

Asia

Lata Mangeshkar The Legend

Manteca MANTDBL510
Budget Price (2 CDs; 145 mins)

★★★★★

Sublime collection from one of the greatest ever voices



The name Lata Mangeshkar is the first – and last – in film music. There are many gems here – too many to mention

individually – but among them is the song 'Aayega Anawaala'. Taken from the film *Mahal*, a spooky psychological thriller released in 1949, the song is thought to have launched Lata's sparkling career. For those who grew up on Indian cinema (I refuse to use the derogatory term 'Bollywood'), it's impossible to disentangle the hazy childhood memories of powerful silvery visuals of a moodily back-lit female – tresses of long hair flying due to the wind machine – miming to Lata's voice – however brilliant the song may be.

Lata could tackle classical and quasi-classical melodies with an ease that forced even the haughtiest, most arrogant of purist classical maestros to sit up and take notice. (One distinguished *khayal* singer once admitted to remaining glued to the radio listening to Lata, waiting for her to produce a false note.) These pure classicists could not even have dreamed of aping Lata's impeccable lyrical diction. Singing for Indian films is tough. Not only do you need perfect voice control, to the same



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degree as a pure classical singer, but you also need some voice-acting talent. On top of which, a flawless Urdu/Hindi accent, with every word standing out as clear as though it were being spoken rather than sung, is a must. Add to that some heavy duty Urdu

poetry alongside some of the most difficult *taans* (melodic passages) of pure classical *raga*, and you've got your work cut out for you. Check out 'Piya Tohse Naina Laage Re' (Lover, my Eyes are Locked with Yours), to hear a gloriously difficult rhythm arranged for four kinds of dance styles – composed by S D Burman, father of the famous R D Burman.

This is an absolutely lovely reminder of Lata's zenith. From the 40s down to the present day – although we don't hear too much from her now – Lata Mangeshkar has defined what it means to be the best.

Jameela Siddiqi

Lalith Rao Raga Darbari Kanhada/ Raga Desh

Ocora C560201
Full Price (73 mins)

★★★★★

Bittersweet ragas from a rough'n'smooth voice



Lalith Rao's North Indian vocal style has the clear hallmark of the legendary Ustad Faiyaz Khan, a leading light of the Agra *gharana* (family style) of music. This is immediately obvious in the first piece. It features a specific kind of *alap* (slow introduction), audible on track two, in what is known as the *nom-tom* style – something that Faiyaz Khan excelled at. Also, the fact that this happens to be

the 'Raga Darbari Kanhada' adds another element of weightiness, since this king of *ragas* readily lends itself to the chaste, heavy-duty treatment it receives on this album. In a complete contrast, the second piece (beginning at the CD's track five) is the lighter 'Raga Desh'. The raga's title means 'homeland', and it's homesickness that often comes across in its execution, owing to its unmistakable echoes of nostalgia and undertones of longing for a long-lost past. Here, it's absolutely perfect, with Lalith Rao's voice carrying just the right mixture of buttery smoothness and cement-like grit (just as Faiyaz Khan's used to). The composition is in the genre of *tarana*, which means it consists only of syllables (instead of lyrics). The idea is that the esoteric quality of the syllables are so laden with spiritual depth and significance that there really

is no need for words. Lalith Rao certainly lives up to that promise – never mind the rest, just listen to the final few phrases and the languorously calm ending, which alone are proof enough.

Jameela Siddiqi

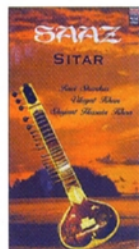
Ravi Shankar, Vilayat Khan, Shujaat Hussain Khan

Saaz: Sitar

Music Today CDA05109AB
Mid Price (2CDs; 115 mins)

★★★★★

Excellent intro to the best of modern sitar playing



This pair of CDs is a predictable, straightforward but well thought-out introduction to the *sitar*, here represented by three of modern India's finest players – Ravi Shankar, Vilayat Khan and the younger Shujaat Hussain Khan (son of Vilayat). The first two represent – indeed, have largely created – modern sitar playing, from Ravi Shankar's *dhrupad*-inspired *alaps* (the unmetred introductions which present the *raga*) to Vilayat Khan's *gayaki-ang*, or vocal, style (drawing on the *gamaka*, or ornamentation, of the vocal traditions of *khayal*). All this is clearly outlined in the brief, but admirably succinct liner notes, which also provide a short description of the instrument itself.

As for the musical performances... well, with first-class musicians such as these, you really can't go wrong. From the beginning of the album Ravi Shankar's measured and thoughtful approach to the *alap* is evident, as is his characteristic use of the lower strings. Vilayat Khan, on the other hand, puts in a dazzling series of improvisations, showing off his formidable technique, into which is incorporated the twists and turns of his ever-inventive mind. As these are the two towering figures of the modern sitar, it is highly appropriate that the pair of them occupy the bulk of time on the discs. However, it is good to note that at least one track has been reserved for Shujaat Hussain, who is perhaps the most innovative and exciting of the new generation of sitar players. Here he puts in a fabulous and incredibly virtuosic performance of one of my favourites, 'Raga Darbari Kanada'.

Maria Lord

Kartik Sheshadri Illuminations

Traditional Crossroads 8070243262
Full Price (63 mins)

★★★★★

Wistful and romantic sitar strains



Kartik Sheshadri began performing at the age of six. He specialises in the distinctive and pure styles of *senia* (a word related to 'Tansen, who was the foremost court musician at the court of Mughal Emperor Akbar in the 1500s) and *dhrupad* (austere, classical song) traditions. Sheshadri's recitals have always been characterised with a degree of restraint coupled with a rich tonal sensibility and the most extraordinary rhythmic intricacy. Notwithstanding the digital age's excellent sound quality, it feels as though one has been allowed a privileged glimpse of a bygone era.

The disc starts with the romantic, late-evening 'Raga Anandi Kalyan', with the *alap* (slow introduction) played on *sitar* alone and strictly in line with the *beenkar* style (as attributed to Tansen), which dictates a slow unfolding of the spiritual aspect – in step with the gradual revelation of its musical content. The second piece on the CD is 'Raga Basant Mukhari', one associated with breezy late mornings in spring that typically uses many flat notes. The result is a hauntingly romantic, devotional melody that has the feel of a light classical *dhun* (lyrical melody). Undoubtedly, this is sitar at its lyrical best.

Jameela Siddiqi

Soname Yangchen Unforgettable Land

Fortunate Recordings FOR001
Full Price (48 mins)

★★★

Enterprising DIY singer finally gets herself heard



Although Tibetan music has become more accessible recently, only a few stars have gained prominence. To hear a new young talent emerge is always exciting. This debut CD of Soname Yangchen is an exceptional achievement: with minimum support, she wrote, performed, produced and promoted the recording herself in 2000 – only now is it being more widely distributed. Rightly so, for Soname has