

Charu Suri - The Book of Ragas (Vol.2)

Album Review – Drew Jarvie

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Mixing genres within music isn't a new idea, Purcell did it, Debussy did it, Faith No More do it, sometimes it works brilliantly as in the Beastie Boys album 'Hello Nasty', as much as I love that album, they attempt to much but sometimes you can come across an album that brings music to a different level almost mesmeric, hypnotic seemingly effortless. Indian Raga music is perfect for this, when it meets Jazz, both improvised and traditional, new heights of enlightenment can be reached. Like the Beastie Boys Charu Suri, whose music is no stranger here, is based in New York, is a fantastic musician, a brilliant pianist who surrounds herself with like-minded and equally brilliant musicians. I can almost feel Pharoah Sanders, John Coltrane and their friends eagerly wanting to join in. I can almost feel the late Mark Hollis (Talk Talk) falling in love with these sounds. I can almost feel George Harrison and Ravi Shankar looking at each other and saying, job done! I would agree with all of them!

First the musicians, as mentioned Charu Suri on piano, Falsa – Sufi singer and Jesse Garbasi on all things percussion. A stunning line-up, a stunning collage of music.

The opening track 'Raga Jaunpuri' begins with a ground bass (repeated bass line) played in a staccato fashion, in an 8/8-time signature, two groups of three quavers followed by a group of 2 quavers. (Count 123, 123, 12). Skillfully brushed cymbals and snare drum enter quickly before Falsa's wonderful mystical Sufi singing enters. A dreamlike middle section slows the tempo down allowing a more Swedish styled jazz piano solo to enter, the raga climaxes with the return of the opening rhythm, powerful piano, the brushes replaced with sticks and the mesmeric vocal.

Next up is the 'Raga Asavari', almost ten minutes in length and the track, I think, that uses the most diverse influences. A beautiful piano solo, played by Suri, introduces the piece, with beautiful chords and scalic runs. Jesse Garbasi comes to the fore with some wonderful double beaters on the vibraphone. Both the piano and vibraphone are joined by a trance like vocalization by Falsa. Scriabin, the Russian composer, he was heavily influenced by Middle Eastern and Eastern culture, would have loved this and the French Impressionist especially messrs Faure and Chabrier would love the painting by music imagery. They would have loved the sustain of the piano and vibraphone punctuated by occasional accented and staccato notes. The thoughtful, calm and reflective vocal melody sitting above this beautiful whirlpool of music. A trio of equal parts, a trio of superb teamwork. Head impressionist Debussy would be impressed.

'Raga Sankarabaranam', continues with the same instrumentation, a Philip Glass type introduction on piano leads to the vibraphone and piano melody. You can almost smell beautiful fresh morning mountain air in the music. The scalic passages continue with both instruments before a more chordal accompaniment. This has a more American 'feel' a more 'movie' atmosphere, almost a travel vibe, the musicians play the intricate scales and chords, slowing occasionally to let each musician show that playing quick notes doesn't necessarily mean the tempo or speed has speeded up. Perhaps a nod to the harpsichord players of the Baroque Period who had to play rapid broken chords to give an idea of sustaining as piano and the sustain pedal had yet to be invented. Suri admits to being influenced by J.S. Bach, perhaps it can be heard here.

We reach the final track of this musical journey with Aaj Rang Hai (Today There Is Colour). Starting in a very restful manner with rolls on cymbals, free flowing piano with trills and mordents. Falsa provides a wondrous almost mournful melody, almost seeming to borrow from indigenous American Indian music forms or Scottish Western Isles Gaelic traditions. Hints of impressionism, slight hints of the Second Viennese School's magical composer Alban Berg and his Violin Concerto. This collage comes to a gradual halt and another collage of

musical colour enters. From out of nowhere the beat picks up and we go into a straight two beats per bar. It seems like its time to get the feet tapping, the piano flows beautifully along with a driving percussive beat being provided on drums and cymbals, some great fills here as well. The journey concludes, in cyclic manner, with the return of the restful opening to conclude the track.

This music could be described as Raga meets Jazz, it could be described as heady mix of improvisation, a sprinkling of traditional jazz, impressionism, atonalism in some parts, the mysticism or inner calmness of the Sufi vocalizations, Baroque-esque piano with sustain, Romantic vibraphone, it could be described as a fusion of influences.

I'd describe by saying it was the music of Charu Suri!