

Naresh SOHAL

COMPLETE PIANO MUSIC

A MIRAGE

TSUNAMI

CHAKRA

PRAYER

PIANO TRIO

Konstantinos Destounis, piano
Cristina Anghelescu, violin
Adrian Mantu, cello
Mark Troop, piano

NARESH SOHAL, A COMPOSER ASTRIDE TWO WORLDS

by Suddhaseel Sen and Janet Swinney

Naresh Sohal's voice was unique in contemporary classical music. He was the first person of Indian origin to make a successful career as a composer of western music in the western world. As a British composer, he wrote fluently in the western idiom; as an Asian composer, he drew heavily on the insights of Indian poetry, philosophical ideas and texts.

The influence of the music of his homeland was far less obvious but was apparent from his willingness to question some foundational aspects of compositional practice, such as the ways of subdividing the octave, and in his choice of pitch-classes provided by certain *ragas* to create original works. He was not a composer of 'fusion' music, however, and shunned the juxtaposition of easily identifiable elements of western and Indian traditions in his work. Nor does his work belong to any particular modernist movement or compositional trend of the mid-twentieth century. His music usually features free atonality and occasional elements of twelve-tone music, with a rather free approach to form, unconstrained by convention.

Sohal was an extremely versatile composer. Over the course of his musical career he added more than 70 works to the classical repertoire, ranging from cutting-edge avant-garde pieces to works that reimagined the folk traditions of Punjab. But in addition, he provided the music for several TV documentaries and a French feature film¹ as well as producing an album of songs in the North Indian *ghazal* style and writing a set of film songs for the Indian film director Vijay Anand ('Goldie'; 1934–2004) based on Goldie's lyrics.. His music appears in a number of popular British drama series, including *Coronation Street* and *Waking the Dead*.

¹ *Manika, une vie plus tard*, 1989, directed by François Villiers.

Sohal's classical works have been performed nationally and internationally by eminent orchestras, ensembles and soloists. The BBC Symphony, the BBC Scottish Symphony, the New York Philharmonic, the Israel Philharmonic, the Berlin Staatskapelle, the London Symphony and the Royal Scottish National orchestras have all performed his work. He received a number of BBC commissions. Zubin Mehta commissioned three pieces from him, and Sir Andrew Davis two.

He was the first composer to receive a bursary from the Arts Council of Great Britain. In 1987 he was awarded a Padma Shri by the Indian government for his services to western music. At the time of his death, he was working on an orchestral commission for the South Bank Centre in London.

Sohal was born in Harsipind, Punjab, on 18 September 1939, into a family with no musical pedigree, and no connection with western classical music. His tastes were formed by listening to the popular music broadcast on All India Radio and Radio Ceylon. Like many young men of his generation, he was encouraged to study the sciences, and so he embarked on a degree course in physics and mathematics at Dayanand Anglo Vedic (DAV) College in Jalandhar, but shortly before he graduated, he decided to devote himself fully to music and to try his luck in the Bombay film industry, a decision that was not popular at home. By this time he was highly proficient on the harmonica, entertaining large audiences of his fellow students which on one occasion included the President of India. He was also busy composing marches and waltzes for the Punjab Armed Police Band.

On his arrival in Bombay, on the lookout for an opportunity to start his chosen career, things took an unanticipated turn: he heard a broadcast of Beethoven's *Eroica* Symphony on All India Radio. It was the first piece of western classical music he had ever heard, and it was a transformative experience that changed the course of his life. As a consequence he moved to Britain in 1962, determined to become a composer in the western classical tradition. After a few grim months in London, he secured a job as a copyist with the music publisher Boosey & Hawkes. This appointment proved to be a godsend. There he copied works by composers ranging from Bach to Britten, from Panufnik to Tippett. The work gave him a unique opportunity to learn, at close quarters,

about compositional techniques, and to gain insight into the ways that contemporary music was developing at that time.

It was here that he encountered Iannis Xenakis' *Eonta*, a work by a composer who, like himself, came from a background in the sciences, and who used mathematical elements as compositional tools. This approach intrigued Sohal, who decided to embark upon a more serious course of study than the evening classes he had been attending. He gave up his job at Boosey & Hawkes to become a freelance copyist, took lessons from the composer Jeremy Dale Roberts and devoted more time to composition.

In 1965 he completed his first major score: *Asht Prahar* for orchestra, followed in 1970 by *Surya* for chorus, percussion and flute. Even at this early stage of his career, many of his personal characteristics are evident: his mastery of orchestral colour, the turn towards the macrocosmic aspects of nature for inspiration, the tendency to think in terms of large-scale single-movement musical structures and a reluctance to belong to any particular 'school' or easily identifiable coterie. His works display few affinities with Schoenberg and his followers, for instance.

In 1969 *Asht Prahar* was premiered at the Royal Festival Hall by the London Philharmonic Orchestra under Norman del Mar and was well received. There followed a highly productive decade of composition of large-scale works, as well as receipt of an Arts Council bursary that took him to the University of Leeds to research quarter-tone music.

During the 1970s Sohal had many premieres of vocal, chamber, choral and orchestral pieces. The works from this period are stylistically diverse: the austere soundscape of *Dhyan I*, a work from 1974 for cello and orchestra in which he made creative use of his systematic study of quarter-tones, sounds very different from the exuberant *Asht Prahar*, whereas the chamber work *Octal* (1972) makes use of electronic devices. *A Mirage* (1974) belongs to this initial period of experimentation.

In the late 1970s he concentrated on writing vocal and chamber pieces, including *Chakra* in 1979. He returned to orchestral composition in 1982, producing a dramatic setting of the Old English poem *The Wanderer* for baritone, symphony orchestra and chorus for the 1982 BBC Proms and *From Gitanjali*, an elegiac setting of poetry by the

Bengali polymath Rabindranath Tagore for baritone and orchestra for the Philharmonic Symphony Society of New York in 1985. Also from this time is the orchestral work *Tandava Nritya (Dance of Destruction and Re-Creation)*, commissioned by the British Council for the London Symphony Orchestra, but first performed only on 8 April 1993 by the Royal Scottish National Orchestra in Glasgow conducted by David Davies, and a violin concerto premiered by Xui Wei with the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra under Martyn Brabbins on 24 October 1992.

From the late 1980s to the mid-1990s Sohal devoted himself primarily to works for the stage, cinema and television, among them his ballet *Gautama Buddha* (1987) and a music-theatre piece, *Madness Lit by Lightning* (1989). The principal work not intended for stage or screen from this period was a Trio for violin, cello and piano commissioned by the cellist Anup Kumar Biswas to mark Sohal's 50th birthday.

Both small- and large-scale works followed, as he continued to compose until his death at the age of 78 on 30 April 2018. They include *Lila* in 1996, an orchestral work in which he strove to capture in musical terms the process of enlightenment as described in Hindu philosophy and experienced through meditation. *Lila* brings to the fore Neo-Romantic elements hinted at in some of Sohal's earlier works. Many of the pieces from this later period have more pronounced Indian connections than his works from the preceding decades, as though the composer were longing for closer ties with his philosophical home. *Prayer* and *Tsunami* belong to this period.

Suddhaseel Sen holds two PhDs, one in English from the University of Toronto and a second in Musicology from Stanford University. He is Associate Professor in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Indian Institute of Technology in Mumbai.

Janet Swinney is the composer's widow and the author of two collections of short stories, The Map of Bihar (Circaidy Gregory Press, Hastings, 2019) and The House with Two Letter-Boxes (Fly on the Wall Press, Manchester, 2021).

NARESH SOHAL'S PIANO WORKS AND TRIO

by Konstantinos Destounis

I first came into contact with Naresh Sohal's music when I was invited to play *A Mirage* for solo piano [1] at a concert tribute to his memory on 13 October 2018 at St John's Church, Notting Hill, London. From my very first glance at the score, I was magnetised – I felt I had just discovered a composer of top quality whose music I would be really interested in studying in depth. The published score of *A Mirage* is handwritten, like the scores of many of Sohal's works, including *Chakra* and the Trio. His handwriting is so detailed, legible and individual that one feels that the score would lose its character if produced in any other way.

A defining characteristic of Sohal's work is its mysticism, a sensibility that raises questions about the foundations of human existence and aims for a connection with the divine: his music sounds like a sacred ritual unfolding. In an interview with Suddhaseel Sen, Sohal said: 'I am fascinated by the ultimate human questions of who I am and where I come from, and therefore most of my music is dominated by philosophical answers that are nearest to Vedantic thought'.¹ His gift lies in his unique ability to incorporate these ideas into the tradition of western art-music.

From the point of view of performance, Sohal's music is highly demanding. He often employs textures of extreme complexity reminiscent of Xenakis. In places *A Mirage* (Ex. 1, for example) reminds me of Xenakis' *Eonta*. In both works an avalanche of notes is dispersed all over the keyboard, each one bearing a different dynamic. But in spite of the virtuosic element Sohal is not aiming to impress. His primary focus is always sound itself. No matter what the dynamic range and the intensity of his music are, his purpose is to create sombre soundscapes, evoke contemplation and elevate the soul.

¹ www.wisemusicclassical.com/features/2022/10/naresh-sohal-interview/.

Ex. 1

$\text{♩} = 120-132$

The image shows two systems of handwritten musical notation for piano. The notation is characterized by 'space notation', where traditional bar lines and precise note durations are absent. Instead, the performer determines note lengths based on the space they occupy on the page. The score includes dynamic markings such as *ff*, *mf*, *f*, *fff*, and *fz*. Performance instructions include *sva* (sustained vibrato), *ad lib.* (ad libitum), and *Red.* (ritardando). The music is written on grand staves with treble and bass clefs. The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is not explicitly defined, consistent with the 'space notation' style.

He often uses so-called 'space notation': indications of metre and bar-lines are absent; the duration of the notes is decided by the performer, depending on how much space they occupy on the paper. An indicative example of this notation, marked *senza misura*, appears in *A Mirage* (Ex. 2). As a performer I find this type of notation extremely helpful, and I believe that it should have been used as a model by numerous composers in the late twentieth and early 21st centuries. In similar passages where the rhythmic character of the music sounds rather free, other composers often use metres, bars, exact

note-values and successive ties that make the scores unnecessarily dense and complex to decipher.

Ex. 2

The image shows a handwritten musical score for piano, consisting of three systems of staves. The notation is extremely dense with many ties and complex rhythmic markings. The first system includes the instruction "Senza misura" and dynamic markings like "fff". The second system includes "Poi" and "ff". The third system continues the dense notation with various dynamics and articulation marks.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'mirage' as 'an optical illusion caused by atmospheric conditions, especially the appearance of a sheet of water in a desert or on a hot road caused by the refraction of light from the sky by heated air', or 'an unrealistic hope or wish that cannot be achieved'. The word can also be used to describe 'something that is not real or true, although it may seem to be'. For me, Sohal's piece poses philosophical questions about the nature of human existence. How far is life itself

from being an illusion? To what extent do human beings dupe themselves into thinking that their efforts are worthwhile, or have any meaning at all? Sometimes, the bigger the effort, the further the goal recedes, just as an apparent sheet of water in the desert recedes as the thirsty traveller approaches. The anguish caused by such experiences is expressed in the tumultuous middle section of *A Mirage*, which reaches gigantic and long-lasting climaxes.

The piece is cast in the form of an arch: it starts in an extremely low dynamic, builds in a huge *crescendo* to its turbulent, central section and then gradually fades away. The outer sections of the piece share the same sequence of notes in the melodic line: A, F sharp, C, D, C sharp, G, A sharp, B – although Sohal breaks up this sequence by interspersing other material at various points. The sequence inclines towards the twelve-tone idiom, but *A Mirage* is not purely dodecaphonic since it deviates from the strict rules of the idiom.

In these outer sections, the word ‘illusion’ is an apt description of the sound quality – that is, the dynamic often gets so low as to suggest that Sohal is aiming for the illusion of sound. A defining feature is a recurring pattern of repeated notes in the high register of the piano in the background, a pattern that disappears so gradually that, if the passage is executed properly, the listener should be unable to identify the number of repeated notes, mark the end of the pattern or even distinguish between sound and silence.

At the end of the piece, the sound disappears very gradually and sinks to nothing (the composer indicates *al niente*). A constant *tremolo* in the bass creates a vibration. Just as a flame dies away, the *tremolo* gradually ceases, signalling the end of life. The arch form is now complete; life has completed its cycle.

A Mirage was composed in 1974 and premiered by Wendy Nightingale in Birmingham on 23 October of the same year.

The sense of an inner personal search and the union of the individual with the universe are also present in Sohal’s second solo-piano piece, *Chakra* [2]. Along with the metaphysical, there is also an implied connection between the piece and the chakras, the series of energetic and spiritual centres which, according to Indian philosophy, lie

one above the other within the spine, and which, if focused upon in sequence, bring increasingly refined degrees of realisation. Thus the main line of the opening section is arranged as a chromatic scale which constantly moves upwards. The structure of *Chakra* is similar to that of *A Mirage*, in that it also forms an arch. A highly dissonant and virtuosic episode in the middle section constitutes its climax, after which the music gradually calms down. Surprisingly, as the piece seems to have died away, a *crescendo* appears towards the end, leading to an explosive final chord at the extreme registers of the piano that signifies the ultimate state of realisation and release from bondage.

Chakra was commissioned by and dedicated to Alberto Portugheis, and first performed by him on 13 November 1979 at Fairfield Hall in Croydon.

Unlike the rest of Sohal's piano works, which consist of single movements, *Prayer* has two, *Adagio* and *Allegretto*. The *Adagio* [3] is tender in nature, the element of prayer being present from its very beginning. The composer indicates 'Yearning' above the melodic line, which has a plaintive character. First, the line descends and then it ascends repeatedly, reaching a higher note each time. The most characterful section of the work is located in its *Allegretto* second movement [4] and is marked *poco meno* (Ex. 3). This section is defined by a chromatically descending motif that recurs continuously, representing the reverential act of 'pranam' (prostration) or bowing forward in prayer. As the flow of quavers unfolds, Sohal inverts and develops the motif by adding octaves and semiquavers, a procedure which results in a two-part contrapuntal texture of considerable beauty and expression, though made up of simple elements.

Prayer was written for Ananda Sukarlan in 2006 and first performed by him in October 2007 at the St Cecilia Conservatoire in Rome.

Sohal's last solo piano piece, *Tsunami* [5], has the quality of a lament, expressed through the extensive use of eastern scales and the predominance of the augmented second. The piece, marked *Adagio*, is based on a steady pulse which imitates the unshakable pace of the motion of a tsunami. The use of low bass notes creates a feeling of depth and mass, suggesting the huge volumes of water evoked in the title. From that title, indeed, one might expect *Tsunami* to be an extremely agitated and tumultuous

piece – but a real tsunami is driven by unstoppable natural forces that are so mighty that they subsume such detail.

Tsunami was commissioned by Helen Reid with funds from the Dartington International Festival and the Ralph Vaughan Williams Trust. It was first performed on 6 August 2007 at the Dartington International Festival.

Ex. 3

The image displays a musical score for an excerpt (Ex. 3) from a piece. It consists of three systems of music, each with a piano (piano) part and a violin part. The piano part is written in a grand staff (treble and bass clefs), and the violin part is written in a single staff with a treble clef. The key signature has one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 8/8. The first system starts at measure 15. The piano part features a complex, rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes, often beamed together. The violin part has a melodic line with slurs and accents. Dynamic markings include *ff*, *f*, *ff*, *fff*, *mp*, *legato*, and *mp*. Performance instructions include *poco meno* and *legato*. The second system starts at measure 19, and the third system starts at measure 24. The piano part continues with similar rhythmic patterns, while the violin part has a more melodic and expressive line.

The metaphysical aspect of Sohal’s writing is apparent in his Trio for violin, cello and piano [6], a defining feature of which is relentless intensity. The piece is constructed

in three interlinked sections which appear as one continuous movement, each section having a different time-signature: the first a slow $\frac{3}{4}$, the second a moderate $\frac{4}{4}$ and the third a fast $\frac{7}{4}$. The imposing character of the Trio is apparent right from the beginning, with bell-like sounds ringing in the piano part. The superimposed parallel fifths in the high register of the piano – fifths sounding on top of one another as chords, and moving in parallel motion – create the feeling of a ritual. The piece is constructed on a meditative motif stated at the outset by the cello, supported by drone-like piano chords. In the second section the rhythmic pattern is achieved with a syncopated *staccato* theme to a canonic development. In the final section, the violin accelerates and the reiteration of the melodic statement leads to the climax of *staccato* chords which end the piece.

The strings shriek throughout, suggesting to me tormented souls longing for release from the eternal cycle of death and rebirth. The anguish expressed through the string textures is enhanced by the frequent use of the tritone. As the Trio progresses, the three instruments engage in ferocious dialogues, as well, at times, as solo impromptus, all of which build steadily in intensity. Towards the end of the piece, after it reaches its climax, the souls seem to abandon all hope, and their dispirited ultimate lament makes for a tragic ending. Others may hear the piece differently, but those are the images that this desperate music evokes in me.

The Trio was commissioned jointly by the Guadagnini Piano Trio and Hinckley Music Club to celebrate Sohal's 50th birthday. Its first performance was given on 17 March 1989 by the Guadagnini Piano Trio at the Hinckley Music Club in Leicester.

Konstantinos Destounis (born in Athens in 1991) is regarded as one of the most prominent Greek pianists of his generation. His performing career has led him to venues that include the Royal Albert Hall and St John's, Smith Square, in London, Opera La Fenice in Venice, Llewellyn Hall in Canberra, the Glocke Saal in Bremen, the Athens Megaron and the Thessaloniki Megaron. As a soloist he has performed with many orchestras in Greece, the UK, Germany, Spain and Australia. He holds a Doctor of Music degree from the Royal College of Music in London for his research on Theodore Antoniou's piano works, and his premiere recording of Antoniou's complete piano works was released by Naxos in 2018.

He has been a prize-winner in many international piano competitions, most notably the Grand Prix Maria Callas in Athens, the Southern Highlands in Canberra and the Bremen European Piano Competition. As the winner of the Greek national competition, he represented his country at the Eurovision Young Musicians Competition in Vienna in 2010. His numerous awards include the Gina Bachauer Piano Prize of the Spanish Association World in Harmony, the Young Artist Prize of the Hellenic Association of Theatre and Performing Arts Critics and the Mykoniou Prize of the Academy of Athens (Order of Letters and Fine Arts).

After graduating from the Hellenic Conservatory in Athens and the University of Macedonia in Thessaloniki, he went on to receive a Master's degree at the Mozarteum in Salzburg, and an Artist Diploma and a Doctorate at the Royal College of Music in London. He now teaches piano at the Athens Conservatoire and the University of Macedonia in Thessaloniki.



Photograph: Yannis Garmann



The Romanian violinist **Cristina Anghelescu** (born in 1961) comes from a family of musicians, having received her first violin lessons from her father, Aurelian Anghelescu, and studying later with Ștefan Gheorghiu at the Bucharest Music Academy. Since 1990 she has been solo violinist with the Romanian Radio Orchestra. She has appeared as a guest soloist with various symphony orchestras in London, Berlin, Moscow, Dresden, Prague, Madrid, Helsinki, Bratislava and Caracas, the Middle East, Taiwan, Thailand and North and South America, and has worked with such conductors as Erich Bergel, Sergiu Comissiona, Jukka-Pekka Saraste and Leif Segerstam. She won fourth prize in the 1986 International Tchaikovsky Competition and second prize

in the International Jean Sibelius Violin Competition in 1990. Her recordings include violin concertos by Mendelssohn, Tchaikovsky and Vivaldi and the two concertos by the British composer George Lloyd.

The cellist **Adrian Mantu** is from Bucharest, where he studied at the George Enescu Music University. He continued his studies at the Royal Academy of Music in London and various other musical establishments, including the Reina Sofia School of Music in Madrid, the Accademia Musicale Chigiana in Siena, the Académie Européenne de Musique in Aix-en-Provence, the Cork School of Music and the Banff Centre for the Arts in Canada. In 1995 he was the cellist/founder of the ConTempo String Quartet, which has been Ensemble in Residence in Galway since 2003, and was the Raidió Teilifís Éireann resident quartet from 2013 until 2019. The Quartet has won fourteen international awards, and Adrian Mantu himself has won twelve national prizes in Romania and two international prizes as cellist. He holds an MA degree in performance with first-class honours from the Cork School of Music. He has been the Artistic Director of a number of arts festivals. In 2022 the President of Romania conferred on him the Order of Cultural Merit for his talent, enrichment of universal culture and promotion of the image of Romania.



Mark Troop is a pianist, broadcaster and writer. As solo pianist, he recorded Beethoven for BBC Radio 3, but he soon branched into chamber music and song, founding the Chamber Music Company, a creative performance group, with his wife, the soprano Patricia Rozario, in the 1990s. Their work takes them frequently to India, where they run programmes to help musicians develop their skills and talents.



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SOHAL Complete Piano Music; Piano Trio

1	<i>A Mirage</i> (1974)	13:44
2	<i>Chakra</i> (1979)	10:11
	<i>Prayer</i> (2006)	11:18
3	I <i>Adagio</i>	6:47
4	II <i>Allegretto</i>	4:31
5	<i>Tsunami</i> (2007)	5:26
6	<i>Piano Trio</i> (1988)	15:49

Konstantinos Destounis, piano 1–5

TT 56:30

Cristina Anghelescu, violin 6

FIRST RECORDINGS

Adrian Mantu, cello 6

Mark Troop, piano 6