

[At Last, India's Classics Are Music to Our Digital Earphones](#)

Category : [February 1995](#)

Published by Anonymous on Feb. 02, 1995

At Last, India's Classics Are Music to Our Digital Earphones

Prime Productions Displace Scratchy Cassettes as Missionary Maestros Improvise in a Sound CD Market

Have you heard? Classical Indian music has exploded beyond her borders and found eager acceptance in Europe, USA, Asia and Africa. The global music industry is witnessing an exponential surge, a kind of merchandising crescendo in "world music." Those who knowledgeably love music are turning away from the pop genre to classical. But now it's not just the Western classical music of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, et al, but all classical music. And Indian classical has proven to be the most sought after. Its deep spirituality and high sophistication have enthralled the world's music lovers. Producers of classical Indian music have responded with a flurry of the finest recordings ever seen on compact disc (CD). Music lovers the world over, strapped to in-line skates and walkmans or ensconced in their Bose-equipped Mercedes, are rejoicing.

It has been a major transformation. Just a few years ago, recorded Indian classical music was rightly associated with poor quality. For the aesthete, it was virtually unlistenable. The recordings were puerile and often distorted. The media-cassette tape or LP record-were of inferior quality and introduced noise, hiss, pops and clicks which would bar the listener from entering the raga's intimate depths. Often, according to some, the performance itself was chosen for convenience, rather than excellence. As a result, Indian music had not won great acceptance outside India, which some producers considered a captive market.

Enter the digital audio compact disc and a band of determined classical music lovers, Indian and non-Indian, to save the day. Some began their own music companies, others joined existing houses with a goal to turn things around. They all shared the dream of producing the highest quality Indian music ever heard (or seen), indeed, the highest quality possible. And they've done it. The sound quality,

performance, packaging, availability and even the liner notes of today's CD releases all serve to excite, inspire and enlighten the buyer. And the CD itself has proven the best vehicle. Its superior sound, durability and imperviousness to scratches and deterioration make it well worth the extra money.

"Today there is tremendous interest in devotional music around the world, and not just from Indian people," shared Mr. Anil Dhupelia of Berkeley, California. He and his brother Hitesh run Shrimati's, a major retailer and wholesaler of Indian music in the US. They ship Indian music as far as Alaska, Florida and Hawaii and told us that at least half of their customers are non-Indian. They have over two hundred devotional titles in Hindi alone.

"It's the availability," says Dr. W.V. Panchacharam, the New York producer of Amutham Records. "If Indian music is available, then more people will go for it and they'll really enjoy it. Right now there are about 4-5 thousand titles available in Indian music." CD producers and other retailers we spoke with confirmed that non-Indians account for up to fifty-percent of sales worldwide. Mr. P.V. Venkataraman, Vice President of OMI Music in Canada, explains why, "With the musical effect slowly dying from various forms of the twentieth-century music-pop, rock, rap and whatever-the melody and soul-stirring effect of what music should produce, what it was supposed to produce and what it did in the earliest days has been missing. That's where Indian music still retains its roots, its mystic quality, the effect to transport one into the realm of another world. There has to be a time where there is a turn around and people start looking for something more pleasant, more melodious, something which touches the heart and transports you to a world where you find peace. That's why the popularity is gaining."

The abundance of excellent recordings we've found and the reports of impending releases indicate that the "turn-around" is complete, as Mr. Amrit Kakaria of Music Today, Delhi, confirmed, "It has been a revelation to us as to how big and robust the market is outside India. Wherever we have taken our music, especially to Europe and North America, it has done surprisingly well."

Hindu Music

Of course, the music produced in India is not all classical. It also includes pop,

hip-hop, rap and film. This article focuses on what we would call "Hindu" music-the traditional forms of Carnatic and Hindustani music, instrumental and devotional, which have retained their spiritual nature. It is exactly this quality which is drawing a new audience, as Western countries look to and embrace India's spirituality. Most health clubs teach hatha yoga and/or ayurveda in some form. Business seminars teach stress-management meditations and breathing techniques. The New Age movement clearly depends upon India's age-old wisdom and borrows freely. For these millions, spiritual music is the natural next step towards a more spiritual life. "Indian music-and I might even go as far as to qualify it as Hindu music-is connected with spiritualism. It has always fired Western imaginations about the sprituality of India. Especially the sitar and the tabla and the ancient instruments from India. It makes people want to meditate and listen. It happens to me," shared Mr. Kakaria.

A New Standard

"I must say, quality in India, be it cassette tapes or CDs, was a problem," confides Mr. Mahalingam Kolapen (see sidebar, page 14). He expressed great satisfaction in the impressive quality of today's CDs and admitted it has not always been so. "I personally have CDs that I bought in India where the tracks are warped. That is unheard of! But it has improved greatly." Mr. Bob Haddad founded Music of the World in North Carolina, USA, partly to correct this situation. "Five years ago the only Indian music available on CD was to a large extent the Indian-produced recordings. Many of which, quite honestly, were of inferior quality. On some of these CDs you can even hear the clicks and pops of an LP. The Western consumer, I think, never really bought into that."

The following list of producers is a good indicator of the extent of today's market: Music Today, T Series, Music India, and Magnasound in India; Chhanda Dhara, ECM and Wergo in Germany; OMI in Canada; Auvidis, Ocora and Playa Sound in France; JVC and King Records in Japan; EMI, Indu Musik, Shankar, Melody and Nimbus in the UK; Jazz Point and Sebaub in Switzerland; and in the US, Chandi Productions, India Archive, Alurkar, Music of the World, Oriental Records, Eternal Music and Lyrichord. This list is by no means comprehensive. We've discovered thirty-three companies in the US alone.

World Music Companies

For several companies, Indian classical music constitutes just one part of their productions. These are known as "world music" producers and include some giants like Victor Musical Industries, Inc. (JVC) of Japan, Nimbus records of the UK and a smaller company in the US, Music of the World. Their "mission" is slightly different than the exclusively Indian music labels. They are trying to preserve and promote the traditional classical sounds from all the world cultures in the form of world music, which encompasses the traditional classical music forms of the world's different cultures, but especially the tribal, indigenous music which was hitherto overlooked.

Music of the World is a small but significant company. Its president and founder, Mr. Bob Haddad, told Hinduism Today, "Indian music was the first type of music that I was attracted to, and still the music that I am most endeared to. It has a magical, mystical, spiritual aura and feeling to it that is just the embodiment of amazement and awe, serenity and exhilaration. None of them hit me, personally, as much as does Indian music. It holds a very, very special place in my heart." His catalog includes titles from Africa, India, Middle and Far East, Latin America, Brittany, US Native American and Horizons, where artists from different cultures perform together. Music of the World produces high quality, crisp and energetic original recordings-Carnatic and Hindustani-with new and established artists.

JVC's World Sounds series is host to 17 titles of Hindu music, many of which are unique, such as A Hindu Ceremony at Meenakshi Sundareshwara Temple. Producer of the series, Mr. Soh Fujimoto explained, "We wanted to introduce traditional music that Japanese people and people in other countries had never heard. Many people know the sitar, but there are so many other types of music that we believe are just as good. Out of all the traditional musics of the world, I think Indian music is the most popular. Some music has a history of 2,000 years. We wish to present the current state of that living tradition. We want to represent every corner of the world and promote mutual global understanding. I am very interested to know what Indian people feel about Japanese music. There are certain similarities in the sound and instruments." JVC's productions tend to have a very "live" ambiance which gives the feeling of "being there."

Nimbus Records' World Music catalog lists twenty-five titles of Hindustani music, but only one Carnatic. Their Hindu music outnumbers their titles from all the other cultures combined. Nimbus has demonstrated consistently high-quality recordings and high-class packaging. Every disc contains a booklet with in-depth background information on the artist and the ragas. In terms of production decisions regarding recording environment and effects such as reverb, their goal seems to be

to present the music in a similar manner that Western classical music is presented—a very polished recording of a performance in a large hall. The approach is quite different from JVC, for instance, but equally desirable. Indeed, each company has its own style. Like the different colors of the spectrum or the different notes of the raga, one must experience them all to enjoy the whole.

As yet, the smallest "world music" company is Eternal Music, which is dedicated to "world peace through world music." Dominated by Indian music, Eternal Music lists a disc by Hariprasad Chaurasia, Zakir Hussain, Navratri in Hairakhan, and a world fusion title, Indian Dream, which blends musicians from various cultures. Emam, the producer and president, recalls, "The initial seeds of the creation of Eternal Music were sown in Hairakhan Vishwa Maha Dham, the main ashram of Maha Avatar Babaji in the foothills of the Himalayas." As far as production is concerned, Emam does it all himself, including photos, graphics design (done on a Macintosh computer) and even performing on tabla and dambak.

Teaching Through Music

A significant development in the nurture and promotion of today's Hindu music are the booklets, or liner notes, that accompany any CD. This booklet fits inside the jewel case cover of the CD and has the capability of being rather substantive. Though not all companies are delving into the many possibilities this offers, several consider it to be as important as the recording itself.

OMI's booklets feature classy design, graphics and photos, well written text and even a three-page glossary of Indian musical terms. Here's a small excerpt from an insightful history and comparison of the two musical systems in Bombay Jayashree's latest release, Raga & Sahitya. "It was the Sama Veda that provided the first scale of seven notes in an octave, a precursor to the current development of the concept of ragas. Like the Vedas, which are chanted even today after several thousands of years, Indian classical music has been transmitted mainly from teacher to student through the process of demonstration by the teacher and repetition by the student." OMI's catalog includes some exciting recordings, such as Essence of Jugabandi by Ronu Majumdar and Tarun Bhattacharya and the finest recording of nagaswaram we have ever heard by Dr. Namagiripettai Krishnan.

Mr. Lyle Wachovsky of India Archive Music is also committed to educating his listeners. "I am trying to offer very expansive and detailed notes on the background of the music, the performance, the raga and the structure so that those people who want to learn about what's going on during the music will have that information in front of them-which is really difficult to come by." India Archive's CDs all include this informative booklet and also feature colorful Indian embroidery on the covers. Mr. Wachovsky's love of Indian music shines through in his high standards for recording, performance and packaging.

Providing information that everyone agrees upon is no easy task, as Dr. Panchacharam discovered, "Checking the accuracy of the scales and coming out with an authentic booklet is the problem. We go to musicologists and discuss the scales with them. Once it is printed, it should be acceptable to all. You shouldn't come out with a book that's controversial. That is the thing that takes the greatest effort." When asked about profits, he disclosed the noble outlook of today's producers, "I take a loss on the first thousand. But it doesn't matter. You see, I don't consider it as a loss. I think it's an investment. Once the CD is made and it is released, it is a permanent record. For the next hundred years it will still go. That's how we are looking at it. We want to make something durable and everlasting."

Digitizing the Classics

One company specializes in re-releasing treasured recordings from the past on CD, specifically the heritage of the Sangeetha and Koel recordings. The company is The Master Recording Company of India who's works are produced and marketed worldwide exclusively by Asia One Stop, Inc., based in Edison, New Jersey, USA. By releasing these recordings on CD they fulfill a crucial need in the industry. No more clinging to your tired tapes with the fear of losing them forever! You can now find it on CD and rest in the security that the CD provides for recordings. Also, the Sangeeta, Koel recordings highlight the music of South India. So Asia One Stop is helping to balance the market, which is so far heavily dominated by Hindustani music.

Magical Mystical Musical Tour

Indian classical music has its roots in the mysticism of Hinduism itself. It

touches the soul, attracts the devas and even invokes the Gods. The classical ragas magically open the passageway which connects the Three Worlds, bringing peace and harmony within the home.

Yogis explain that in the inner worlds, sound takes on shape and color. Indian classical music is seen psychically as beautiful soft shapes and pastel colors, like the yantra and kolam images we see in the temple. It is said that contemporary music, especially acid-rock, generates dark, sharp and distorted shapes. This repels the devas and attracts the asuras, who then cause contention and confusion, destroying the integrity of the human heart and home.

Listening to classical ragas stimulates and opens the cranial chakras. This is why it is such a wonderful background music to play all day long, especially for those trying to maintain higher consciousness and meditate daily. The ancient instruments-vina, sitar, flute, tabla, pakhawaj and mridangam-were designed by rishis to reproduce the tones heard within the sahasrara chakra, the psychic center of enlightenment at the top of the head.

Where to Find It?

It should take just a little persistence to find an outlet in your local area. Check local records stores and Indian shops. Look for ads in Indian newspapers and New-Age magazines like Yoga Journal. Contact Indian music and dance teachers and academies. Record stores should have computer access to the list of CDs currently available. If you give them the name of the artist, title or producer, they can usually special order it for you. In the US, you can call 1-800-ASK-TOWER for Tower Records mail-order service. Once you find the discs, write to the address on the back for their catalog.

If you've been hesitant to invest in a CD player due to shortage of quality Indian music, now there are no excuses. If you have the means, it's worth the investment. You owe it to yourself to support these dynamic artists and companies by buying their CDs. Enrich your life, enlighten your family, enliven your home. Make the sounds of India's virtuosos a delightful daily encounter with dharma.

Sidebar: Leading the Way-India's Music Today

All the companies we investigated offer excellent choices of original and re-released recordings. It would be inaccurate to say that one is any better than another. Each one excels in its own way, with its own style. Having said this, we still feel we must commend Delhi based Music Today for producing exceptional thematic collections of modern recordings which are the connoisseur's delight. Particularly notable is the sixteen CD collection called Bhaktimala-devotional songs and chants to Ganesha, Rama, Shiva, Vishnu, Shakti, Krishna and Hanuman. Other valuable collections are Ragas from Dawn to Midnight, Maestro's Choice and Music of the Seasons. Hinduism Today recently spoke to Mr. Pradeep Mohan, the general commercial manager of Living Media India Ltd. (in charge of marketing Music Today's products). Music Today is run by Living Media Ltd. which also owns the highly successful fortnightly magazine, India Today.

Interview by Rajiv Malik, Delhi

Hinduism Today: What prompted Living Media to venture into music?

Mr. Pradeep Mohan: "Classical music has been there from time immemorial. When we launched Music Today in the year 1990, we felt that classical music had taken a back seat. We also identified classical music as a part of our heritage which was not being given due importance by all those who were a part of the music industry. We first came up with Ragas from Dawn to Midnight in 1991. All these ragas had been heard before, but we got fresh recordings done. We took a lot of pain to have digital recordings done on the best hardware. Great care was also taken to insure that the packaging was beautiful. We marketed the strong thematic presentation rather than the ragas themselves.

There are many well-known companies producing Indian music on CD-HMV, Music Today, CBH, Music India, Weston, Tips, Venus and T-Series. However, none of them are dedicated exclusively to promoting devotional and classical music as is Music Today. Most of the other companies are dealing in a big way in Hindi film music and others specialise in regional film music.

Hinduism Today: How big is the CD market in India?

Mohan: The Indian music market is in its developing stage for CDs. The truth is that the CD player is not within the easy reach of the average person as the cost is somewhere around seven thousand rupees. It is a lot of money by Indian standards. However, the prices of CD players will come down in the near future. And the cost of CDs will also see a downward trend in the times to come. Presently there are around 1.5 lakh CD players in India.

The prices of CDs in India varies between rs100 to rs450, with Music Today's priced at rs395. Initially, we had apprehension whether the customer would buy our CDs at the price we were offering. But soon we realized that customers appreciated quality, and they were willing to pay more for high quality. Moreover, our input costs are certainly higher than others. When you are buying a CD, you are making a life-long investment. Most people do not buy contemporary film music on CD because its charm does not last. Film music has a very short life. But classical music or devotional music has a sense of timelessness. The Indian music market is growing at the rate of twenty percent per annum and CD sales at twenty-five percent, which is quite a phenomenal growth.

Hinduism Today: Where is your music sold?

Mohan: The biggest market for Indian music on CD is America, followed by Europe. There is also a big demand in the Gulf, where there is a large Indian population. The big markets in India are Bombay and Delhi, followed by Madras, Bangalore, Hyderabad and Calcutta. The market is limited to the big cities because a CD player owner has to be an affluent person and such people are more in number in metropolitan cities. The language of music is understood by all and therefore age, caste, religion and nationality is no bar. People of all age groups in all parts of the world buy our CDs.

Hinduism Today: What is special about Indian classical music?

Mohan: There is a base which always takes you back to the music's origins-that

is the raga. Indian classical music is a part of an old tradition and rich heritage. Whereas America has a history of four-hundred years, our heritage is thousands of years old. I think it is this factor that sets Indian music apart from the rest of the world. The future is great. Lovers of Indian classical music are all over. And we are taking more interest in learning about our great, ancient heritage.

Hinduism Today: What can we look forward to from Music Today?

Mohan: We are currently recording a series entitled Tirth, in which we are covering places like Dwarka, Badrinath, Kashi and Tirupathi. The recordings will be based on the day-to-day happenings there from the music point of view. It will be a music of a different kind altogether. The series will be four hours long.

Sidebar: Words of the Masters

Pandit Ravi Shankar: When I start to perform a raga, the first think I do is shut out the world around me and try to go down deep within myself. When, with control and concentration, I have cut myself off from the outside world, I step onto the threshold of the raga with feelings of humility, reverence and awe. To me a raga is like a living person, and to establish that intimate oneness between music and musician, one must proceed slowly. When that oneness is achieved, it is the most exhilarating and ecstatic moment. In these miraculous moments, when I am so much aware of the great powers surging within me and all around me, sympathetic and sensitive listeners feel the same vibrations. It is like feeling God.

Pandit Hariprasad Chaurasia: Music is the supreme power, which can move the hearts and minds of men. Music is my dharma and I worship its soul. My prayer is to be reborn as an artist so that in my next life too I can continue to devote myself to the service of music.

I express myself through the flute, the most ancient instrument in our tradition, the origin of dhvani, or pure sound. The flute and the shanck, conch, are both gifts of God, and both require sustained breath to evoke the beauty of their utterance. And yet as an instrument it is difficult to master and calls for great dedication. To

bring out the essence of the music, I must breathe from deep within me into the flute. When my breath meets the sound of the flute and the two become one, I feel the sublime force of God and of music.

Excerpted from Music Today's Maestro's Choice compact discs.

Sidebar: Insider Interview

In a recent visit to Hinduism Today's Hawaiian headquarters, Mr. Mahalingum Kolapen took a few minutes to discuss the state of Indian music worldwide. Mr. Kolapen is an accomplished mridangam player himself, having studied at Kalakshetra, Madras, and having performed music with his family from the age of six. He is the founder and executive director of the prestigious Sangeeta Nataka Academy in Laudium, South Africa. The academy will be celebrating its twentieth anniversary in April, 1995 with "the biggest festival that would have ever happened in South Africa."

Hinduism Today: Is Indian music thriving, or barely surviving?

Mahalingum Kolapen: Indian music is as healthy as it's ever been five-thousand years ago. If one had to go to India from November to the end of January, be it in the North or the South, one would see how vibrant Indian music really is. In Madras, in the festival in December, during a thirty-day period, one could see as many as 956 concerts. These are the main concerts, not the concerts by junior artists which are catered for in the morning. In India, we have the sabha system, which is constantly giving a platform for young artists to perform. We've never been short of great artists in India and every year one goes around to the festivals and one can really see artists moving up the ranks. Even in the listening public you have people who are fifty, sixty, seventy going to concerts and you also have the youth who go there and listen because it's all part of the scene. I think it's thriving. I wouldn't call it an entertainment industry because it's such a rich part of our culture. It's something you cannot divorce from religion-classical music. It will never die.

HT: How did Indian music fare in South Africa?

MK: Music in South Africa, because of the cultural boycott, has had a very slow growth, but a very definite one and a very good one. We have produced some excellent artists in South Africa. We've managed to culturally keep it intact. Every festival and every big function is celebrated with big concerts. One needed an identity of saying "I'm an Indian. I'm a Hindu. This is my music and this is why I need it-to make me Indian, to stand out." That made our identity stronger. It wasn't taken for granted that "I'm Indian." We fought for it.

HT: What is special about Indian classical music?

MK: Indian music has one great advantage. There are ragas, which have scales and certain parameters for you, but within those parameters you are as free as a bird to fly. You can give that raga your own coloring, your own vision of what's within you-and that is purely spiritual. I once talked to a great musician and he said, "The closest I come to my Master, the Lord, is when I'm really playing. Because I forget my surroundings. I forget there's an audience and I'm in total communion with my Master." I think that point illustrates the spiritualness of our music and its greatness.

HT: Are Hindustani and Carnatic music Hindu music?

MK: Yes. It is Hindu music. The only thing different about the two systems of music is that the South never got involved in invasions by either the Muslims or the Persians. India had one system of music, if one goes back in our history. As various rulers took over in the North at certain periods, it affected our music. Otherwise, if one listens to various ragas that are presented in the North, we have similar ragas in the South. It's Hindu music by all means. After all, the North Indian music is termed `Hindustani music' more so than `North Indian Music.'

Sidebar: A Visit to USA Superstores

In order to see just how deeply Indian music has sunk its roots in the West, Hinduism Today visited America's temples of tunes to search for any sign of sangeetha. We found that even in the most hard-core western music store, Indian

classical music has found a niche.

By Archana Dongre, Los Angeles

I first made a call to the super-store Block Buster. Their computer shows a large collection of CDs of Indian classical music, but the shelves do not have any of those. Lack of demand, I reasoned. A relatively small store in Laguna Beach called Sound Spectrum did not have a section devoted to Indian music, but they had several CDs by Ravi Shankar and Ali Akbar Khan, which are frequently bought by the local residents.

Tower Records topped all others in carrying quality Indian music on its shelves, as well as selling a hundred or more of these in a given year. Manager Dennis Lorimer reported that they usually sell about sixty of Ravi Shankar, and around forty Ali Akbar Khan CDs plus several others, annually. He said this store was a typical representation of Tower's stores in the Los Angeles area.

"Most of them are bought by the forty or fifty-something generation who may very well have been ex-flower children of the sixties," Lorimer stated. "Also, some teenagers have developed an ear for Indian classical due to their exposure to Indians and the Indian classical performing arts like dance and music," he said. It seems that all those classical music and dance classes run by Indian artists are nurturing a love for the classical and are stirring some interest in parts of the mainstream community.

A little over fifty quality music titles were on Tower Record's shelf in its World Music section. There were CDs of Ravi Shankar, Shivkumar Sharma, Bismillah Khan, L. Subramaniam, tabla by Alla Rakha and Zakir Hussain, Vasant Rai's sarod, Hariprasad Chaurasia and G.S. Sachdev's bamboo flute, Ram Naryana's sarangi and also Rajeshwari Padmanabhan's vina. Among the vocalists were Pandit Jasraj, Girija Devi and many others. The section, though small, boasted excellent choices of Hindustani as well as carnatic music CDs.

The Indian section was miniscule as compared to the huge size of the store

(most Tower Records stores have several floors in spacious buildings with large sections dedicated to pop, rap, jazz, rock, heavy metal, etc.). One could not detect any distinctly Indian feeling in the store itself, as you would in an Indian grocery store or a New-Age bookshop. Still, handling the CDs and reading from the covers about the singers and the ragas did stir a surge of sentiment as well as memories in my mind. But the sights and sounds of the environment struck a discordant note, as loud rock music played in the background. The clash of Eastern and Western cultures was so vividly palpable to me at that moment. It was like trying to worship a deity amidst the noise of a loud band playing in the background. The East and the West seemed like two distant banks of a river-the two shall never meet, but I am that river who can touch and feel both the sides.