

BEGINNER'S GUIDE

RAVI SHANKAR

One of the world's most famous Indians is still at the top of his field after a lifetime of *sitar* magic.

By Robert Maycock

Bestridding the span of high and popular culture, Ravi Shankar makes anybody's list of the five most famous living Indians. It would be invidious to assign a top spot from a pool that might also contain Asha Bhosle, Lata Mangeshkar, Amitabh Bachchan, and the technically non-Indian but totally considerable Sonia Gandhi... let's just say it's unprecedented for a classical musician from any culture to be so universally familiar. For nearly half a century he has been the ambassador of a form of music previously thought outside India to be understandable only with intense study. However did he get us all loving our *ragas* and *talas*?

In Indian classical music the arts of performing and creating are impossible to separate. Those who drive the music's evolution do it before our ears. Shankar's restless, innovating spirit lies behind many of the changes during the second half of the 20th century. His own developments of his chosen instrument, the *sitar*, fed on and then magnified the virtuosity of his playing, towards a quick-fire style that, at his peak, he embodied better than anybody.

In his performances with the great *tabla* player Alla Rakha, he inspired the current popularity of 'question-answer' encounters: the duets, or often duels, towards the end of a raga performance in which one player challenges another at high speed to imitate a

sequence of phrases, systematically halving in length until they come down to one precisely placed note each. He pioneered the nowadays widespread use of South Indian percussion as well as North, the *mridangam* (barrel drum) and *ghatam* (clay pot) alongside the *tabla*, a practice until then thought off limits by purists. Then there was the way he met a challenge of his time, posed by the length of record sides and the slots available on All-India Radio: the perfecting of a miniature raga elaboration, which allows all the essential stages to occur in the space of a few minutes.

In his recordings the miniatures are over-represented, but they wouldn't have been so good without a proper grounding and a similar flair in the traditional format, gradually unfolding over an hour and more. Subjective memory suggests that in the early stages of a raga performance, the free-flowing *alap*, his strengths have been more in quirky, unpredictable turns of phrase than in expansive serenity. But once the pulse quickens, a raging torrent of imagination gets going and regularly takes the music to sustained heights of structured excitement beyond the reach of ordinary mortals.

He learned the art, in the traditional way, from one of the great gurus, Allauddin Khan, gradually achieving independent professional respect and public acclaim around the subcontinent. But the deep,

formative influences on his character had already occurred. Born in 1920, ten years later he was touring the world with his brother Uday's dance company.

The experience taught him to think on his feet, literally, and instilled in him the infinite possibilities for making music interact with other art forms. It also brought out his potential for living the life of an unstable workaholic: his own autobiographies, particularly the second (*Raga Mala*, edited by George Harrison), are as candid about his human failings as his musical achievements. Typically, even his chaotic catalogue of relationships produced two daughters of uncommon musical talent: Norah Jones and Anoushka Shankar.

From the 50s he was providing music for a unique range of forms and genres, especially film, dance and theatre. With hindsight these vivid formative years gave him the perfect preparation when the rest of the world adopted him as an Indian icon. He wasn't the first, or the only, musician to tour in the West and awaken the public's interest. But he was the one who was open to collaboration.

He tried duets with the violinist Yehudi Menuhin and the flautist Jean-Pierre Rampal. In the US he played with jazz musicians and in Paris he met the young Philip Glass, who transcribed a film score for him and learned tricks of rhythm that changed not only his but much of the West's way of composing classical music.

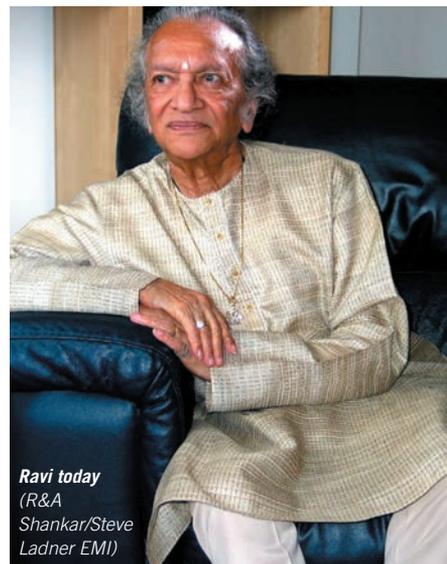
He composed sitar concertos conducted by André Previn and Zubin Méhta, a theatre piece for a Birmingham opera company, and the material for a spectacular Kremlin concert with choirs, dancers, Russian folk musicians and an orchestra. And then there was pop. Shankar appeared at the famous American festivals of the 60s, performing in classical style but sometimes inspired to play out of his skin – though not out of his



A young Ravi Shankar



The uncommonly talented Anoushka Shankar



Ravi today (R&A Shankar/Steve Ladner EMI)

Ravi socks it to them (Carolyn Jones)



head: he was disgusted by the drug culture of Woodstock. He had become a cult idol, and then a mass one when George Harrison took a few lessons from him. However little this did for the Beatle's sitar playing, it brought about a lifelong friendship and plenty of practical work together, when Harrison made exploratory cross-cultural arrangements and produced recordings that Shankar took part in.

In recent years he has used his performances to introduce and advance the career of his sitarist heir Anoushka, in the time-honoured way of India's musical dynasties. Last August he made his debut at the Proms in London, when Anoushka played one of Ravi's concertos and father and daughter shared a second half of evening ragas. Still more firsts to come, you can be sure.

BEST ALBUMS

Live: Ravi Shankar at the Monterey International Pop Festival (Angel, 1967)



Has to be heard to be believed. Announcing himself hesitantly, almost nervously, in under an hour he takes his instrument and a vast, evidently rapt audience to astonishing

levels of intensity, focus and pace. A unique encounter with the creative fires at their fiercest.

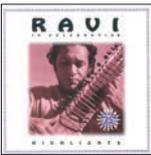
Ravi Shankar and Ali Akbar Khan (Apple/EMI, 1972)



Long-famous example of two giants of North Indian music striking sparks off each other in powerful, exhilarating duets, recored live, now issued in a double CD album. Hugely influential in developing the fashion for *jugalbandi*, or shared and competitive improvisations between top-class musicians.

BEST COMPILATION

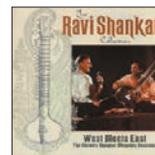
In Celebration (Angel/EMI Classics, 1996)



Four CDs range through Shankar's prodigal diversity of accomplishments, wisely selected by George Harrison, you'll find a bit of almost everything, from straight classical to concerto extracts, and from international experiments including the Kremlin concert to the bizarre pop arrangement, 'I Am Missing You'.

BEST AVOIDED

West Meets East (EMI, 1966)



OK, the session with Yehudi Menuhin was one of Shankar's most famous ventures, and maybe it invented fusion. But when did you last listen?

Distinctly clunky now, with the violinist veering from excessive respect to Romanian-style twiddles and the sitarist hemmed in – it's done its job, and we need to move on.

LIKE RAVI SHANKAR? THEN TRY...

Purbayan Chatterjee & Shashank Rasayana (Sense World Music, 2005)

One of India's brightest sitar exponents of the new generation, Purbayan Chatterjee delivers not only his own formidable talents but a sparkling duet session with flute. There's percussion from both Hindustani and Carnatic traditions too, a north-south mix in the Ravi Shankar spirit. |

