

PROGRESSIVE CIRCLES

Bernhard Schimpelsberger is a drummer whose unique approach to on the kit combines the intricacies of Indian rhythms with a groove that many of us can only dream of...

Words: Robert F. Fox

It is just a matter of time until Indian rhythms become as influential to the modern drum set player as Latin is today. We are already seeing great kit players such as Steve Smith, Benny Greb and Russ Miller employ some of the techniques. There was also the release a few years back of the *Indian Rhythms For The Drum Set* book on Hudson. What though, if you become influenced by the genre at an early age, even at the very beginning of your career? One such person is Austrian-born drummer Bernhard Schimpelsberger, who studied for years in India from his mid teens. Having gone on to become inspired by the work of Trilok Gurtu, the result is a captivatingly unique approach to the instrument, a kind of 'Bebop Raaga with a mathematically poetic, drum and bass' approach. Hard to imagine? Not for Mr Schimpelsberger...

I WAS READING THAT YOU WERE LUCKY ENOUGH TO COME FROM A VERY MUSICAL FAMILY. TELL US A BIT ABOUT THAT AND HOW YOU CHOOSE DRUMMING?

"Yes – that is true. I was fortunate to grow up in a family where everyone plays the piano. I started playing very early too, but I was soon drawn towards the drums. My family formed a band where I played the drums. That was good because my first connection to drums was through playing songs and not learning technique. That shaped my musicality a lot."

DID YOU DECIDE IN THESE EARLY DAYS THAT DRUMMING WAS GOING TO BE YOUR LIFE?

"I decided at the age of 14 that I wanted to become a musician. I envisioned a life of travelling and sharing music with people. It has all come true so far for me."

WHEN DID YOU FIRST EXPERIENCE INDIAN MUSIC? WAS IT SOMETHING





YOU JUST DECIDED TO DO OR DID IT 'COME AND GET YOU'?

"I would say it came and got me! I was 15 when I attended a music workshop in Austria. I didn't know anything about Indian rhythm at that time. Although I could not understand Trilok Gurtu's drumming I was intrigued by it, so I went there and met who was soon to become my guru, the tabla master Suresh Talwalkar. We immediately connected so deeply that I was mesmerised. For the first time in my life I had met a real master musician."

TO PUT IT MILDLY, INDIAN RHYTHM IS NOT EASY. WHEN YOU STARTED OUT DID YOU REALISE QUITE WHAT A GOLDMINE OF STUDY THIS WOULD BE?

"Yes, somehow I did. I was looking for a master, someone who embodied music completely. I think that was actually more important to me than learning any specific system; through experiencing his mastery I discovered this huge system that is very deep and scientific."

WHY DID YOU LEARN THE SKELETAL RHYTHM AND PHONETIC POETRY INSTEAD OF CHOOSING TO LEARN ON A TRADITIONAL INSTRUMENT SUCH AS TABLA OR PAKHAWAJ?

"When I met Suresh-ji I had already decided that I wanted to be a drummer. He, in return, is very progressive and was keen to teach a western

drummer, so that was clear from the start. In fact he was against me learning the tabla, too. The tabla is an extremely intricate instrument: you need to spend years just developing your sound. Putting years of practice into learning rhythms and applying them to the drums seems to have given me a different perspective."

COULD YOU SUMMARISE WHAT TYPE OF MATERIAL YOU LEARNED AND HOW IT WAS TAUGHT?

"In India, music is still taught in an ancient way called the guru-shishya tradition. It is the traditional way of learning, which requires a great deal of dedication, surrender and devotion from the student. It is a strong discipline that is based on an extremely intense bond between the guru and student. So I tried to spend as much time as possible with my guru and learned not only the musical compositions, but moreover his whole perspective on music. He would be teaching me anywhere, not only in the music room, but also on the train or in the middle of an overnight car journey."

"The rhythms I learned are based on the language of rhythm called konnakol. Suresh-ji would sing them out to me. I then copy him and sing them back. This will go back and forth. Every few days I would withdraw to my practice room and work on the application to the drum kit. He then would check them to make sure that the essence of the compositions was kept intact."

WHAT CHALLENGES WERE THERE IN FINDING APPROPRIATE PATTERNS AND ARTICULATIONS FOR THE PHONETICS ON 'NON INDIAN' DRUMS?

"There are many challenges and I am only just overcoming a few of them! The biggest challenge is that the tabla and the drum kit function completely differently. The tabla is a finger drum and works in a linear way – you only ever play two sounds at the same time, and rhythmic phrases are created by combining various strokes. The drum kit is a polyphonic and polyrhythmic instrument. We have several layers of voices and they all add up together into one groove."

BEING IN THE POSITION TO CREATE YOUR OWN STICKINGS AND ORCHESTRATION MUST HAVE GIVEN YOU A FEELING OF FREEDOM? DO YOU THINK YOUR DEVELOPMENT WOULD HAVE BEEN DIFFERENT HAD YOU BEEN PINNED DOWN ON A TRADITIONAL DRUM?

"Absolutely. I feel blessed that I am in a free creative space where there are not too many references. I cannot just copy anyone else blindly. I can only collect different influences and then channel them through my own thinking."

I UNDERSTAND THAT THROUGH YOUR TEACHER YOU ALSO BECAME

ACQUAINTED WITH TRILOK GURTU? TELL US ABOUT THIS AND WHAT THAT DID TO EXPAND YOUR HORIZONS ON WHAT IS POSSIBLE WITH RHYTHM AND SOUND?

"I was a big fan of Trilok and started attending as many of his concerts as possible. I started following him around and one day his technician Duncan needed help on stage. I stepped in and we became good friends. When Duncan left I grabbed the chance. I became Trilok's drum technician and for two years I travelled the globe with him. This was the best way of learning intensely from Trilok."

DID THIS NEW RELATIONSHIP CHANGE THE WAY YOU APPROACHED PLAYING? IT MUST HAVE BEEN INTERESTING TO SEE SUCH A GREAT PLAYER BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN EAST AND WEST IN THE WAY HE DID?

"Trilok was my idol. I was fascinated by his world of rhythm. Everything he touches turns into rhythm. Also his choice of sound was a big influence on me."

BEFORE THAT, DID YOU EVER HAVE DOUBTS ABOUT HOW YOU MIGHT BE ABLE TO UTILISE THE MATERIAL IN A WESTERN SETTING, OR WERE YOU PREPARED TO TAKE GIGS WHERE YOU WOULD APPROACH THE DRUM SET IN A CONVENTIONAL WESTERN WAY?

"I always think about the music first and choose my drum parts according to the genre. I never impose my Indian knowledge unless the music calls for it. I simply love playing great music: the style doesn't matter!"

WHEN DID YOU DECIDE TO MOVE TO LONDON AND WHAT PROMPTED THAT DECISION? DID YOU HAVE A SPECIFIC SET OF GOALS AND AMBITIONS AND AN ESCAPE PLAN IF IT DIDN'T WORK OUT?

"I knew that after my music education in Austria had finished I needed to be in a place where my musical horizons would be challenged. I also wanted to live in a multicultural and cosmopolitan place. When I moved to London I did not have much money and only knew a few friends but for me it was a 'no risk; no reward' move."

IT'S NOT AN EASY MOVE. WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO A YOUNG PLAYER THINKING OF THAT NOW?

"My advice is to follow your dreams and passions. You have to go for it. No one else will do it for you. The bigger the risk you take, the greater the rewards will be. My advice in one sentence: work hard, don't take short cuts, stay





focused, be patient, take risks and surely luck will come to you."

YOU HAVE BEEN INVOLVED IN NUMEROUS VERY INTERESTING COLLABORATIONS, INCLUDING WITH ANOUSHKA SHANKAR. HOW LONG WAS IT AFTER YOUR MOVE THAT THINGS STARTED TO COME TOGETHER FOR YOU? THE ANOUSHKA CALL MUST HAVE BEEN AN EXCITING ONE TO GET?

"When I arrived in London I got in touch with many musicians and the responses overall were great. Not after long my arrival I started performing with Talvin Singh and Susheela Raman and within my first year I was working with Nitin Sawhney and Akram Khan. Anoushka Shankar came to one of my concerts with Circle Of Sound in London. She liked it so she invited us to play a private performance at her home for her father, the great sitar legend Pandit Ravi Shankar. We spent a wonderful evening together and soon after I got the call to join her band on a six-week US tour."

TELL US ABOUT CIRCLE OF SOUND?

"Circle Of Sound is a long term collaboration of myself and the young sarod virtuoso Soumik Datta. The sarod is an Indian classical fretless lute. Soumik is deeply rooted in Indian classical music, but at the same time very experimental too. Together we blend Indian classical melodies

and western progressive rhythms with rock and electronic music. It is a combination of eastern and western influences – a completely new and modern sound."

IF YOU HAD 50 WORDS TO CONVINCE A MODERN DRUM SET PLAYER OF THE BENEFITS OF INDIAN RHYTHM, HOW WOULD IT GO?

"Indian rhythm is the most profound rhythmic system in the world. It consists of the most accurate mathematical calculations and stunning poetry. Studying it gives you the road map to understand rhythms from anywhere in the world."

SOME OF THE INDIAN STUFF REQUIRES VERY DETAILED AND FAST STICK WORK. WHAT SORT OF STICKINGS DO YOU USE MOSTLY? SINGLES, PARADIDDLES, DOUBLES?

"I choose them according to the tempo. In slower tempos I like singles because they sound very strong. In faster tempos, I mostly use paradiddles, but I have made my own stickings, which represent the Indian phrases very closely."

WHAT OTHER PROJECTS ARE ON THE GO?

"Another great project I am co-developing right now is SAPTA35. It is a collaboration with percussion ace Pete Lockett. I have known

Pete's work for many years. I admire his journey through so many styles of percussion and it is amazing how he has constantly grown and absorbed the Indian rhythmic system so deeply. In SAPTA35 we share our rhythmic worlds and present a new type of percussion show. We visit different languages and percussion textures. SAPTA35 will be launched in 2014."

GEARBOX

Cymbals:

22" Bosphorous ride
20" Avedis Zildjian ride
20" Istanbul dry ride
12" Meinl Byzance hi-hats

Sticks and brushes:

Mainly Vic Firth

Drums:

14" VP kick custom made by Brad Miller (bradpercussion.com)
Pearl Chad Wackerman signature snare
10", 12" and 14" Yamaha maple toms

Percussion:

Schlagwerk Finline Morado cajón
LP Frank Giorgini drum udu