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MUSIC

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Barely 17, sitarist Anoushka Shankar conquers music's toughest critics

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I met Anoushka Shankar during her visit to New York. In her hotel room, clad in a black tanktop and pants, she could have been any carefree teenager all set to spend an afternoon at the mall. But see her on the stage of Carnegie Hall in her Indian robes, with the sitar in her hands--and she is transformed. As her hands pluck the strings of her instrument, she not only keeps up with her father but creates beautiful music of her own.

Though still a developing artist, the media has embraced her enthusiastically for her obvious potential: BBC Music Magazine wrote, "Anoushka looks set to be as important a pioneer as her father," while The Telegraph in London noted, "The one person who outshone Ravi Shankar when the 75-year-old sitar maestro performed at the packed Barbican Hall in London was his 14-year-old daughter, Anoushka." Vivacious and bubbly, Anoushka has stage presence and performs with confidence. Just a few months back, she signed an exclusive contract to

record for her father's current label, Angel/EMI Classics, and released her first album, "Anoushka."

The world of classical Indian music is very much a father-and-son enterprise, with each successive generation taking up the musical instrument of their forefathers. Enter Anoushka, one of the few females to walk in the footsteps of a famous musician father. The daughter of legendary sitar maestro Pundit Ravi Shankar, she is proof that fathers and daughters can have equally meaningful musical collaborations. Anoushka, now 17, has been performing all over the world with her father since she turned 13. She's played at Carnegie Hall and performed solo under Zubin Mehta's conducting of the London Symphony Orchestra. Recently the British Parliament presented her with a House of Commons Shield in recognition of her artistry and musicianship, the youngest and the only female to receive this honor.

Anoushka was born in London to Ravi Shankar and his second wife, Sukanya, an accomplished Carnatic singer. By the time she was three or four, Anoushka was singing with her mother. When she was nine, her father crafted a baby sitar and taught her to play. At eleven, the family moved to California. She grew up mostly in the West but spent at least three months in India every year. She openly admits she didn't have any great passion for the sitar as she was growing up: "When I first started learning, I didn't like it at all. It was my mother's idea that I play, and I slowly began to like it more and more. My father told me I could decide to go for it more seriously or stop it."

Is it difficult being her father's daughter? Says Anoushka, "As a sitarist, I'm getting a hundred times more attention from the media than I would have if I was not his daughter. All I have to do is prove myself." She smiles and adds, "But the proving myself part is where the difficulty about being his daughter comes in. I think people's expectations are a lot higher since I am his daughter." Her typical day revolves around school, homework and friends and sitar practice when she is in California. When she is touring, she has to do her studies by correspondence, and life becomes a succession of plane rides and hotel rooms. From a base in India, Ravi Shankar and she tour all over Asia. In the summer, they reside in London, and tour Europe. In the fall and spring they perform in different US cities.

Anoushka is also an accomplished pianist, and once considered it as a career. She also loves writing and often contributes articles for her school paper on topics that matter to her, like child abuse. If she decides not to follow her musical career, Anoushka sees herself going to college and perhaps studying psychology and counseling abused children.

Life for Anoushka is a balancing act between East and West. Both Ravi Shankar and Sukanya are brahmins, and Hindu rituals play an important part in their lives. They celebrate every Hindu festival, from Krishna Jayanti to Durga Puja. Their beautiful house in California has huge statues of Lakshmi, Ganesha and Saraswati, and a large Om outside the door. Says Anoushka: "All my friends say our house smells so good--because you walk in, the first thing you smell is Indian food. Then you go a little further, and you smell the incense in the puja room!" According to Sukanya, Anoushka has read the

Mahabharata in English several times and knows every character in it. She says, "In India, she's Indian. At home, she's Indian, but when she goes to school, she's American. As modern as she may be, she has all the traditional values in her mind."

Even while living in California's "Valley Girl" culture of spoiled, shopping-obsessed teenage girls who gave the English language "fer shure" and "duh," Anoushka maintains her Hindu roots. She goes to public school, but, she says, "It is an experimental academy where students have a more powerful voice than in most schools. It's not one of those schools where blonds rule the world--it's not at all like that." She chants Sanskrit slokas and attends yoga classes at a local gym. Says Anoushka: "I don't think Hinduism should be tied to India, because it's a religion and India is a country. It's very easy to be Hindu and be outside India. Religion is a very personal thing, and anyone can hold any philosophy inside of them."

Anoushka loves her sitar because it has brought her father and her very close. There is a vast gap in their ages--the maestro, at 78, is old enough to be her grandfather--but their music ensures intense closeness. They also love watching old movies together, especially Alfred Hitchcock mysteries. What most people don't know is that Ravi has a droll sense of humor, and the laughter really escalates when good friend and ex-Beatle George Harrison is around. Anoushka jokes: "My father says people call him a pundit because he's always punning so much!"

Her father says, "Anoushka has beautifully performed all the

pieces that I specially composed for her. She has all the signs--the lakshana--that she is the ideal person to absorb what I can give and to develop it further, so I enjoy it immensely. Just like her personality, she can completely switch over between Indian and Western music. Not everybody can do that, unless you are blessed by God and have that special gift."

Where does she see herself ten years from now? "I don't have a clue," she says. "I want to continue with the sitar and be a performing artist." She also sees herself teaching--she already has one student, a 15-year-old girl. "By teaching her, I end up noticing so many things about my own playing. So I'm learning too--by teaching."