


Multimedia Review

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Goddess: Divine Energy, Music from India

Produced by G. S. Sachdev, D. Parson and P. Pannke

Tucson, Celestial Harmonies in association with Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg, 2006
Audio CD, Celestial Harmonies 13266, \$15.

In Praise of the Goddess: Devotional Songs from North India

Pandit Premkumar Mallik with Prashant, Priyanka and Nishant Mallik, vocals; produced by Peter Pannke

Tucson, Celestial Harmonies in association with Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg, 2006
Audio CD, Celestial Harmonies 13267, \$15.

The Art Gallery of NSW, as well as the musicians and producers of these two CDs, is to be congratulated on a beautifully produced pair of albums. Although the two CDs do not constitute a double album, they do emerge from very similar intents—Goddess worship in Hindu and Buddhist theology. Both discs were inspired by the 'Goddesses in Asian Art' exhibition held at the Art Gallery of New South Wales from 13 October 2006 to 28 January 2007. In particular, as the notes to *Goddess: Divine Energy* state, 'whereas the exhibition... surveys the richness of the imaginative expressions of the divine female found in the art of India, Tibet and Nepal, the music on this CD displays some of the innumerable ways of sonic worship of the Goddess'. Indeed, the sonic element in worship—what Guy Beck refers to as *Sonic Theology* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1993)—is now recognised as a crucial element of Hindu religious practice. In metaphysical explanation, sound itself is the creative impulse of the universe. From primordial sound emerge language, energy, music and, therefore, knowledge and existence. The goddess Saraswati embodies these elements, at once the goddess of learning, speech and music. In this sense, all music is embedded with spirituality and it is to this sonic theology that these CDs refer.

Track 6 on *Goddess: Divine Energy* perhaps best exemplifies this inspiration. In it one hears the bells rung during worship at the Durga temple in Varanasi. It would be rare to hear such a sound track on any other commercially available compact disc. Yet, here on an album devoted to the Goddess, it makes perfect sense. Similar sounds of bells and worship reappear on Track 8 within the composition titled 'Maitreya' by David Parsons. In this case, however, Parsons takes sounds of Buddhist chanting, bells, shawms and straight trumpets and recombines and mixes them with singing and chanting recorded in a studio context to create a spiritual soundscape. Although the Buddhist influence behind Parson's 'Maitreya' is not directly related to the Goddess, the sonic theology at the root of both Hinduism and Buddhism is the same, and thus the track is appropriate.

Listeners who have some knowledge of the Hindustani classical music tradition may find these recordings interesting for a number of reasons. The album *In Praise of the Goddess* exclusively contains vocal items sung by various members of the Mallik family, who trace their heritage to the *Dhrupad* style of singing. In their voices one can clearly hear these roots, with deep resonant tones, unlike the lighter timbres and embellishments of *Thumri* and popular singers today. This may not be to the liking of all listeners. Although the 'compositions' chosen for performance and improvisation all praise the Goddess, only one, Track 4, is in the *Dhrupad* style. The first three items are *Khyals*, each with a text appropriately focused on the Goddess. The final item is a *Bhajan*. It is in the *Dhrupad*, Track 4 '*Triveni Kalindi*', that the vocalists feel most at home, and clearly the heritage of the Mallik family is best revealed through this track. In contrast, the *Khyals* presented on the first three tracks are not as strong. The tone quality of each displays an attachment to *Dhrupad* that does not quite do justice to the *Khyal* format. Similarly, the final devotional *Bhajan* on *In Praise of the Goddess* is not as confident as the *Dhrupad* of Track 4. When all four singers sing the *bhajan* in unison, naturally this works well. However, when the four singers follow each other in the *alap*-like section, the texture becomes too crowded.

Although these shortcomings may be of concern to the knowledgeable listener, overall the presentation of a variety of songs in different and contrasting *rags* makes the CDs most enjoyable. In particular, *Goddess: Divine Energy* contains a flute solo by G. S. Sachdev, a *pakhavaj* solo by Ramji Upadhyaya, a *sitar* solo by Krishna Chakravarty and a *bhajan* in a lighter style by Aparna Charavarty, all of which make for a diverse offering on the one CD. In this sense, those looking for a breadth of sound examples and a more 'mystical' experience would prefer *Goddess: Divine Energy*, whereas those more familiar with the Indian tradition will prefer *In Praise of the Goddess*.

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