hopes of increasing transparency in the music industry and eliminating genre. In March 2020, Shruti founded [Sound Travels](#), a remote hire platform and educational resource to help musicians during COVID and beyond.

Here are some links around the album and release:

[I Care If You Listen / American Composers Forum](#)

[VENTS](#)

Here is a podcast turned zoom in COVID run by Nadia Sirota in which we talk at length about changing the classical space: [Living Music with Nadia Sirota](#)

<https://www.facebook.com/LivingMusicwithNadiaSirota/>

Here is a podcast where I talk about music industry reform at large:

<https://theculturejournalist.substack.com/p/the-digital-hustle>

<https://www.shrutikumar.com/>