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HIS RECORDING features two

plucked stringed instruments, which have a long history and high status in India. The Sitār is already well-known in the West, and the Surbahār has gained a comparable esteem almost entirely through the efforts of its leading exponent, Ustād Imrat Khan. He is a member of the greatest family of Sitār players which stretches back several generations to the famous Ustāds (Muslim master musicians) of the Mughal courts, where modern North Indian classical music was developed. He and his elder brother, Ustād Vilayat Khan who guided his early development, and their sons constitute the most formidable group of Sitār maestros of modern times, if not in the whole history of the instrument. Not only has this family made important contributions to the development of the Sitār but it has also pioneered the Surbahār for performing the slow, dignified styles of North Indian classical music. To call the Surbahār a bass Sitār is only to convey a small part of its enormous expressive range and richness of tone which this recording has been able to capture. Traditionally it is played unaccompanied, and one could easily say that any other instrument would detract from its beautiful and noble sound. For his performance on the Sitār, Imrat Khan is joined on the Tablā by Shafaatullah Khan, the youngest of his four sons, all of them gifted concert performers. Shafaatullah Khan received his training in the authentic Rampur Gharānā style from Ustād Ibrahim Khan, and has accompanied his father and brothers all over the world.

Both the Sitār and Surbahār are long-necked fretted instruments, with a gourd resonator at the lower end and a number of metal strings which are either plucked or which vibrate sympathetically. Two strings, called Cikārī, are tuned an octave apart to the base note, called Sa. These strings are never stopped but are plucked to provide an intermittent drone and to punctuate the melodic phrases and reinforce rhythmic patterns. In the tradition of Imrat Khan the Sitār has four other playing strings: the main one tuned to the fourth degree, Ma, the second string to the Sa below, and the other two, unstopped like the Cikārī strings, to prominent notes of the Rāg. The pitch relationship between the Surbahār and the Sitār is similar to that between the cello and

violin, although the actual interval between the Surbahār and Sitār is an octave and a fourth.

On both instruments the left hand stops the main playing strings, mostly with either the first or second finger, placed just behind the appropriate fret. The most distinctive and important element of the technique, however, involves pulling the string sideways, thereby making the instruments capable of reproducing the slides and other graces of vocal music which are the very heart of Indian music. Assiduous practice is necessary in order to develop the strength and ability to control the intonation and quality of the notes, and it is in the Vilayat and Imrat Khan tradition that this technique has found its greatest refinement. Vocal music is never far from their art, as is indeed the case with all leading Indian musicians. The fact that such fluid, melismatic lines can be produced on plucked instruments is quite remarkable. The strings are plucked with a metal plectrum, called Mizrāb, which is clipped tightly on the first finger of the right hand. In fast and exciting music the up and down plucking motions of the right hand are extremely rapid, but in the slow and meditative Ālāp, at the beginning of the performance, whole phrases can be released from a single stroke of the Mizrāb, the pulling technique of the left hand and the natural resonance of the instrument being the means of prolonging the melody. The Surbahār, with its lower pitch and greater size, can achieve this even better than the Sitār, which is why musicians who have mastered it, such as Imrat Khan, often prefer to use it for the Ālāp part of the performance, in which the Rāg is gradually unfolded in slow, expressive phrases. The Sitār can then be used for the faster kinds of music, with accompaniment on the Tablā (the two hand-beaten drums most commonly used in North Indian classical music). This is what happens on this disc.

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The two Rāgs on this disc are clearly related, at least in name, since they both come from the Todī (Torī) group of morning Rāgs. The relationship extends to their actual creation. The first one, “Mīyā’s Todī”, is attributed to Mīyā Tānsen, the great musician at the court of the sixteenth-century Mughal

Emperor, Akbar. The second, “Bilās Khān’s Todī”, is credited to Tānsen’s son. Imrat Khan’s own musical lineage can be traced back to both these seminal forces in the history of Indian music.

For the major part of his performance (on the Surbahār) Ustād Imrat Khan has chosen a suitably grand and serious Rāg, capable of extended treatment in the hands of a master. The mood of this, and any Rāg which Imrat Khan plays on the Surbahār, is meditative and devotional. Such music is traditionally performed to a small group of knowledgeable listeners who expect the Rāg to be developed fully, without superficial virtuosity or hurried treatment.

Most Rāgs of the Todī group use all seven notes of the Indian scale: Sa Re Ga Ma Pa Dha Ni, which correspond to the Western Doh Re Mi etc. Rāg Mīyā kī Todī itself has a flat Re, Ga and Dha, and a sharp Ma. The fifth, Pa, is treated in a special manner (and in some Todī Rāgs it is avoided altogether). To Imrat Khan, its treatment in the Mīyā kī Todī suggests the sun appearing from the clouds, only to disappear again. The way just this one note is used in the performance tells much about the great subtlety of Indian music. It is hardly played at all in the early stages, and its lack of stability is conveyed by avoiding any sense of emphasis or resting on it. As the Ālāp progresses, and as the sun rises higher in the sky, so the note Pa begins to shine more brightly, so it emerges more clearly only in the upper register.

The performance begins with the main strings and then the sympathetic strings struck to check the tuning and to prepare for what follows, which is an extended Ālāp. After the essential Sa has been established, the flattened sixth, Dha flat, becomes a note of special emphasis. The structure of the Ālāp follows the classical tradition of gradually unfolding the Rāg, note by note or in groups of a few notes, first in the generally descending line towards the very low Sa, and then in a protracted ascent to the upper Sa and beyond. This full treatment, in which the Rāg is explored in all its detail in a methodical process of gradual revelation with notes and phrases continually varied in subtle ways, is called Vistār Ālāp, and few instruments can equal the Surbahār in its ability to meet the demands of this stern yet serene exploration of the Rāg.

After this Ālāp comes a shorter section, called Jor, in which Ālāp-type phrases are set to a pulse, and the music gradually gains momentum. When the musician is as versatile as Imrat Khan, and can expound a Rāg on both the Surbahār and Sitār, it is customary at this point to leave the Surbahār and take up the Sitār to introduce a composition, called Gat, set to a Tāl (time cycle) and accompanied on the Tablā. The change of instruments and kind of music also tends to change the mood, so it is common to change the Rāg accordingly.

Although a Rāg of the Toḍī group, this no longer has the characteristic Toḍī scale of the previous Rāg, and will therefore sound completely different. The Ma is now natural, and the Ni is flat (as well as the Re, Ga, and Dha, as before). Careful listening, however, reveals that the way the notes are treated is generally typical of Toḍī Rāgs: the Dha flat is important, followed by the Ga flat. In addition Bilāshkhanī Toḍī has a number of complicated melodic movements which test the musician, especially in fast passages.

The drone instrument, Tambūrā, is added to the performance, and its four strings, tuned to Pa, Sa, Sa, and Sa an octave below, are clearly audible at the beginning. A short Ālāp is performed to establish the Rāg. Soon a typical Sitār Gat (composition) in slow Tīntāl (16 beats), is begun and this signals the Tablā player, Shafaatullah Khan, to join the performance. Recognition of the beats in this slow tempo is aided by his subdivision of the second beat into four. Within the repeating cycle the Sitār can develop rhythmic complexity and fast passages (Tāns) which distinguish its music from that of the Surbahār, and which are also particularly difficult in this Rāg. After a very short pause, Imrat Khan introduces a different Gat, again in Tīntāl, but in a fast tempo. (In both Gats the note Ga flat falls on the first beat of the Tāl, which adds to its importance). The faster tempo and increasingly virtuosic Tāns characteristic of Sitār music help to bring the performance to an exciting conclusion.