

Learning to be Me Again

The Indian *sitar* player Anoushka Shankar has just released a deeply personal collection of songs following a turbulent period of her life. She talks to **Jane Cornwell** about feeling empowered, as well as her late father's forthcoming centenary celebrations

Just over two years ago, the world Anoushka Shankar knew fell apart. Until then, the six-time Grammy nominee had lived what appeared to be a life filled with riches. She made profound and glorious music, performed at the greatest festivals and concert halls across the world, and channelled her sense of social justice into weighty global campaigns. The scion of an Indian musical dynasty, a virtuoso in her own right, she was and remains internationally celebrated.

But heartbreak can feel like a death, and it did. Blindsided by circumstance Shankar scooped up her two young sons and spent Christmas with her half-sister Norah Jones in Brooklyn, New York, two weeks before the official announcement that she and film director Joe Wright had ended their seven-year marriage. Soon after that she retreated to Jamaica, whose remote beach sunsets reminded her to count blessings, which included the friends (many of them women) who had her back, and the plucked string instrument that had never let her down.

'Like a rock, like a mountain, like the certainty the next wave will crash upon the shore, it's always been there,' she tweeted, under a photo that showed her silhouetted among palm trees, a hand around the long wooden neck of her instrument. 'When I needed to scream, to cry, or to revel in my joy, it's been my voice, always there. My baby, my axe, my lover, my heart.' Her sitar.

She was seven when she began learning to play the North Indian instrument with its gourd-like resonator, moveable frets and set of main strings running over a greater number of sympathetic strings. Her teacher was her Bengali-Indian maestro dad, who had a child-sized sitar made for the daughter he'd fathered with South Indian singer Sukanya Rajan.

Raised between California and North-West London, with winters spent attending English-syllabus schools in India, Anoushka Shankar was used to devoting hours each day to playing the sitar, one of the world's most expressive instruments. Little wonder, then, that her rigorous practice is what helped her to navigate personal trauma, unleashing a torrent of creativity along the way. The result is *Love Letters*, an EP of seven songs that are among Shankar's most intimate and beautiful compositions yet.

"As a musician how do I not write about my experiences?" reasons Shankar, 38, when we meet in a café near her home in East London. "What I try to do is have a sense of dignity and respect for people in my life in terms of how I speak about them and what I share."

'Does she feel younger than me... Do you call her bright eyes too?' sings Alev Lenz on 'Bright Eyes', a track lent depth and nuance by piano, upright bass and solemn *ghatam* (clay pot) percussion, with the shimmers and loops of the sitar seeming ▶

to emanate straight from Shankar's broken heart. It's a healing song, raw and defiant, as intimate as it is universal, a song destined to be played on repeat.

"I have been so surprised by the strong response to this, especially the feedback I've had from women," says Shankar of the composition that she and Lenz co-wrote during the raw early stages of her separation. "There's a little tone in there that is not addressed very often, and that really seems to resonate."

Lenz is the pure-voiced, London-based German/Turkish singer and composer who collaborated with Shankar on the latter's 2016 album *Land of Gold* (reviewed in #118), a work that conceptually conveys the humanitarian plight of refugees. "Working with Alev has been incredibly nurturing." A smile. "It was a truly ego-free collaboration involving friendship, shared life experiences and creative sessions squeezed in between school runs, over many cups of tea."

It was Lenz who suggested that Shankar revisit some of the poems the sitarist had written over the years, to see if any particularly lent themselves to melody, to song. So evolved the meditative tune 'In This Mouth', which "came to life as a love letter, a beckoning, a prayer. In the middle of the song Alev and I move away from her lead vocal rhythm and go into a Vedic chant-style melodic refrain, turning earthy desire into something exalted and holy."

Other similarly fabulous female musician friends helped Shankar birth songs. 'Those Words', for example, is based on an original poem about memory and loss that she co-wrote with British singer and cellist Ayanna Witter-Johnson (who features). It subsequently inspired director-writer Shirin Anandita to pen lyrics in Punjabi, which were then sung oh-so-sweetly by renowned Indian vocalist (and former playback singer) Shilpa Rao. Then there is the gentle but steely 'Lovable', a tune that features the unmistakably sumptuous harmonies of French-Cuban twins Ibeyi. Oh, and remarkably, for the first time ever on record, vocals by Shankar herself. She flashes a grin. "I've known Lisa and Naomi [Diaz] for a few years, and Lisa doesn't live far from me here in London. She came over

to do a session, and like all the other sessions it was about hanging out and chatting then moving gently to the next step. I had this one line ready, 'Am I still lovable if you stop loving me?' Lisa said, 'I love it! Let's build with that. But you have to sing that line!' I was like, no! Then slowly, eventually it felt right," she says of her fine and delicate soprano.

"I've gained so much from all the women I've worked with. They've helped me move towards music that is more and more unfiltered. More trusting." Fiercely pro-women, Shankar has been vocal in her support for campaigns including One Billion Rising (a global campaign dedicated to ending rape and sexual violence against women) and welcomed the #MeToo movement as a hugely positive force. Committed to continuing her father's vision that music can promote peace and

contribute to the world, believing that being an artist is an extension of being human, she tends to respond creatively to salient life experiences.

Her 2013 album *Traces of You* (reviewed in #96) was a meditation on her father's death, aged 92, on December 11 2012; 'Traces of

you linger like a tear drop, fresh upon the air,' sings Norah Jones on the title-track, over her sister's plangent sitar. The aforementioned *Land of Gold* was inspired by the images of dead Syrian three-year-old Aylan Kurdi, washed up on a Turkish beach after fleeing his war-torn country with his family. It is a soundtrack to a movie that continues to be played out by the dispossessed and voiceless. "I felt overwhelmed by a sense of powerlessness to alleviate the suffering and injustice taking place as the world looked on," she told me at the time. "Like many others I was aware it was impossible to deny my emotional connection as a human being, as a mother."

She admits that world crises made her think twice about releasing the ultra-personal *Love Letters*: "It felt weird to be making something that didn't, in quote marks, have a 'bigger purpose'," Shankar says. "For a project like *Land of Gold* I felt part of a positive change of some kind, especially when I was touring and talking 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's increasingly rare. It's really important to reach across those boundaries and belief systems."

Going inward, however, was necessary, especially since she was forced to face the additional shock and challenge of serious (now resolved) health issues. "Sometimes we have to replenish. We have to heal. We have to go inside to come back out again in whatever way we do. It's part of the journey." In this way *Love Letters* might be seen as the latest contribution to a body of work that began in 1998 with her self-titled debut of traditional *ragas* and includes her 2005 breakthrough album *Rise*, with its elements of jazz and pop and non-Indian instruments, and 2011's *Traveller*, which explored links between Indian classical music and Spanish flamenco. *Home*, an album of classical ragas, was released in 2015, its

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Mother and daughter: Sukanya and Anoushka Shankar

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Anoushka Menon

traditional parameters making the cross-genre collaborations of the following year's *Land of Gold* even more pronounced.

Given the interest surrounding her divorce, Shankar is keen to ensure the music of her new EP garners as much attention as its lyrical themes. While respectful of tradition, Shankar is a musical innovator, as might be the case for one who grew up listening to Britpop and techno in between learning Indian songs and dances with her mother. Where her father was a first generation pioneer who shared a new music with the world, she has a two-way dialogue with artists such as classical violinist Joshua Bell and modern jazz icon Herbie Hancock that has rendered musical boundaries meaningless.

"I've reached a point where it's about, 'This is what it's like to be brown, born and brought up in London.' Obviously I come from a tradition," she continues, "and I think in some ways we're in danger of losing that. The bulk of the Indian classical shows I go to are more acrobatic than meditative. Plus people from my tradition often feel they have a monopoly on it. This is music that welcomes deep listening from everyone, everywhere."

Ravi Shankar certainly thought so. Feted by Yehudi Menuhin, the Grateful Dead and ex-Beatle George Harrison ('Uncle George' to Anoushka), his influence spanned continents and generations and introduced Indian classical music to new audiences. Celebrations taking place in this centenary year of Ravi's birth includes a series of events and performances hosted by the Southbank Centre and developed by Sukanya (to whom

Ravi Shankar dedicated his only opera) and Anoushka, who is currently a Southbank Associate Artist.

The musicians Nitin Sawhney and Harrison's widow Olivia are among the special guests appearing at next month's Ravi Shankar Centenary Gala Concert at London's Royal Festival Hall (April 7), an event led by Anoushka and Norah Jones (or if you like, Geethali Norah Jones Shankar). "There's a difference in how we approach the evening since I'm the one who has learned the instrument. She is contributing in some really beautiful ways," says Shankar of the jazz singing, Grammy-winning Jones, two years her senior, who she first met aged 18. "We'll both be doing stuff that's never been done before. I'm really excited about getting to go in and very deeply and sincerely offer something to my father in a way that feels truthful. It feels really special, and obviously there's all the other events as well..."

Those bright eyes flash. The Anoushka Shankar of two-and-a-bit years ago would be proud – is proud – of the Anoushka Shankar of today. "I'm learning to be me again," she says. "It's very powerful. I'm really enjoying it and getting very protective of what it's about. So with all that, and all this..." She waves a hand, taking in both *Love Letters* and the Shankar 100 programme. "It is going to be a big, beautiful year." ♦

+ **ALBUM** *The EP Love Letters* is released on Mercury KX
 + **DATES** *Shankar 100* launches in April at the Southbank Centre, see www.southbankcentre.co.uk for more details