Michael Bradburn-Ruster

Ananta Raga

for Ravi and Anoushka Shankar

"The entire world gleams..." — Abhinavagupta

Out of divinity's silence, rags of echoes, vines that trace vestiges of verse on barren stone: within the desert cave flows a womb of water, amid a nest of coals flowers a tongue of flame, and music without end seems again to begin.

Not merely aesthetic: sublimely ascetic: listening, we forget to remember our grief, and bondage of pleasure yields to beauty's nectar, no longer erotic: ecstatic sacrifice.

Alāp: veil raised in sleep, glimpse of the sacred voice, five fingers transfigured into a lotus throne, each finger become one of the five syllables carving the path that leads beyond light and darkness.

Saffron and turquoise join sapphire and turmeric: so the fire affirms poise, soft rain murmurs passion, *purusha* and *prakriti* embrace, intertwine, unleash earth's hidden streams, give birth to tender grain, awaken the flame inscribed in the heart's ashes: pulverized sun, mirror of moon's liquefaction, palace of symbols whose ruins invent gardens.

Tāla and rāgā: from the rhythm arises the aroma. *Rasavant*, flavor of rapture, fragrance that transmutes time into eternity, as four hands scintillate, dance in Chidambaram: Golden Hall, cloudless heart, still center of the world.

With one thousand eight hundred names you praise the One, Vīrabhadra dancing over the blazing ghats on whose burning-ground corpses nurture the cosmos: visions and illusions created, cremated. When the cup was shattered, water filled the parched mouth.

Body smeared with ashes: shadow that perishes; concealed in that body presence without measure.

Young woman, ancient man drink from the same river whose undivided source reflects a single face: Ardhanārīshvara, radiant amalgam both female and male, form of the unmanifest Lord who bestows fever and banishes evil. Kālīdasa knew: one of His eight modes is sound.

Tablā and sitār: weft and warp of earth's carpet. Drum that consecrates time, dissolves it in color, clay filled with flakes of breath, articulate petals. Gourd that becomes garbha trembling with seeds of stars: instrument of knowledge, devotional compass, incandescent tissue of sympathetic strings, utterance of incense, delicate plenitude.

The daughter does not dwell in her father's shadow: both are inhabited by the pulse of planets and the lakes' quiescence, by night's luminous tide, serenities of snow, sonority of smoke, sorrow's fathomless web, clarity's vertigo. Body: vibrant crystal, tree where our lives alight. On the branch the ripe fruit became bird, and took flight; now she, like her father, resides in resonance.

Once the man vanishes melody will not cease to kindle the silence, sustain and ravish us, return us to that place we never discovered, where grace alone abides, horizon and heaven. *Anugraha* is all: with East and West erased, farewell turns to summons: *Come, embody the art* of Natarāja, divulge Pythagoras' dream: reveal the mystery ever invisible. Not matter – music weaves the substance of the world.

Notes: Ananta Raga

Ananta: endless, eternal. Also the name of the world-serpent on which Vishnu rests. *Rāgā:* neither melody nor mode, a Rāgā is rather a melodic structure that rises or falls, a constellation of notes having specific ratios to their tonic. It is thus the configuration upon which the sitār player improvises; comprising both pattern and passion, each Rāgā corresponds to a specific color and mood, a time of day, and a season of the year.

<u>Abhinavagupta</u>: (950-1020 AD) leading exponent of Kashmir Śaivism, referred to by his disciples as Mahamaheśvara, "great devotee of Śivā." The core of his philosophy, Pratyabhijñā ("recognition"), is that liberation consists in realizing that the Lord's real presence resides in all things: the soul, *ātman*, is thus an image or mirror of the divine. The epigraph is from his *Tantrāloka*, I.192.

Alāp: The musical invocation or unveiling of the Rāgā's form. Ravi Shankar has referred to it as disclosing "the face of the Rāgā," and as an "unfolding, like describing a beautiful body."

<u>Five syllables</u>: the "five syllable mantra" is *Śivāya namah*, "Hail to Śivā." Its repetition is held to lead to the direct awareness of the unity of opposites.

Lotus throne: padmāsana, indicating spiritual purity, divinity. In yoga, the "lotus pose."

Purusha and *prakriti*: respectively, spirit and nature, day and night, essence and form, the male and female principles.

Tāla: the rhythmic structure of Indian music, expressed by the tablā or hand drums.

Rasavant: A work of art possessing *Rasa*: beauty, essence, flavor, also implying color and mood, and often identified with the divine. *Rasa* is the essential element in traditional Indian poetry, not meter or rhyme. The lover or connoisseur of art is *rasika*. See Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *The Dance of Shiva*.

<u>Chidambaram</u>: As Natarāja, Lord of the Dance, Śivā danced in Chidambaram or Tillai, the Golden Hall at the center of the universe, which is the human heart. He is represented with his four hands moving, one holding the drum whose rhythm creates the cosmos, another the flame that destroys: his dance burns away darkness, ignorance and evil, and releases the seeker from the fetters of illusion.

<u>Vīrabhadra</u>: An avatar of Śivā as both protector of sages and fierce warrior who battles against demons. In this form, Śivā dances on the ghats among incinerated corpses, goblins and ghosts, the dance of destruction, complement and counterpoint to Natarāja's cosmic dance. One of Vīrabhadra's several temples is located in Bangalore.

<u>Ardhanārīshvara</u>: The form of God that is female on the left, male on the right, according to Śaiva Siddhānta tradition. Literally, the Lord (*Iśvara*) that is half (*ardha*) woman (*nāri*): God and his grace are indivisible.

Garbha: womb. Garbha grha refers to the innermost sanctuary of a temple.

Anugraha: divine grace, favor.

<u>Kalidasa</u>: (ca. 350-420) considered the greatest poet of classical Sanskrit, he composed both epic poems and dramas incorporating music and dance. According to legend, he received his gift from the goddess Kali, the mother-aspect of Siva.