

# The Piano Prodigies



**PRECOCIOUS MAESTRO:**  
Ten-year-old Suproteem Sarkar who competed in the 51st World Piano Competition at Carnegie Hall in New York in September.

MOHAMMED JAFFER / SHAPINDIA



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## Geeta Bhatnagar-Novotny

It is rare to find Indians pursuing Western classical music at a competitive level. But the young Suproteem Sarkar and youthful Sonia and Simmi Tripathi, who have extraordinary talent, have done just that

**O**N A MILD Saturday afternoon in September, as New Yorkers were creating their typical hustle and bustle in Midtown, a boy was creating beautiful music at 57th Street and 7th Avenue. The boy was 10-year-old Suproteem Sarkar and the location was Carnegie Hall.

Glorious Western classical piano music filled the Weill Recital Hall as about 63 young pianists from all over the world came together to perform solos and concertos at the 51st World Piano Competition. Suproteem mesmerized the audience with his virtuosic performance of Mendelssohn's Song without Words, Op. 30, No. 6, The Venetian Boat-Song No. 2.

The prestigious World Piano Competition, held in association with the American Music Scholarship Association, is an annual international contest in which medalists from the finals are invited to perform at Carnegie Hall. After winning the regional evaluation in Philadelphia, Suproteem qualified to compete in Cincinnati at the semifinals and the finals. He won the silver medal in his ability and age level.

So you think that is impressive? Even more impressive is the fact that this was his second time performing at Carnegie Hall. He first performed at the world-renowned facility at age 7 as a World Piano Competition/AMSA gold medal winner. And at that time, Suproteem had only been studying classical piano for two years. He has been learning classical piano from Joy M. Kiszely,

director of the Main Line Conservatory of Music in Ardmore, Pa., since he was 5.

Suproteem has had incredible experiences in his 10 years. He has already traveled widely, speaks fluent Bengali and is studying Hindi. Though mature beyond his years, he is also pleasantly precocious and has quite the sense of humor. But he is still a typical 10-year-old boy, rather, a typical 10-year-old Indian American boy. And there is a difference – young Indian Americans seem to partake in more diverse interests and seem to excel at all of them.

Suproteem is a fifth-grader at the Valley Forge Middle School in Wayne, Pa., about 20 miles northwest of Philadelphia. He placed second in the botany division at the Chester County Science Fair in Spring, he has been learning fencing and was elevated to the

advanced level last year, his favorite subject in school is “math, without a doubt,” he is interested in astronomy and science and he is a straight A student.

Indrani and Susanta Sarkar, Suproteem's proud parents, may just have something to do with his successful endeavors. The parents grew up outside of Kolkata and are deeply rooted in their Bengali culture, which they impart to their children. A Ph.D. in biophysical chemistry, Susanta works in imaging sciences for GlaxoSmithKline and Indrani is a computer scientist with Unisys.

And let's not forget the other influence in Suproteem's life, his older sister Saiontoni, a sophomore at Duke University who has also performed twice at Carnegie Hall at the World Piano Competition.

Indrani has studied and performed dance and music. ▶

**MULTITALENTED:** Sarkar, who speaks fluent Bengali, practices at home in Wayne, Pa. In terms of musical talent, he's all mature for his age.



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**“We are very pleased that they are capitalizing on the tremendous opportunity of growing up here and being exposed to different cultures and this happens through their piano and songs.”**

◆ Between her knowledge of music and Saiontoni’s study of violin, piano and Indian classical dance, the arts have always been important in the Sarkar household. Suproteem’s favorite Bengali song is “Aha ki anondo akashe batase” from the Satyajit Ray classic, “Hirak Rajar Deshe.” Susanta explains the lyrics, “There is such a joy all around us in the sky, in the air.”

Suproteem and Saiontoni have flourished in many diverse endeavors and Susanta says that’s because “in this country you can max out your potential.” He adds,

“We are very pleased that they are capitalizing on the tremendous opportunity of growing up here and being exposed to different cultures and this happens through their piano and songs.”

What does the future hold for Suproteem? “I think it will evolve. He is equally advanced in math and sciences,” Susanta says. “All you can do is plant the seeds.”

The parents say they see music as an asset, it builds personality and gives pleasure in life.

Suproteem likes to say his sister didn’t inspire him to play and he discovered his love for piano

on his own. But he admits she has helped him learn his music and to achieve the victories he has had thus far. He says of his sister’s tutelage, “She was strict with me!”

Saiontoni says although she doesn’t play much piano anymore, it is a great release for her to take her mind off her school work. She volunteers to teach piano and music theory to children in Durham, N.C., near where she goes to school. She says the volunteer teaching program sends the message of charity and shows talents can enhance a life and do not always have to be used for profit.

Saiontoni is proud of her brother and says of his talents, “First of all, I am really glad that he has taken a liking to piano and he is working hard toward these competitions, but the bigger picture is him growing to love the instrument and growing to have the passion to enjoy the music. If he enjoys it as much as he can, he will get the most out of it.”

The Sarkars give most of the credit for Suproteem’s piano triumphs to Kiszely, his music teacher.

Kiszely uses a combination of techniques mostly based on the Kodály Method, which is built on the philosophy that learning the language of music is as paramount as learning language in general. The basis of this method stems from strong sight singing skills with an emphasis on the language of rhythm and rhythmic movement, solfege, music theory, etc. But Kiszely combines this with a very philosophical approach to music.

She speaks of teaching music with such passion, it is not difficult to understand why the Sarkars sing her praises. For over 20 years, Kiszely has nurtured multiple winners in the World Piano Competition and other contests, but she stresses it is not

**SISTER ACT:** Simmi Tripathi, a professional pianist, practices. Along with her older sister, Sonia, she understands the dedication, perseverance and meticulous work it takes to master a musical instrument.



just about competition.

"The goal is not winning or losing, it is the preparation. Do the very best that you can, and good things can happen. Competitions give a student a sense of their own capability and children are given a sense of empowerment through seeing their hard work and preparation pay off," she says.

She says while teaching Suproteem, she noticed he was going to be an unusual student because he possesses great sensitivity. "He is that kind of student that every teacher wishes he/she has," Kiszely says.

"In the last year he has matured – his musicianship has turned into artistry and that is rare for a student of his age."

Suproteem says his first performance at Carnegie Hall was "a humongous blur." He says he was emotionally unprepared for the experience: "I traveled two hours to New York City and didn't know what to expect, I met my teacher and she led me into the hall. And I just played how I play at home." Needless, to say he was a success.

Many people do not realize that learning the piano requires great patience and mental and physical fortitude. Suproteem likes to practice and challenge himself with new repertoire, but he says, "Sometimes, I am too tired to practice, my hands are tired and my arms ache as I practice my trill exercises to work on my technique, and when I get tired, I lose my willpower."

The 10-year-old says music has helped him understand his emotions. "I learn emotions through songs, by portraying the personality of a piece," he explains. "I had to learn to be sad for my Mendelssohn song." He loves to play Haydn and says he had to learn to be mischievous to play that music. He aspires to play Grieg's Nocturne Opus 49, No. 9.

It has become less rare to find

Indians in the arts, especially Western arts, such as Western classical music. That said, I would like to introduce you to two other extraordinary sibling pianists: Sonia and Simmi Tripathi.

Sonia, 27, and Simmi, 23, are professional pianists who, like Suproteem and Saiontoni, understand the dedication, perseverance and meticulous work it takes to master a musical instrument. They also understand what it takes to parlay that into a career in music. They have traversed the competition circuits and currently attend prestigious universities in

pursuit of their degrees in piano performance.

Sonia and Simmi grew up in Houston and started studying piano at 12 and 7, respectively. Sonia says she was just "drawn to piano" and when she was given the opportunity to take lessons, she just threw herself into it. Simmi might have been inspired by Sonia, but soon found her own passion for this instrument.

The sisters attended the High School for the Performing and Visual Arts in Houston. Sonia remarks going to that school "sealed the deal" for her as

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**PRODIGAL DAUGHTER:** Sonia Tripathi received her bachelor's and master's degrees from the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, N.Y. She has studied piano performance with Nelita True and Douglas Humphreys.



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◆ far as what she would pursue as a career.

Simmi says of her experience at the school, “It was so nice for me to be around other students who were as driven as I was. I realized how much more focused I had to be in my music classes and logically that was the only thing I could see myself doing. You have to love what you do to spend quality time doing it.”

Both agree piano competitions were a huge part of honing their skills. Competitions are a “reality check” and provide participants a perspective on other competitors and talents, Sonia says. “Winning gives you the confidence to know that you are in the right field.”

Personally, she says, through competitions, she found her love of performing. “I love to perform. Performing gives me a rush like none other.”

Simmi says she started competing in the fourth grade. “There is a place for fun in competition. You build confidence and you have goals that you work toward,” she says. “It forces you to perfect things and to take yourself to a certain level. You have to learn to control your nerves.” Competitions can be beneficial to a student who is ready, but they aren’t for everybody.

The sisters followed similar paths in their adolescence, but when it came to college, they chose very different environments.

Sonia received her bachelor’s and master’s degrees from the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, N.Y. She has studied piano performance with Nelita True and Douglas Humphreys. After she completed her master’s, Sonia was hired as a piano instructor by the Eastman School’s Community Education Division and taught private lessons and group classes.

It was then that she developed her love of teaching. Many uni-

versities require their music professors to have their doctorates in music. So in 2005, Sonia moved to the University of California, Santa Barbara, with a full-tuition scholarship to begin work on a doctorate degree. She is studying piano performance with Charles Asche and teaching piano classes as part of the teaching assistant fellowship she was granted in 2006. Sonia is also a fixture on the Santa Barbara music scene, where she can regularly be seen performing in solo and collaborative settings.

Asche says Sonia “brings great joy and enthusiasm to her piano recitals and chamber music performances.” Last year, she performed the Piano Trio in C Minor of Felix Mendelssohn “with a high level of virtuosity and a deep musical understanding of the work,” he says, adding it has been my pleasure to work with her.

Sonia’s future goals are “to ideally move back to the East Coast and to get a professorship job.” She always wants to be able to balance a teaching career and a

performing career.

Simmi received her bachelor’s degree from the University of Houston. She is in her second year at the Cleveland Institute of Music pursuing her master’s and plans to go right into her doctoral degree after that.

“My heart is in performing. I want to just play,” she says of future plans. “But I know that for a stable source of income I need to teach at the university level.”

Simmi studies piano with Antonio Pompa-Baldi and Emanuela Friscioni at the Cleveland Institute. Pompa-Baldi says Simmi is a “very talented young pianist” who is fulfilling her potential “with passion and commitment.” Friscioni says there is no doubt about her pupil’s talents, but what has impressed her more is Simmi’s ability to reach out to students.

Friscioni, who is also director of the Classical Piano Performance Academy at Tri County Eastern Campus, says watching Simmi teach piano

**INDIAN TOUCH:** Sarkar plays the harmonium and other Indian instruments as well. The Sarkars give most of the credit for their son’s piano triumphs to his music teacher, who uses a combination of techniques mostly based on the Kodály Method, which is built on the philosophy that learning the language of music is as paramount as learning language in general.



MOHAMMED JAFFER / SNAPSHINDIA

lessons was an eye opener. "All the students simply loved her. She is very easy to work with and she is very communicative and positive," Friscioni says. "She is able to connect with very young students as well as with adult students. I'm glad I have the opportunity to work with her."

Although pursuing very similar careers, Sonia and Simmi are very different and bring that to the table as performers, teachers and individuals

"When people see us together they think we are twins, and I get so mad," Simmi says. "I have worked very hard to have my own identity. ... I admire Sonia greatly, she amazes me, and I have taken good things from her, but I need to carve out my own identity

Sonia says her playing style is "very Germanic" though she prefers the Romantic, early 20th century music of Scriabin, Chopin, Liszt and Schumann. Playing that music is not her forte, she says. "People love to hear me play late Beethoven and

Bach. It is interesting because it is not always what you like that is your strength," she says. "You cannot choose your strong points they choose you."

Simmi, too, is drawn, at this point, to Chopin and Liszt, though she likes to play as many Beethoven sonatas as she can. "I like what Beethoven was writing for, there are a lot of extremes and dynamics in his music because he was experimenting with what the piano could do at this point. And his personality shows in his music," she says, adding she also loves Bach.

"Overall, I want for Liszt's music to be more accessible for me. Liszt is intense musically, physically and emotionally and I want to be able to understand the music," she says. "I know that I am not ready for it. You have to be in a certain mindset and it is therapeutic to get it out."

Sonia and Simmi say when they started out learning music, there weren't many Indians around. They were constantly

asked, "Are your parents OK with you and your sister being in the arts?" Sonia says. Simmi recalls how when they were younger, at Indian gatherings, other parents would "steer clear" of them because they did not know what to talk about with the sisters.

So they are happy now to hear of younger people pursuing music and excelling at it, too. "I am so excited about seeing more Indians out there," Simmi says. "I believe that the arts are not pushed enough in Indians."

But Archana and Bhoopendra Tripathi, the sisters' parents, have always been very supportive. "My parents were more supportive than I was about my career," Sonia says. "I had my own hesitations, but they knew this was my passion."

Originally from New Delhi, Archana, who has degrees in business but put her CPA career on hold to take care of her daughters, and Bhoopendra, a mechanical engineer, have been living in the United States for 32 years.

"All parents want the best for their kids," the Tripathis say. "We really let them (Sonia and Simmi) be, we let them decide what they wanted they do. We were hoping secretly that they would choose music as their path. We couldn't have been happier."

Archana says many friends questioned the choice to pursue music, and wanted to know if the Tripathis were in their right mind. "But we were so sure, and words can't describe what these girls have in them," she says. "They play from the heart and that cannot be taught."

Sonia believes Indian parents shouldn't have to justify their children going into music. Of course, other friends of the Tripathis praise them for allowing their daughters to pursue their passions. Archana says, "When something is so you, you have to pursue it. It is simple."

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**IN SEARCH OF HARMONY:**

Sarkar is a precocious fifth-grader with many interests. He is a straight A student whose favorite subject is math. He also likes astronomy and science and is learning fencing. Music, however, is closest to his heart. Music helps him understand emotions, Sarkar says. "I learn emotions through songs, by portraying the personality of a piece," he says.