

## Indian musician pioneers raga music on slide guitar

By Andrew Gilbert

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When Debashish Bhattacharya talks about his beloved guitars, his voice radiates the same sense of rippling joy and beatific pleasure that permeates his *ragas*.

"Our instruments are like our parents, we're so attached to them with our souls," says Bhattacharya, 43, who performs Friday in the Carriage House Theatre at Montalvo Arts Center, accompanied by his brother Subhasis Bhattacharya on *tabla* and his sister Sutapa Bhattacharya on vocals.

Steeped in classical Hindustani music, Bhattacharya has attracted an international following with his graceful slide guitar work, though calling him a guitarist doesn't really capture his unusual instrumental arsenal. In addition to the Chaturangui, he plays the 14-string *gandharvi* and the *anandi*, a four-string slide ukulele, all designed to facilitate his lyrical flights.

Last year he won the BBC Planet Award for World Music, and his growing reputation is sure to be enhanced with this month's release of "Calcutta Chronicles: Indian Slide Guitar Odyssey" (Riverboat Records), a deeply satisfying album that features his original, mostly devotional compositions.

In American music, slide guitar is indelibly linked to the blues, and the technique's vocal-like inflections are used for searing, extroverted effect.

In Bhattacharya's hands, slide guitar is an infinitely subtle vehicle employing microtonal scales and intricate patterns alternating brief, lightly touched notes and long sustained slides. Bhattacharya performs while sitting cross-legged on stage, with his instrument flat across his legs.

Lately he's been working with guitarist John McLaughlin, who wrote in an e-mail that he was so impressed by Bhattacharya's "musicianship and heartfelt playing" that, in 2000, he invited the slide guitarist to perform with Remember Shakti. The group is an incarnation of the pioneering Indo-jazz ensemble McLaughlin founded with *tabla* master Zakir Hussain. (That Mumbai concert was documented on the DVD "The Way of Beauty.")

They've performed together several times since then, "and for my latest recording 'Floating Point,' it was impossible not to invite him as a guest soloist," McLaughlin wrote.

Bhattacharya has been keeping other impressive company. He started his 13-city U.S. tour with a concert at the Savannah (Ga.) Music Festival, where he was featured in musical conversation with the 28-year-old Allman Brothers phenomenon Derek Trucks, dobro master Jerry Douglas and globe-trotting string expert Bob Brozman, who has performed widely with Bhattacharya over the past decade.

"His manual dexterity and his depth of rhythmic knowledge are generally off the charts of normal Western musicianship," writes longtime Santa Cruz resident Brozman in an e-mail. "At the same time, there is a certain naivete about his harmonic sensibilities, which adds a kind of charm to the super-human playing."

Bhattacharya grew up accompanying his parents, who are both vocalists, but he distinguished himself as a prodigy at age 3 after discovering a Hawaiian guitar at home. The instrument was a remnant from a Bengali Hawaiian music craze sparked by a visit from the great Hawaiian steel guitarist Tao Moe in the late 1920s.

"I couldn't leave it in the corner. The tone, the design, the rich sound, the tradition should be like my voice," Bhattacharya says of his immediate connection with the instrument. "You can say I'm the pioneer, because no one has done it before, playing *raga* music on slide guitar."

Bhattacharya was already a revered virtuoso when he came under the sway of Brij Bhushan Kabra, the man most responsible for bringing the guitar into Indian classical music. Rather than try to channel Bhattacharya's style in a specific direction, Kabra has encouraged him to continue collaborating with an international array of artists, while expanding his knowledge of Hindustani ragas.

"Many gurus have a passion to hear or see their style in their disciples, which is natural," Bhattacharya says. "My guru has done the reverse. Maybe he has seen a future in me, in the way I grew up with the instrument. . . . But I loved to copy his music, and many nights I was crying in my room. I thought my guru doesn't love me because he doesn't want me to copy his music."

Now Bhattacharya knows that Kabra was paying him the ultimate compliment by encouraging him to continue on his own path. Bhattacharya may not echo his guru's sound, but in transforming his instrument into a perfect vehicle for *ragas*, Bhattacharya is following deftly in his footsteps.

**Where:** Carriage House Theatre, Montalvo Arts Center, 15400 Montalvo Road, Saratoga

**When:** 8 p.m. Friday

**Tickets:** \$25

**Call:** (408) 961-5858, [www.ticketmaster.com](http://www.ticketmaster.com)