



MANCY GREEN

STRAP-HANGING YOUR WAY TO and from work on a train, wedged like a vertical sardine, is hardly part of a Utopian, stress-free existence. It is bad enough on London's Northern Line, but rather more uncomfortable on the suburban railway in Bombay. For one thing there aren't any doors, so it is not wise to let go of your strap or you will find yourself one of many clinging to the outside of the train. Where our railway advertising mundanely tempts the passenger with Listerine mouthwash and diverse secretarial agencies, in Bombay it is ear-piercing or Doctor Gupta's Clinic—pregnancies terminated painlessly, discreetly and inexpensively: 24-hour service.

I was bound for Vile Parle at Bombay's northern extremity one Saturday evening to hear what one might anachronistically call the Holy Trinity of North Indian classical music, Shiv, Hari and Zakir: otherwise Shivkumar Sharma (virtuoso on the Santoor, a highly sophisticated dulcimer), Hariprasad Chaurasia (bamboo-flute-player of almost Krishna-like magnetism) and Zakir Husain (tabla superstar, equally at home with Western jazz musicians and Indian classicists). Most Bombay-based musicians seem to inhabit the north of the traffic-engorged city; it is closer to the airport and also to the film studios, source of much work and many rupees. The three musicians had been booked to play in some fly-blown cinema to boost attendance at what appeared to be a political meeting of small importance but great tedium. Interminable speeches began the pro-

MUSIC GRAHAM SHEFFIELD

Playing On

A reflection on concert life in India

ceedings, before we reached what everyone knew to be the main business of the evening.

Concert-going in India is a far more varied affair than here in the West with our '7.30 sharp start—not more than 100 minutes' music—watch out for overtime—better finish by 9.50 so as not to miss the last train' mentality. Advertised start-times are approximate: '8.30' means that some time after 8.30 one might begin to consider setting the platform, and possibly at nine o'clock (but no desperate hurry) one might even start tuning, if, indeed, any audience has turned up. The arrival, when it does occur, is not a concerted rush: people drift in—and out—more or less at random, and families congregate en masse, complete with suckling babes, aunts and grannies. There are regional variations: music lovers in South India are more than happy to go to concerts of North Indian (Hindustani) music as well as the indigenous South Indian (Karnatic) music. But the reverse is not the case. A concert I attended of Karnatic music in Delhi was populated entirely by migrants from Madras or thereabouts—not a northerner in sight.

During all performances *aficionados* and would-be *aficionados* murmur encouragement

and approval to the musicians in a way that would prompt a wave of 'shushes' in a Western hall. In-flight retuning occurs as and where necessary—very disconcerting to our ears if it happens in the middle of a particularly ethereal improvisation.

And then, of course, there are the sound systems. Almost without exception, Indian musicians demand amplification; it has become *de rigueur*, something of a status symbol to surround oneself on the carpeted dais not only with disciples and friends, but with a forest of microphones, even in the smallest or most acoustically sympathetic of auditoria. To some extent one can appreciate their point, if, that is, they are attempting to convey the super-subtle slides and graces of a solo sarod to the back row of the equivalent of the Albert Hall. The trouble is

I remember one young boy with a voice so individual that its impression will never fade

that the sound systems frequently malfunction and at the Bombay concert even the placid Hariprasad was driven to break off in mid-flow amidst recurrent howl-round, distortion and amplifier hum in order to demonstrate smilingly with the young, eager but not altogether competent sound engineer.

Purpose-built concert halls (most of them are in Delhi where the power and money is) are an invention of the last 40 years or so, since Indian musicians emerged from the cloistered, salaried and secure world of the princely courts to find themselves obliged to earn their livings in a competitive democratic society. No more for them the intimate private concerts before the Maharajah and his entourage or the affluent merchant. Nowadays large audiences in large halls are necessary to pay the household bills.

However, there are, as there always have been, informal concerts amongst friends in private houses; Indian musicians as a rule still feel most comfortable in this kind of environment. We went to one deep in the suburban labyrinth of Calcutta. Friends of the host and hostess, students from the Calcuttan music academy and your intrepid BBC duo were crammed into a small upstairs room to listen to a promising young singer of the florid, romantic Khyal form. Everyone sat cramped on the floor, everyone except us, who as VIPs(!) were accorded the luxury of two small stools, a rheumatic fan to keep us cool and a smouldering mosquito coil to keep us unbitten. This is the