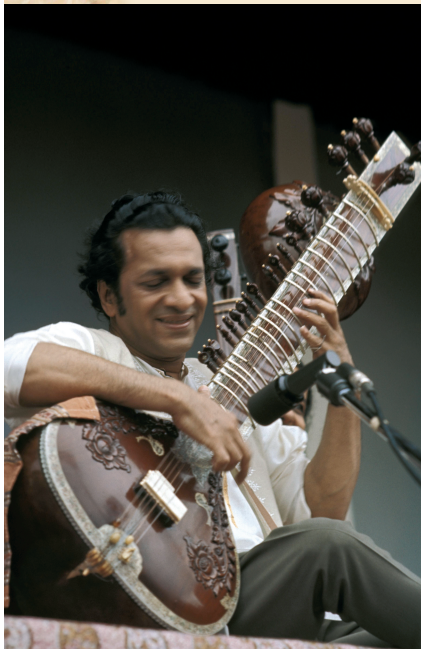


PERFORMANCE
PERSPECTIVE



Ravi Shankar, Sitar Player, Performing Maru-Bihag

The sitar player and composer Ravi Shankar exerted a greater influence on western culture than any other performer of Asian music in the twentieth century. Starting in the 1950s, he introduced audiences around the world to a new sonic universe in the art music of his homeland, India. At the same time, his collaborations with composers and performers from Philip Glass to the Beatles brought profound new ideas into our musical culture.

Shankar was born in 1920 in the ancient holy city of Benares (Varanasi), where he was surrounded by traditional music. At age ten, he left his country for Paris to participate in a dance troupe led by his oldest brother Uday, a famous dancer and choreographer. When he was eighteen, Shankar returned to India, where he spent seven and a half years studying the sitar with a master musician who became his *guru*, or teacher. "Taking a guru was the most important decision of my life," Shankar later recalled. "It demanded absolute surrender, years of fanatical dedication and discipline." He learned from his guru "how sacred music is, and how it should be kept that way when you perform."

Around 1956, after becoming prominent in India as a performer and composer, Shankar began to give concert tours around the world. He collaborated with distinguished western musicians such as the violinist Yehudi Menuhin and the composer Philip Glass, and composed concertos for sitar and orchestra, as well as works combining the sitar with the western flute and the Japanese koto (a plucked stringed instrument). It was through these creative encounters that ideas and concepts from Indian musical traditions spread into western musical practice. He showed that in Indian music, for example, improvisations "are not just letting yourself go, as in jazz—you have to adhere to the discipline of the ragas and the talas without any notation in front of you." This idea of "structured freedom" found its way into the music of Philip Glass and other composers. Shankar's performances also exemplified the idea that music has a spiritual role: "My goal has always been to take the audience along with me deep inside, as in meditation, to feel the sweet pain of trying to reach out for the supreme, to bring tears to the eyes, and to feel totally peaceful and cleansed."

It was this emphasis on the spiritual that made Shankar a superstar in the 1960s through his connection with the Beatles. In 1966, the Beatles went to India, where Shankar taught the sitar to their guitarist George Harrison. Subsequently, Harrison wrote songs permeated by the sounds of Indian music, including *Love Me To*, from the album *Revolver*. George Harrison has aptly said that Shankar merits the title "godfather of world music" because "he has shown it is possible to introduce an apparently alien art form successfully into another culture." In the late 1960s, Shankar performed before hundreds of thousands in rock festivals including Monterey and Woodstock.

Now in his eighties, Shankar still performs widely, and his musical legacy is continued by his two daughters in their early twenties: the sitar virtuoso Anoushka Shankar, who has made several solo albums and tours the world with her father's ensemble; and the pop singer Norah Jones, whose album *Come Away with Me* won five Grammys in 2002.

Ravi Shankar's performance of *Maru-Bihag* is included in the Brief CD Set.