

# Mostly Mozart For Mohini

**I** HAVE DECIDED to complement this column on Western classical music by including actual Indian American musicians who have made this style their passion.

Through my networking, I discovered Russell Steinberg, a successful conductor, composer and educator. He led me to Mohini Banerjee, a 14-year-old violin player in his orchestra, the Los Angeles Youth Orchestra. Thus began my inspiring journey.

On a gorgeous Sunday afternoon, I approached a cream-colored Spanish-style house in Studio City, Calif., the heart of the entertainment business in Los Angeles. I was greeted by Utpal and Arpita Banerjee, Mohini's parents. Then, I met Vivek, Mohini's 12-year-old brother. He seemed bashful at first, but had that sly, light-hearted, artful demeanor only a younger brother can possess.

Finally, I met Mohini. Although she too seemed coy at first, she settled into the interview with bewitching grace and intelligence.

My strongest curiosity was to see if the times had indeed changed. Although I had come to interview a young, successful Indian American musician, I had many questions for her parents, too. Would they encourage their children to become professional musicians?

## PATERNAL NOTES

It was obvious Arpita and Utpal encouraged music and saw to it that their children garnered knowledge of Indian and Western classical styles. But how would they feel about their children pursuing the arts as careers? And although they are still young, how would Mohini and Vivek feel about being professional artists? Needless to say, I was pleasantly surprised.

See, I am still a product of that awe-inspiring generation of immigrant doctors and engineers. My father, who excelled in his medical practice, encouraged a well-rounded education, but had reservations about my pursuing a college degree in music and a profession

in the arts. But we are older now, and the tumult of clashing with parents has absolutely subsided.

Arpita and Utpal's passions are to support their children's passions. So you can imagine why I evolved this feature to include topics relevant in our Diaspora. With Mohini, I had found a kin. Many of the elements of Mohini's life reminded me of my teen years. Does the word "overachiever" ring a bell? And is this term complimentary or derogatory?

Mohini, a 14-year-old tenth-grader, began taking violin lessons at age 4, starting her training with the Suzuki method, which is the method I first studied on the violin. She still studies Suzuki with her teacher, Christine Honsinger. Mohini and Vivek have participated in the annual American Suzuki Institute events, attending six years of the Suzuki summer program at Occidental College in Los Angeles.

"I was a very dedicated Suzuki mother," Arpita says. The Suzuki method requires much support from the parents, especially when

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**CELEBRATED SIBLINGS:**  
Mohini and Vivek Banerjee of  
Los Angeles.



## Geeta Bhatnagar-Novotny

a child is so young.

Mohini and Vivek were also in a fiddling club and truly enjoyed this other aspect of the violin.

When Mohini got to middle school, she played in two orchestras and then auditioned for Steinberg's Los Angeles Youth Orchestra, which includes students from grade four to seniors in high school.

The orchestra also has a few adult members, who serve as great mentors for the young musicians. The orchestra is in session for about six months a year and each three-month session culminates in performances at prestigious concert halls in Los Angeles.

### VIOLIN VIRTUOSO

Mohini takes her violin studies very seriously. She takes two lessons a week from two teachers – Honsinger and Philip Vaiman. She already has a very impressive resume. She auditioned, was accepted and has performed with the Summer Music Academy of the University of California, Los Angeles, and the prestigious Idyllwild Arts Academy Summer Program in Idyllwild, Calif.

Her favorite aspect of performing is chamber music. Chamber music is a form of classical music written for a small group of instruments that traditionally could be accommodated to perform in a palace chamber. Chamber music is performed without a conductor.

Mohini organizes her own chamber groups, utilizing the varied talents of her friends. And you thought the garage band was keen!

The last work her chamber group played was Mozart's "Eine Kleine Nachtmusik," a piece you may not know by name, but if you heard it, you would recognize it in

a heartbeat. Mozart also happens to be Mohini's favorite classical composer.

Vivek and Mohini do not attend private schools. They are part of the highly gifted magnet program of the Los Angeles Unified School District. Arpita and Utpal say they do not spend the money on private schools because they want to give their children the opportunity to explore as many extracurricular activities as they can, and want to, pursue.

When I asked the parents why they encouraged their children's interest in classical music, Arpita responded, "One key thing to classical music training is that there are people who are able to go beyond everyone else, there is that one creative push. I do believe that musical and artistic training uses some of those tools to bring that creative push out of you and that creative push you need to make it in science and history and in any other profession. I think it is such a good tool kit to have in your arsenal."

"Learning music at young age taught Mohini how to focus," she says. "I hope Vivek and Mohini continue to play for

the rest of their lives."

### ARTFUL UPBRINGING

The Banerjees believe the arts are a very important part of a child's basic education. They believe children should have the opportunity to be raised with, and have equal exposure to, the arts, sciences and humanities. They say all this is just part of an upbringing, especially an American upbringing.

Although Arpita and Utpal did not study music, they both were raised with an intense appreciation of this art form.

Arpita came to the United States from Calcutta when she was 8. She has degrees from UCLA in engineering and mathematics

and is the founder and president of a health care communications agency. Utpal grew up in New Delhi, where he attended the prestigious St. Stephen's College. He came to the United States in 1979 and has a Ph.D. from Caltech. He has been a professor at UCLA for 18 years and is chairman of the molecular, cell and developmental biology department.

About parenting, Utpal says, "It is a little scary to know what is the right thing to do. ... I think one is to assume that the right thing to do is what they have the passion for. Let your children have the breathing room to develop their interests, although if the breathing room causes more 'Seinfeld' watching then you can choose to help focus their interests."

Now to the equivocal question, and I ▶



◆ preface this by saying I will not hold a 14-year-old to her answer, but even at this point her answer speaks volumes to me.

I asked Mohini if she would consider pursuing her college degree in music performance. She answered much of her desires lie in the humanities. Although she does not see herself majoring in

violin performance, she says she would love to contin-

ue to perform in chamber music in college. Of course, she has a grade point average of above 4.

She says so many things in her life fascinate her at this point. "Music fulfills a part of you that you can't really get from anywhere else and music is a huge part of who I am," she says.

It well may be that Mohini will minor in music or continue to take lessons while she's obtaining another degree. Or, by the time she is declaring her major, she may decide to pursue music performance. Who knows?

Her parents' reactions to their daughter's future career plans are encouraging.

Arpita says, "It is not important to me that she (Mohini) pursues music as a profession, it is way more important that music serves as some kind of means of intellectual and spiritual growth and it is with her all the time."

Although I came to interview Mohini, I also became fascinated with Vivek. There is no doubt his sister's achievements have had a profound effect on him. But this seventh-grader possesses the keen instincts of a younger brother who

observes his sister in the spotlight and uses his sense of humor to pave his own way.

Vivek, too, has been playing the violin for about eight years. He will audition for the Los Angeles Youth Orchestra this year. He loves basketball. He is just beginning middle school.

At the suggestion of a mentor, Vivek decided to take up the tabla. About his sister, he says: "She has that breadth of knowledge and that thing that makes people excel in life."

#### LEFT-BRAINED

Vivek considers himself more "left-brained." He loves physics and is fascinated by how the universe was made. While Mohini is interested in singing, Vivek enjoys the composition aspect of music. As musician to musician, we enjoyed speaking about how Western classical music is much more structured, whereas Indian classical music has its roots in improvisation. Vivek undoubtedly enjoys the improvisational aspect of Indian classical.

I asked Mohini about her favorite classical works and composers. She likes Holst's "The Planets," Dvorak's "American Symphony," Beethoven's fifth and Vivaldi. Vivek, on the other hand, enjoys the works of Scott Joplin, who paved the way for ragtime with his famous composition, "The Entertainer."

It is safe to say Mohini's immersion in Western classical music has brought her the most accolades and success in her young life. Her teachers rave about her. Steinberg says, "Mohini is a such a wonderful member of the LA Youth Orchestra. She has been with us several years, and in that time, I have watched her

develop into a remarkably intelligent and sensitive young musician."

But there are many different facets to Mohini's life. Mohini and Vivek are black belts in tae kwon do. Mohini is a skilled tennis player. She studies classical Indian dance and has just performed her solo Bharata Natyam with Vivek accompanying her on the tabla. In her spare time, which I am surprised actually exists, she interns for a local congressman.

One of the paramount things I observed was that despite being very accomplished at a young age, Mohini is greatly down-to-earth. One does not detect that unusual high-strung angst in her that one may observe in children who are overly involved and are forced into an unrealistic ideal of perfection.

In fact, Mohini loves classic rock, including The Beatles and Queen; she is even getting into some heavy metal. She loves Broadway musicals such as "Wicked" and has a secret desire to belt out a Broadway tune or two. And her favorite TV show is "Project Runway."

#### COMMUNITY SPIRIT

Arpita and Utpal's support for the arts isn't limited to their children; they also support arts in the community. On the first floor of their home, they have two studios – one equipped with a dance floor and both with a selection of Indian classical music instruments.

"My parents have put on major music, dance-dramas and written scripts, choreographed dance and organized musicians and made these huge programs," Mohini says. "They did something unique, and I would like to do something unique with my music training."

