INDIAN SUN

The Life and Music of Ravi Shankar

By Oliver Craske. Faber & Faber. 658pp. ISBN 9780571250858

Reviewed by Andrew Robinson

Ravi Shankar, who introduced Indian music to the world in the 1950s and after, is a unique, challenging and fascinating figure for a biographer. Oliver Craske was the editor of Shankar’s autobiography Raga Mala (1997), and knows his life and work intimately. Now, after six years of intensive research and writing following the great musician’s death in 2012, comes Craske’s own study, Indian Sun, the very first biography of Shankar, published on the birth centenary of its subject.

It tells the story of a hugely creative but also highly troubled man, born in Benares in 1920, who barely knew his absentee father, lost his mother and favourite brother at an early age, suffered from childhood sexual abuse, contemplated suicide, and remained acutely lonely as an adult despite his worldwide star status, numerous affairs with women and friendships with leading musicians such as Yehudi Menuhin and George Harrison. Craske remarks in his Introduction that Shankar’s life “often resembled the music: swan-like serenity and this was true of many of Shankar’s early recordings”. In Shankar’s music, women were discarded my own sense of sexual self-worth in the 1950s and after, is a unique, challenging and fascinating figure for a biographer. Oliver Craske was the editor of Shankar’s autobiography Raga Mala (1997), and knows his life and work intimately. Now, after six years of intensive research and writing following the great musician’s death in 2012, comes Craske’s own study, Indian Sun, the very first biography of Shankar, published on the birth centenary of its subject.

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Though primarily famous as a concert performer on the sitar, Shankar composed a substantial number of film scores. He did so not only in Bollywood cinema, including Tapan Sinha’s Kshatriya (1957), but also in the West-for example, Jonathan Miller’s 1966 BBC version of Alice in Wonderland—the collaboration of a “sitarist” with a “sitarist”, jokes Craske—and Richard Attenborough’s Gandhi (1982), in which Shankar collaborated with George Fenton. But the Apu Trilogy undoubtedly inspired his greatest film music, especially in Pather Panchali and The World of Apu. Who can forget the grief-stricken wall of Apu’s mother after the death of her young daughter Durga—expressed not by her own voice but by the bowed stringed instrument known as the sarodeh playing a passage of high notes, transforming her grief into something nobler and universal?

As the profoundly musical Ray described in his 1970s sleeve notes for the Apu Trilogy LP, the composition and recording for Pather Panchali had to be done in Calcutta in less than a day to accommodate Shankar’s ongoing concert schedule. Ray recalled Shankar “humming, strumming, improvising and instructing at a feverish pace, and the indefatigable flautist-cum-assistant Alokde Dew transcoding the composer’s ideas into Indian notation and dealing out the foolish sheets to the tence handful who had to keep plucking and blowing and thumping with scarcely a breathing space”.

When Ray died in 1992, Shankar immediately recorded a new composition in honour of this “creative genius”. Entitled Farewell, My Friend, it intermingled two melody lines, one based on his immortal theme music for Pather Panchali, the second on the classical raga ‘Ahir Bhairav’. “While recording I had flashbacks of some of the wonderful time we spent together and poured my heart out through my music.”

Music apart, Ray’s personal interactions with Shankar were at times tense and frustrating; and this was true of many of Shankar’s relationships with artists and others, as Craske reveals. A key virtue of this fine biography is that it mostly resists the tendency to idealise Shankar. When Attenborough went to see India’s prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, in the early 1960s about his proposed film on Gandhi, Nehru advised him that it would be wrong to deify the Mahatma because “you are cultivating a man for that”. Craske fruitfully follows the spirit of Nehru’s advice in his always sensitive, if sometimes dauntingly detailed, portrait.

A season of films selected by Ravi Shankar’s daughter Anoushka Shankar to mark his birth centenary was due to play at the BFI, London, in April but has been postponed.

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