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Bowing Into Infinity

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Light-Fast L. Shankar Takes Karnatic Violin Past the Sound Barrier

On a Los Angeles stage, South Indian violinist L. Shankar blurs his fingers and bow across a passage of rainbow beauty and smokey speed. The aesthetic sound barrier shatters. The audience is riveted. It feels like Shankar is playing right on their central nervous system. Right in the dendrites of the spinal cord. Shankar's youthful face is yogically serene in the spotlights as he sustains what is known in karnatic (South Indian) music technique as 6th speed, sixteen notes per second. Hummingbird speed. A run arches up in sonic slides to a note near the 20,000 megahertz limit of human hearing. Applause erupts.

"I used to give two-hour concerts in America and it does limit what you can do." Shankar tells HINDUISM TODAY while explaining concerts in India are customarily 5 hours long. "Westerners used to applaud the fast ragas more frequently than a slower improvisation, but through the years they have understood a lot more about slow ragas."

Shankar is 41 years old, the youngest brother from a Madras clan of brahmins who are super-violinists. His home for nearly two decades now, California. Karnatic in California? Who's listening? Just about everybody. Outside a string of his own traditional and pop/jazz albums, Shankar has welded karnatic stylings into music by Phil Collins, Sting and Bruce Springsteen, into movie scores and his own symphony. Pancha Nadai Pallavi - Shankar's talam-bending (time cycles of 9 3/4, 6 3/4) album - with his traditional ensemble was on the Billboard top ten world music charts for three months - the first time a traditional Indian record ever hit those charts. On Shankar's flip side is his Indianized pop group. The Epidemics.

Only one other person has been as contributive in taking karnatic modes to foreign musical shores: Shankar's own older brother, L. Subramaniam to be profiled later).

Ancient meditation and mantra practices punctuate Shankar and his British wife - and fellow performer - Caroline's day. "It helps us to get in the right frame of mind when we play our music," he notes. "The music we do uses ragas as meditation on various deities so the effect is like reading slokas or reciting mantras." Yet, later at practice, riding on Shankar's shoulder is an acrylic and wood double violin - with five strings, not four, per neck. The necks can be played individually - with the other neck's strings droning sympathetically - or in tandem. Shiny black body with clear plastic resonating chambers and rose wood necks, the violin looks Star Trekish. It sounds thunderous to spectral, with an orchestral range when both necks are bowed.

As much as his double violin is experimental, Shankar himself was bred as an experimenter in South Indian music. His musical roots grew from the DNA and open mind of his father V. Lakshminarayan, a virtuoso violinist who preached the heretical doctrine that his sons should absorb influences from the northern music school as well as the southern school. "I was really encouraged from the beginning to play North Indian music, Western music, pop, everything. And you know the north and south traditions in India, they don't even mingle," notes Shankar. "It is good to listen to different styles - there is not one music that is superior to another - just different ways of expressing the beauty of our culture."

Born in 1950, Shankar was studying singing by the age of 2. His mother was an admired singer and performer on vina. His three sisters were all studying vocal music. Initiation into the violin came at age five. Two years later he made his public debut in Madras. The family was living in Sri Lanka where Lakshminarayan taught music at Jaffna College for 8 years.

Alongside his violin fingering and bowing technique, Shankar daily pummeled the mridangam drum. "My father really insisted besides learning your melodic instrument, you also learn percussion." In 1958 the family returned to Madras, driven from Sri Lanka by anti-Indian riots. That same year Shankar and his two elder brothers created the Violin Trio that rose to considerable prominence in India.

Much of the sons' early success is attributed to constant discipline and a rigorous schedule. "Father used to get up around 4:00 AM and wake us up," fondly says Shankar. He'd practiced with us for an hour or more. We went to school at 7:30 but when we returned at 1:30 father was waiting for us with another lesson. After dinner we'd all get together and have a kind of jam session." Slowly, out of this tight discipline and fluid free-form playing emerged Shankar's genius for improvising exquisitely beautiful and muscular lines over the skeleton of a raga.

But dogmatic musicians - forgetting how the violin was a radical introduction to karnatic music 200 years ago by the brother of the innovative composer Muthuswami Dikshitar - condemned the new directions Lakshminarayan's sons were bowing into. Much to the critics consternation, their hybrid music and wizardry on the strings was immensely popular in India, and exploded around the world after Shankar came to America in 1969.

Shankar says he was financially successful as a musician by age 19, "but my father wanted me to go to the West to learn more. My parents wanted to make sure I had another profession to fall back on." By the mid-70's he had earned a PhD in ethnomusicology from Wesleyan University but had very little time to teach. He met John McLaughlin, a British superstar guitarist, who at the time was deeply immersed in Indian culture, was a devotee of meditation master Sri Chinmoy and led a guitar, violin, synthesizer, base-and-drum ensemble called Mahavishnu Orchestra that shaped music history in the early 70's.

McLaughlin and Shankar formed Turyanandha Sangeeth, McLaughlin using a custom-made acoustic guitar with scalloped frets (like a vina, though he uses guitar-playing technique) and a set of 13 sympathetic strings. The early duet evolved into the quartet Shakti, featuring North Indian tabla percussion by Zakir Hussain and South Indian mridangam and ghatam (clay pot) drumming by T. Vinayakram.

Together and individually, McLaughlin and Shankar composed high velocity and Indianly intricate music that smokes with new karnatic energy. The rapid-fire percussion on the South Indian clay pot adds a bell-like pulse that is mesmerizing. Three world music albums - Shakti, Handful of Beauty and Natural Elements came out of the quartets volcanic creativity during the mid-70's. These became the standard to gauge the playing and composing abilities of any world musician following in Shakti's expansive wake. According to Lee Underwood, Downbeat

music magazine critic, "All three are masterpieces, of which the deeply moving and technically astonishing Handful of Beauty will stand tall in recorded history for decades to come."

Since Shakti, Shankar has benefitted from the growing worldwide interest in ethnic music. As a leader, he focuses on two groups. The Epidemics is a pop/rock group with Hindu musical modes that he formed in 1980. Three infectious albums and two music videos have been produced out of this group.

His Indian classical group features at any one time Ustad All Rakha, Zakir Hussain, V. Ramabadrán, U.K. Sivaraman, T. Sankaran, T.H. Vinayakram (from the original Shakti), Caroline and others. Their approach is so intense it seems they are reinventing Karnatic music and according to Shankar, they are. It is more than rapid scale work and dazzling solos; there is a profound bhava (intense devotion) for Indian culture that transcends the pyrotechnics. Listening to the prolonged meditative chanting on their album Soul Searcher you feel like the musical equivalent of a Vedic yagna is being performed. This album is dedicated to the Kanchi Mutt Shankarachariya.

Two hundred years from now L. Shankar may be idolized as the new Muthuswami Dikshitar. "I hope I am serving my people well by introducing our beautiful culture to new listeners. I am a karnatic musician, but I really believe in world music. Even the violin is relatively new to Indian music, but when we are open to what we don't know we can make the music go farther."

HT: What makes music spiritual?

LS: Any form of music can be spiritual and can have a meditative aspect for people. For music, the concentration involved in creating it is like in painting or sculpting; you can attain the same thing as in meditation. Concentration trains the mind to meditate on one thing at a time. Music can give a spiritual attitude which over the long run can help you to understand life better. When we perform or record our music, it reflects our lives and we understand ourselves better each time.

HT: Is your band The Epidemics spiritual?

LS: Actually, in The Epidemics we have a lot of Indian elements and we have a lot of meditating aspects to be used in the same way as our Indian music. We use a raga alap which is a slow introduction in Indian music to our songs. I can find spirituality in Indian music, the Epidemics and other things we do. When you include lyrics you can say meaningful things, like with The Epidemics we write about reincarnation, astral projection and other things we believe in.

HT: You said you have a meditative approach to your concerts.

LS: Meditative energy is very important. Everybody has it but people may not be aware of it. At our concerts, the music prepares people to become conscious of it and absorb the energy they feel. This meditative energy passes through them. We will use certain microtones in a raga and hold them which creates a vibration corresponding to the energy within drone accompaniment, no drumming. And in the free improvisations, the silence between tones is as important as the melody your playing. I love drums too but they have their place. In a concert we play these long, slow ballads that people really respond to because they're like Vedic chants.

HT: How has your violin style evolved from your South Indian roots?

LS: My style is basically my father's style which is really a vocal style of music. I should explain that in South Indian music there is no instrumental music at all. Everything is based on songs which you adapt to instrumental music. When I started playing violin the lines I practiced were vocal lines I had learned. Also, the double violin gives me more expressive capabilities and the new ragas and talas I've written have taken Indian music further. We are creating new rhythmic cycles no one has done.

HT: Tell me about the spiritual practices you do?

LS: My yoga practice is basically a lot of mantras everyday and there are certain ways of doing them with rituals four times a day. I also meditate regularly and read scriptures. I have many books in Sanskrit that I read if I haven't memorized them. I regularly recite slokas for Shiva, Saraswati And Ganesh. Also for the different planets, fire, air, water, etc.

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