Sarah Morelli was first drawn to Indian culture while growing up in South Central Pennsylvania, where many of her friends’ parents were from India. During her first year of college, she took a course on Indian music, and while studying North Indian classical music, something clicked.

“I realized that not only did I want to go to India on a semester abroad, but that the most important aspect would be the opportunity to continue to study music,” said Morelli, associate professor of ethnomusicology at the Lamont School of Music.

Since 1992, Morelli has studied the classical traditions from South India (Carnatic music), and from North India (Hindustani music), as well as North Indian classical kathak dance.

She is a scholar and a performer who has trained extensively with internationally renowned Indian artists including maestro Ustad Ali Akbar Khan and kathak dance master Pandit Chitresh Das. Since 2000, Morelli has performed as a kathak dancer and as a musical accompanist for Pandit Das and the Chitresh Das Dance Company throughout India, Europe and the United States.

“Kathak involves storytelling, rhythmic ability, singing, athleticism and grace. This combination brings me a feeling of completeness—there seems to be no area in which I am not challenged through the practice,” said Morelli.

“Since I’m trained in North Indian classical music as well as kathak, I’ve performed various roles as needed—sometimes singing or reciting dance compositions, sometimes dancing, sometimes playing the manjira (cymbals that are played to keep time) or playing the harmonium or the 25-string sarod,” she said.

But her own path doesn’t focus on performance mastery. “As a teacher, I delight in helping build bridges for others to better understand the richness of the world’s performance traditions.”

According to Morelli, kathak dance has roots in the ancient Hindu performance practice in which troupes of musicians and dancers (Kathakas) traveled from village to village to bring to life stories from the Hindu epics. Throughout the subcontinent’s history, the art form has evolved, absorbing the influences of sociopolitical and economic changes, from the Moghul Era, through British colonialism and Indian independence.

Today, in a global world with rapidly shifting social and cultural dynamics, many kathak dancers are experimenting with various ways to keep the dance form relevant for modern times.
“My teacher, Pandit Chitresh Das, argues that the format of traditional kathak performance—which, like jazz involves composition and improvisation, fixity and fluidity—is itself a vessel for performance that can be fresh, innovative, and pertinent,” she said.

Her forthcoming book, *Tales of a Modern Guru: Pandit Chitresh Das and Indian Classical Dance in Diaspora* (University of Illinois Press), is an ethnographic account of Pandit Das’s dance company and school, his contributions to kathak dance, and processes of culture-change in artistic diasporas.

“Pandit Das grew up in Calcutta and came to the United States in his twenties. Over the last 40-plus years, he’s travelled the world as a performer and a teacher of kathak. My book project follows his life’s trajectory,” she said.

Morelli has a PhD in ethnomusicology from Harvard University. She’s been with the University of Denver since 2006 and teaches courses on music cultures from around the world and leads a North Indian classical performance ensemble.

“No matter what the students’ musical background, I relish the moments when I see things ‘click’ for them—perhaps when someone finally manages a difficult footwork pattern in my ensemble or when a student is able to connect concepts and musical materials in a manner that suddenly makes sense in a new way,” she said.

“I also love hearing from students after they leave DU and learning of the various ways their studies and experiences here have shaped their trajectories.”