

Sangeet4All: From Musical Family to Educational Revolution

by Vidushi Saskia Rao-de Haas

About the Author

World-renowned cellist and composer Maestro Saskia Rao-de Haas is a pioneer in the world of music. She is the creator of the 15-string Indian cello and a trailblazer as a master performer of Indian classical music, and as a composer and educator. She was recently honoured by the King of the Netherlands with a knighthood in the Order of Orange-Nassau for her immense contributions as a performer, composer, educator, and cultural ambassador between India and the Netherlands.

Speaking of his disciple, her Guru Pandit Hariprasad Chaurasia describes her music as 'a gift from God that everyone should experience'. The New York Times describes her music as 'movingly meditative', and her new instrument, the Indian cello, was described at the Edinburgh Festival as 'unmatched by any other string instrument'. Her concerts have taken her from the most sacred of Indian classical music festivals to the most prestigious concert halls of the world.

As an author and music educator, she has authored Sangeet4All. In the last decade, over 100,000 children have benefited from the Sangeet4All music framework, and over 250 music teachers have been trained in this philosophy of teaching, which she runs with her husband, the musical stalwart Pandit Shubhendra Rao. The Ministry of Culture of India, the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, Sangeet Natak Akademi, Tata Steel Foundation, Massachusetts Cultural Council, leading schools, and many NGOs across India have been part of the Sangeet4All initiative — described by experts as one of the 'most complete music curricula in the world today'. Her latest book on Indian music history, *Shashtra*, was released at the Asia Society in New York and Houston in 2022 as part of the Jaipur Literature Festival.

Abstract

This article is my personal testimony — as a mother, musician, and member of a music family — sharing the mission behind Sangeet4All and its transformative effects on my own child and the entire Sangeet4All family. Rooted in our lived experience and enriched by science and research, Sangeet4All bridges traditional music upbringing with modern pedagogy and methodology. Here, I reflect on how empowering teachers, parents, and children to reclaim music as a living language transforms families, classrooms, and communities — all supported by neuroscience and education studies.

Motivation

Music has been the invisible thread binding my family, passing from parents to child with love and quiet pride. As parents, we watched our son absorb ragas and talas effortlessly, create his own music, excel academically, and discover his own voice in a home where music is ever-present. Pandit Shubhendra Rao — my husband, and often my partner on stage — would create a new lullaby every evening for our son in a different raga. By 20 months he could recognise over 20 ragas. When we performed at the Kennedy Center, he travelled with us to Washington DC; when we collaborated with Aboriginal artists in Australia, he played with the children; when we performed in Paris, we visited the Louvre. At the world's

most prestigious concert halls, he absorbed the music and cultures of the world; at the beautiful classical music festivals of India, he absorbed India's rich cultural heritage.

It is this lived experience — not just as a musician, but as a mother — that inspired me to create Sangeet4All, so that every child and family in India could share in this gift. The leading principle of the Shubhendra and Saskia Rao Foundation is Shubhendra's saying: 'Music is the birthright of every child.'

Music Education in Schools: The Issues

For decades, music education in schools has followed a predictable pattern: specialised musicians conduct isolated sessions, often viewed as supplementary to 'core' academic subjects. This approach, while well-intentioned, creates several fundamental problems:

- **Lack of early-childhood music education:** Music teachers often have no training in early-childhood educational principles or classroom management, leading to a belief that children cannot learn music young, or that only a few can.
- **Fragmented learning experience:** Students experience music as separate from their daily academic routine.
- **Limited teacher–student connection:** Music teachers have minimal time to build meaningful relationships with students.
- **Inconsistent methodology:** Different teaching styles between classroom and music teachers can confuse young learners.
- **Cultural disconnect:** Generic music curricula from outside India fail to connect students with their cultural heritage.
- **Resource limitations:** Schools struggle to hire qualified music specialists, leaving many students without quality music education.

Young children, particularly those from Nursery through Grade 2, learn most effectively through integrated, multi-sensory experiences.¹ They thrive when learning is seamless, consistent, and delivered by trusted adults who understand their individual needs and developmental stages. Traditional music education models fail to leverage these critical insights.

Research consistently demonstrates that music education enhances cognitive development, academic performance, and emotional intelligence.^{2,3}■ However, the segregated approach limits these benefits by failing to create the deep, sustained engagement necessary for transformative learning. This is precisely why the National Education Policy 2020 advises schools to integrate music into the core curriculum at least up to Grade 2.■ The policy recognises that arts education — particularly music — is not merely an add-on but fundamental to holistic development. Yet the question schools grapple with remains: how?

There is no course in Indian universities called 'early-childhood music', or even 'music education', as there is in many other countries.■ We found a way to begin addressing these systemic gaps. Let me explain the most important part.

The Science of Music, Families, and Learning

Centuries-old wisdom in musical families teaches us that children learn best through immersion — by listening, imitating, and experimenting within a safe environment. Music happens seamlessly, as a sharing art rather than a performing art.■

Modern neuroscience now confirms these observations. Early music exposure within nurturing relationships stimulates brain development and strengthens neural pathways linked to language, executive function, memory, and emotional regulation.■ Studies on (Indian) classical music specifically show remarkable impacts on cognitive growth, with regular exposure enhancing pattern recognition, mathematical thinking, and emotional intelligence.■

Children learn music most naturally when it is woven into daily life — through play, rituals, and bonds with loving adults.¹■ Our research over the last 15 years shows that when teachers or parents become musical guides (the 'musical family' at school), the benefits multiply: empathy, confidence, and even academic performance improve.¹¹ Secure attachment between children and their caregivers or teachers forms the critical foundation for such learning. These insights shape every aspect of Sangeet4All.

Turning a School into a Musical Family

Many parents and teachers I met felt music was out of reach — reserved for experts, the precociously talented, or select families. They expressed concerns, especially post-pandemic, that their children's concentration, focus, and calm confidence were lacking. With Sangeet4All, we broke this barrier by empowering not only music teachers but every classroom teacher, especially in the early years, to serve as a musical guide.

Our curriculum mirrors the playful, immersive environment our child experienced at home, enabling children to assimilate music rather than simply learn it. And it transformed not only music education, but the entire classroom. Through workshops, resources (original books, worksheets, and instruments that I created), and hands-on support from my wonderful team, even non-musical teachers discover joy and confidence in singing, storytelling, and musical play.

The results speak volumes. Research on our approach reveals improved language skills, cognitive flexibility, better memory, and stronger social-emotional abilities in participating children.^{12,13} In partner schools and institutes, parents and teachers report that children who were once shy or disengaged now lead activities and show pride in their learning — echoing our son's journey at home.

Empowering Classroom Teachers: A Revolutionary Approach with Proven Results

One of the most transformative aspects of Sangeet4All's success is its pioneering strategy of positioning classroom teachers — not just music teachers — as primary providers of music education in the early years.¹■ This fundamentally addresses core challenges faced by many Indian schools today: a severe shortage of trained music educators combined with a lack of Indian-contextualised curricula.

Typically, music classes rely on specialist teachers who may be scarce, inadequately trained as educators, or undervalued and under-resourced. This leads to fragmented, infrequent, and often disengaging music experiences, making consistent, meaningful instruction difficult to sustain. Schools also struggle with overloaded curricula and limited resources, which often side-line music as an extracurricular add-on for a few rather than an integral part of learning for all — contradicting the NEP 2020's vision of holistic education.¹■, ¹■

Sangeet4All's early-years model offers solutions by equipping regular classroom teachers — even those without any musical training — with multisensory tools, lesson plans, and ongoing mentorship that reach far beyond music to influence the entire teaching style. It gives teachers educational resources, classroom-management skills, and knowledge of appropriate noise levels and effective use of their

voice. Teachers feel empowered and can confidently lead music learning from Nursery through Grade 2, fostering a natural, immersive experience that reflects the traditional Indian musical family.

Teacher voices deeply affirm this transformation:

"I was hesitant at first, but the resources and mentorship gave me confidence. Now I can lead engaging music sessions with my whole class, and the children love it." — A Grade 1 teacher

"I've seen real improvements in children's focus and joy. It's become a highlight of our day and has brought our teaching team closer together." — Another educator

"With Sangeet4All, music is no longer an afterthought. It has become embedded in the daily school routine, driven by teachers who embrace it wholeheartedly." — A school administrator

"There is so much noise everywhere, but my music class makes me calm." — A student

By resolving the bottleneck of specialist-teacher shortages and giving classrooms ownership of music education, Sangeet4All's approach is revolutionising the access to, and quality of, music education in Indian schools.

Simultaneously, I have created a university-level course titled 'Music Education' for musicians wanting to become engaged and engaging educators. Both approaches work hand-in-hand, strengthening each other. Through partnerships across primary, secondary, and traditional education sectors, I believe India can lead the world in arts education. We look forward to collaborating with more institutes to make this vision a reality.

Deepening the Journey: Structure and Growth

As children progress, Sangeet4All prepares them for more formal learning: by Grade 3 and beyond, they are ready to explore music with specialist teachers — also trained and mentored by our team. Their foundation, built on trust, play, and exposure, enables deeper focus without fear or undue pressure, mirroring the gentle progression our son experienced in our family.

Research on neuroplasticity shows that this early foundation creates lasting changes in brain structure, enhancing not just musical ability but overall cognitive flexibility and creative thinking.¹■ The transformative power of music extends far beyond the classroom, shaping how children approach challenges, express emotions, and connect with others throughout their lives.

Beyond Skills: Building Connections and Belonging

For me, and for countless other teachers and parents, the most meaningful changes extend beyond musical skills to relationships themselves. Daily musical moments foster attachment, communication, and a profound sense of belonging — both at home and in school communities.

When schools become musical families, children flourish not only as musicians but as confident, compassionate people. This aligns perfectly with the NEP 2020's emphasis on values-based education and the development of well-rounded individuals.¹■

"In giving our children daily music, we give them not just a skill but a companion for life — a joyful language for love, wonder, and belonging."¹■

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