Holy Sound Bites!
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MUSIC

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Bring home your favorite mantra with quality cd's of Sanskrit, the ancient vehicle of the Vedas

No sounds stir the soul as deeply as traditional Sanskrit chants. For years, the only way to hear these was to travel to India and visit a temple, or strain to listen to a rancid Indian cassette tape. Now, at last, Hinduism's cherished hymns, including the most popular chants of the Vedas, are available on compact disc.

Veda Mantram (59 min., Rythm) and Vedic Chanting (59 min., Vani) both deliver the classic Vedic repertoire of Sri Rudram, Purusha Suktam, Mantra Pushpam and more. These are the chants the way you are used to hearing them, from traditional, authentic priests who have been chanting them all their lives, and most likely longer. A valuable solo and contemporary offering is Vishwanatha Sharma Aatreya's Vedic Chants (47 min., BMG Crescendo). Aatreya renders six Suktam chants along with four other popular chants, including an Upanishad.

Gayatri (60 min., Times Music) offers several slokas and mantras as a prelude to 44 minutes of incantation of the Gayatri mantra in chorus. A dramatic four-minute explanation

of the mantra is also given. This disk begins with a two-minute invocation by Pandit Jasraj, which is enough for some retailers to list Jasraj as the principle artist, but don't be fooled. The CD is actually led by Rattan Mohan Sharma. It is still well worth the purchase. Mahamantra Gayatri (62 min., T Series) is led by the smooth vocal of Hariharan, supported by an enthusiastic chorus. Hariharan begins with a tender explanation of the mantra in Hindi, and the bulk of the disk is an exceptionally calm repetition of Gayatri. Great enunciation! Maha Mrutyunjaya Mantra (59 min., RPG, www.saregama.com) contains 15 minutes of English commentary by Swami Sukhabodhananda. Swami fills in the rest of the CD with repetition of the mantra, Mrityunjaya. This presentation is the most static. In fact, by our analysis he actually chanted the mantra for only two minutes and then that clip was repeated again and again. It is hardly noticeable, however, since his repetitions are so precise anyway.

Women get a holy word in as well. Sanskrit Slokas (62 min., H&M Enterprises) has the young star, Nityasree, soulfully chanting the invocations of the primary Goddess forms, including Ashtalakshmi, Meenakshi, Annapurna and Raja Rajeshwari--sublime and devotional. Sri Kamakshi Navavarna Krithis (62 min., Padmini) is a collection of Sanskrit songs to the Goddess sung by the Bombay Sisters, complete with mridanga, violin, flute and vina.

Many recordings now available on CD were released years ago on cassette. Typically, Indian music companies don't divulge when these were produced, but in some cases you can guess by the sound quality, or lack thereof. Or if they do, they give the date of the release onto CD without mention of the original recording. In most cases, but not all, efforts have been made to upgrade the quality with the digital release. Sri Ganesh Pancharatna Maala and Bhajagovindam (56 min., Sea Records) delivers these classics sung by the ever popular icons, S.P. Balasubramaniam and Saluri Rajeswara Rao. Praathah Smaranam (50 min., RPG/EMI) offers the Sri Raghavendra Subrabhatham, Sholingapuram Amruthapalavalli and Sri Venkateswara Subrabhatham. These are audibly old recordings, but worthwhile for the chance to hear these chants.

The few high-quality modern productions are a joy to hear, not to mention a relief to the ear. Om: Music for True Meditation (46 min., BMG Crescendo) is pure Pandit Jasraj, solo and sublime, singing the sacred "Aum" to a tanpura drone--definitely meditative. Pandit Ajay Pohankar tirelessly leads the devotional ensemble in Mantra

Sankirtan (58 min., BMG Crescendo). This is actually part of a series of CDs each presenting a different Vaishnava mantra sung by Pohankar in the North Indian style. Neither Jasraj nor Pohankar gives a discourse, just their soul-stirring singing.

We have yet to hear modern, purist productions of the classic Vedic chants (such as Sri Rudram) chanted by contemporary priests. Vedic Chants comes closest. We can only hope that these will follow soon.

With help from Ashu Kataria (Khazana) and Radha Parasuram (H&M)

CONTACTS: KHAZANA, 1010 MARQUETTE AVENUE, MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA 55403 USA. TEL: 612.339.4565; FAX: 612.630.2207; web: www.khazana.com; e-mail: ashu@khazana.com. H&M ENTERPRISES, 8405 MANTLE AVENUE, OKLAHOMA CITY, OKLAHOMA 73132 USA. TEL: 405.728.0634; FAX: 405.718.3338; e-mail: h.menter@icon.net