

VAZESH LIVE AT THE OPERA HOUSE

by Ian Muldoon*

The opening of the programme of music on *The Sacred Key* album by Vazesh (CD Earshift Music, 2021) is a long introduction by the Iranian tar, an instrument related to the sitar.

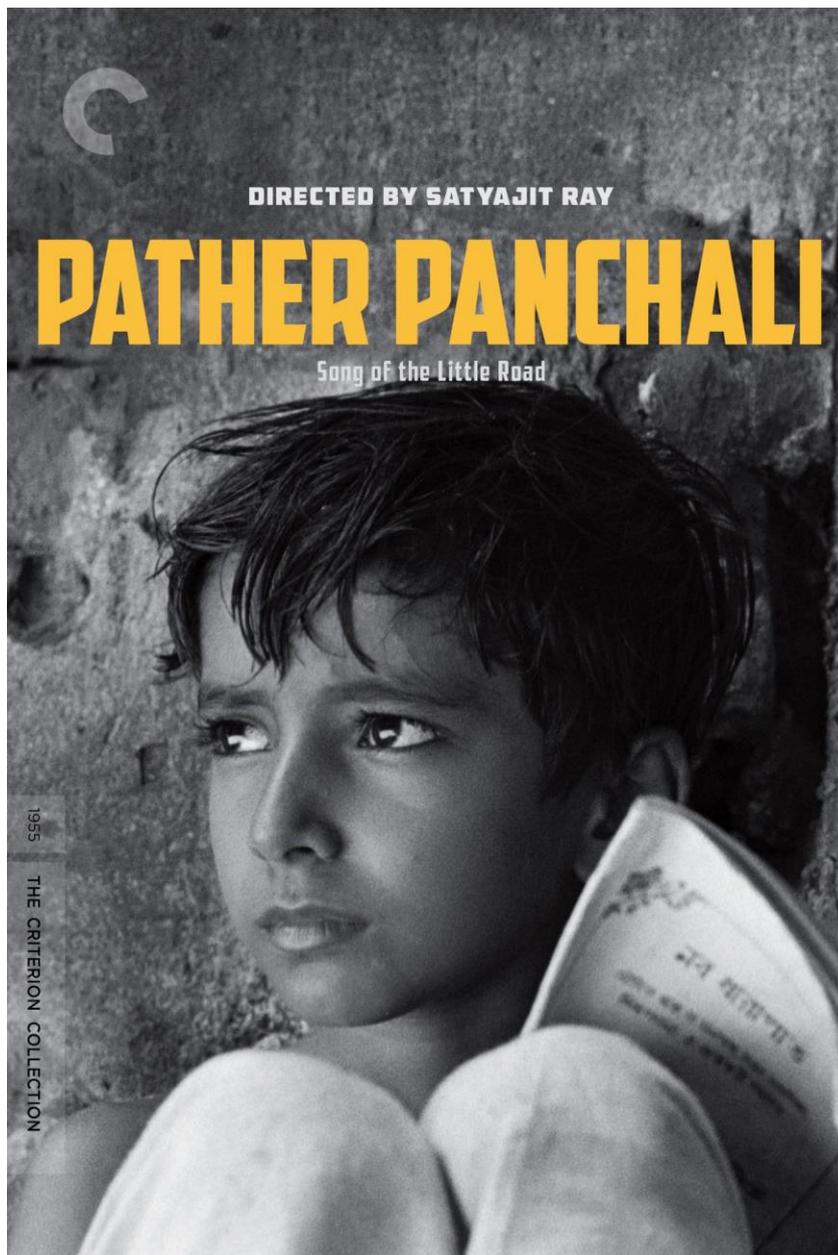
As soon as I heard the tar my mind was filled with the images of the Satyajit Ray's film *Pather Panchali* and the train passing through the fields and villages of the rural poor in India and the train's symbol of (Western industrialised) progress and its road to the city and wealth, with the glorious sound of Ravi Shankar's music filling the auditorium - it was this moment when the world was awakened to the beauty of Indian music.



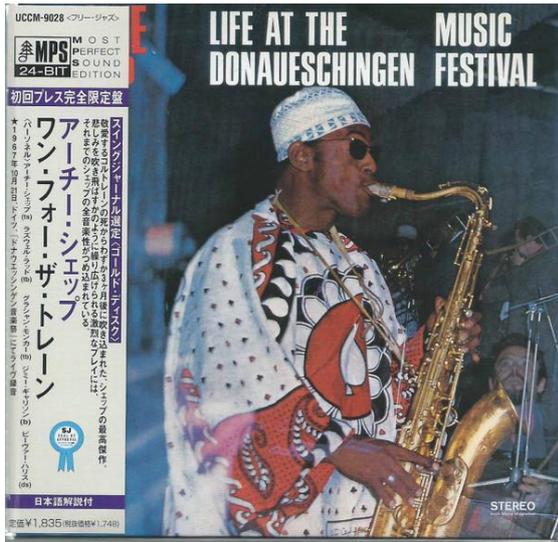
An image from Satyajit Ray's film "Pather Panchali" with the train passing through the fields and villages of the rural poor in India and the train's symbol of (Western industrialised) progress and its road to the city and wealth...

**Ian Muldoon has been a jazz enthusiast since, as a child, he heard his aunt play Fats Waller and Duke Ellington on the household piano. At around ten years of age he was given a windup record player and a modest supply of steel needles, on which he played his record collection, consisting of two 78s, one featuring Dizzy Gillespie and the other Fats Waller. He listened to Eric Child's ABC radio programs in the 1950s and has been a prolific jazz records collector wherever he lived in the world, including Sydney, Kowloon, Winnipeg, New York & Melbourne. He has been a jazz broadcaster on a number of community radio stations in various cities, and now lives in Coffs Harbour. In 2021 he published a collection of essays on jazz subjects, entitled "My Jazz Odyssey: Confessions of a Lifetime Enthusiast".*

The oud has featured in quite a number of distinguished modern jazz recitals (cf especially Anouar Brahem on ECM and Rabih Abou-Khalil on ENJA) where the works have been of the “normal” song length rarely extending beyond ten minutes whilst Indian ragas normally last 30 minutes and may last two hours. I have not encountered the tar previously - a six stringed instrument with three pairs of strings, each pair tuned in unison - and it seems perfectly suited to long raga-like works as occur on the *The Sacred Key* with *Hypolimnion* (28:51) and *Thermocline* (22:46).



Like the sitar the tar is a melodic instrument but may of course be used rhythmically. One of the very few Western improvised music groups that normally perform raga-length wholly improvised works is the trio The Necks. Lloyd Swanton of Vazesh, founding member of The Necks, has been exploring the depth and complexity of rhythm with that trio since 1987. But before looking at Vazesh a small digression into one live performance by some jazz artists who invested in longer works.



Archie Shepp (tenor) was recorded live at the Donaueschingen Musiktage 1967 with Roswell Rudd and Grachan Moncur, trombones; Jimmy Garrison, double bass; and Beaver Harris, drums. There is one track of 43'45" called *One For The Trane* (Shepp). I mention this for a number of reasons - one is that long improvised works of raga length are not rare in jazz. Secondly, jazz, like the English language, is an art that borrows from any instrument, any culture, any sound to make something new. Thirdly, long works can either reveal limitations in the improviser, or allow them to stretch out creatively sometimes to profound effect. Finally, Shepp's Donaueschingen outing when Swanton was seven years of age, is one the finest live jazz performances ever recorded *sans piano* and features *inter alia* a legendary bass solo by Jimmy Garrison.

In my view, Swanton's astonishing, beautiful solo on *Hypolimnion* (Rose/Swanton/Sadeghi), one of two long pieces recorded live at the Sydney Opera House on 12th December, 2020, on their album *The Sacred Key*, bears comparison to Garrison's.



Lloyd Swanton: his beautiful solo on "Hypolimnion" bears comparison to Garrison's... PHOTO CREDIT MARKUS LACKINGER

Obviously context is crucial - for lovers of solo bass technique then Barre Phillips and Peter Kowald amongst a score of others may suffice. But musical power comes from the context of performance in a live situation in a place in the work framed or set up by, say two trombones, a tenor saxophone and a drummer in the case of Shepp at *Donaueschingen*, and in the case of Vazesh, Jeremy Rose, tenor or soprano saxophones or bass clarinet and Hamed Sadeghi on tar. Additionally, to be performing in one of the world's iconic musical spaces such as the Sydney Opera House, albeit in the intimate Utzon Room, may be cause for inspiration and greater passionate commitment to playing in the moment - in any case, Swanton's five-minute solo beginning arco then segueing masterfully into pizzicato is, in its construction, sonority, timing, and feeling, an astonishingly beautiful piece of music.

Rightly or wrongly, Shepp's *Donaueschingen* is remembered especially for Garrison's solo, as Goodman's *Sing Sing Sing* at Carnegie Hall may be recalled as much for pianist Jess Stacy as it is for drummer Krupa. Similarly, Vazesh's Opera House gig of *Hypolimnion* will be remembered for Swanton's solo which is not to say that Rose or Sadeghi do not shine: they do and create the context for Swanton's solo. For example, Rose's climax towards the end of *Thermocline* (Rose/Swanton/Sadeghi) is especially fine, whilst the spacing, control and melodic beauty of Sadeghi's introduction to both pieces is enchanting.



Jeremy Rose's tenor solo following Swanton is as good as I've heard him on that instrument... PHOTO COURTESY AUSJAZZNET

It seems the double bass of Swanton raises the music to another level but this may be a misconstruing of the interplay between improvising musicians where each pushes the other to a collective brilliance - Rose's tenor solo following Swanton is as good as I've heard him on that instrument. So let's just say *Hypolimnion* is an especially memorable performance by three artists playing at the top of their game, in a long work of nearly 30 minutes where there are no longueurs and every note seems perfectly suited to the structural arc and overall development of fine music constructed in the creative moment.



Vazesh, L-R, Swanton, Rose and Hamed Sadeghi: “Hypolimnion” is an especially memorable performance by three artists playing at the top of their game... PHOTO CREDIT PRUDENCE UPTON

Sadeghi opens the work allowing the melodic sounds of the tar to hover and resonate, reverberate, and penetrate to powerful effect dramatically preparing the listener for the musical story, and Rose does not disappoint on the soprano saxophone where at four minutes it takes on the melodic role (*cf* shenai) whilst the tar and bass assume rhythm and harmonic roles. The sax echoes the sounds of Indian melodies a tradition in jazz which probably began with, or at least made popular by, John Coltrane whose recorded works include *India* (Coltrane) recorded in a legendary c15' live performance whilst in residence at New York's Village Vanguard in 1961.

Historically jazz liberated the acoustic bass from its humble classical origins - bass viol 15th century - and has made it a major musical force. Duke Ellington composed works featuring Jimmy Blanton whilst Charles Mingus, Professor Reggie Workman, Charlie Haden, Dave Holland, William Parker, Gary Peacock, John Lindberg and Cecil McBee and perhaps Mario Pavone and Lloyd Swanton as well, are amongst those who have made major artistic contributions to music in the 20th century and beyond. Consider Parker, a major contemporary hugely influential and productive artist, and his approach to the European double bass: "I approach the bass as a drum set. I've said this before. The G string is my ride cymbal, the D string is my snare, the A string is my tom-toms, and the E string is my low gong. That's how I approach it. I also approach it using the idea of taking away the fingerboard on the bass, and using it as a harp, like a kora. You don't see the kora technique because it's hard to get rid of the fingerboard." (*JazzTimes* 21/3/22).

Just to consider Swanton's recorded legacy, which includes production, composition, leadership, and arrangements over more than 30 years, or his mentoring, hundreds of live performances worldwide but mainly in Australia, is to give one pause. Yet, had he left only one piece, then *Hypolimnion* would stand as a telling legacy.