

RAJESH PRASAD Striking Up the Band

"The smaller instruments, like the triangle, might be a little more tedious to practice," begins Rajesh Prasad, Assistant Principal Percussion at the North Carolina Symphony. "But they are always so much fun to actually play in the orchestra, in the moment."

Yes, professional percussionists practice the triangle — although Rajesh clarifies that after technical skills have been honed in undergraduate and graduate school, most of the work lies in "learning to play well within the ensemble—listening incredibly actively, being really present in the moment, and being able to adjust to the timing."

It was during his undergraduate work at Northwestern University, studying with Jim Ross of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, that Rajesh came to appreciate the smaller instruments — like the triangle, the cymbals, tambourine, and more — and the role that they play within the symphony. "It's the art of collaboration," says Rajesh, who up until that point had planned to become a marimba soloist. "That was an eye-opening time for me as far as going in the direction of playing in a symphony orchestra."

After graduate school at the Manhattan School of Music, a fellowship with the prestigious New World Symphony training orchestra, and a couple years traveling the country playing as an extra musician with the symphony orchestras of Detroit, Kansas City, Phoenix, and his hometown of Columbus, Ohio, Rajesh came to NCS in 2016 as Acting Assistant Principal Percussion. With two years under his belt, this season marks his first in the official role of Assistant Principal Percussion, appointed by Music Director Grant Llewellyn.

His job with the North Carolina Symphony is a busy one and no two days are the same, but it's the variety that he loves. "You get to play something different every week and have a different role in the orchestra every week,"

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he elaborates. "The way you interact with the other members of the orchestra when you're playing the melodic instruments, like the glockenspiel, is so different from the way you interact when you're playing the snare drum or the cymbals. It's all incredibly gratifying."

While variety defines the career of a percussionist, both Rajesh and Principal Percussion Richard (Rick) Motylinksy do have roles they generally adhere to within the orchestra. The decisions as to who plays what on each piece are made by Rick on a program-by-program basis, but most often, Rajesh plays snare drum and Rick plays the melodic mallet instruments.

Of course, it was the small instruments that had played a big part in drawing Rajesh to orchestral music — and that passion has continued. Rajesh points to the tambourine as an example. "Of all the orchestral pieces




Rajesh, a huge fan of The Beatles, had the chance to see Ringo Starr's drumset at the Zildjian Cymbals factory while on a trip to Boston.

that have been written, maybe 20 to 30 have heavy tambourine parts," he says. "But each composer wrote so differently for that instrument, which makes it endlessly interesting."

Among his favorite composers, Rajesh admires Stravinsky for his unique pairings of percussion with other instruments to create innovative sounds, calling him "one of the geniuses of Western classical music in terms of the way he was able to orchestrate." Ravel and Shostakovich are also on his list of composers who wrote best for percussion; this season, he's especially looking forward to performing the snare drum part in Shostakovich's Symphony No. 10. On the other end of the spectrum, Rajesh loves the Symphony's movie-concert events, with films shown on the big screen and the scores performed live.

Besides being fun to play ("We'll be back there rocking out!" he says of *"Star Wars: A New Hope" in Concert* this October), the cinematic concert experiences also expose new audiences to orchestral music — something Rajesh feels strongly about. He's taken part in numerous NCS education activities: In addition to performing on the orchestra's 40-plus education concerts each year, he has given master classes; participated in a side-by-side concert where NCS musicians performed alongside Sampson All-County Band students; and coached percussion sectionals for the Triangle Youth Philharmonic, the resident youth orchestra of NCS.

"Personal interaction with professional orchestral musicians helps younger musicians to cultivate their interest in the arts, and to carry on and perpetuate orchestral music," explains Rajesh. "I think it's important to put faces to the orchestra and to be out in the community."

At NCS, that means communities all over the state, and faces that have become friends for Rajesh over the past two years. "My favorite thing about the North Carolina Symphony is the people — the other musicians I get to play with," he says. "It's the spirit of the musicians to play well under every circumstance. We travel so much and play concerts in such a wide range of settings. The commitment of others to give a fantastic performance, no matter where they are, is always inspiring and always pushes me to play my best." 

This season, Rajesh is most looking forward to playing *"Star Wars: A New Hope" in Concert* on October 5-7 and *Shostakovich's Symphony No. 10* on January 10-12. For details and tickets, visit ncsymphony.org or call 919.733.2750.