Rhythmic Gymnasts
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MUSIC

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Indian drum maestros band together in celebration of their art

Only in indian classical music have percussionists so successfully created a place for themselves as solo artists. While in the West, Alla Rakha and Zakir Hussain first brought the tabla center stage, now new fast fingers and pounding palms have secured the spotlight. And the "other Indian drum," the carnatic mrdangam, is also being honored.

Bikram Ghosh is the latest welcome addition to the clique of solo percussion artists. His 1997 recording, Talking Tabla, has been re-released in a two-CD set called The Language of Rhythm, (Music of the World, us$26.95). In addition to Bikram's best, the set includes the solo CD of mrdangam maestro Trichy Sankaran [see A Master's in Rhythm, May, 1997], as well as a 26-page booklet introducing the history, construction and theories of performance of both drums.

Language is a valuable and rare presentation of the rhythmical systems of India's North and South. While the text details the sophistication of the drums and Indian tala, musical time, these discs were never meant to be academic. The greatest lessons are taught by sound example. Ghosh and Sankaran

display impressive dexterity and astute musicianship. But still, Ghosh remains humble. In a spare moment during an April US tour with Ravi Shankar, he told Hinduism Today, "It is the blessings of the gurus which gives you success. Without their guidance, I would not have been able to do anything."

Ghosh is known for his years of work with Ravi Shankar. Lately, he has added tasteful punch to recordings of santoorist Tarun Bhattacharya. Returning the favor on Talking Tabla, Bhattacharya joins Ghosh on one track. We would have enjoyed more such duets, but the character and intent of this CD set is different. A variety of styles and instrumentations are presented in order to demonstrate, still only partially, the wide dynamic range of the drummers and music.

Ghosh says of his art, "When we sit with our instrument, we take off our shoes. We pray, touch the feet of the guru and then begin playing. It is a form of prayer."

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