

Devout Rebel

Rita Sahai creates new bhajans to poetry of Meera

By TEED ROCKWELL

MEERA. Rita Sahai, vocals, with Swapan Chaudhuri, tabla, and Manose Singh, bansuri. Available at www.ritasahai.com

The word "radical" is often used to describe someone who wants to overthrow traditions. But its literal meaning is exactly the opposite, for it is the adjective of the word "root." Radicals are thus people who return to the roots of their culture and are thus able to re-interpret that culture for their own times. Because India has a culture with diverse (and often conflicting) roots, it has produced some of the greatest radical innovators in world history. Gandhi used the essential principles of Hinduism to justify outlawing the caste system. Allaudin Khan once showed respect for his guru by treating the guru's visiting servant like a nobleman—and in the process outraged his caste-conscious neighbors. Similarly, the remarkable story of Meera shows that this kind of radical traditionalism is not merely a 20th century aberration, but an essential element of the Indian spirit.

There are very few facts about Meera that are universally accepted. She was a 16th-century Rajput princess who developed a deep devotion to Krishna at an early age, resisting her in-laws' attempts to change her allegiance to Shiva. When her husband died, her in-laws harassed her because she refused to commit sati (ritual suicide). Instead, she left her wealthy family and became a wandering yogini, composing and singing bhajans in praise of Krishna.

There are also stories from many other sources, each of which is biased in a different direction. The bhajans themselves reveal a strong-willed woman who refused to consummate her marriage because she was already married to Krishna, sang and danced unashamedly in public with members of the weaver and leatherworker castes, and had a dalit leatherworker as her guru.

This willingness to flout custom was, however, motivated by deep devotion and piety—and often defended with a quick wit. When an unscrupulous teacher told her that Krishna told him to make love to her, she sarcastically asked him if he was willing to perform the act in front of a statue of Krishna in the temple—and thus shamed him into becoming her disciple.

According to Parita Mukta's book *Upholding the Common Life*, these bhajans have re-



mained a focus for social protests for centuries, giving outcastes of all sorts an opportunity to protest the mistreatment of dalits, the restrictions of traditional Indian marriage and widowhood, and to glorify poverty as a manifestation of holiness.

Some establishment historians, however, say that her husband taught her to be devout, and that she became a wandering yogini only in response to the grief she felt at his death. And when Gandhi used her stories to show the Indian roots of non-violent resistance, he claimed that she was trying to convert her husband by refusing to bow to his will. Mukta rightly points out that we will never know which of these images is the "real" Meera.

There are about 1,300 bhajans attributed to her, and only about 200 are considered to be genuine. And while the bhajans almost certainly add elements to her story to reflect the grievances of the women and lower classes who sing them, the establishment historians almost certainly have repressed large parts of her story, and are thus equally untrustworthy.

Even Gandhi appears to have softened her rebellion against traditional marriage to make her more palatable to the general Indian populace. But whatever true events inspired them, the stories have an impact of their own, which continues to give hope to the downtrodden, and frighten the powerful. It is thus not surprising that the music and poetry attributed to Meera continue to inspire other artists as well.

Berkeley-based Rita Sahai has just released

an album of her own musical settings of Meera's poetry, which combine Meera's emotional intensity with Sahai's expressive classical techniques. The music is described as light classical, but I would say it is more classical than light. Unlike the original tunes composed by Meera herself, these are not simple melodies that could be learned by laborers after a hard day's work. Each one is set to a different Hindustani raga, featuring not only classics

like Pilu and Bhimpalasi, but also the contemporary Ali Akbar Khan creation Chandranandan, and a new raga created by Sahai called Pardesh. The simple verse-chorus format is replaced by variations on short phrases that travel up and down the raga in sequences like those used in thumri (or the variations on phrases like "Kyrie Elieson" or "Alleluia" in Bach or Mozart). The CD booklet also contains the complete Hindi text in Roman letters, which makes it possible for non-Hindi speakers to follow these musical sequences, and to more fully appreciate Sahai's artful use of sruti.

The songs also feature first-rate accompaniment. Swapan Chaudhuri's tabla playing is impeccable as always, and is supported admirably by Kanwaljit Kalsi on harmonium, and David Weeks on acoustic guitar. The decision to use Manose Singh's bansuri playing is especially appropriate, given Meera's devotion to the flute-playing god. Sometimes Singh's phrasing carefully mirrors Sahai's melodies. Other times he does variations on them that show the many affinities between bansuri and voice.

In the final bhajan, Meera sees Krishna face-to-face and describes her joy in being united with him. The album thus concludes in a way that parallels Meera's final reunion with Krishna. At one point, Meera's family said they would fast until she returned home, thus forcing her to either give up her chosen life, or be responsible for their deaths. She chose a third alternative, merging with Krishna and leaving only her shawl on the shoulders of her Krishna statue. Would Meera have approved of another singer setting new melodies to her poetry? I think so, especially when they capture the mood of the poetry as well as this. And Meera certainly would have rejoiced that her work enabled another woman, and fellow artist, to create a personal expression within her tradition. ■

Teed Rockwell has studied Indian classical music with Ali Akbar Khan and other great Indian musicians. He is the first person to play Hindustani music on the Touchstyle Fretboard.