

Shirish Korde Kala Chakra

Composer **Shirish Korde** is celebrated for “integrating and synthesizing music of diverse cultures into breathtaking works of complex expressive layers.” (*Musical America*.) His music is influenced by diverse world music traditions ranging from the throat singers of Tuva and the ancient Vedic chants of India, to the shimmering colors of the Balinese Gong Kebyar Gamelan orchestra. His distinctive music is performed throughout the United States and Europe.

Shirish Korde’s works include: *Tenderness of Cranes*, influenced by Japanese music; *Time Grids*, for amplified guitar and tape; *Constellations*, for saxophone quartet; *Drowned Woman of the Sky*, a song cycle based on poems by Pablo Neruda; *Svara-Yantra* (violin concerto); *Nada Ananda* (guitar concerto) and *The Songs of Ecstasy*, based on spiritual texts from world literature. Korde has composed six large-scale music-theater works, his most recent chamber opera *Phoolan Devi* (new version) will receive its New York premiere in the spring of 2015. Boston Musica Viva commissioned and premiered the workshop version of *Phoolan Devi* in the spring 2010.

Shirish Korde’s works exhibit influences of Asian musical and dramatic forms. *The Computer Music Journal* described Korde as one of the few “contemporary composers who have been deeply touched by music of non-Western cultures, jazz, and computer technology and who have created a powerful and communicative compositional language.”

Korde’s works have been performed by orchestras such as the Chicago Symphony, the New Zealand Symphony, the Boston Philharmonic, the Minnesota Symphony Orchestra, and the National Polish Radio Orchestra; ensembles, such as the Boston Musica Viva, the Da Capo Chamber Players, the Ensemble Modern, and the Phrominx Ensemble; and numerous other ensembles, soloists, and conductors. He has received grants and awards from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Massachusetts Cultural Council, the New England Foundation for the Arts, the

Fromm Foundation, the Siemens Foundation, the Celebrity Series of Boston, and the Jebediah Foundation. As a fourth time recipient of a composition fellowship from the Massachusetts Cultural Council in 2011, he is listed among the most “distinctive artists” currently working in the state of Massachusetts. His works can be heard on Chandos, Neuma, Centaur, and Mode CD labels. Matthew Guerrerri of the *Boston Globe*, in his review of Korde’s performance of his violin concert by the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra noted “*Svara-Yantra* stole the show... a terrific piece in which the traditional symphony orchestra is dropped in the middle of the sub-continent, exploding with color.”

Korde studied jazz and composition at the Berklee College of Music, analysis and composition at the New England Conservatory, and ethnomusicology at Brown University. He is a Distinguished Professor of Humanities, and the Chair of the Music Department at the College of the Holy Cross (Worcester, MA) and has previously taught at Berklee College of Music, New England Conservatory, and Brown University.

Kala Chakra is Shirish Korde’s seventh commission for Boston Musica Viva.

Kala Chakra – Sanskrit for *Cycles of Time* – is a song cycle in nine movements for three soloists and a chamber ensemble of six instrumentalists. My recent music is deeply influenced by World Music traditions, especially those of Asia. *Kala Chakra* is inspired by the Indian rhythmic system of *tāla*; folk and classical music of Eastern Europe and China; and American Jazz.

The nine interconnected movements that comprise this cycle are:

- I. Kala Chakra – Prologue
- II. Kviti Milodejne
- III. Duo Cadenza – Improvisation I
- IV. Kala Chakra – Intermezzo
- V. Single Light
- VI. Yanzi: Song of the Swallow
- VII. Jabucko
- VIII. Improvisation 2
- IX. Kala Chakra

Kala Chakra movements I, IV, and IX provide the outer frame and act as a “refrain,” or ritornello, for the entire work. Each time this movement appears it is recast, fully revealing itself in the final iteration.

Kviti Milodejne (II) and Jabucko (VII) are based on fragments of Czech folk songs (four and eight measures long, respectively). Traditionally, these are sung while accompanied by a stringed instrument, such as a lute or violin. Kviti is a song about the arrival of winter. Jabucko is a song about the blossoming of Spring. In my version, Jabucko is transformed into a jazz ballad with the cello cast as a bassist and the soprano line draws materials from the original song.

Yanzi: Song of the Swallow (IV) is based on a beautiful folk melody from Kazakstan and Western China. Here it is recast as a duet between soprano and tenor, depicting a love lost between lovers. Single Light (V), the central movement of the cycle, is a setting of a Zen poem by the medieval Chinese poet Po Chu Yi (772-846). The poem (given below) is set as an abstract meditation scored for soprano surrounded by a rich array of bell-like sounds. It imagines a mystical temple ritual.

Flowers not flowers, fog not fog;
It comes at midnight, goes at dawn.
Arriving like a spring dream,
Leaving like the morning clouds –
No way to hold it.

The two instrumental interludes: Duo Cadenza (III), a duet for sheng and tabla, and Improvisation 2 (XIII) are instrumental commentaries that call upon the soloists to improvise on materials drawn from the other movements. Movement II is less formal while movement XIII is more structured and infused with phrases reminiscent of great jazz improvisers – especially Miles Davis, Bill Evans, and Sonny Rollins.

Kala Chakra (movements I, IV, and IX) is a rhythmic game, based on metric units of two and three. The structure is inspired by both metric constructs in ancient Sanskrit poetry and

the system of Indian *tāla*. The entire rhythmic structure of these movements derives from two simple arithmetical processes: Addition (e.g., 2+3, 2+2+3, 2+2+2+3, or 3+2, 3+3+2, 3+3+3+2, etc.) and Subtraction – more accurately, contraction (e.g., 1-2-3-4-5, 1-2-3-4, 1-2-3, 1-2, 1). These rhythmic modules are combined to create larger structures, or sections. Both rhythmic processes (addition and contraction) unfold simultaneously in different instrumental groupings. The sung and spoken texts derive from Indian drumming bols (nonsense syllables).

The last iteration of the Kala Chakra cycle (IX), restates the opening with a tabla solo embedded within it. The recitation by the soloist belongs to a special set of sacred compositions that weave together bols with texts that refer to attributes of Hindu dieties like Ganesh, or Ganapati.

When considered from a philosophical perspective, *Kala Chakra* refers to the Hindu/Buddhist doctrine of impermanence. It is the notion that all things and experiences are impermanent (i.e., that everything is in constant flux). Life embodies this flux, as seen in the aging process and with the notion of *Samsāra* (the repeating circle of birth-death-rebirth). The seasons – Kviti and Jabucko; the sound of bells and the Zen poem – Single Light; and the depiction of loss, *duḥkha*, in Yanzi all metaphorically and musically manifest this notion of “impermanence.”

I am deeply indebted to Sandeep Das, one of the great masters of tabla who inspired me to take on the challenge of composing this work; Wu Tong, who is a master of the Chinese sheng in addition to being one of the most expressive singers I have ever encountered; and Gitanjali Mathur – a multi-talented soprano, who is trained in both Western and Indian Classical music. I also want to acknowledge the help of my colleagues Eric Culver and Matthew Jaskot. Finally, I am honored and indebted to Richard Pittman and Boston Musica Viva for giving me another opportunity to collaborate with such internationally renowned musicians.
—Shirish Korde