

ZAKIR HUSSAIN

The Tabla Maestro

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About five years ago, Zakir Hussain, like all other talented tabla players, was known merely as an accompanist. Being the son of a world famous artiste, Ustad Alla Rakha, he had far more exposure than those with less exalted family connections, but he did not draw crowds for himself, as he does today. This star status, this cult that has been built around Hussain, really started, predictably enough, with news of his experimentation with jazz and classical musicians abroad. "Suddenly, when 'Shakti', our musical trio, with L. Shankar, violinist, and John McLaughlin, and myself, became a success in the States, I found, on my return to India that year, that I was something of a celebrity," Hussain admits.

Nowadays, at any music conference, Hussain is a must, along with other 'star' musicians like Shivkumar Sharma, Amjad Ali Khan, Rais Khan, Hariprasad Chaurasia, and a couple of others. The crowds never seem to tire of them. As musicians, of course, they are universally acknowledged as first rate artistes. But, as is becoming more and more evident, it requires more than that to cultivate the mass popularity that these musicians have acquired. It needs the projection of an image, similar to that perpetuated by other glamorous performers, be they painters, film-stars or socialites. And the co-ordination discernible in the mutual image-boosting among the younger musicians, is in direct contrast with that of the older generation, which was known for its professional jealousies.

Promotional Urge: "It is all for the sake of promoting Indian classical music," claims Hussain, who is not unaware of the soft-sell. "Today's musicians are young and well-educated, they present themselves better," he says. According to him, although classical music is fashionable,

it is equally true that only those who are really interested in it, or who develop a genuine liking for the sound, "hang on", the rest "drop out on the way."

Hussain's Americanisms are the result of a prolonged stay in the US. "For the last 12 years, I have been

spending the summer and fall seasons in the States," he says, with an American drawl. Unlike other musicians who spend the country's more uncomfortable months abroad, for the money or for the 'professional satisfaction,' Hussain has a more original explana-



Hussain: not content to bask in the limelight

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tion, for this arrangement. "There is nothing much happening in the monsoons or in summer," he says. "So it is a waste of time being here at the time. Abroad, I can learn music of other parts of the world, I can teach, I can practise, and use the time much better," he adds. In California, Hussain teaches at the Ali Akbar Khan college of music. He has about 80 students at a time, and gives the more advanced classes "one-to-one tuition," as he puts it. "Normally, my students have some kind of a background in music—European, African or South-East Asian," he explains. "So there is always a lot of exposure to the music of different cultures, and believe me, there is a lot to learn," he says. However, Hussain claims that he prefers living here. "In fact, I like California mainly because it reminds me of home."

In spite of his unorthodox experimentation with semi-classical and classical music abroad, Hussain believes that traditional Indian music has to be left untouched. "Unless all students have a thorough classical training, it becomes impossible to learn other music to any benefit," he says. To avoid controversy over the subject of his experimental music, he sticks to purely Indian classical music in India. "In fact, I don't even mention my work in the States, for fear of offending conservatives," he admits. "Nevertheless, without my knowledge, nuances from my new repertoire may possibly seep into my playing," he says.

Praised: Whatever Hussain has made of his music, he has won unqualified admiration. Says Sarangi wizard Pandit Ram Narayan: "He is an excellent tabla player, and has a very bright future." Even those who sarcastically refer to his 'acrobatics', or his 'playing to the gallery,' at the end of each performance, when the crowd, eager for the frenzied sound of the 'jhala' (which is the climax of a *raag* recital), eggs on the instrumentalist and the tabla player to outdo each other in speed and intricacy, cannot but admit that, "his fingers have something elec-

tric in them."

Says Hussain, "I don't understand the criticism about our fast playing. The previous generation used to do it, too. The only difference is that now, more note is being taken of every aspect of our music."

Hussain, who has been playing since the age of five, no longer finds it difficult to sense different audience tastes. "I have been watching my father handle audiences for years," he says. Most of his training has been carried out under the eagle eye of his perfectionist father-cum-guru, Ustad Alla Rakha. "Actually, in those days, he used to be travelling so much, he could only sit with me on intensive sessions for about two months of the year. The rest of the time I used to practise, and listen to as much music as I could," he says. Hussain, who is a dyed-in-the-

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wool Bombaywalla did not go through the rigorous routine that his father's generation was subjected to. "Since I had school to contend with, I would put in only about two-and-a-half to three hours of practice a day," he recalls. "In fact," he continues seriously, "I don't believe in playing longer than your concentration allows. Otherwise it becomes sleep-playing."

Alive Music: During his December to March sojourns in India, Hussain hardly practises. "However, I have so many performances, I am constantly in touch," he adds. The Napean Sea Road apartment, belonging to his father, with whom Hussain lives while he is here, always resounds with the peculiarly 'alive' music of father or son. Hussain, dressed in his favourite—and the girls' favourite as well—attire of silk kurta and pyjama, is never far from his tabla, kept in one corner of the room, carefully covered with frilled satin bonnets. Even as he talks, he

fondly runs agile fingers over the polished surface of the instrument, playing a short '*tukda*' with enviable ease. "I play a lot of cricket in California, you know," he says idly, rolling the 'r' as well as any American.

Hussain has another hobby as well—photography. The boyish looking 'tabla Maestro' as he is already called, keeps only one photograph, however, of his wife, Antonia, an America-based Italian, who has, last year, borne him a daughter—Anissa. Both Antonia and Anissa will be down shortly to join Hussain in India. Interestingly, Antonia has been learning classical kathak dancing for the last eight years. "So we have a common ground," as Hussain puts it.

He nevertheless, is not averse to the large female following that he has. In fact, some of his well-cultivated charm is presumably directed towards the sighing girls attending his concerts, who quite openly go into ecstasies over his handsomeness and talent. "I do not encourage it, certainly," he protests, "but I don't mind if it helps the cause of music."

As the roar of appreciation around Hussain increases, he is not merely content to bask in the limelight. "It has not been so easy," he says. "First of all, being the son of such a great artiste means that people expect something more than excellence from you." Reflecting on his maturing as an artiste, he adds, "earlier, when I played, I used to give it all I'd got. I needed to show people everything I could do. I was young then, and admired for my versatility. Then suddenly, from the age of 14 years I was expected to grow up to thirty-five-years," he says wryly. "I had to realise that my having a successful performance did not necessarily mean that the concert had been successful." "In fact," he continues on a philosophical note, "I realised that it was not my concert, nor the instrumentalist's. It had to be 'our' act, so to speak." "And," he concludes frankly, "today I am much more of an accompanist than I used to be."

—Robini Soman