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Master of the Flute

Lester, Meera "I feel that sound is God Nadabrahma," says world renowned flutist Gurbachan Singh Sachdev, speaking of the music he creates on the Bansuri, a bamboo flute with seven finger holes. He believes that not only does the Indian classical music he plays have the power to open the heart chakra, it has the power to invoke the manifestation of God in a subtle personal form such as the Goddess Saraswati through the Saraswati Raga and Durgadevi through the Hindola Raga. According to Sachdev, who believes that the universe was created out of God's nada/shabda/sound, "this music is every thing." It is, for him, a spiritual sadhana.

Gurbachan Singh Sachdev was born into a nonmusician household of Punjabi Hindus 54 years ago. His mother's family were Hindus and his father's family were Sikhs. Gurbachan means "words of truth" and Sachdev means "true God."

As a young boy in India, he used to travel to Simla with his family in the summer. There he would hear the flute music of shepherds. The sound touched him deeply, and he felt the first stirrings of what would become for him an all-encompassing love for music.

A Challenging Beginning

He may have received his penchant for music from his mother, who loved classical Indian music and from her early childhood desired to be a musician. According to Sachdev, she nurtured his fondness for music. "She sang devotional songs and played the harmonium, but being a woman in India she couldn't pursue music.

Every move I made toward the music, she was there, encouraging me. It is all due to her."

While his mother supported his desire to become a musician, his father objected vehemently. For Sachdev, the conflict cut to the core of his being. He knew his father did not understand how deeply the music touched him.

At age 14 at school in Lucknow, Sachdev studied everything but music. His family did not allow him to register for the music class. So he would often skip his scheduled class and sit and listen outside the music room. After a few months, the music teacher, Om Prakash Tripathy, noticed him, came outside, and asked him if he'd like to play the flute. Sachdev recalls, "That year math became an optional subject, so I quit math and took music. My music teacher told me to go and buy a flute, which I did for five cents."

Sachdev's says his father was not happy. He'd decided that his son should become a doctor. Over the next few years, Sachdev's mother tried without success to change her husband's mind. To placate his father, he made an attempt at medical school, but soon abandoned it for music. He received a B.A. from Gandhi Memorial National College in Ambala Cant, and after graduation moved to Delhi to be with his parents.

The Music

All along, music was transforming his heart and consciousness. He harbored a burning desire to find a guru, one with whom he felt a deep connection. After about six years of searching, he met Vijay Raghav Rao. He studied with Rao for 12 years, living with him for three. During that time, they would rise at 2.00 AM to practice music. When asked if they meditated together or if the music was the puja, prayer, and sadhana, Sachdev replied, "The music was everything."

Sachdev's art has its origins in simple devotional songs set to classical Indian music that stretches back over 2,000 years. Says Sachdev, "My music is Hindu music, because this music was taught in the temples. We always did this music in

praise of God, but when we go beyond that then there are no boundaries left."

With Rao, Sachdev journeyed to Bombay where he found work in the movie industry playing sound tracks and movie songs to support himself. During that time, he also practiced his flute eight to ten hours each day. Movie music, however, presented a problem. It was not purely Indian, not purely Western; it was fusion. The flutes were tuned more or less to Western scales. Sachdev struggled with it and, after five or six years, quit and left for Delhi, then Chandigarh. He decided that he would never again play anything but classical music.

In 1968 at the age of 32, he married. His wife Saroj, having studied vocal music and kathak dance, supported his life of music. Eventually, all his family members accepted his chosen career path, even his father.

Sachdev notes that his music is exactly the same as that performed in temples by yogis and sages thousands of years ago. Then, as now, time of day dictated the type of ragas played. Long ago, devotees would retire at 8:00 PM and awaken at 2:00 AM for meditation. After resting their bodies early, they could take advantage of the high energy hours from the middle of the night until noon and play those appropriate ragas which move in upper and middle octaves. When the body began to lose energy in the afternoon and evening, the ragas they played would reflect that, moving calmly in the lower octaves.

For all his worldly fame and stature, Sachdev is a man of simplicity. His home is beautiful, but Spartan; his dress is typically Indian (pajamas and kurtan with a woolen shawl); and his demeanor is honest, forthright and open. A deeply spiritual man committed to his music like religion, Sachdev is dedicated to spanning the cultural differences between the East and the West.

On religion, Sachdev says, "I am religious, for sure, but I think spirituality goes beyond [religion]. I feel that every human being is a spiritual person. Some have awakened that aspect of spirituality within themselves. Religion helps that to awaken. The rituals are a reminder. I have a life in the West, but I still don't have a Western life, because I live like I would in India—simply."

Sachdev first came to the West in 1970 at the invitation of Ali Akbar College in Marin. He felt right at home in California. "People accepted me immediately," he recalls. "They didn't want to know if I am from a family of musicians or not. That's very common in India. If you are from a musician family, they'll accept you right away. If you are not, you'll have a very rough time. And I was one of the latter. I saw that I could achieve here what I could not in India."

While Sachdev felt few, if any, cultural adjustment pains, he did discover that the Western method of teaching music to groups of students, rather than one-on-one, was not to his liking.

When asked how he teaches his music, Sachdev points to his heart and his ear. "I play and they play back. They have to listen to it. I sing and they have to play back. This is the way I was taught in India-master to student. You don't have to read notes. With this music, you'll never find one reading notes."

With regard to Western and Indian mixtures of music, Sachdev says he won't do it. "I know that the music which is meant for spirituality would suffer a lot." He says when you start blending the two forms of music, you get away from the purity and beauty of both. Fusion may be more commercial but its focus is different. It is no longer an invocation to meditation. It becomes music to please other people, not God.

"The older I get, the more satisfaction this music gives me. It's because it takes me deeper and deeper and that's where I want to be." Asked if he'd experienced samadhi while playing this devotional music, Sachdev answered, "Yes. While playing, I have become not there. I feel the flute is shrinking, becoming smaller and smaller until it's not there. I'm on the stage...I am, and I also am not. I'm just gone. Those moments make life worth living and the music worth doing."

The Family

Sachdev, his wife and son live a modest life. Yet, he has had to and must continue to wrestle with, as have other Hindu parents, the issue of Western cultural

pressures upon his child.

"Hindu parents bring the old traditions to the West and practice them because they want to foster them in their children. But the children, wanting to be accepted in Western society are diluting the traditions - If they don't dilute, they are not accepted. My own child is 18, and if I want him to get up in the morning to do puja at four o'clock, I think he will be hesitant to do that. He doesn't see other children doing that here. He wants acceptance from his parents, but he's one of them [American kids]. If they go to rock music concerts, he wants to go. If they want to talk about certain TV shows that he doesn't know about, he's alienated from them. So it's very difficult for us to expect that our children will have those real, deeper values. Who doesn't want acceptance?"

Sachdev suggests that cultural activities in which families can participate, like satsang, strengthen the cultural network. "If parents participate in cultural events, their children will come and watch. It's a way to make the traditional cultural impressions stronger."

Whether our boundaries are cultural or otherwise, music has the power to transcend them. Music speaks the language of the soul. It is an aspect of Nada Brahma. For a few special souls, like G.S. Sachdev, it becomes the predominant theme of their life. "We all have different gifts," says Sachdev. "My music is God's gift."

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