



Wake up and smell the curry

BY CH LOH

DEEPAK RAM'S AROMATIC JAZZ EXPLORATIONS LEAD TO THE TOWER OF BABEL

THE FUSION OF jazz and Indian music is nothing new but Deepak Ram's jazz explorations bring something new to the field — after years of cross-breeding and forced marriages, it is the South African musician who manages to capture the spirit of jazz as spoken through his mother tongue the Indian bamboo flute or bansuri, as an assimilation of a new language with the traditional medium rather than a meeting of cultures.

Perhaps it's a result of Ram's expatriate upbringing as an Indian minority in a distant land, or his worldly outlook and experience, that has given him the freedom to express the two forms so naturally. Or perhaps it's just in the blood, or in getting the right blend to the masala.



What was it like growing up in South Africa, and how did you become interested in the bansuri?

I grew up in the Apartheid Era, and in the hierarchy of racism, as a person of Indian descent I was subject to all the restrictions placed on education, movement et cetera...

My parents tried to protect me from this harsh reality. Indians were only allowed to live in designated areas, and this galvanized aspects of Indian culture, music, philosophy, language. I grew up speaking a dialect of Hindi known as Bhojpuri and was exposed to all genres of Indian music.

[But] apart from performing at Indian community functions [gratis] there were not many opportunities, especially during Apartheid.

When I first heard Pandit Ravi Shankar's album *Portrait of Genius* I was 'born again'. It was really the album *Call of The Valley* by Pandit Hariprasad Chaurasia that introduced me to the bansuri, which I thought was the most beautiful sound I had ever heard. As destiny would have it, I became a student of Pandit Hariprasad six years later.

Has life in South Africa influenced your music in any way?

I am always asked this question! Music for me comes from an internal inspiration and is not influenced by geography. However I have great respect and admiration for the musicality of African people.

Returning to India as a performer, are you ever considered an 'outsider'?

Indian audiences have been very generous in their support for me and my work, and since I do speak the language and 'look the part' they do not consider me an outsider.

[Interestingly] European and American students of Indian music sometimes have more opportunities in India — Indians are fascinated with people of other cultures playing Indian music.

How easy or difficult is it to make a name these days in Indian classical music, especially in the shadow of the great master Pandit Hariprasad?

Music is a difficult path, especially professionally. But even if I am considered to be in the shadow of my master, Pandit Hariprasad, I consider myself blessed to study with him and to be in his presence. I am working on my own voice and hope to extend the scope of the bansuri, or at least I am going to try.

You have also recorded a wonderful series of jazz records. How did that come about?

I heard lots of jazz growing up, and both my brothers, Rabin and Vivek Ram, exposed me to lots of Coltrane, Dave McLaughlin and many other great artists. [The music I listen to] also includes koto and shakuhachi music. It is only recently that I have begun studying jazz and jazz harmony, so this will influence future recordings.

My own recordings of crossover music happened by accident, and most of my recordings are done with no 'double takes'.

Indian classical seems, like jazz, to be very improvised. Yet it is highly formal, is it not?

It is like a bird that is trapped in a cage but which can still fly freely. The rules for improvisation are strict, but after many years of practice and study, you begin to find loopholes in the rules.

Each raga has specific notes, with a hierarchy of important notes, phrases, ways of ascending and descending motion et cetera. It's like how two painters with the same colour paints and brushes can come up with unique paintings, and yet have the same overall mood.

Talking about classical music, you probably came face to face with the differences between Indian and Western traditions when composing the 'classical' work for guitar and bansuri. What were the challenges there?

Good question! In this piece I wrote for classical guitar and bansuri, the challenge was to write out all the guitar parts and some bansuri parts but leave large portions for me to improvise and have specific meeting points to connect with the guitar.

I was encouraged by [the success of] this work and am now writing for bansuri and string quartet, and later if I have the means, I want to write for a full string orchestra.

Having worked and recorded in these major genres now, which way are you heading in the future? Or are you content to straddle them all — is that at all possible?

Classical North Indian music is a dynamic art form — it is evolving all the time. For example, what Ustad Zakir Hussain plays now has never been played before — he has taken the tabla to another level. In the future, there will be more like him and Pandit Hariprasadji.

My first love is classical, but as an aspiring composer, I want to do everything.

What would you say then to purists who think that Indian classical traditions and western styles do not mix?

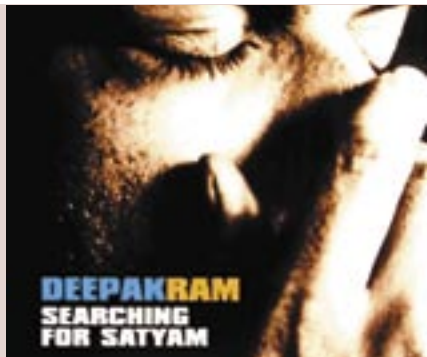
Wake up and smell the curry — there are good mixes and there are bad ones.

But don't you worry that the great tradition is being watered down for commercial appeal, made easy listening? I mean, why bother learning all the ragas and perfecting the craft when you can make more money recording some commercial new-age-type fusion instead?

It does not worry me, because there will always be classical music, and there will always be people who would spend their lives studying the music, art or any aspect of the culture.

Most artists do art for art's sake; very few people choose music or art to make money. Of course, there are many bad examples of music by people who are after commercial success, but like bad politicians they will always come and go... ■

Deepak Ram's albums are available via Trident Entertainment in KL. CH Loh is a musician and a writer



Flute for thought

REVIEWS BY CH LOH

BLURRING THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN JAZZ AND INDIAN CLASSICAL MUSIC

IF ANY MUSICIAN were to epitomise a World Musician, it might very well be Deepak Ram. The 46-year-old bansuri player was born and raised in South Africa, studied the instrument with the great maestro Pandit Hariprasad Chaurasia in India, and now lives in San Francisco where he both performs and teaches at the University of California. While he may not be the first (nor the last) classical Indian musician to perform with jazz musicians, the difference here is that Ram is as much a jazz musician himself as he is a consummate classical artist of the bansuri, the traditional Indian flute.

It's never a case of "Indian musician trying to play Western scales" collaborating with "Western musicians trying to play raga". Of the many attempts at crossbreeding two great and greatly diverse musical traditions, Ram's is a success story with an award-winning series of albums that he has turned out over the past few years. It's a question of great musicianship and immaculate taste, combined with a sense for the sublime and choosing the right kind of musical collaborators, all of which bear testimony to the effortlessness of Ram's albums. ■

DEEPAK RAM, *SEARCHING FOR SATYAM*
Melt 2000/Trident Media

Before you moan "not another Indian cross-over album", listen to Deepak Ram's award-winning venture. I was certainly tempted to do so too until I was struck, first by the adventurous bansuri playing, then by the spontaneous jazz feel, and finally by the obvious artistry of the musicians on this album.

This really is a class act and then some. Ram is firmly steeped in the classical traditions of the instrument, which in itself offers endless possibilities, but which he takes to the next level into the realm of jazz.

Ram spins ideas with his band of musicians, all of whom do not try very hard to sound Indian or force him to sound Western, but instead contribute to the pieces a little bit of their individual personalities. The guitar (Eduardo Niebla), acoustic and electric bass (Achim Tang), percussion (Patrice Heral) and tabla (Partha Sarathy Mukherjee) combination works really well, and Ram's searching playing underpins everything from the Afro-Latin funk of *Dance Pour Kooksie Aux Ben* to the Kalahari-meets-Rajasthan of the title track, *Searching For Satyam*.

The album is a delicious mix of the subtle and the exhilarating, but it's the oases like *Minavivek* with its raga-like meditation spiced with Latin guitar and *Lullaby for Krupa* — where Niebla's exquisite guitar plays subtly on Indian scales like the strumming of the sympathetic strings on a traditional instrument — that gives *Searching For Satyam* the spiritual balance often missing from such collaborations.

Searching for Satyam was recorded in 2000, when it won Best Instrumental Album at the South African Music Awards. It's recently been re-released along with another previous album *Flute For Thought*, and fans of Ram can also look forward to the very fine 2002 album *Beauty In Diversity*.

STACEY KENT, *THE BOY NEXT DOOR*
Candid Records/Trident Media

No one said it better than Cole Porter — she's the smile on the Mona Lisa, she's camembert, she's the nimble tread of the feet of Fred Astaire, she's the top. Although in this day and age, it is not clear what Porter really meant by "Top" (ah, the way semantics change with time — remember the word that used to mean "happy" that has gotten *Star* so worked up lately?) — we can safely say in Kent's case one gets the feeling as she lends her Ellasque swing to that great Porter classic she is really singing about herself.

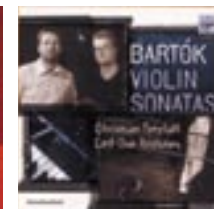
This sixth album (she's been around that long!) sees Kent continuing to warm the hearts of audiences worldwide with her disarming, ever charming style, the sort of laid-back unpretentious jazz style that really melts the borders between labels and genres, and brings it back to good ol' song-singing. And like the Porter song, her voice is many things from a dash of Ella Fitzgerald to a hint of Macy Gray and much in between, yet none of these. A voice really her own, it's a style she has not sought but which has found her.

Drawing from a wealth of tradition which she calls the Great American Songbook, you will find not only the great jazz standards but surprises as well, from *You've Got A Friend* to *What The World Needs Now*. This album is a tribute to the men in Kent's artistic life, the songwriters and singers who have inspired her. And she conveys that enthusiasm with these new arrangements, done with plenty of stylish restraint with the aid of her British band bringing a tasteful East Atlantic nonchalance and wit to the songs.

There's formula here, no attempt to seduce or impress, no theatrics nor dramatics — its simplicity simply makes you want to listen to it over and over again. Did I already say she's the top? Certainly on my list she is.

A marriage made in heaven

MOZART'S HIT OPERA GOES AUTHENTIC



WA MOZART, *LE NOZZE DI FIGARO*
Veronique Gens, Simon Keenlyside, Lorenzo Regazzo etc
René Jacobs, Concerto Köln

HARMONIA MUNDI 1818/20

Get a fresh start with Mozart's hit opera with this Gramophone Award-winning recording by the Concerto Köln. Forget that this is a period performance — the opening Overture literally sizzles with the excitement of opening night, and the singing is so fresh and transparent it puts the dusty old "modern" performances to shame. Despite its lightness of touch, Jacobs directs this classic with a firm sense of drama and wit that has rightfully gotten the opera world to sit up. It's a far cry from the heavily cosmetic Figaros of the past, of huge and heavy casts and syrupy sweet orchestras.

Jacob's cast is superb with the simple and direct delivery which exposes the little touches of character that they bring to each of their roles. Hear it to believe how truly stunning it is. You might not be able to put it down after that!

IGOR STRAVINSKY, *RITE OF SPRING*
Carl Nielsen, Symphony Nr 5
Paavo Jarvi, Cincinnati Symphony

TELARC 80615

You know the story — it's spring, creepy crawlies are making their morning rounds, pagan rituals sort of kill the enchantment of dawn, and did I forget to mention the virgin sacrifice at the end? It's no wonder it wasn't a runaway hit with the Parisian audiences of the 1930s. It's a classic now, and probably every orchestra that has come of age has recorded it.

This latest addition to the glut of possi-

bilities is Paavo Jarvi and his American band, serving up the full blood and gore in a somewhat literal reading. Where is the manic exuberance of the early recordings, which bring such excitement to truly crazy sections such as *Game Of Abduction* (the first big climax) and the final *Sacrifice*? Instrumental balance is pretty good, the lower end is thick and solid for sections such as *Spring Rounds*, in all plenty of detail to indulge the seasoned *Le Sacre* enthusiast, and it comes with a stunning reading of the Nielsen *5th Symphony*, in many ways the better of the two performances. But is this the Rite for you? Listen before deciding.

BELA BARTOK, *VIOLIN SONATAS*
Christian Tetzlaff [violin]
Leif Ove Andsnes [piano]

VIRGIN CLASSICS 545668-2

Bartok is the music lover's modernist, a pioneer in his time and still compelling and fresh today, a unique blend of the experimental with the fundamental sounds of Hungarian folk that gets to the very core of his motherland without resorting to schmaltz. It would have been interesting to see what Bartok would have done with our own folk traditions — he could very well turn *Rasa Sayang* into a masterpiece!

These violin sonatas are a fine example of his art — the folk dance styles infuse subtly into the angular violin explorations — it's as much an avant garde violinist as it is a tavern fiddler playing to drunken peasants, reiterating the age-old truth that classical music is after all people music. These sonatas were popularised by Isaac Stern, Yehudi Menuhin and Joseph Szigeti in their heyday. Tetzlaff and

Andsnes provide a sparkling, exuberant performance worthy of the great masters, serving up a well-balanced and wonderfully illuminated version that will have you kicking.

CONCERTO FOR VIOLIN AND ORCHESTRA.
SYMPHONY NO 8, 'THE JOURNEY'.

Jaakko Kuusisto [violin]
Osmo Vänskä, Lahti Symphony Orchestra
BIS CD1315

It's hard not to love the music of Rautavaara — his unabashedly romantic approach to aleatoric music, the obvious inspiration of nature, the constant shifts and swirls of harmony that mimic the ever-changing shades of nature's colours and sounds, they all come together splendidly and each new work evokes marvel in the listener as each new golden sunrise brings new awe.

The programme on this disc has been superbly recorded by Segerstam on Ondine, but Vanska's touch is wonderful with these scores and more recordings of such beautiful works are always welcome. The *8th Symphony* in particular is a fine example of how the form continues to speak to us. The brooding opening, reminiscent of Tchaikovsky's own *6th*, breaks into a shimmer of dawn that is Rautavaara's unique sound world. The second movement *Feroce* is a stunning scherzo that has an elemental feel to it. *Tranquillo* offers an oasis of calm, and the opening horn solo is quite remarkable. The symphony ends with an apocalyptic ring, as the journey approaches its final chapter and the orchestra gathers in full force. It's a work that is full of the wonder of the world we live in, and the kind of music that you will find a constant companion.