

# BUILDING ON A LEGACY



ANUSHKA MENON

Anoushka Shankar, main picture, and in Adelaide in 2010 with her father, Ravi Shankar, below right, before they played at WOMAdelaide, top right

**H**aving learned to play the sitar at the knee of her maestro father, Ravi Shankar, before going on to win six Grammy nominations as the star of a plucked string instrument whose shimmering textures seem to offer a hotline to the divine, Anoushka Shankar has developed a routine that keeps her on form, aiming high, thinking about the future.

There are the hours of daily practice, the yoga sessions and gym workouts, the concert diary booked two years in advance.

There are the peace signs she does in the bath. “Feel these calluses on my fingers,” says Shankar, 36, laughing as she reaches across the sofa in her living room, located down one end of a vast warehouse conversion in bustling east London. “When I was still on tour in India last week they were solid black lines! They’re not as rock-hard as they need to be, so I have to be careful. Whenever I’m relaxing in a nice hot bath, I’m like this ...”

She flops backwards, her hands forming two sets of Vs. It’s an ironically hippie-ish gesture from the younger of the two daughters born to the Bengali-Indian sitar maestro Ravi Shankar, made heavier by his role as progenitor of the 1960s “psychedelic” sound, collaborations with Beatle George Harrison, and appearances at the Monterey and Woodstock festivals that made him a star in the US.

Anoushka famously didn’t meet her half-sister, American jazz chanteuse Norah Jones, until she was 16. They’re close now. Closer, perhaps, given recent personal events, more of which later.

We’re here to talk about *Land of Gold*, Shankar’s most recent release, a 2016 concept

Anoushka Shankar had no choice in the path she took, she tells **Jane Cornwell**. Her mother played her father Ravi Shankar’s ragas to her in the womb

album she will perform in Australia next week, aided by a quartet on double bass and keyboards, the reed-like Indian shehnai and a set of percussion instruments — including the ambient, wok-shaped hang — played by the work’s co-writer, Manu Delago. In turns beautiful and raw, simple and complex, with seven instrumentals and three vocal tracks featuring M.I.A, Alev Lenz and a recitation by Vanessa Redgrave (all of which will be performed instrumentally live), the album is Shankar’s response to the plight of refugees.

It’s a project that makes listeners sit up and pay attention. Titles such as *Last Chance*, *Boat to Nowhere* and *Reunion* trace an arc from vulnerability, fear and hope to relief and longing. Co-produced by film director Joe Wright (*Atonement*, *The Darkest Hour*) — Shankar’s husband and the father of her two sons, Zubin, 6, and Mohan, 2 — *Land of Gold* is a cohesive work, a soundtrack to a movie being played out by the world’s dispossessed and voiceless. At its centre — lamenting, communing, sparkling — is the sitar, underscoring the uniting power of music.

“I released this album two years ago but the issues are still so relevant,” says Shankar, who had recently given birth when the horrific images of three-year-old Alan Kurdi, washed up on a Turkish beach after fleeing war-torn Syria with his family, were flashed around the world. “I felt

overwhelmed by a sense of powerlessness to alleviate the suffering and injustice taking place as the world looked on. But like many others I was painfully aware that it was impossible to deny my emotional connection, as a human being, as a mother.”

She pauses for a beat. “What is doubly painful is the sense that, as a society, it has become even harder to talk about these issues because a fatigue has set in. There’s a normalisation of this state of affairs that feels heartbreaking. So it is good to be able to step into this music and talk to people from the stage. The lovely thing about speaking through music is that you often have people who think differently in the same room together, in a way that is increasingly rare. It’s really important to reach across those boundaries and belief systems.”

Shankar was last in Australia in 2010, performing alongside her father on his 90th birthday farewell tour (he died two years later). Their sublime interpretations of Indian classical ragas, the epic melodic forms attuned to different times of the day and featuring dazzling experimentation, had audiences swooning. The sense of a baton being passed was palpable.

Little wonder. As Shankar writes in her 2002 biography *Bapi: The Love of My Life*, she was just nine years old when she began learning the sitar on a smaller instrument that the great Pandit (master) Ravi Shankar had commissioned especially for her. Aged 13, her solo debut in New Delhi (at Ravi’s 75th birthday celebrations) confirmed the magic had indeed passed from guru to protegee. Father and daughter would perform together regularly when their schedules allowed. Anoushka would gasp along with everyone else at Ravi’s audacious flurries, then