Sitar trek

A new Radio 3 series charts contemporary Indian classical music. Here, writer/presenter Roger Savage shares his diary of discovery

Delhi, 7 March 1987

DELHI AT dusk. Rattling in from the airport, our speeding taxi swerves wildly to avoid a jaywalker. Still, I guess it's no bad thing to be thrown in at the deep end of the Indian traffic scene right away. We see a lot of that scene in the next few days as we're driven about the city stalking interviewees for the series **Ragas and a Republic.**

Delhi, 'the city of contrasts': it may be a guidebook cliché but it's true, and the feelings of the classical musicians we meet concerning changes in Indian music since independence are pretty diverse too. The spectrum of types is wide, ranging from the mercurial sitar-playing dean of the music faculty at the university to the stately doyenne of the Indian ladies' music festival movement. The latter lives in a chic corner of town and receives us like a maharani, while her wraith-like maid dispenses tiny biscuits and lime fizzes.

Nearer the centre of the spectrum are two brothers, members of a Muslim family that has specialised for generations in the severe song form called dhrupad.

After cinnamon tea and nuts, we enter a tiny concrete music room, where a disciple is playing the long-necked tanpura and a son squats in the doorway. Cross-legged on the floor, I fight against cramp and, as the singing starts, time stops.

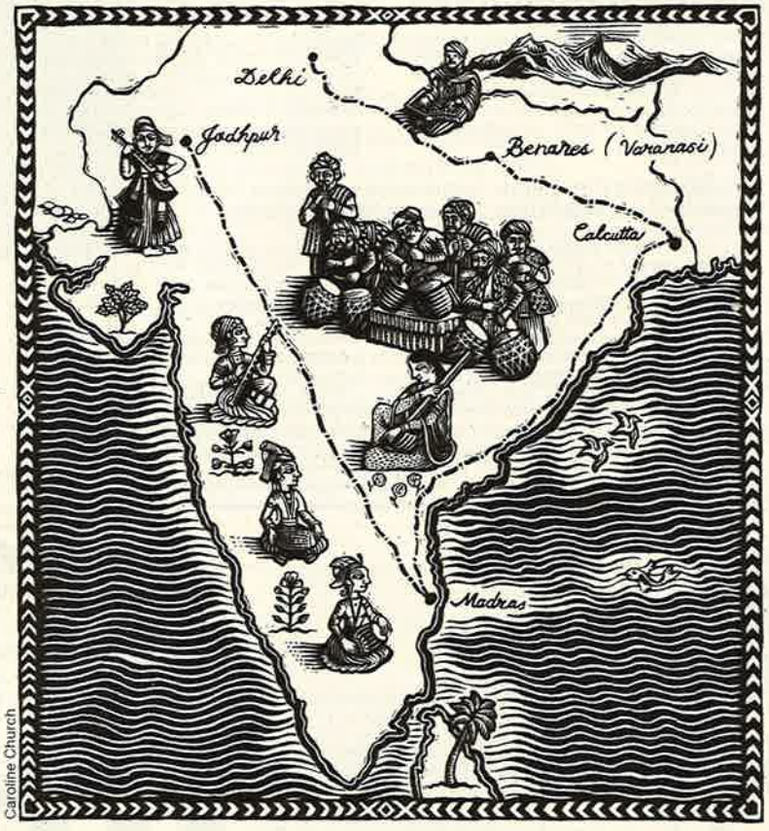
Benares, 12 March

The sun is shining and it does unfriendly things to my poor Nordic skin. But I wouldn't have missed this city. After all, among other things, it is the birthplace of Ravi Shankar, who's done more than anyone to change the world's image of Indian music.

Benares is ancient, sublime, confusing and faintly terrifying. It's like a Canterbury-on-the-Ganges with a split-open cathedral which sprawls along the river bank.

The dean of music at the Benares Hindu University is a woman from the south and an exponent of the southern style of playing the violin. Earnest, shy, and formal, she nevertheless let her hair down to demonstrate fantastic virtuoso slides and grace notes, backed by a group of exotic campus songbirds.

Ragas and a Republic, Sunday 6.15pm Radio 3



Caroline Church

Calcutta, 15 March

It's election time here in Calcutta and the hotel we're staying in turns out to be thick with politicos. Luckily we are commandeered by folk from the local music research academy, a centre of musical excellence in a difficult climate.

They ply us with tea, lemonade and invigorating gossip. One of them arranges a private musical soirée and we dice with death driving through Calcutta's rutted and pitted streets to get there. But when we do arrive, everything is civilised, urbane and friendly. Our hostess is adamant that, though Calcutta deserves a lot of its bad press, it should get much higher marks than it generally does for the things it does well.

If by this she means her own cooking and the khyal singing style of her young protegé, we agree.

Madras, 24 March

Musical memories mingle with images of pavements heaped high and fragrantly with melons, mangoes and bananas.

Madras is festooned with bougainvillea and enormous, garish film hoardings. The cool wind off the sea is a big plus, since the hot season is coming on and we are on the tropical coast of Coromandel.

Madras is a very musical city, and we take various flavoured teas with equally various instrumentalists and singers. We meet two exponents of the South Indian vina who, other than their shared virtuosity on this type of lute, have very little in common: one is super-confident and extrovert; the other is retiring and other-worldly.

We track down a southern violinist who lives simply except for a TV for the India-Pakistan tests. He shows us a 30-year-old photo of himself with Yehudi Menuhin and, as we leave, touchingly hands us an invitation to his daughter's wedding.

And we meet a musicologist who runs a tiny music school for young children near a noisy fruit market.

Jodhpur, 30 March

Jodhpur, in the middle of the Rajasthani desert, is another world. It was once a courtly, aristocratic centre and a honey pot for Indian classical musicians. But the old rajahs were abolished and everything changed.

Now it's essentially a regional centre, which lent a special flavour to the open-air gathering of village performers we attended outside the town hall. There were puppeteers, mummers, stick dancers, fire eaters and hobbyhorse players. Rustic stuff, you'd think. Yet the audience milling about and enjoying themselves was largely made up of dapper, sophisticated townsfolk.

The director of the Rajasthani Centre for the Preservation of Traditional Musics is a canny, eloquent man who makes it his business to promote the art of the desert musicians. He introduced us to some of them: big eyed, long faced, fine boned and travel stained.

They sang and sang and sang, with an earnest, fervid intensity that left us limp and open-mouthed with admiration. Theirs is a song of the earth that might have puzzled Gustav Mahler, but it makes us feel like gods. Can such things survive? They have to! ●

Radio 3 has 'Music from India' on Sunday 7.15pm, Wednesday 10.30pm