

→ BEGINNER'S GUIDE

# PANDIT JASRAJ

Jameela Siddiqi delves into the lengthy career of India's most famous Hindustani devotional singer

Pandit Jasraj, who celebrated his 80th birthday in January, is one of the leading figures of North Indian classical vocal music and still able to demonstrate tremendous voice control over three-and-a-bit octaves. Best known for his recitals of *Haveli Sangeet* (temple music), he was born into a family tradition known as the *Mewati gharana*, (or family style, based in Jodhpur, Rajasthan). Jasraj shot to stardom in the 1970s, with his radical approach to classicism – captivating, haunting melody, delivered with a soft, velvety tonality, rounded off by delicate clusters of filigree-like embellishments. He couples this with an overt romanticism and flavours it with just the tiniest bit of sensual languor.

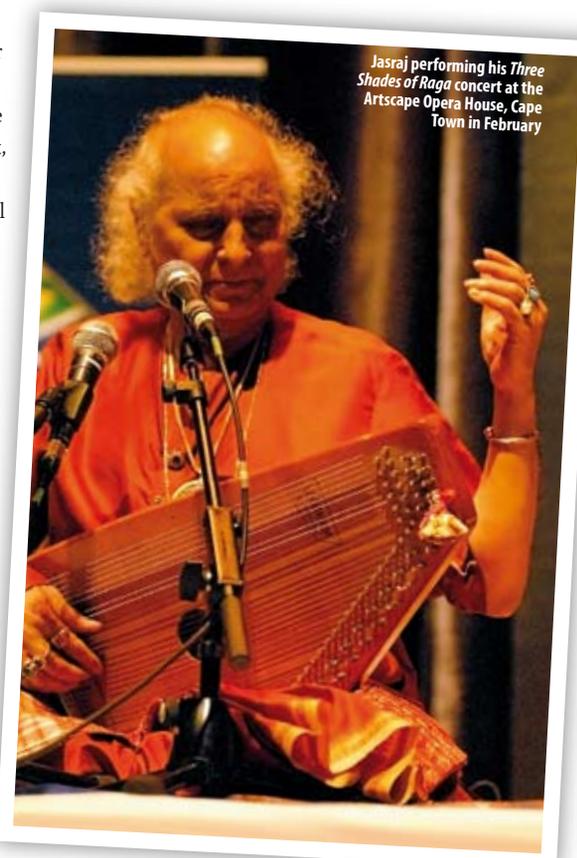
His unique style grabbed the imagination of a new generation of listeners who had felt alienated by the robustness of the mainstream classical technique.

Although not that well-known outside of India, Jasraj is to Hindu temple music what Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan was to *qawwali* – the devotional music of the Muslim Sufi mystics.

As Khan was largely responsible for the spread of *qawwali*, so is Jasraj, almost single-handedly, responsible for the popularity of *Haveli Sangeet*, a traditional temple style from one of northern India's primary spiritual paths known as *Krishna Bhakti* (or loving devotion to the Hindu god, Krishna).

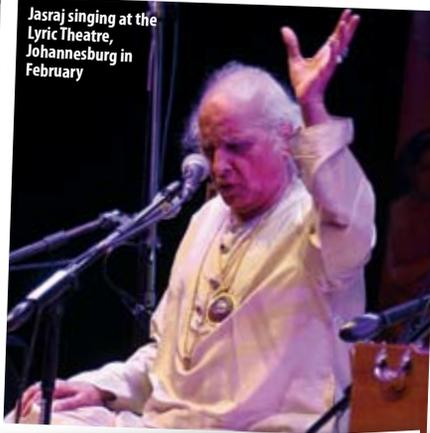
Music is inseparable from this path, also known as *Pushti Marg* (or way of grace) which was founded by Vallabhacharya (1479-1531) who, drawing inspiration from various ancient classical texts and poems, built up an entire worship cult around Krishna.

Jasraj specialises in these hymns sung before an idol of Krishna – believed to be an actual likeness – which is placed in the temple. The devotees who gather around the image don't merely perform a worship ritual, but actually treat the image as an honoured guest – one who must be served with



Jasraj performing his *Three Shades of Raga* concert at the Artscape Opera House, Cape Town in February

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*tan-man-dhan* (body, mind, wealth) in an act known as *seva*, (service with loving devotion). The same spirit of *seva* is used by Jasraj to embellish every single word, microtone and musical note.

The songs speak of various anecdotes and legends about Krishna, the famous flute-playing god whose music mesmerised the *gopis* (milkmaids) of Vrindavan – an ancient forest region of North India – so much so that whenever his flute was heard, they would abandon whatever they were doing and follow him into the forest. The story is allegorical in that the flute represents the call

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of the divine which entices and soothes but also causes restlessness – for union with the beloved – in the devotee. Krishna is also an important embodiment of the idea that God is everywhere, yet liable to be somewhat elusive if the devotee seeks him outside, instead of searching within.

It is not surprising that Jasraj, who began his musical training as a *tabla* player, should become the main proponent of this devotional style because, as he says, it was Krishna himself who appeared to Jasraj in a dream and ordered him to sing instead of playing the *tabla*.

Jasraj has an immensely rich tonal quality and his voice is unusual in that it combines the opposing characteristics of austerity and opulence so that his performances can come across as richly ornamented as well as musically chaste – an essential requirement of devotional vocal music.

The Jasraj style is one in which the rules of pure classical music are upheld with the added task of paying utmost attention to the clarity of the lyrics. Generally, in Indian classical vocal music, the spoken word is not as important as the purity of the musical note, but where devotional vocal music is concerned, offering the opportunity to directly praise a deity, both word and note have to be 100% on the mark – something that Jasraj manages to do, seemingly, without great effort.

The songs, although performed on stage, closely follow the temple format in which the main refrain is set by the chief soloist and then repeated several times by devotees. The repetition of key phrases, as well as Krishna's name, serve to heighten spiritual awareness and can lead to a trance-like state.

Jasraj has also made his mark by introducing a brand new form of *jugalbandi* (duet) in which male and female voices are simultaneously blended into many different *ragas*. A radical departure from the rules of Indian classical music, the form known as *jasrangi jugalbandi* has, nevertheless, been eagerly received by fans and critics alike. ●

# BEST...

## ...ALBUMS



### Haveli Sangeet (Navras)

The best examples of recorded *Haveli Sangeet*. Volume One is probably the world's first live recording of this style. Authentically, Jasraj begins with an invocation – his ability to turn any venue into a place of worship is quite remarkable – and the stage is set for what is to follow. Starting with a track in which the devotee pleads to be housed at the lotus feet of the lord, we are treated to all those songs relating to the more mischievous antics of Krishna – like when he steals the clothes of Radha and the *gopis* (milkmaids) while they're bathing in the river.



### Haveli Sangeet Vol 2 (Navras)

The follow-up album, released some years later, contains the memorable 'Laal Gopal Gulaal Hamare,' a song in praise of Krishna. Both albums also have violin accompaniment by virtuoso and disciple Kala Ramnath (see below).



### Jugalbandi Series: Live At Shivaji Park, Mumbai (Navras) featuring Pandit Jasraj (vocals) & Pandit Hariprasad Chaurasia (flute)

In orthodox circles, two soloists playing a *jugalbandi* (duet) is a relatively modern concept and, as such, might pass off as fusion. The second volume features one of the best renditions of 'Raga Jaijaiwanti.' Chaurasia's flute provides the perfect counterpoint for Jasraj's vocals, while Zakir Hussain is simply brilliant on *tabla*. It really can't get much better than this.



### Darbar (Sense World Music)

This has the most wonderful opening invocation in 'Raga Darbari Kannada' along with the very rare 'Raga Bhinnashadja,' a pentatonic evening *raga* which is used for a song in praise of Krishna. Jasraj treats all music as devotional and even when singing *khayal* (romantic, classical song) he conveys the same intense spirituality in every phrase.



### Soul Food (Sense World Music)

His performance of the 'Raga Maru Behag' (also spelt Bihag) on this disc is tantamount to a deep and utterly dedicated worship ritual. The final track is one of Jasraj's all-time biggest hits – the *bhajan* (Hindu devotional hymn) 'Om Namoh Bhagawate Vasudevaya' with some fantastic *pakhavaj* (ancient, barrel-shaped drum) sounds.



## IF YOU LIKE JASRAJ, THEN TRY... KALA RAMNATH



### Samaya (Sense World Music)

One of Jasraj's distinguished pupils is the violinist Kala Ramnath. Although there are no obvious successors to Jasraj, Ramnath's violin-playing soars to some giddy heights, very much in the Mewati style of Jasraj. A Top of the World review in #56.

SENSE WORLD MUSIC