

# Pandit Jasraj

## Bright sun of Indian Music

*Legends don't need introductions. Legends are sources of inspiration and have achieved what might need a few life times. He is now 80 years old but has spent more than six decades trying to popularize classical singing all over the world. A few years back, he went city to city, village to village in India singing classical and devotional songs thus creating not only fan following but also disciples some of whom have been with him forever. Dr. Neelam Verma met the doyen of Indian music on his recent visit to Vancouver*

His status as an unparalleled living legend confirmed by a scholarship instituted by the University of Toronto in his name for deserving young Canadian students wishing to train in Indian music, has made history by being the first living Indian musician to be honored by a foreign university in this manner. Pandit Jasraj, the doyen of Indian classical vocal tradition held a jam packed concert for music lovers of the city of Vancouver during his tour of North America, last month. His rich, soul-stirring, sonorous voice that traverses effortlessly across three-and-a-half octaves, left the audience spell bound. He has performed in Vancouver a number of times, starting first in the nineties. His first concert created so many fans following giving birth to Pandit Jasraj School of Music in Vancouver. The school is run by volunteers who have been taught by Pandit Jasraj himself and then in turn they run classes in their homes.

Like most of his concerts, Pt Jasraj's concerts are a means of establishing a communion with God. His notes are suffused with spirituality and his concerts are known to cast magic spells that may last forever. No wonder, he has been bestowed with almost every musical award possible that one could write a whole journal on them. Not many Indian musicians have been felicitated and celebrated the way he has been both in India and out of the country. Out of India, he has been awarded by universities who have instituted awards



Pandit Jasraj in Vancouver

in his name with an aim to seek a portion of musical divinity. In India he has received all the Padma awards ranging from Padma Vibhushan to Sangeet Natak Akademi Fellowship this year and still continues.

This reporter got the opportunity to meet the doyen on his recent visit to Vancouver and he talked about everything under the sun- his music, his life, his childhood, his fans, politics, the new generation etc but I could not get the answers to the questions

I had thought I would ask him. Yet, looking back, he did but in his own devotional and musical style.

His childhood memories are mostly related to his father who passed away unexpectedly when he was just about four years old. Says Pandit Jasraj, "Somehow, he knew he would die young. He was not ailing and had everything going for him. He was a court musician in Kashmir and we had just moved to Hyderabad and he was to take up his new position in the Court of Hyderabad the next day. The same day, he had

received a letter from one of my uncles whom he had wanted to meet but had not met in a long time. He went to bed that day telling my mother not to wake him. A little while later, she heard a noise from his room like some one who is taking a last breath. He died peacefully but I still remember the words of my mother who said "mujhe majdhar mein chod gaye" (You have left me mid way)"

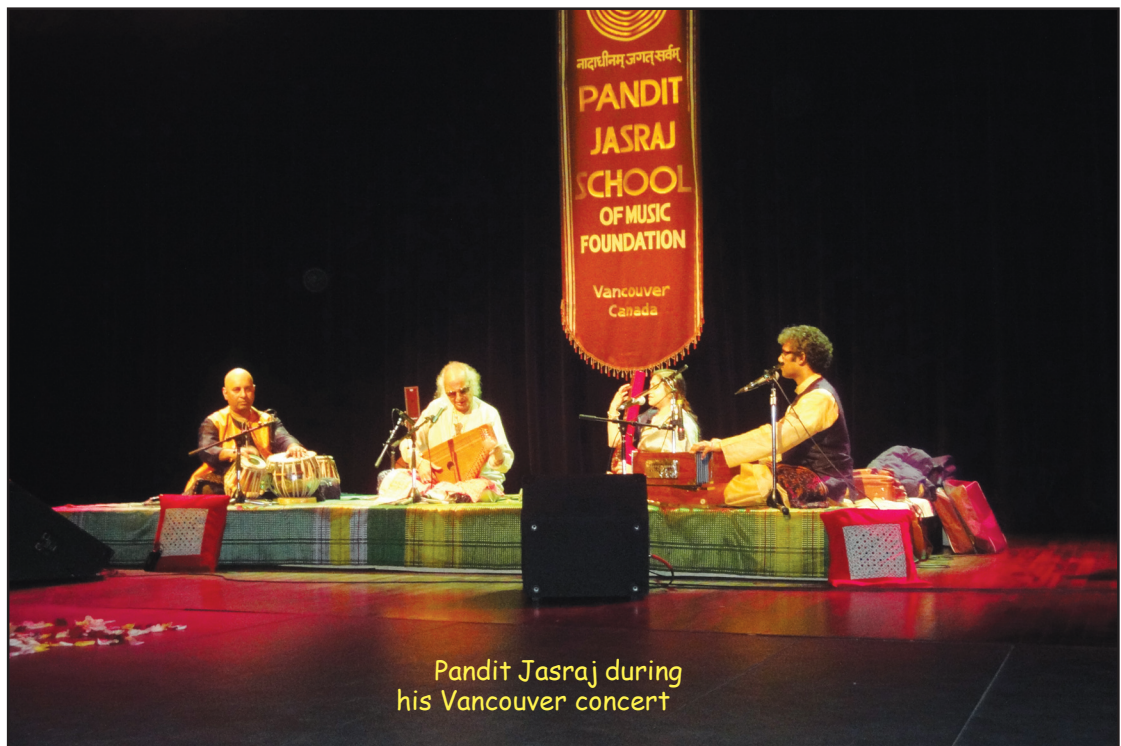
Till then, Jasraj, had just seven notes as his inheritance from his departed father, but with those he stepped out into the cold world of harsh realities. Today, those seven notes make up his rainbow... his bridge to a mystical realm of sound... that lies beyond the applause, the awards, the titles, the trophies, the honours...putting him in touch with the music of the infinite.

Being interested in music, Pandit Jasraj

started learning from his uncles and his elder brother, Pandit Maniramji, and later from Maharaja Jaywant Singhji Waghela. "I was also greatly influenced by the voice of the famous ghazal singer, Begum Akhtar, whom I used to listen to, skipping school, at a small hotel that played her songs all day. She inspired me to learn vocal music."

As a means of livelihood, Maniramji took Jasraj as an accompanying tabla player. It

misplaced my ticket, but was sure I would have no trouble gaining entry as a well-known radio artist. To my dismay I went not only unrecognised, I was humiliated and also denied entry. All my ardent even tearful pleas to the watchmen, the organisers, etc., went unheard. I even tried telling them who I was but to no avail. Finally Mrs. Som Tiwari (Ammu) and the great artist A. Kananji came to my rescue and took me inside. He consoled me saying, that a



Pandit Jasraj during his Vancouver concert

was in 1937 that he gave his first performance on stage as a Tabla artist. Says he, "At that time table players were looked down upon as minor artists and I did not like that. I said I want to become a singer and started practising 12-14 hours a day. "By 1945, he had renounced the Tabla and taken to classical singing full time.

During his journey as an artist and also to support his family, Pandit Jasraj worked at the radio station in Calcutta. He fondly remembered an incident in 1954 when despite being a rising star, people still did not recognize him. "I went to attend a concert of the great Kesarbai with tremendous enthusiasm. I had bought ten tickets worth twenty-five rupees. I had given away the tickets to the other nine who were to join me at the venue. As luck would have it I had

day would come when Kesarbai herself would hear my singing."

When asked as to why did he switched to devotional singing, he philosophises about that day in 1999 when he had just returned from a concert. "No sooner had I stepped in I heard a voice emanating from around me. It was as if the walls were singing... resounding with the one word "Hey Kanha". I kept following it around the room, singing after the voice. Thus the whole bandish in raga Shankara unfolded, leading me along..."He Kanha...Tum par beeti jo beeti, Ham par beeti so kahi na jai...Ham jani tum jaaye pachtaye, Phir bhi prabhu kahaaye, Ham to rank hoon na ban pai. Through my music I try to reach out to God and now even my audience sways and enjoys the music. I think that my relationship with God does not need the rigour of ritual. I will always sing in

praise of Him and my music is really my aradhana (devotion). Mai swaron se ishwar ko saadhne ki chesta karta hoon (I try to reach God through my music.)”

Talking about taking the music to the next generation, Pandit Jasraj is not worried and feels the desire to learn classical singing cannot be forced. Says Tripti Mukherjee, an upcoming artist who has been singing with Pandit Jasraj since 1976 and has never looked back, regrets the influence of Bollywood amongst today’s youth. “It is Bollywood influence everywhere. Regretfully, the next generation just does not have the right environment to take to classical singing. They learn what they see.” Panditji does not agree and is more complacent. Says he, “If someone really wants to learn, he or she will do so. There is no need to create an environment or influence people. Music is not something that can be perfected in a lifetime. With every life you start off from where you have left in your previous life. Once you have understood this, age is no more a barrier and death is not the end of your musical pilgrimage.”

Bollywood music today though become hit as soon as it is out, yet do not have a long life. Says he, “Today in Bollywood it is more commercialization and people want results fast. They want to earn and don’t care about quality or impact of the music they are creating. Their music is just for today and the songs are forgotten in a few days after. Yet we cannot deny that the impact of Bollywood and its music is here to stay. Once again, it is extension of our own culture. I have also not been immune to Bollywood and did sing a couple of songs a few years back.” Pandit Jasraj has many students, and is ensuring the longevity of his genre. Amongst his flag-bearing disciples, Rattan Mohan Sharma, Sanjeev Abhyankar, Suman Ghosh, Tripti Mukherjee, Radharaman Kirtane, Pritam Bhattacharjee, Gargi Siddhant and Kala Ramnath are well-known exponents of the Mewati Gharana. Sadhana Sargam, a well-known Bollywood singer, is one of his disciples.

He married Madhura, daughter of V.Shantaram, the pioneer of Indian Cinema who has worked quietly behind the scenes to express herself through many a medium. She has wielded the pen to take up the daunting task of writing for her father his larger-than-life autobiography and directed a film based

on his life’s work; ‘Portrait of a Pioneer’ exhibited in international documentary film festivals and the Indian Panorama. Madhura had also directed and produced the once critically acclaimed ballets, Geet Govind and Kaan Kahaani based on medieval Indian literature, art and music. She has conceptualised albums like Ashta Prahar and has several books and films to her credit. She also has made a documentary on her acclaimed husband.

He does not hold any grudges as none of his two children followed his path of taking classical singing forward. “But they are contributing to Indian music in their own way and I am proud of them. My daughter Durga is today the multi-faceted star of the small screen and promotes music and upcoming musicians. She was the co-host of the popular Antakshari show on Zee TV and is now trying to find her place in the sun by organising thematic, multi-media and multiple artistes classical concerts. She is also planning to reach out to music-lovers through her Indian Music Academy and slickly made classical music shows for the television. My son composes music for the film industry. I know they have the potential but they are doing what they love doing.”

However, his granddaughter Eshwari Pandit, is making waves especially after she composed and sang a song for America’s first lady Michelle Obama during her visit to India in November. The two-and-a-half minute English composition called ‘Make a Difference’ was commissioned as the anthem for an NGO of the same name.

Speaking about Indian culture and Indian

languages, he regrets the government of India’s callous attitude towards the same. “It is highly unbelievable that while as an individual you are trying to keep the Hindi language alive miles away from India, yet the government of India has remained indifferent. Like all other languages, Hindi is a rich language and is the basis of our roots and culture. The government of India needs to contribute towards its growth in a foreign country by not only providing with funds but their support.”

There was a time when Pandit Jasraj would visit Vancouver quiet regularly but slowly his visits are declining. Says Asha Lohia, who is one of the founding members of Pandit Jasraj School of Music in Vancouver, “We used to hold at least five concerts a year till the nineties, but now we are able to organize just 2-3 a year. We have had a number of Panditji’s great students perform in Vancouver. But now all of us who were the pioneers are now getting old and need the new generation to take over. In the last ten years, demographics have changed and lot of people are retired and either moved back to India or travelling. For us it is a challenge to promote classical music to the new generation especially as we have to compete with Bollywood music. Remixes are common and fusion is the trend. Panditji’s music is more devotional and certainly cannot compete with popular music.”

In an attempt to promote his music, his devotees teach music in their own homes in and around Vancouver at nominal costs as renting a place would incur mere expenses.

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# Honey tube

One are the days when bollywood starts were seen only on the big screen and whenever their films were released. Today, you can watch your favorite stars as many times as you want as they are all over the idiot box. With not many movies on the sets leaving bollywood starts twiddling their thumbs most of the time, they are now making a beeline to television. As if Amitabh Bachchan's Kaun Banega Crorepati or Salman Khan's Dus ka Dum and Big Box 4 were not enough, Akshay Kumar recently jumped into the fray with his Masterchef India a la Masterchef Australia.

So, can we say that the days of saas-bahu are over and after breaking apart a few families; viewers have finally seen through the game of brick bats and moved over to reality TV. B'wood celebs, of course, are no newcomers to TV; you see them there all the time-out-of-work actors, stars promoting their films, and then, those looking for an image makeover. But this time, it's television that

seems to be looking for an image refurbishment. And it's Bollywood to the rescue, with A-listers readily shrinking to the size of the idiot box. As the number of entertainment channels they are every minute competing for the TRPs and thus in an attempt to out beat each other, they are getting the best of the best available. They come in as anchors, as judges, as chefs, as performers and what have you with an aim to entertain the common man who earlier had to rush to the nearest theatre to see his favourite hero now does the same sitting in his home. But he is getting his fix to the maximum resulting in fear that over exposure might finally harm the image of Bollywood actors adversely affecting their films.

After couple of shows, these shows become star centric to the extent that once the star is removed, the vacuum created is impossible to fill. Remember what happened to KBC: once Amitabh for whatever reasons was not doing the show, Shahrukh Khan was roped in. Unfortunately, despite his popularity and mass fan base, he was

not acceptable to the show resulting in its failure. Now with Big B back on the show, TRP is just flying once again. Most contestants who come on his show are mostly for the two-minute of fame they get while spending time with the legend. Money certainly is important, yet not the only driving factor. While some turn into anchors, others hop from show to the next, from one TV channel to the next as a contestant or a judge or just as a viewer but producers make sure the presence of the star is felt. Contestants make a beeline for the show once a star is thrown in and their presence also generates a buzz big enough to make the viewers sit up and take notice.

Rakesh Anand

## Pandit Jasraj

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Though his CDs and music is available in stores, but to listen to him live at a concert is an experience of a life time. His inimitable devotional quality of singing together with the sanctity of the Sanskrit verses creates a highly charged atmosphere of the divine in the auditorium. He wears dark glasses on stage to avoid the bright lights but wants the lights on so he can see the audience and feel the pulse.

His collection of albums recorded for posterity, by prestigious national and international music companies is a virtual treasure trove for the music lover. As every maiden effort of an artist holds a special place in his life Pandit Jasraj's very first album with HMV was an LP, and contains a bandish composed by his father in raga Hamsadhwani and one of Pandit Jasrajji's own earlier bandishes, in raga Shuddh Baradi. Today, Pandit Jasraj's relentless pursuit, his passionate strife and his single-minded devotion to music have made him what he is.....The bright sun of Indian music...the glorious Sangeet Martand. ♦



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## **TRIPTA MUKHERJEE**

# **CLASSICAL MUSIC - A LIFE LONG SAGA**

*Tripti Mukherjee's journey in music started when she was just four years old and has never looked back. She has been with Pandit Jasraj since 1976 who took her into his tutelage after realizing her devotion and dedication to Hindustani classical music. And today she stands bright among the generation of musicians carrying forth the music from great masters of Pandit Jasraj's generation.*

She travels the world with her master, taking care of him, representing him when he is not able to and singing alongside him in concerts, reverberating the auditorium with her melodious voice. She was in Vancouver with her guru Pandi Jasraj, singing alongside him on stage, providing the melody with her resonant sweet voice which would put many singers creating hit music albums to shame. Tripti is blessed with a mellifluous divine voice, and with her tremendous passion and dedication, has honed musical skills, which are a seamless blend of sombre and rich elements. Her vocal renditions are characterized by delicate, refined and intricate qualities, with a tremendous depth in the power and conviction of her delivery. This balance is her unique forte. Pandit. Jasraj accepts few disciples; only those ready to dedicate their entire life to music, are taken in the fold. Traditionally, Indian classical music is passed down the generations through the Guru Shishya parampara. In this system of education, the Shishya, or disciple stays with his Guru and learns this art. Through constant exposure to the art and the life of the Guru, the Shishya imbibes knowledge.

Tripti Mukherjee undertook rigorous study under Pt. Jasraj. For years now, Tripti has taken upon herself the responsibility to spread India's rich culture and heritage in their purest forms throughout America. "Till a few years back, the pure tradition of vocal classical music was not prevalent in America at all. It was Bollywood music everywhere and to break into that arena is not easy. It took me a lot of time and help from the volunteers to reach the stage where we are now. Although Indian classical arts had found recognition in the U.S. in the form of dance or instrumental music, the pure tradition of vocal classical music was not prevalent in America over a decade ago," reminisces Tripti. Realizing this disparity, Tripti ventured to establish the first institute for vocal Indian classical music in the U.S., in the name of her guru, the Pandit Jasraj Institute for Music Research, Artistry and



Appreciation - the Mewati Gurukul.

Today the Institute has branches in New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania. In addition, the Institute reaches the community at large through a magazine called JasRangi, which publishes comprehensive articles written by students of PJIM, on history and theory of Indian classical music in a current cultural context. Through her tireless efforts, Tripti continues to pioneer ways of establishing Indian classical arts in America, providing an invaluable service to the Indian community.

Tripti Mukherjee has never left behind her primary identity as a performing artiste, carrying forward a musical tradition sculpted by her several gurus: Bharatkar Choudhary, Sunil Das, Prasun Banerjee, Sipra Bose, and of course Sangeet Martand Pandit Jasraj.. Tripti has been a Grade-A artiste on the All India Radio and National Television, having performed on the national programme. In addition, Triptiji has received great recognition for her stellar performances at the annual Pandit Motiram Pandit Maniram Sangeet Samaroh in Hyderabad, the Hari Vallabh Sangeet Samaroh in Jalandhar,

the Sawai Gandharva Music Festival in Pune and the Dover Lane Music Festival in Kolkata - India's prime music festivals. Besides her many performances in numerous cities in India and the U.S., her concert sites have included Carnegie Hall (New York), Tagore center (Berlin), Nairobi (Kenya), Bahrain Arts Performing Center, and Queen Elizabeth Hall (London).

But above all her performances, it was the invitation to perform at the White House in 2007 on the occasion of Diwali earned her the reputation to be the first Indian musician to ever perform at the White House. "Diwali is the only Indian festival celebrated at the White House and of course I was very pleased by the invitation." Her renditions of the Ganesh Vandana and Laxmi Vandana left a deep and lasting impression on the audience

As a child, Tripti took up Hindustani classical music not as a profession but as devotion for life. She never married but fortunately was never pressured by her parents to get married. "My father was very adamant that I should marry, settle down, have kids etc. But my mother supported me whole-heartedly. She said every girl can do that. There is nothing different in getting married. But giving your whole life to music and taking Hindustani classical music to the next level is not everyone's forte."

Along the way, she has earned tons of accolades. Triptiji's major awards include the Amir Khan Memorial Award, the Pandit Jasraj Gaurav Puraskar, the 'Pandita' award from University of Karnataka and the 'Acharya Shiromani' award from the music students in USA. When talking to Pandit Jasraj in Vancouver, he encouraged me to talk to Tripti instead as she is the next generation of upcoming Indian classical music. Said he of her, "What you hear when she sings with me on stage is just a fraction of the concert. You have to hear her sing alone to understand the depth in her voice and her calibre. Tripti's dedication to her art and

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