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### **Fusion Sign-Vehicles: A Semiotics Analysis of Social and Musical Behavior in South Asian Fusion A Cappella**

Nicole C Muffitt

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## Abstract:

In 1996, the first collegiate South Asian a cappella group, Penn Masala, was founded at the University of Pennsylvania. Over the last twenty-two years, nearly fifty such groups have been established at colleges and universities across the United States. These ensembles blend Western popular music with South Asian music, namely Bollywood film songs. Membership in these groups typically involves participants with South Asian ethnic backgrounds as well as participants from various other ethnic groups. Through a case study with the ensemble Dhamakapella, this paper explores the ramifications and outcomes between the multifaceted essence of South Asian a cappella and the multifaceted ethnicities of its members, using the concept of sign vehicles to show how identities are blended, reinvented, and performed in both musical and social settings.

## Introduction and Background

In 1996, the first collegiate South Asian a cappella choir, Penn Masala, was founded at the University of Pennsylvania. Over the last twenty-two years, nearly fifty such groups have been founded at colleges and universities across the United States. These ensembles blend Western popular music with South Asian music, namely Bollywood film songs. Membership in these groups typically involves participants with South Asian ethnic backgrounds as well as participants from various other ethnic backgrounds. This paper discusses the way in which sign-vehicles of South Asian a cappella performance aid in the construction of the ethnicities of its performers, showing how identities are blended, reinvented, and performed in both musical and social settings. Specifically, I will analyze the way that Dhamakapella, a South Asian a cappella choir at Case Western Reserve University, behaves in a fashion that conveys a fusion of South Asian and Western identities.

In order to make the theoretical concept of identity more tangible, I will rely on the work of Erving Goffman, Judith Butler, and Thomas Turino. The former two scholars view identity as performative, and the latter scholar uses Peircean semiotics to understand how music can be interpreted as a sign and an identity marker.

The theoretical perspective of Erving Goffman maintains that individuals monitor their actions to perform their identities. In his 1959 text, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman introduces his dramaturgical theory, which asserts that individuals are constantly acting roles, utilizing props and nonverbal behaviors as “sign-vehicles” so that other people they interact with, such as the audience, view them in the best and most desired manner befitting their role. He maintains that we are all constantly acting, and that this perspective offers researchers a valuable starting point for understanding group function:

The perspective employed in this report is that of the theatrical performance; the principles derived are dramaturgical ones. I shall consider the way in which the individual in ordinary work situations presents himself and his activity to others, the ways in which he guides and controls the impression they form of him, and the kinds of things he may and may not do while sustaining his performance before them. ... The justification for this approach ... is that the illustrations together fit into a coherent

framework that ties together bits of experience the reader has already had and provides the student with a guide worth testing in case-studies of institutional social life.<sup>1</sup>

As I will be completing a case study for this project, I find Goffman's use of dramaturgical terms helpful. They are accessible to me and easily understood. His approach allows for better understanding individual "actors" as well as "teams," a distinction that I propose will be useful in my study of group musical performance. While Goffman's theory was not originally intended for use in literal performance environments, his notions of a social front stage and back stage also serve to function as a guide for understanding the literal front stage and backstage habits of performers.

Judith Butler also utilizes a theatrical lexicon to describe her understanding of identity construction. In "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," Butler discusses gender as a performed condition, rather than an objective reality, noting that "what is called gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo."<sup>2</sup> While Butler relates this theory of performativity specifically to gender, I posit that other elements of identity, including ethnicity, are also performative. Butler's essay speaks mostly in the theoretical perspective and to her own lived experience as opposed to a field study, but her notion of identity construction as a performance within social norms offers a valuable paradigm.

Synthesizing the concepts of Goffman and Butler, there is no "one true self." To use Goffman's terminology, I maintain that people make decisions to "give off"<sup>3</sup> a certain expression, in order to maintain others' impressions of them. These decisions vary by role and stage. The desire to have a certain expression given off comes from our desire to perform what is socially sanctioned and avoid that which is taboo. We are accepted or rewarded based on the quality of our performance. This suggests that there is a best way to play the part of a singer, college student, American, American with South Asian ancestry, and so on. Each expression is a way to construct and maintain a desired identity.

Many ethnomusicologists have written about music and identity from a variety of theoretical perspectives. Thomas Turino (1999) utilizes Peircian semiotic theory to analyze the way Peruvian migrant youth create a group identity. He identifies elements of music as icons that are used to construct identity. Concerning such icons, he says "Icons are, at root, signs of identity in that they rely on some type of resemblance between sign and object, as, in fact, do all relationships of identity. ... Musical forms that 'sound like,' that is, resemble, in some way, other parts of social experience are received as true, good, and natural."<sup>4</sup> South Asian a cappella, in its use of both Indian and Western musical concepts, serves as an icon for the social experiences of being an American, a South Asian, or an American of South Asian descent. I contend that the inclusion of Bollywood melodies found in South Asian a cappella music are icons of India and can thusly be used as identity markers in the way Turino discusses.

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<sup>1</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959) xi-xii.

<sup>2</sup> Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 520.

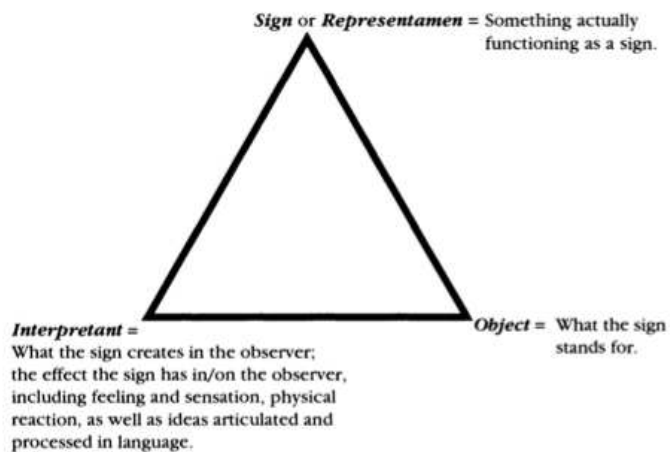
<sup>3</sup> Goffman, 1959, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Turino, "Signs of Imagination, Identity, and Experience: A Peircian Semiotic Theory for Music," *Ethnomusicology* 43, no. 2 (1999): 234.

## Proposed Topic

I enter this project using Goffman's theory to view identity as a performance. As such, I am of the belief that belonging to a music group that is symbolic of said identity provides an opportunity to perform that identity. From this, I assert that the reason Dhamakapella behaves the way they do is in order to maintain the audience's impression (both literal and figurative audience, as in the case of Goffman) that they are adequately enacting a South Asian/Western fusion, in all elements of musical and social performance. As the previous statement explains the "why" of behavior, I will use this paper to explain the "how." I will do this by analyzing the totality of performance in Dhamakapella, interpreting rehearsals, costume, music and competition. I maintain that these aspects are signs or sign-vehicles used in the performance of South Asian a cappella. As such, I will analyze them through the lens of the Piercian semiotic triad, noting the sign/sign-vehicle, the object to which it relates, and the interpretant. The Piercian semiotic triad, which I am borrowing from Thomas Turino's 1999 article, is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Thomas Turino's interpretation of the Piercian triad.



## Methodology

As previously stated, this project relies on a case study. With appropriate consent, including IRB (#18-450), I have been working with Dhamakapella, employing some basic ethnographic techniques, and observing their rehearsals for the Fall 2018 semester. I have interviewed their president, music director, and arranger in person and through email. Additionally, I have conducted a group interview with the choir, gathering demographic information in the process. The information gathered through this process, as well as what is available through their website, YouTube channel, and Facebook page, are what I will use as my data.

Basic Demographic Information for Dhamakapella Members Present During Group Interview

First Name	Year in School	Major	Years in Dhamakapella	Home City and State
Gavin	5	Computer Science	5	Akron, Ohio
Grace	4	Computer Science	3	Richland, Washington
Naya	4	Psychology/Medical Anthropology	3	Naperville, Illinois
Shilpa	4	Biology/Psychology	4	Boston, Massachusetts
Vasu	4	Systems Biology	4	North Potomac, Maryland
Aashna	2	Anthropology, Pre-med	2	Naperville, Illinois
Kevin	2	Accounting	2	Danville, Illinois
Komal	2	Neuroscience	2	Westchester, New York
Antonio	1	Biomedical Engineering/Finance	1	West Chester, Pennsylvania
Divyam	1	Aerospace and Mechanical Engineering	1	Kota, Rajasthan, India
Eric	1	Computer Science	1	Radnor, Pennsylvania
Kasey	1	Computer Science/International Studies	1	Canton, Ohio.
Lewis	1	Civil Engineering	1	Green Springs, Ohio
Pavani	1	Psychology	1	Not shared
Savannah	1	Theatre/Civil Engineering	1	Charleston, South Carolina
Swetha	1	Biomedical Engineering/Music	1	Overland Park, Kansas

**Rehearsals and Observation Experience**

Dhamakapella is a student-run organization founded in 2005 that features 17 members. The group rehearses a total of six hours a week, meeting Monday, Tuesday, and Friday evenings in buildings on Case Western Reserve University's (CWRU) campus. The first sign of South Asian and Western fusion is in Dhamakapella's name. In talking to Gavin, the group's president, I found that it is a portmanteau. As Gavin, the choir's president, told me, "'Dhamaka' [is] literally translated from Hindi, it means 'a loud noise or explosion'. However, it can also mean 'exciting' or 'party' or 'hype.'" Beyond its meaning and the fact that 'Dhamakapella' sounds

cool.” Immediately, there is a fusion between the words “Dhamaka” and “a cappella,” demonstrating South Asian and Western identity through the group’s name alone.

Using Goffman’s dramaturgical terminology, the rehearsal space offers one degree of backstage behavior. While it is not truly backstage as Goffman considers it, it is a social space where the choir is not being assessed as a team by an audience. As such, it is here where I feel their behavior reveals their truest opinions about their craft and each other.

Rehearsals begin with vocal warmups led by Shilpa, a senior and one of the group’s music directors. She uses an app on her phone that emulates a pitch pipe, then leads the group through warmups that ascend chromatically. After warmups, the group will rehearse one or two of their pieces. While learning, the members use their phone, computer, or tablet to read the music that has been arranged for them. Gavin serves as a teacher in many ways, and his perfect pitch, the ability to identify or produce any pitch without assistance, often helps people find their notes as they rehearse.

Rehearsals can become very chatty, offering genuine opinions that have informed me of what the members of Dhamakapella feel about each other. I immediately noticed that the singers are very aware of ethnic identities. When talking about a new member who was not present at rehearsal, one white member said, “Well, is he Indian?” and with a resounding roar, several Indian students said “No!” While I had thought that this would create conflict, it actually resulted in a casual discussion about race and ethnicity that was informative, not exclusionary. It has become clear to me that regardless of ethnicity, each member of this group is valued and welcome to participate fully. Beyond these few moments where ethnicity is a topic of discussion, the group interacts like typical college students. They are friends, interested in each other’s lives, supportive, kind, and happy when they are together. They make an effort to involve everyone.

Dhamakapella’s value for all of their members is apparent not only in their interactions, but also in their music. Everyone has a seat at the table throughout the process, from selecting songs to blend to final performances. The music this group produces reflects that reality. The first day I visited the group, Gavin and Vasu, two senior members, spoke to me about the idea of “true fusion.” This is an idea that has come up several times. By a “true fusion,” the members mean a song that most effectively blends the original Hindi song with a Western song. While other groups might switch back and forth in a single arrangement between Hindi and Western, Dhamkapella arrangements will blend the two songs so that they occur simultaneously. Via email, I asked Shaun, an alumni of Dhamakapella and their arranger, about his views on “true fusion,”

As an arranger, I have been fortunate to have written and received recognition for both types of arrangements [fusion and single genre/language]. These experiences have helped me discover the intrinsic strengths and weakness in each. I cannot speak for other arrangers within the genre, but I find it objectively easier to write and edit single-song/single-language arrangements. There is an entire layer of ideas that I do not have to necessarily think about such as the raag/melodic interplay, chord progression clashes, and phrasing/structural differences between the source genres. “True” fusion arrangements are challenging to write due to the presence of the aforementioned layer, especially those that move beyond the classification of a “mash-up.” However, when I am successfully able to weave source and original material together, I feel that the arrangement moves beyond the classification of a “medley” or a “mash-up.” I feel a greater sense of gratification because I have created a “new” song, rather than a novel

cover/interpretation. This plays out in my arranging by aiming to artfully incorporate different elements (sourced and original) to create a unique-sounding background texture that supports a well-thought-out exchange of soloist lines and lyricism.

The notion of “true fusion” and creating a new song out of two has been mentioned several times to me, especially as I carried out a group interview.

Gavin, once again, described other arrangements as switching back and forth between a Hindi and western song as “ABAB,” etc., but that Dhamakapella creates a new song. A freshman member, Savannah, described it as “If a Hindi song is red and a Western song is blue, other groups have red and blue stripes, but we make purple.” When coupled with the social fusion previously mentioned, these opinions inform me that not only are the members of Dhamakapella aware of the social and musical fusion their artform requires, they pride themselves in doing it in a way that they see as most legitimate.

I would like to take an aside here to discuss the importance Dhamakapella places on “fusion” to Goffman’s dramaturgical theory. I am of the persuasion that the music they choose to perform and their arrangement process is an intentional act to affect the impression of listeners. Goffman identifies “performance teams,” which Dhamakapella is in a literal and figurative sense. Goffman has the following to say about group performances,

Whether the members of a team stage similar individual performances or stage dissimilar performances which fit together into a whole, an emergent team impression arises which can conveniently be treated as a fact in its own right, . . . It may even be said that if our special interest is the study of impression management, of the contingencies which arise in fostering an impression, and the techniques for meeting these contingencies, then the team and the team-performance may well be the best units to take as the fundamental point of reference.<sup>5</sup>

Dhamakapella, I believe, stages similar individual performances to intentionally manage the impression of listeners that they are an effective example of fusion between South Asian and Western popular music. They work together in their social and musical performance interactions to express social fusion (in the way that they are friends; the group is not ethnically segregated) and musical fusion unlike similar groups.

The importance of the fusion is not only related to a sense of musical pride or impression management. When I asked the group if they think more people should know about their music, Vasu said, “Just by virtue of a Western song being mixed in with a Hindi song, it kind of, in a way, makes it more relatable to people who haven’t heard Hindi music.” Many other members agreed with this sentiment.

This idea of South Asian a cappella as a doorway to experience more South Asian culture resonated with many of the Indian members of Dhamakapella. Many of them stated that they decided to join the group to express their ethnic identity.

Vasu: The fact that it was music from my own culture just made me naturally gravitate toward it.

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<sup>5</sup> Erving Goffman, *op. cit.*, 80.

Divyam: I just wanted to be part of some sort of Indian community on campus because that's the only way I can feel like I'm home sometimes. It just makes me feel happy.

Naya: I really liked how it was fusion element of it. There weren't a lot of Indian people where I grew up in Arizona so I felt very disconnected from my identity, but when I came here, everyone embraced it. It's a big part of [CWRU] life, people know what Dhamakapella is.

Other members expressed their agreement with these statements by nodding or making brief interjections.

While many of the South Asian members were drawn to the popular and fusion elements in Dhamakapella's performance, others sought a more classical experience.

Swetha: I actually wanted to join Indian classical music and dance group, but they discontinued it this year. But [Dhamakapella] is close. I heard what they do and it sounded classical, kinda. And they were really good, so I wanted to join.

Pavani: I wanted to join an Indian classical group, but I thought this group offered a new challenge for me, mixing in two genres of music is very difficult.

From these statements, and the sense of agreement most students expressed through gestures, I maintain that performing in Dhamakapella is in itself a sign-vehicle of South Asianness. It is a way for South Asian members to embrace and underscore the ethnic element of their identity in a way that they are recognized and supported by their university community. This prompted me to consider why the non-South Asian members decided to join. It came down to two things: complexity of arrangements and competition.

Grace: I came to a rehearsal before I decided to join ... On top of it being [in] different languages, [the music] was so much more complex than the music other people were singing, so much more challenging and so much more interesting.

Savannah: I heard Dhamakapella perform at one of the orientation events and I literally stopped breathing, they took my breath away... I pictured myself being up there with them so I said I have to audition.

Even though the older members of the group felt this particular performance was terrible, it clearly left an impression on Savannah.

When it comes to competition, many members become very excitable. The competitive element gives them a goal to work towards.

Grace: Out of all the a cappella groups we have on campus, this is the only one that competes, I was like "hell yeah competition let's crush some people!"

Kevin: If it wasn't competition-based I probably wouldn't join ... the competition pushes you to get better, and like, that's something I was looking for. I didn't want to just sing the same three songs every year.



Moreover, from my experience observing their rehearsals and talking to them about their experience, I have found that Dhamakapella allows members to make friends from different experiences and act together as a team to achieve the same goal of exceptional performance, both musically and as representatives of a Western and South Asian fusion community. In addition to this, Dhamakapella provides an outlet for CWRU students who identify as South Asian to express that identity.

### Costume

Traditional clothing serves as an important symbol of South Asian culture, especially as Western influences continue to pervade South Asian popular culture. Researching glocalization, the idea of maintaining traditional values during the process of globalization, journalist Shakuntala Rao found dress served as an important cultural signifier in Bollywood film. Rao, through her consumption of Bollywood film and by interviewing Indian people, has noticed that protagonists in modern Bollywood film can frequently wear Western clothing like jeans and t-shirts, but they must wear something that signifies their Indian culture at least once. Two of her interviewees had the following to say:

Mona: If you watch old movies, Saira Banu or Tanuja will wear skirts or pants only in one or two scenes. Now a heroine can be in jeans and skirts in most of the film.

Nancy: But, at least, in one scene she has to be seen wearing a sari or salwar kameej. It is what makes her Indian.<sup>6</sup>

Rao similarly found that Indian audiences look for clothing that demonstrates worldliness without sacrificing an Indian feel, “while Indian clothing is adopting global styles, audiences nevertheless desire that sari, choli, and sherwani continue to mark simultaneously both the cosmopolitan and Indian attributes of the characters and that clothing remain a sign of global sophistication and Indianness of characters.”<sup>7</sup>

This is not surprising, as the sari and other Indian clothing often serve as a sign of South Asian ethnicity. Anthropologist Karen Hansen recognizes the sari and other traditional Indian clothing styles as “dress icons” of India, especially as it has remained a constant over India’s colonial and globalized history.<sup>8</sup>

From these two discussions on Indian clothing, it would be an obvious choice for Dhamakapella to utilize this sign in their performances. At a competition this past spring, members of Dhamakapella wore both Western and Hindi-inspired clothing, depicted in figure 2. The men wear Western clothing while the women wear garments reminiscent of what would be seen in Bollywood cinema.

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<sup>6</sup> Shakuntala Rao, “‘I need an Indian Touch’: Glocalization and Bollywood Films,” *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, 3, no. 1 (2010): 7.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>8</sup> Karen Tranberg Hansen, “The World in Dress: Anthropological Perspectives on Clothing, Fashion, and Culture,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004): 369-92.

Figure 2. Dhamakapella at their All American Awaaz performance in Chicago, Illinois.



Looking at clothing through the Piercian semiotic triad, I see the following:

**Sign:** Western clothing (button downs, bow ties, dress pants) and South Asian clothing in the choli (blouse) and lehenga (skirt)

**Object:** Bollywood performance

**Interpretant:** This particular dress offers a sense familiarity of the men's clothing and curiosity of the women's clothing. The women's clothing does remind me of South Asian culture, especially with the midriff revealing cut and the bright colors of red and gold.

While it could be said that my interpretant leads me to see the clothing as a blend of Western and Indian elements because I am already familiar with the group, there are certainly reasons beyond that that prompt me to make this connection.

The women's clothing certainly signifies the South Asian element of the group's costume. The bright colors are reminiscent of brocades such as the one in Figure 3, a heavy material, "with woven borders and cross borders, created in the tapestry technique with a combination of gold thread creating the background and the patterns worked in multicolored bright-hued silk."<sup>9</sup> The application of this style of fabric and colors to the choli and lehenga (an outfit with a similar cut is exhibited in Figure 4) creates an even more powerful symbol. The fabric and style together create the sign.

<sup>9</sup> Jasleen Dhamija, "History of Textiles of South Asia," in *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion: South Asia and Southeast Asia*, edited by Jasleen Dhamija, 30–37. Oxford: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010.

Figure 3. (Left), Stitched Brocade retrieved from the *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion: South Asia and Southeast Asia*.

Figure 4. (Right) Bollywood actor Priyanka Chopra wearing a design by Ritu Kumar at India Couture Week, Mumbai, 2008. Retrieved from the *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion: South Asia and Southeast Asia*.



The men's clothing is very familiar to most Westerners. It is somewhat formal apparel of a neutral color, excluding the golden bowtie. It is reminiscent of something a young man would wear to a high school dance.

## Music

Dhamakapella's musical selections are the most important way the singers perform their fusion of ethnic identities. From the original song selection process to the finished product, all members have a chance to make their voice heard, both literally and figuratively.

When talking with Shilpa, Dhamakapella's music director, she informed me of the song selection process:

Any member of the group can suggest new fusion ideas. We have a document on our Google Drive where people can suggest ideas and others can commit to arranging them. When we are pairing songs, we look for similarities in lyric meaning, musical key, and tempo. We try to fuse songs so that Hindi words can be sung over motifs from the English song and vice versa. Even with songs that are in all one language, we use classic English a cappella motifs in the background to create a fusion piece.

After a fusion is selected, it is sent to Shaun who then arranges it. This is where the “true fusion” element that I have previously discussed is manifested.

In this paper, I examine one of their arrangements which blends the songs “Madness” by Muse and “Phir Le Aya Dil”, a song from the 2012 Bollywood film titled *Barfi!* Both songs have a relaxed mood and discuss memory and being reunited with a lost love. The lyrics of both songs are provided below.

#### Lyrics to “Madness” by Muse

I, I can't get these memories out of my mind / And some kind of madness has started to evolve

I, I tried so hard to let you go / But some kind of madness is swallowing me whole, yeah

I have finally seen the light / And I have finally realized  
What you mean / Oh oh oh

And now, I need to know is this real love / Or is it just madness keeping us afloat?  
And when I look back at all the crazy fights we had / Like some kind of madness  
Was taking control / Yeah

And now I have finally seen the light / And I have finally realized  
What you need / Mm

And now I have finally seen the end / And I'm not expecting you to care  
But I have finally seen the light / I have finally realized  
I need to love / I need to love

Come to me / Trust in your dream  
Come on and rescue me / Yes I have known I can be wrong  
Maybe I'm too headstrong / Our love is / Madness

#### Lyrics to “Phir Le Aya Dil,” translated in English

The helpless heart has brought me here again, what to do,  
Staying away wasn't good to me, what to do..  
The heart says go complete-  
That talk that remains still incomplete,  
That memory that remains still incomplete,  
That memory that remains still incomplete.

Today I admit, what to do,  
There was a mistake that I did, what to do,  
The heart says, go get it,  
That one suppressed wish that is there (in the heart)..  
That one suppressed spark that is there,  
That one suppressed spark that is there.

The fate wishes this, what to do,  
 Let us keep meeting as we do, what to do,  
 The heart says, go make it forever,  
 That stuck path that is there,  
 That stuck wish that is there.  
 That stuck love that is there.

The similar meaning between the lyrics of the two songs as well as their similar tempo and feel make them great candidates for being fused. Shaun’s arrangement begins with the melodic opening of “Phir Le Aya Dil” and almost immediately juxtaposes it with the background content of “Madness.” The background material stays fairly consistent throughout the song, tying the melodic content from both songs together.

Due to past experiences where other South Asian a cappella choirs have taken ideas from their competitors without permission, Shaun elected not to share the entirety of his score with me. He did, however, share with me a segment that I think illustrates well what Dhamakapella means by “true fusion.” Their arrangements all have this degree of fusion, where the songs are really blended together. The climax of this song, as seen in Figure 7, has the melodies from both “Madness” and “Phir Le Aya Dil” sounding at the same time.

Figure 7. Excerpt from “Madness/ Phir Le Aya Dil”

38 Madness || Phir Le Aya Dil

75  
 PLAD  
 8  
 Madness  
 ah oh Come  
 77  
 PLAD  
 8  
 woh jo ru - ki si  
 Madness  
 to me just in a dream come on and

This short example continues for the final 20-25 seconds of the song. The two songs playing at once is what the members of Dhamakapella mean when they say “true fusion.” This selection, as well as its two component songs, are available on YouTube.

Looking at this musical example through the semiotic triad, I see the following:

**Sign:** “Madness” by Muse, in English and “Phir Le Aya Dil,” in Hindi

**Object:** Western popular culture, South Asian popular culture

**Interpretant:** The combination of different language and different melodic material immediately forces the listener to experience elements of both Western and South Asian cultures simultaneously.

Having music like this arranged, Dhamakapella tells their audiences that they are representing South Asian and Western fusion.

## Competition

South Asian fusion a cappella has its own competition circuit sponsored by the Association of South Asian A Cappella (ASA). ASA has been hosting this circuit, culminating in a national competition called All American Awaaz (A3) held annually in April for the past two years. In order to make it to A3, the choirs perform at as many preliminary competitions as possible, as the choirs with the highest overall scores from these preliminary competitions are allotted the opportunity to perform at A3. The more preliminary competitions a group performs in, the better chance they have of making it to A3.

The competitive element of performance is tremendously important to the members of Dhamakapella, as previously addressed with earlier quotes. From my experience talking to the group, I am of the belief that competitions are an avenue where the group expresses not only their musical talent, but the success of their South Asian/Western fusion – and they are of the belief that they do this better than other groups.

One frustration the group has is that ASA does not consistently seem to value the concept of fusion as much as Dhamakapella does. As presented in Figure 8, the ASA competition judging rubric, “Fusion” is only worth five points, while every other judging category is valued at 10 points. For a group that highly values fusion, this lack of emphasis is a point of contention.

Dhamakapella, as a whole, is of the persuasion that the fusion element of this genre is what makes it stand out, and for that reason, fusion should be weighted more heavily in the judging process.

The value of fusion is not the only obstacle Dhamakapella faces as it enters the competition season. Of the seven preliminary competitions, only two are close enough to drive to in one day. Figure 9 lists the competitions and their dates. Jeena is held in Texas; Anahat, California; Sangeet Saagar, North Carolina; Mehfil, California; Sahana, California; Gathe Raho, Iowa; and Awaazein, Texas.

Dhamakapella will be attending Sangeet Saagar and Gathe Raho. Additionally, they are raising money to participate in one of the competitions being held in California or Texas.

Figure 8., Association of South Asian A Cappella competition rubric, 2018-2019 season

## OFFICIAL ASA JUDGING RUBRIC

Vocal Performance	Balance & Blend (10)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Are the harmony, melody, and rhythm parts balanced? Do they sound like a unified ensemble?</li> <li>- Are voices balanced across parts and within parts?</li> </ul>
	Arrangement & Style (10)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Difficulty &amp; Creativity (Too many "doo's" or repeats? Clever textural changes? Too much repetition?)</li> <li>- Arranged within a range appropriate for singers' voices (avoids muddiness at low end, screeching at high end)</li> <li>- In the case of a medley, do the songs flow well together? (seamless transitions, meanings) Does the structure of the medley make sense?</li> <li>- Is the interpretation of the arrangement musically, lyrically and rhythmically interesting?</li> <li>- Does it work in a live a cappella format? Does it convey appropriate emotion?</li> </ul>
	Musical Nuances (10)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Intonation - Is the pitch centered? Are there noticeable errors with the intonation of all the singers?</li> <li>- Dynamics - Is there variety? Are they appropriate to the piece being performed?</li> <li>- Is the tone quality of voices exceptional and appropriate to the music performed?</li> <li>- Is the diction adequate and pronunciations accurate?</li> <li>- Rhythmic precision, tempo consistency, or effective use of non-metered time</li> </ul>
	Solo Interpretation (10)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Contribution to the musicality of the performance</li> <li>- Quality of soloists and appropriateness to song</li> </ul>
	Fusion (5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Do the arrangements highlight aspects of South Asian music?</li> <li>- Do the arrangements creatively integrate the genres while maintaining the integrity of each?</li> </ul>

Visual Performance	Creativity and Visual Cohesiveness (10)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Is the movement, or lack thereof, appropriate to the overall perceived aims of the group and maintained effectively throughout the performance?</li> <li>- Do they appear cohesive and organized as a group?</li> <li>- Do the movements enhance the music or interfere with it?</li> </ul>
	Effectiveness of Presentation (10)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Is there audience connection and emotional credibility?</li> <li>- Do they have energy and stage presence?</li> </ul>
	Professionalism (5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Is it evident that this performance was well thought out and rehearsed?</li> <li>- Is the overall effect professional? Is this a performance that people would pay to see?</li> </ul> <p><i>(Note: Individual groups are encouraged to maintain their own style. If this style is casual, however, it can still be regarded as professional inasmuch that the casual style appears well-planned and well-rehearsed.)</i></p>
Overall Performance (10)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How effective and engaging is the overall performance?</li> <li>- Would you listen to a recorded version of this performance again? Would you recommend it to a friend?</li> </ul>
<p>The points earned in each of the three major categories (Vocal, Visual, and Overall Performance) will be scaled up to represent a pre-determined percentage of the total score as described here:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Vocal Performance points = 50% of total score</li> <li>- Visual Performance points = 35% of total score</li> <li>- Overall Performance points = 15% of total score</li> </ul>		

*Last Updated: October 28, 2018*

Figure 9. Association of South Asian A Cappella preliminary competitions.

— 2018-2019 —

## BID COMPETITIONS

JEENA	11.10.18
ANAHAT	12.01.18
SANGEET SAAGAR	01.19.19
MEHFIL	01.26.19
SAHANA	02.02.19
GATHE RAHO	02.23.19
AWAAZEIN	03.09.19



While competitions are not necessarily signs of South Asian/Western fusion, they are the means by which Dhamakapella and other similar groups express what they consider to be the fusion genre. As I continue to work with this group through the competition season, I will be curious to see how Dhamakapella compares to other groups. They won second place in the 2018 All American Awaaz, and they hope to rank highly again this year.

In addition to competing in the ASA circuit, Dhamakapella will be competing in the International Championship of Collegiate A Cappella (ICCA). There is some anxiety among the group that they will not fair well in this competition. “It can be jarring to hear a song that is in two languages,” said Gavin, explaining why fusion choirs rarely compete with single-genre choirs; “[another South Asian a cappella group] entered last year and made it to second place, but they did not sing any Hindi. Just English.” Dhamakapella will be competing in ICCA with their fusion repertoire.

## **Conclusion**

From their social interactions to their costume, music, and competitive experience, Dhamakapella constantly works as a team to act out the South Asian/Western fusion. The decisions they make are intentional and calculating. The group not only strives to embody South Asian fusion culture well, they intend to do so better than anyone else. These various behaviors, or sign-vehicles, all convey the message of South Asian culture, Western culture, or a mix of both.

Dhamakapella’s love for what they do and their commitment to the concept of fusion will likely manifest itself in more fusion behaviors and signs. I am looking forward to my continued work with this ensemble and hope to see this philosophy of fusion reveal itself further.

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