Ravi Shankar, acclaimed Indian musician, dies at 92

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Ravi Shankar, Indian musician, composer and teacher, died on December 11 at the age of 92 following heart surgery at a hospital in San Diego, California. He was a master of the sitar, best known for his role in bringing Indian classical music to the world.

Shankar reached out to international audiences and musicians alike. He was a consummate performer and tireless educator who sought to make Indian classical music accessible to Western audiences. He collaborated and innovated with people as diverse as jazz musician John Coltrane, classical violinist Yehudi Menuhin, avant-garde composer Philip Glass and Beatles guitarist George Harrison.

The task was not an inconsiderable one. Western music, with its musical notation and complex harmonies, enables the bringing together of many voices or instruments in various forms. Indian classical music, featuring different scales and structures, often initially jars on Western ears. Its focus is the individual instrumentalist or vocalist, who elaborates a melodic theme, or raga. In the northern Indian or Hindustani tradition, in which Shankar was schooled, the raga begins slowly, becomes interwoven with the rhythms of an accompanying tabla or drum, then builds in complexity and speed to a climax, before falling away. Its subtle, evocative character depends much on the skill of the individual performer, who breathes life into the structure of the raga through his or her improvisations.

Ravi Shankar was born Robindro Shankar Chowdhury on April 7, 1920 in Varanasi in the state of Uttar Pradesh—a city with a long association with Hindustani music. The youngest son of a well-off family, he moved to Paris at the age of just 10, and joined his elder brother's well-known Indian dance troupe.

For a young Indian, the experience was unique. The precocious teenager travelled in Europe and America, meeting film stars, and jazz and classical musicians. In Paris, he became acquainted with a dazzling array of cultural figures, including the ballerina Anna Pavlova, composer and songwriter Cole Porter, violinist Jascha Heifetz and classical guitarist Andres Segovia.

Shankar recalled in an interview: "My brother had a house in Paris. To it came many Western classical musicians. These musicians all made the same point. 'Indian music,' they said, 'is beautiful when we hear it with the dancers. On its own it is repetitious and monotonous.' They talked as if Indian music were an ethnic phenomenon, just another museum piece. Even when they were being decent and kind, I was furious. And at the same time sorry for them. Indian music is so rich and varied and deep. These people hadn't penetrated even the outer skin."

Shankar's meeting with Indian classical maestro Ustad Alaudeen Khan, a sarod player, who joined the dance group for a period, proved a decisive turning point. Khan bluntly told the youngster that he was wasting his talent and should concentrate on learning one thing well, rather than dabbling in many. Shankar returned to India at the age of 18 and underwent years of arduous and rigorous training to master the sitar under Khan's guidance.

Shankar married his teacher's daughter, Annapurna Devi, though they later separated, and established a lasting musical collaboration with Khan's son, Ustad Ali Akbar Khan, a virtuoso of the sarod. The two performed together in India and on various international stages. Their musical collaboration enriched the less common musical form of *jugalbandi*, in which two maestros, performing on an equal footing, develop the raga as a duo.

Shankar established himself as one of the many accomplished Indian classical musicians. But what was unique about Shankar was the breadth of his interests, his willingness to experiment and innovate, and above all his enthusiasm and passion for making the music available to a broad audience in India, and the entire world.

After completing his training, he joined the Indian People's Theatre Association, where he composed music for ballets in 1945 to 1946. Following formal independence from Britain in 1947, he was appointed music director of All India Radio (AIR). He became the driving force for making Indian classical music available to a mass audience, via radio and LP records.

Shankar recognised that the form of Indian classical music had to change to meet the requirements of new mediums and audience. Before independence, Indian music had largely been the preserve of the princely courts and a narrow elite. In the manner of aristocratic Europe, musicians often depended on patrons. Musical events frequently extended throughout the night, with individual ragas lasting hours.

Shankar honed the music for radio and recording by shortening the ragas. "I didn't jazzify it or anything, but I edited it, didn't beat around the bush. That was a bit shocking for our traditionalists in the beginning," he once told the *Ottawa Citizen*. He also insisted that musicians turn up on time and plan their ragas, so that they did not extend indefinitely. Despite early resistance, ragas of 20 to 30 minutes, sometimes much shorter, are now the norm. Recordings of the remarkable AIR performances are classics in their own right, continually sought after and listened to.

While thoroughly steeped in the Hindustani music tradition, Shankar had a broad and open attitude, and did not limit himself to the usual *gharana* of Indian music. Gharana comes from the Hindi word ‘ghar,’ meaning family or house. In music, it signifies a particular discipline or style. Shankar was hostile to those who treated the music of their school or locality as a private preserve.

AIR encouraged musicians from southern India, which has its own related, but different, Carnatic tradition. Collaboration between Hindustani and Carnatic musicians followed. Shankar also founded the Indian National Orchestra, which experimented in combining Western and Indian classical instruments. He wrote the hauntingly beautiful soundtracks for film director Satyajit Ray’s masterpieces—the Apu trilogy: *Pather Panchali*, *Apu Sansar* and *Aparajitho* .

By the time he began to travel, Shankar was already a recognised force in the Indian musical world. In 1954, he was part of a cultural delegation sent abroad by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to present India internationally. He quit his job with AIR in 1956 and for much of the rest of his life travelled and lived abroad. It was in the 1950s that Shankar began a series of remarkable collaborations, including with the violin virtuoso Yehudi Menuhin.

Like Shankar, Menuhin was intrigued by the possibilities of combining Western and Indian classical music. He studied the various traditions of improvisation to be found in Western music, including that of the gypsies, whose origins were in India. The collaborations between Shankar and Menuhin included the classic *West Meets East* album in 1967, in which they explored a synthesis of the two traditions in different ways. Shankar also composed several concertos for sitar, which he performed with the London and New York philharmonic orchestras. One can judge the success of these experiments for oneself, but they played an important role in introducing Indian traditions to the West, and vice versa, as well as encouraging further innovations in this fertile realm.

Shankar’s most widely known association and friendship was with Beatles guitarist George Harrison, who began learning the sitar from the Indian maestro in 1969. For a period, various rock bands experimented with the sitar to give an Eastern effect to their music and Shankar became something of a celebrity. He was featured at concerts such as the Woodstock Festival, the Monterey Pop Festival and the Concert for Bangladesh. However, he became disillusioned with the rock culture, particularly the use of drugs. He was reportedly horrified when Jimmy Hendrix set fire to his guitar at Monterey.

In 1978, Shankar collaborated with prominent Japanese musicians, notably Hozan Yamamoto, a shakuhachi player, and Susumu Miyashita, a koto player, in producing an album that attempted to combine Indian and Japanese influences. He received a string of international awards, including for composing the music for Richard Attenborough’s *Gandhi* (1982). His three Grammies included the Best Chamber Music Performance award for the *West Meets East* album with Menuhin.

Shankar’s personal life was complex. His marriage with Annapurna Devi ended in the late 1960s. He had long relationships with dancer Kamala Shastri; concert organiser Sue Jones, with whom he had a daughter, the singer Norah Jones; and Sukanya Rajan. He married Rajan in 1989 and their daughter, Anoushka Shankar, is also an accomplished sitar player, who often played alongside her father.

Throughout his career, various critics accused Shankar of abandoning the purist forms of Indian classical music. He once answered them by saying: “I have experimented with non-Indian instruments, even electronic gadgets. But all my experiences were based on Indian ragas. When people discuss tradition, they don’t know what they are talking about. Over centuries, classical music has undergone addition, beautification and improvement—always sticking to its traditional basis. Today, the difference is that the changes are faster.”

For the Indian establishment, Shankar became a useful cultural icon in promoting India to the world. He was appointed to a seat in the upper house of the Indian parliament from 1986 to 1992, largely for symbolic value. But as his career attests, his attitude to music was profoundly internationalist. Indeed, the Hindustani tradition in which he was trained was itself the product of the cultural melting pot created in the courts of the Mughal emperors, who dominated India prior to the British raj. Indian musical traditions interacted with the music and songs from Persia and other parts of the Islamic world.

Despite Shankar’s fame and fortune, he always retained a certain humility, especially in relation to music. Many remarkable Indian classical musicians have travelled and performed internationally since the early 1950s. Others have followed in his footsteps, experimenting in synthesising music from different international traditions. In many ways, he blazed these paths and enriched the musical heritage of humanity as a whole.

One can think of no better tribute to Ravi Shankar than to encourage those not familiar with Indian classical music to choose one of his recordings of a classical Indian raga, patiently and attentively immerse yourself in it from start to finish, and begin to appreciate the subtle beauty that motivated his life and work.