

Asha Srinivasan

## Creating Cross-Cultural Music

By FRANCIS C. ASSISI

Indian American composer Asha Srinivasan is proving that you don't have to be European and dead for a couple of centuries to succeed as a classical music composer in the United States.

Born in Logan, Utah, and raised in India till the age of nine, 27-year-old Srinivasan's recent trajectory has catapulted her to the ranks of the top young composers in America.

Her composition "By the River near Savathi" for clarinet, violin, viola and cello premiered June 2 at the Chelsea Art Museum in New York City during the "Notable Women: A Celebration of Women Composers" music festival. The work was commissioned for the St. Luke's Chamber Ensemble in New York City after Srinivasan won a competition among 74 other young composers.

"We picked her because we thought she had a voice," says Joan Tower, 68, the ensemble's composer-in-residence and the festival's curator. "I heard something more individual," says Tower, a professor of music at Bard College in New York.

Srinivasan says the struggle within herself, reflecting a flowering of multiple consciousnesses, is embedded in her music as much as it is part of her hybridity. The inspiration for "Savathi," she says, arose from the Carnatic raga

"Shubapantuvarali" as well as her own fascination with German author Herman Hesse's classic *Siddhartha*.

"Every time I heard the scale, it evoked a sense of deep sorrow...It reminded me of a deep world pain or world weariness in a philosophical manner. This immediately brought up the image of Siddhartha by the river—staring into it and wishing oblivion."

Srinivasan says that Hesse's book always held a strong sway over her mind since she first read it in high school. "I seem to keep coming back to the book and re-reading it at various points in my life and getting much meaning out of it every time."

A fusion of diverse influences is evident in Srinivasan's earlier compositions, too. In "Kalpitha," she borrowed tones and concepts from Carnatic music and harnessed them into a simple yet compelling structure. Classical guitarist Michael Durek says that the piece can be viewed as a metaphor of both Srinivasan the person and Srinivasan the composer: childhood in India, adulthood in America; Carnatic vocal study as a child, Western classical music as an adult. On the other hand, her "Falling: Samsaaram," moves, in her own words, "between oppositions of attach-



From left: Joan Tower, Asha Srinivasan and Ralph Jackson, assistant vice president of BMI (Broadcast Music, Incorporated) Classical.

ment (*samsaaram*) and detachment (*nirvaanam*) to life's pain and pleasures through the juxtaposition of urgent volatile textures with calm ambient ones."

Srinivasan explains that she is as American as she is Indian. Her musical training has been predominantly Western but her musical ideas have often been more Indian, because that was also ingrained in her from early childhood and from hearing Indian music at home. She spent her early years in India because her parents had to come back when their work visas expired. They returned to the United States when her father's former employer rehired him.

How does she integrate Carnatic music into computer generated Western classical compositions? She says that it is in the acoustic parts of her music that the Carnatic influences are strong—especially where there is a flute. "Generally I compose by singing my melodic lines and I think this is a strong influence from my limited training in Carnatic music," she says.

Srinivasan admits that there may be other influences as well

that are not as obvious. "...I listen to a lot of Hindi film songs, Tamil film songs and so on, so influences from those genres might also be there."

During her undergraduate years at Goucher College in Baltimore, Maryland, she was first introduced to a course in computer music. She liked the idea of being able to create sounds on her own, and immediately. "This is one difference between computer music and acoustic music composition. In computer music composition, the composer works with the actual sound. It feels more like sculpting where you use audio materials to create a certain sound object."

Currently working toward her Doctorate of Musical Arts at the University of Maryland in College Park, Srinivasan participates in a program to teach basic music to inner-city school children in Baltimore, the state capital. Besides the "Introduction to Music Technology" course that she will teach this summer, her upcoming major project is an orchestra piece for her dissertation.

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