

LITERATURE & ARTS

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A Tribute to Ravi Shankar

The tribute to Pandit Ravi Shankar, the Indian music legend, by one of his famous collaborators Ehud Menuhin is fitting and remarkable: "Ravi Shankar has brought me a precious gift and through him I have added a new dimension to my experience of music. To me, his genius and his humanity can only be compared to that of Mozart's."

Ravi Shankar was a multifaceted personality. He was a musician, composer, writer and teacher – all rolled into one. His six decade long career was full of a rich saga which would be difficult to describe in a small piece like this one. His name is so much etched in popular memory in the west and the east, his contribution so rich, verdant and enduring; geniuses like Ravi Shankar continue to remain alive in the hearts and minds of music lovers around the world. In death, he remains immortal.

Applying the Sanskrit terminology, Ravi Shankar was a Karma yogi. His life was a life of action. He produced ceaselessly till he breathed his last on 11 December 2012. His old age could not be a fetter when he last performed along with her daughter Anoushka Shankar at Long Beach in California on 4 November 2012, at the age of 92. His contributions were so enormous it would be difficult to fill all in one piece of paper. Winner of three Grammy awards, and two more posthumously, composers of music of great films like Gandhi, an avant-garde musician impacting the hippy culture in America in sixties, a dear to Beatles particularly George Harrison, Ravi Shankar was not an individual person, but was a cult, an embodiment of music in its highest form. Harrison called him 'Godfather of the world music.'

Ravi Shankar's website succinctly describes his contribution. It would be apt here to quote from it: "Always ahead of his time, Ravi Shankar has written three concertos for sitar and orchestra, last one of which in 2008. He has also authored violin-sitar compositions for Yehudi Menuhin and himself, music for flute virtuoso Jean Pierre Rampal, music for Hosan Yamamoto, master of the Shakuhachi and Musumi Miyashita - Koto virtuoso, and has collaborated with Phillip Glass (Passages). George Harrison produced and participated in two record albums, 'Shankar Family & Friends' and 'Festival of India' both composed by Ravi Shankar. Ravi Shankar has also composed for ballets and films in India, Canada, Europe and the United States. The latter of which includes the films 'Charly,' 'Gandhi,' and the 'Apu Trilogy'. In the period of the awakening of the younger generation in the mid 60's, Ravi Shankar gave three memorable concerts - Monterey Pop Festival, Concert for Bangla Desh, and The Woodstock Festival."

Ravi Shankar was born Robindro Shaunkor Chowdhury in a Bengali Brahmin family in the religious city of Varanasi in India on 7 April 1920. Youngest among the four brothers, Shankar joined the eldest brother Uday Shankar, another legendry figure and dancer, in Europe tour. He left dancing in 1938 and developed interest in sitar, and learned it from the famous musician Allauddin Khan of Maihar court in the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. After rigorous training, Shankar shifted to Mumbai and joined Indian People's Theatre Association, and started working in All India Radio and HMV India. His star

rose faster and he started composing music for famous movies like Pather Panchali, composing music for the famous Indian song *sare jahane accha*, and Hindi films like *Godaan* and *Anuradha*. His tour of Europe, the United States, and Australia in 1961 made him immensely popular. In 1966 he met George Harrison of the Beatles brand in London and their relationship became enduring.

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh paid tribute in glowing words and called him “a national treasure and global ambassador of India’s cultural heritage.” Perhaps the most important contribution of Ravi Shankar is to introduce Indian music to the West. Ravi Shankar Foundation’s official recording label called East Meets West Music is reflective of this resolve. He was also a great learner. He blended the north Indian music with the south Indian Carnatic music. The Beatles’ song ‘Within You Without You’ was influenced by Indian classical music as introduced by Ravi Shankar. He believed that there could be a synthesis between the music of the east and the music of the west.

In this regard, he has similarities with the 19th century Hindu spiritual leader and philosopher, Swami Vivekananda, though both espoused different thinking and life practices. The similarity is while Vivekananda introduced Hindu religion to the west Shankar introduced Indian music to the west. It is famously said that one of the great contributions of the America to India is Swami Vivekananda as it was his famous Chicago speech in 1893 and later discourses in America that made him popular, the same could be said about Ravi Shankar. Though he contributed to the world of music before his forays into the America, it was indeed his works in America, his collaborations with great musicians in the west that made Ravi Shankar immensely popular. Perhaps it may not be an exaggeration to say that Ravi Shankar was more popular in the west than in the east.

Besides a great musician, Ravi Shankar was also a great philanthropist. During the crisis in 1971 when millions of refugees rushed to India from West Pakistan, Ravi Shankar along with his collaborator Harrison organized a famous concert called Bangladesh concert to raise money for the refugees. The concert was successful. Not only that, it also inspired many others to contribute to the cause of the refugees.

India has a tradition to court its famous men and women in foreign countries. In 1986, Ravi Shankar was invited by Indian government to be a member of the upper house of the Parliament, called Rajya Sabha (Council of States). He was awarded the highest civilian award Bharat Ratna by India in 1999. He taught music to disciples world wide and left a mark. In the words of one of his disciples, “Surely, the world knows Guruji as one of the greatest musicians and countless articles have been written about him for decades. Aside from the music I was privileged to learn from him; I was fortunate to see the human side of this great artist as well. His childlike enthusiasm to learn and live life to the fullest, his humility, and his humour – like a true “guru,” he taught me not just music but about life itself.”

Certainly the absence of Ravi Shankar had left a void in the world of music. He not only influenced music lovers across continents and other divides, he also pointed to us how music could bring human beings together. In his life as well as in his death, Ravi Shankar would remain a shining example how a man from a modest background could conquer the world by the sheer power of his music and passion. He was not only an icon or a cult hero; he was also a human being who could understand the pulse of others, who could captivate millions by his music by drawing them to his orbit of love and compassion.

While receiving the Grammy Awards for their late father on 11 February 2013, Ravi Shankar's daughters, Norah Jones and Anoushka Shankar echoed the admirers of the legendary musician. Anoushka said, "It was 60 days ago today that he passed away. It's kind of difficult to be standing up here...My father always said that music could create world peace because it had the potential to raise the consciousness of people... When I watched him play what moved me was this incredible meditative state where he could take people." It may also be apt to say that rarely in human ages such geniuses are born.



MURAKEÖZY, Éva Patrícia

Leiden Pearls

On my way to the exhibition *Pearls in the Arts, Nature and Dance*, I have met a girl called Gonya. We engaged in conversation when I accidentally stepped on her feet in the train – I did not see her standing there. She was not complaining at all, rather, she got enthusiast and treated me as an unexpected gift of Fate. She told me about her speciality: she could live in the skin. «When I am there», she said, giving me an excuse at the same time, «I am almost invisible.»

Then she told me how it happened: slowly with the years her skin was growing ever thinner until it felt transparent. And there came a day when she could see the sausage going in at one side of her and appearing on her other side. The only difference was that what she saw “inside” was not the sausage itself but her mother quarrelling with uncle Paul. Uncle Paul lost his half stomach due to excessive drinking and was forbidden to eat sausage and got nervous every time when he sniffed it out. Gonya also told me that beyond such small distortions, due to personal memories, there were identical lands on both sides. It did not matter much at which side she was looking at. Out of curiosity, I touched her skin: it felt silky, even, and intensely warm.

The train stopped, we took off and headed together towards the museum building. A grey thick fog, hardly penetrable for the light of the street lamps, blanketed us benignly. As we advanced in the mist, I heard the sounds of a far-away drum. The pale lights of the street lamps disappeared and we were surrounded by reddish-brown darkness. The drumming became louder and faster. It reverberated in my stomach, plucked the strings inside my bones and evoked deep remembrances of a onetime tribal existence. Drawings appeared, of women lost in the fervour of accelerated dance; their bodies disappearing in the swirl, letting see but a few arms and legs, each adorned richly with pearls. All was made of tightly placed curling lines.



Kinke Kooi: Eternal Dance (2003) 37*53 cm, © Copyright Kinke Kooi

Then we saw the young Aboriginal girl, Siluce, floating in the sea. She went to pearl hunting with her friends but swam astray when a fish enticed her. A sudden tropical storm hit the waters. Huge waves, sized of a three-storey building, carried her away from her beautiful home. Like a pearl torn out from the shell, her body floated unintentionally in the sea.

Siluce was brought finally to the faraway, cold and cloudy Northern Low Countries, inside a pearl shipment. She was sad and lonely, stripped of her youthful innocence, more beautiful than ever. She got placed in a jewellery box, just like the Barbie of Marlene Dumas.



Marlène Dumas: Barbie (1997), © Copyright Marlène Dumas

After some time, Siluce looked around in the jewellery box, and bit by bit began to discover the contents of the partitions. The more she saw the more astonished she became. New jewels turned up at every corner; gold necklaces with ruby beads, earring sets studded with pearls, emerald bracelets, diamond brooches, gold filigree cameos... She found herself engulfed with a lust for wealthy objects, enslaved to a love for luxury. She would put a handful of pearls in her mouth and let them slowly rolling down her youthful body. Just like in *Chasing Pearls*, a film of Michael Schumacher (2012).

By her thirties, Siluce gradually overcame all the decadent extremes. She expanded to a big two-story house, gloriously enlit, which emitted a welcoming air of warmth, comfort and stability. She got

populated with children and found her place in the vicinity of other houses; on her left stood a sombre-looking house, with just a few windows lit, on her right we saw a little coquette, with curly ornaments and a pigeonaire, while further away we found several shy, always-locked houses. No doubt: Siluce was by far the most attractive among them.

Siluce invited us into her realm of utter feminine beauty.



*Kinke Kooi: Digging (2011), 80*57 cm, © Copyright Kinke Kooi*

It was made of densely curling pencil lines which embraced us within their feminin world, enmeshed in the double realm of inside and outside. We looked behind the rich curtains between the thumb and the index finger and admired the myriad of little wonders.

We left Siluce, promised her to return soon and climbed to the upper floor. I soon forgot about my promise as I looked around. Great enthusiasm filled me. At first I thought that we went astray and

bumped into a nature history museum depot. I strongly hoped I had enough time to look around before a warden chases us off.

The first thing I saw was a pod of dolphin skeletons and a bale of preserved sea turtles swimming in the air. It looked so weird but also enthralling. Often skeletons appear as mute remainders of a one-time organism, as silent mementos to death. (Beyond doubt, the sight of a few skeletons scattered in a vast sea of sand dunes is quite depressing. Especially, I heard, if one's water/diesel reserves are running low.) However, these flocks of skeletons swimming above my head were not depressing. They were the Form, more precisely: the many individual forms that the invisible entity called bottlenose dolphin creates. They created wonder and respect in me.

Further away, I saw several collages of paper cuttings. The carefully arranged small pieces of paper, through their form and arrangement, reminded of bones bleached white in the sun. They evoked an ancient, totemistic effect. As if –acknowledging our inability to understand the complex natural order– we would create a new, simplified, esthetical order.



Sea scene (2012). Decoupages on light box. Courtesy Willem Barentsz galerie.

In the far left corner, little carved idols were lined up on a shelf together with jarred sea animals. Such jars, containing the murky remains of some animal specimen, are usually very sad to look at. Dispossessed of their original context and meaning, bathing in liquid preservative instead of seawater, the colourless, swollen bodies are trapped for ever in the process of decomposition. This installation, however, looked harmonious and created positive excitement and I did not know of it was for the smile of the little idols or the pairing of the innocent beauty with the beast.

On the right side of the room I saw a series of sculptures representing humans. I saw a flattened body, positioned like a victim of the 76 A.C. Pompeii eruption, the fleshless skin dried to the bones: what a perfect material for studying the bony structure!



Atelier Joep van Lieshout: Emaciated (2009), Cradle to cradle, © Copyright AVL

Next to it, an absurdly contorted female body standing on all fours ruffled my feathers: the abdomen was cut open and its content: intestines, uterus, bladder, ureter -still connected to the body- were solicitously exposed. It may have been for their whitish color and facelessness that the above sculptures were dwarfed in awfulness by two monstrous diving suits hooked on the ceiling. Heavy and cumbersome, the suits were hanging like water monsters and exhaled an air of annihilation. All of these objects were glorious examples of the analysing extremes of the Western mind.

Further to the right I found large show-cases filled with ceramic objects. Peacefully and in huge quantity rested the ceramics there, like amphorai in the hold of an ancient shipwreck - quite unaware of the rest of the room.

I was wandering around fervently, filled with excitement by the myriad of impressions. I might have left the path of Siluce and Gonya had definitely faded away. I found myself among historical objects: it was one of the rooms of the permanent exhibition. I saw two huge canvases on the subject of «Leiden's ontzet», the siege of Leiden. It occurred during the Eighty Years war when the Dutch revolted against the Spanish rule. During the siege thousands of inhabitants died of starvation. At a critical moment Mayor van der Werff inspired his citizens to hold on by offering his body as food (they did not eat him). Finally, on the 3rd of October, 1574 Leiden was relieved and ships carried provisions to the inhabitants. (The first food that got into the city was herring and white bread. Ever since 3 October is the biggest festivity in Leiden when the municipality distributes free herring and bread.)



Mattheus Ignatius van Bree: Mayor Pieter Adriaensz. van der Werff offers his sword to the people, (1816-1817), collection Museum de Lakenhal, Leiden



Erwin Olaf: Liberty – Plague and Hunger during the Siege of Leiden (2011), collection Museum de Lakenhal, Leiden

I was looking at the two pieces hanging in each other's proximity: the historicizing painting of *van Bree* created between 1816 and 1817 and the 21st century's photomontage of *Erwin Olaf*. One thing struck me deeply. There was an obvious difference in the behaviour of the citizens. A strong emotion was depicted on *van Bree's* painting; I could almost see that all the surrounding houses had been emptied, that the community was suffering together, as a whole, and I saw that its leader was ready to die for it. On the contrary, *Erwin Olaf's* work depicts many individual stories, many independent unities. Nothing, but the common space they happen to occupy keeps the people together. There is no big drama, just many small dramas. How true!

I kept wandering for some time. I saw the wonderful winged altarpiece from Lucas of Leyden and many other great artworks. And I went back, again and again.

Pearls in the Arts, Nature and Dance was a very successful exhibition designed by choreographer *Karin Post* who combined dance, visual arts, literature and natural history in one display. Temporary exhibits were superbly combined with elements of the permanent collection; individual artworks got often placed in a wider dramaturgical context. The exhibition took place in the Museum de Lakenhal, Leiden, The Netherlands, between 15 September 2012 and 13 January 2013.

