

Bonding over melody: West tunes in to Indian ragas



INDIAN TRADITIONAL MUSIC IS THE NEW GLOBAL MELODY MANTRA SINCE A.R. RAHMAN'S JAI HO (GLORY BE).

By Madhusree Chatterjee

AS THE WORLD joyously hums "Jai Ho", the Oscar winning song scored by composer A.R. Rahman, the two words meaning 'glory be' sum up a golden moment for Indian music. The country's 1,000-year-old musical legacy has just acquired a global outlook and a new face.

The international spotlight is on Indian music like never before, especially fusion which combines traditional classical ragas and ethnic folk beats with sounds from the West. The country's first ever Oscar for a song has come at the same time as a Grammy for India's Ustad Zakir Hussain, famous for making magic with the tabla, a percussion instrument.

"The world is discovering our music all over again. We have

so much to give," said Hussain, who collaborated with Western musicians on the Grammy winning "Global Drum Project".

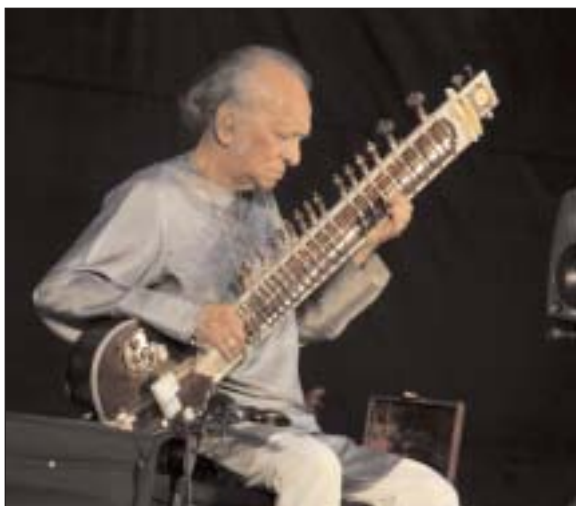
Vocalist Lakshmi Shankar, who bagged a Grammy nomination this year and specialises in Hindustani classical music that has roots in the country's northern half, describes this period as "the second renaissance of Indian music. I find in the west that everyone is craving for our music; they want to hear more of it".

Indian music, however, has been making forays past geographical boundaries for almost seven decades, though not as dramatically as now.

Many historians concur that Indian music first went abroad in 1930 with dancer-musician Uday Shankar - whose company, headquartered in Paris, toured Europe, North America and Southeast Asia for eight years.

The ensemble boasted of some of the biggest names in the history of Indian classical music like Baba Allauddin Khan, a legendary player of the string instrument 'sarod'; vocalist and instrumentalist Vishnu Das Shirali; and composer Timir Baran.

In 1955, famous conductor and violinist Yehudi Menuhin presented to the west "Music of India: Morning and Evening Raga", the first long-playing record of Indian classical music. The album featured Ustad Ali Akbar Khan on 'sarod', Pandit Chatur Lal on the 'tabla' and Shirish Gor on the string instrument tam-



MUSICIANS LIKE PANDIT RAVI SHANKAR AND ZAKIR HUSAIN HAVE TAKEN CLASSICAL INDIAN MUSIC TO THE WEST.

bura. In a foreword, Menuhin introduced each musical instrument and the sounds that it created for the western ear.

When American composer La Monte Young first heard the drone of the 'tambura' on the radio that was broadcasting the concerto in 1957, he drove to the nearest store to purchase the LP. Young eventually studied Indian music for 26 years with vocalist Pandit Pran Nath.

Menuhin also famously partnered Ravi Shankar, the Indian legend known for his mastery over the string instrument 'sitar', for the album "West Meets East" in the 1960s.

Mickey Hart, drummer of the popular American band The Grateful Dead, found it hard to believe that Chatur Lal was playing the 'tabla' with bare hands! Hart, one of the best percussionists that western contemporary music has ever had, felt: "Indian rhythm was very Arabic, very Moorish with intense multi-layered detail."

Musician-author Peter Lavezzoli, a professional drummer and musician based in Miami and St. Louis who spends his winters in India listening to and writing about Indian classical music, says developments in technology have made it possible for Indian music to travel west.

In his new book, "Bhairavi: The Global Impact of Indian Music", Lavezzoli says before the invention of the long playing record, Indian classical recordings were limited to three-minute 78 rpm discs, manufactured solely for the Indian market.

Technology also made it possible for sarod maestro Ali Akbar Khan to appear on television in the US - the first Indian classical musician to do so.

If 1955 was the year when the seed for Indian classical music was planted in the west, then 1967 was a watershed when the search for an alternative worldview led musicians to Asia, especially India, to explore its spiritual and aesthetic traditions.

Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, an Indian seer who spread the ancient science of transcendental meditation in Europe and

America, captured the imagination of the Beatles - one of the greatest British pop-rock bands that ever existed.

The quartet from Liverpool spent nearly six weeks at the seer's retreat in Rishikesh and composed more than 30 songs there. It also saw the beginning of a lifelong association between George Harrison, one of the Beatles, and Ravi.

The spread of Indian religion like the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Buddhism and the Chinmaya cult also helped open the doors for Indian music in the west.

Lavezzoli reminisces in his book about the time Ravi Shankar and late tabla maestro Ustad Alla Rakha performed at the Monterey Pop Festival in California in 1967.

"The weekend's events were filmed...capturing several of rock's legendary figures in their prime - Jimi Hendrix, the WHO's, Otis Redding and Janis Joplin. ... almost all the musicians were there in the audience for Ravi Shankar's set; most of them never having seen him before...And the response of the audience was ecstatic, further catapulting Shankar to stardom."

In 1994, Indian musician Pandit Vishwa Mohan Bhatt, who invented the string instrument 'mohan veena', won a Grammy along with Ry Cooder for the album "A Meeting By The River".

The crowning glory has been recognition for the country's film music industry - be it for a composer like A.R. Rahman or a sound designer like Resool Pookutty, both of whom hail from southern India and brought home Oscars for the film "Slumdog Millionaire", made by British director Danny Boyle.

As Vishwa Mohan Bhatt sums it up: "If the 1970s were about Beatlemania and Ravi Shankar, 2009 is about Indian musicians moving westward for the next musical wave.

"The west is overawed by our ragas and discipline. They are overwhelmed by the emotions in our music; that is what gets the attention of the world."

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