

Ethnographical Field Report on
Mata Amritanandamayi's Spiritual Program
in New York City, July 11-14, 2013, for
an Eastman School of Music DMA, 590-level Summer 2013-Spring 2014
Independent Study research seminar with Dr. Beth Bullard

A Study of Bhajan Ensembles at Spiritual Programs
of Mata Amritanandamayi Devi

By Greg Chako, March 2014

Introduction and Background

This report is based on my observations, recollections, and field notes taken during the latter half of a three-day spiritual program I attended in New York City, held July 11-14, 2013. This program was led by Sri Mata Amritanandamayi Devi, from India, who is commonly called “Amma,” meaning “mother,” and I shall refer to her herein as Amma. She is also known by many people as “the hugging saint,” and among her disciples (and other admirers), she is considered to be a Satguru or Avatar, a supreme saint or enlightened being who is here on Earth to spiritually guide initiates towards self-realization through a realization of God. She claims not to subscribe to any one particular religious system, saying that “. . . all religions are good,” but that hers is based purely on “love.” Thus, she serves as a humanitarian leader on a global scale, heading an organization involved in disaster relief, health care, and numerous other charitable and socially beneficial activities. Both her main ashram (a religious retreat similar to a monastery), called Amritapuri, and the international headquarters for her global charities organization, Embracing the World, is located in her native state of Kerala, South India. In 2003, Amma founded Amrita University, India’s largest private university, with fourteen schools and five campuses. It is accredited, with Amma as Chancellor, guiding the university’s mission and growth. One of her homepages includes the following descriptive paragraph about her:

Since 1993, Amma has been increasingly recognized by the international community as a treasured repository of practical spiritual wisdom, who has the capacity to guide the world towards a better, brighter future. She been a featured speaker at the United Nations on three occasions, most recently when she was presented with the 2002 Gandhi-King Award for Non-violence. Presenting the award, Dr. Jane Goodall referred to Amma as “God’s love in a human body.”

Amma has been coming to New York City for the past twenty-six years as part of an annual North American summer tour which includes ten American cities (Seattle, San Ramon, Los Angeles, Albuquerque, Dallas, Cedar Rapids, Chicago, Washington DC, Boston, New York City) and Toronto, Canada. She also often visits Detroit in November. She makes similar tours around the world: to Asia and the Pacific Islands; Australia; Africa; Europe; Latin America; the Middle East; India and elsewhere. She travels so much, in fact, that she is only at her home in India about four months collectively every year.

The bulk of my fieldwork, culminating in an ethnography I wanted to write, was scheduled to take place at Amma`s ashram in Kerala from December 14, 2013, through January 12, 2014. The primary reason I attended Amma`s program in New York was to prepare my “entry into the field,” the process by which I endeavored to obtain whatever formal permission might be required to carry out my work, to inform key members within Amma`s organization of my intentions, and to gain insights into identifying key people that might be able to assist me in this project.

All of the people I spoke to initially, who were close followers of Amma and familiar with the way things worked at Amirtapuri, were encouraging and positive about my intended work; however, in early October, two months prior to my scheduled trip to India, the ashram`s Board of Directors denied permission for me to do my work there, sending the following response to my formal proposal:

Thanks for your interest in Amma and her humanitarian and spiritual mission and bhajans in particular. We do appreciate your sincere desire to raise awareness about Amma and her contributions to society through a thesis. Unfortunately, due to the large volume of such requests we receive, we are not able to accommodate your request. As you know, ours is an almost entirely volunteer organization, and we are not able to dedicate resources for such projects. We wish you the best of luck with all your academic pursuits.

I continued with my travel plans to India (December 17, 2013 – January 16, 2014), despite this setback, and had a fruitful and memorable experience there. In fact, since permission to conduct my academic work was denied, I was better able to completely immerse myself in the ashram experience without feeling divided or distracted about why I was there and what I should be doing.

This project was motivated both by academic concerns, including my growing interest in ethnomusicology, and my awareness of Amma, whose spiritual movement and its appeal to me predate all my scholarly efforts. I am, in fact, a devotee (follower-student) of Amma. Deeply and personally involved in the spiritual aspect of her teachings, I am not merely an objective observer studying her organization “from the outside.” My focus for the ethnography is not, however, on Amma herself, but on the Indian devotional music called bhajans that accompany and play a central role in all her spiritual programs and teachings. As a trained and experienced professional musician, I can hardly call myself completely neutral and unbiased with regard to her music either. In gaining scholarly mentorship from professor and author, Dr. Beth Bullard, who holds two doctorates, one in musicology and one in ethnomusicology, I was prompted to promise that I would maintain as much of a “Janus-faced” approach to this project as possible, endeavoring to keep separate my personal feelings, beliefs, and opinions, from the academic work to be done.

I know quite a lot about Amma’s spiritual philosophy, but very little about Indian music. The only formal education in Indian music I have experienced was taking an introductory-level ensemble course from the Ethnomusicology Department of The Eastman School of Music in 2012 called “Indian Drumming,” using the South Indian drum called the mridangam. A talented Indian percussionist, named Rohan Krishnamurthy, who used teaching methods more common to Indian culture than to my Western culture, taught that ensemble. I found that challenging because of the complicated rhythms and the necessity to

memorize everything quickly - something musicians trained in a Western style may not be used to, since we tend to rely on music's being notated rather than incorporated in memory by means of the ear alone. The way rhythms are organized in Indian music is also foreign to many Western-trained players, including myself.

I have done some graduate-level research on the influence of spirituality in general, and of Indian culture in particular, on the music of several jazz musicians and on Richard Wagner. The latter related to his work, "The Ring of the Nibelung," but the focus of that research was primarily philosophical in nature. Given my limited knowledge of Indian music, it seemed relatively easy to put aside my musical prejudices and personal point of view while studying the music played at Amma's New York City program, however, there *was* a logistical type of challenge I experienced as a budding ethnographer: while there ostensibly to prepare my entry into the field and do preliminary academic research, I was also there, naturally, since I am a devotee of Amma, to experience her "darshan." Darshan means an audience with, and blessing from a deity, or holy person. Since she is my guru (a sacred spiritual guide and mentor), an audience with Amma was also a key motive for my being there. I hope it is fair to say that I was able to conduct interviews and record field notes in a reasonably unbiased fashion. But, I will admit that my attention, focus, and actual time, was always divided between the academic and the purely personal work to be done while in Amma's presence.

Because my involvement with Amma and her teaching is significant, I wish to provide some preliminary background information on how I came to know about her. This may serve to fully disclose my mindset (especially while in her presence) and properly frame my sincere efforts to be objective, nonetheless, in carrying out my scholarly research. Perhaps, one result of my attempt to maintain a "Janus-face" with this project will be that I plan in the future to write two works: one that adheres to academic research requirements and

another that describes my personal spiritual development and experiences relating to Amma, something that many of her devotees have written about over the years.

I first became aware of Amma sometime in the late 1990s in Singapore. While leading a jazz trio in Raffles Hotel nightly, a professional playing engagement of mine that lasted almost seven years, I met a European couple who mentioned Amma to me during a general discussion of psychology, healing childhood trauma, and 12-step programs (such as Alcoholics Anonymous). This couple went almost every year from their home in southern France to attend Amma's annual program in Singapore. They gave me Amma's biography to read and called me on the phone during each of their trips, enthusiastically encouraging me to come and see Amma for myself. I did so eventually, but without their repeated promptings, I probably would not have so. The intimate attachment to Amma I feel now did not occur immediately, but rather, was the result of what I like to call a "slow burn" that developed and increased in intensity over ten years or so.

When I lived in the Far East, I only saw Amma in person once a year, in Singapore and Japan, two countries I lived in that she visits on tour annually. In 2010 however, when I was living in New Jersey and enrolled in a Masters of Music degree program at William Paterson University, I was able, for the first time, to attend multiple programs of Amma's in the same year, since when she is in the United States she visits various cities within driving distance of each other. The most significant change in my sense of devotion to Amma came in Japan around 2007 and 2008, when I got a "spiritual name"¹ and a "mantra"² from her.

¹ My spiritual name is "Hriday," pronounced with a rolling tongue sound, something like "her-day." I was told the meaning of my spiritual name is "heart." Apparently, she chooses a name that has spiritual resonance for the recipient, though I am not sure how important it is that the recipient necessarily understands *what* that significance is. Maybe it is readily apparent or, it might be a sort of "life lesson" one learns or "grows into," so to speak. For example, my name could mean that I have a "big heart" (as in being a compassionate and generous person), or it might mean that I need to learn how to have a bigger one (to be *more* compassionate and generous)! According to her teachings, nothing in life is insignificant, and especially when something given derives directly from her, as was the case with both my mantra and spiritual name, one can be assured, I believe, that there is an important lesson for growth and improvement in it.

After I had received my mantra and spiritual name, I felt my connection to Amma deepen and grow to a level of intimacy I had never experienced before. Ever since then, I have referred to her as my guru when asked, something I had never done prior to that time.

The bhajan music that is the focus of my ethnography has its roots in the poems and chants written by saints commonly associated with the bhakti movement that originated in Medieval India around the 6th century. It is beyond the scope of this current work to delve into the historical complexities that help to define just what the movement is, but Dr. Krishna Sharma's book, *Bhakti and the Bhakti Movement – A New Perspective*, which critiques, according to the author, the most popular academic conceptions of the bhakti movement, offers some helpful information: the word “bhakti” means devotion to God in a *general* sense. The gist of her book claims that it is more accurate to consider the word bhakti in generic terms, and the movement as “. . . an amalgam of a number of devotional movements of a divergent nature . . .,” with bhakti as their common denominator, as opposed to thinking of bhakti as representing a “cult” or any one particular school of thought, doctrine, or sect. Bhakti is a far-reaching term that may best be understood, for the purpose of my research, in terms of a human “state” or condition to be sought, perhaps more closely aligned to the realm of feeling and emotion than to doctrine or philosophy. Author and professor H.S. Shivaprakash, considered by many to be an authority on the bhakti movement, claims it is “. . . the first and greatest Pan-Indian literary and cultural movement, which traveled across languages and regional barriers . . .”

² The mantra is a short phrase that one should repeat silently to oneself. It should be kept secret and not be shared with others. In Indian spiritual practice, repeating one's mantra is referred to as doing “japa.” Supposedly, when Amma gives a person a mantra, it is catered specifically to the individual receiving it and is infused with strong spiritual power. Its repetition is meant to promote concentration, positive thoughts, and appropriate action. According to a book I read after I got my mantra, written by one of her long-time Western devotees, Amma's willingness to give a mantra and spiritual name to an initiate means she guarantees to oversee that person's spiritual growth forever. From what I understand, she does not accept that responsibility unless the initiate is also “ready” (on some level that *may* only really be perceived by her) to commit to change for the better or, perhaps, for the initiate to accept her as ultimate guru.

Sharma's suggested generic definition of the word "bhakti" is appropriate I believe, because a singular, passionate, or even mystical love for the divine is the most common thread of bhakti and the primary theme for many of the poems that were put to song in the form of bhajans. Three main principles on which the Bhakti movement rests are: (1) that one's life should exemplify *selfless service* that is (2) directed to all people *equally*, and that is (3) in devotion to *one God*. Bhakti saints rejected caste distinctions, along with the hierarchy and ritualistic observances of the Brahmins, in favor of inward devotion and egalitarian attitudes. Though many leaders of the bhakti movement were, in fact Brahmin, there were also significant numbers who were from lower castes. Women saints played important leadership roles in the bhakti movement also. These women saints included Andal, the author of the Tiruppavai collection of verses and over 150 poems; Karaikkal Ammaiyar; Meerabai; Janabai; and Bahinabai. The poet-saints of the bhakti movement mentioned above, and others such as Kabir Das and Chaitanya, wrote their praises of God in verse and encouraged, if not actually insisted, that their followers should *sing* these poems regularly. The universal ideals of the bhakti movement, and its focus on music as a primary means of devotional worship, is exemplified by the fact that Kirtan at a Hindu temple, Qawwali at an Islamic Dargah, and Gurbani at a Sikh Gurdwara, *all* have roots in the bhakti movement of medieval India.

Knowing what I do about Amma's philosophical and religious teachings, it is easy for me to consider her as a leader of a modern-day bhakti movement, even though I am not aware that she has ever referred to herself, or her movement, in those specific terms. It seems clear to me that she espouses bhakti principles: giving selfless service to humanity; embodying the type of equality that asks us to see God in everyone and treat them accordingly; adhering to the concept of one indescribable God that is referred to by many

different names and that can be approached through devotional spiritual practice and self-realization; and recognizing the significance of music as a primary means of worship.

There are three primary aspects to Amma's spiritual programs, and they are also the disciplines she encourages, by example, in all her teachings: (1) meditation; (2) listening to spiritual discourse or reading inspirational words; (3) singing bhajans. Of the three, it may be bhajans that are the most pervasive and influential. Amma has recorded more than 1,000 bhajans, and many have been translated into up to 35 languages. She has also composed dozens of bhajan texts and set them to tunes, some of which follow traditional ragas. Regarding devotional singing as a spiritual practice, Amma herself says that, ". . . If the bhajan is sung with one-pointedness, it is beneficial for the singer, the listeners, and Nature as well. Later when the listeners reflect on the songs, they will try to live in accordance with the lessons enunciated therein . . ." ³

All of Amma's programs I am aware of have a specific and similar schedule that is always published on her websites and in printed promotional material. The basic schedule for the July 2013 program I attended in NYC was typical of others I have attended:

Thursday morning program - guided meditation, Amma gives darshan

Thursday evening program - spiritual discourse, bhajans led by Amma, meditation, darshan

Friday morning program - guided meditation, darshan

Friday evening program - discourse, bhajans, guided meditation, darshan

Saturday morning program - guided meditation, darshan

Saturday evening program (Devi Bhava) – a special program interspersed with Hindu rituals and ceremonies, and including a much longer spiritual discourse, meditation, and darshan

³ In today's world, she explains, it is often difficult for people to get one-pointed concentration in meditation, but this concentration can be attained more easily through devotional singing.

For the purposes of this report, the key thing to point out about Amma's program schedules is that music accompanies *all* the activities except guided meditation and spiritual discourse. While Amma is giving darshan, the single activity that takes the most time, due to the sheer number of people wishing to receive Amma's darshan, her swamis (a swami is someone initiated into a religious monastic order, similar to a monk or priest) and devotees are singing bhajans and playing music. As far as I know, Amma herself never sings during the day programs, but she sings and leads the music at every evening program with the exception of Devi Bhava. Devi Bhava is a special ceremonial program that can last as long as 18 hours (or more), and it is always held on the last day of a two or three-day program in any given city or location. It is like a finale. When Amma gives darshan during a Devi Bhava program, two things happen in conjunction with the regular accompanying music that usually do not occur on any other given night. One is that the regular bhajan ensemble singers and players are either joined by, or supplanted by, a variety of guest artists. Many of these guest performers could be either professional musicians or famous artists, who perform voluntarily in tribute to Amma or in support of her universal message of love and optimism. Another is that, interspersed at particular times in between the sets of live music, is traditional chanting conducted by a senior swami. One such chant is the Lalitha Sahasranam ("The Thousand Names of the Divine Mother").

Preparing Entry Into the Field

Prior to attending Amma's 2013 New York City program, I made phone calls to three of Amma's devotees whom I thought could offer advice to me about how I should proceed and how my project might be received by the administrative people of Amma's organization. I called Bharat Jayaraman first. We met at Amma's 2011 Toronto program in connection

with my desire to start a “satsang” in Rochester, New York, where I was living at the time. Satsang is like a prayer group; it is an assemblage of people who get together to worship and socialize in the spirit of religious ideals such as kindness, compassion, humility, joy and devotion. What happens at one of Amma’s satsangs is very much the same as what occurs at her large tour events: introductory comments, spiritual discourse, meditation, and the singing of bhajans. In conversation over lunch at the Toronto program, I had mentioned my interest in satsang to some people, one of whom suggested that I talk to Bharat and his wife Padma about it, because they were very close to Amma and ran a satsang in Buffalo, New York.

On the phone, Bharat suggested that my work would likely be well received. He thought that I was looking for academic professors in India to talk to (Bharat holds a PhD). He mentioned that, though there were many players adept at playing Indian music there, those who actually had any university training might be hard to find. It did not seem to occur to him initially that as an ethnographer, I might not want or need to talk to academics at all. He suggested that I compose a letter describing what I wanted to do and email it to him. He would then endeavor to show it to the appropriate people during Amma’s 2013 Toronto program, so I did as he suggested. He also encouraged me to keep doing more of what I was doing, namely, reaching out and asking questions.

When I asked him about the music I intended to research, he seemed to know quite a bit about it, explaining that the bhajans that Amma’s devotees sing derive from a wide variety of sources: some from the realm of popular song, some based on ragas from Indian classical music, and some relating to fishing or Nature, since Amma was born in a fishing village and hence, was exposed to, and may have been inspired to compose, songs written about fishing and the natural world surrounding her home.

The second person I called was Sri Pati, an American I met at Amma’s 2010 New York program. He was organizing “seva” volunteers and I became one of them for that

program. Seva is “selfless service.” Doing seva means helping others, volunteering your efforts to whatever needs to be done, without expecting anything in return. The myriad of volunteers and organizers that work to set up and run Amma’s huge events, and indeed, who comprise Amma’s global humanitarian organization, Embracing the World, are all performing “seva.” Those performing seva can be called “sevites.” Because Sri Pati lives at the main (first established) American ashram in San Ramon, California, has been to Amritapuri multiple times, and seems well informed about the workings of Amma’s organization, *plus* the fact that he was an American like me, made him, in my mind, an excellent person for me to talk to.

He said that I should try to come to the New York program since “everyone that I would need and want to speak to would be there,” but I told him that schoolwork and a lack of funds would make the trip impossible for me. It turned out that I was wrong about not being able to go, but since I did not know that during my phone conversation with him, I asked if I could send him the same letter I sent to Bharat and proposed that he might share its contents with anyone that he thought was appropriate to advise me further. He said ok to that, and told me that he did not think I would encounter any obstacles in getting what I needed to proceed with my project. He suggested that my being a devotee, a benevolent “believer” in Amma, as opposed to a critical detractor, could help put the organization’s administrators at ease with me.

Because I wanted to learn to sing some bhajans using one of the Indian languages, I asked him if he sang bhajans with Indian words. He said he did, and told me that he remembered the songs from the melody, saying that the melodies are “catchy,” and after practicing them for a while, the words were relatively easy to recall. He also reminded me of something I already suspected: that I could take free singing and music instrument lessons while in India, suggesting that my musical training might help me learn more quickly than

usual. But, I discovered that the music lessons are not free at Amritapuri, and because I was on such a tight budget, I never took any music lessons while there.

The third person I contacted by email only, and her name is Amritapriya Schmidt. When I was discussing organizing a Rochester satsang with Bharat in Toronto, he had told me to talk to Amritapriya about it, because she advised people (in the USA) who wished to do just that. Bharat also told me that she should be able to give me the contact details for an American devotee who has transcribed many of Amma's bhajans. Apparently, this person had written the music down using Western notation and guitar chord symbols. The transcriptions were then published in a book that could be purchased by those who preferred not to function purely "by ear" as Indian musicians normally do. I did follow up on Bharat's advice, meeting Amritapriya at that same Toronto program. Because she had been very helpful then, and since she seemed to hold a rather elevated position of authority within Amma's organization and knew something about bhajans, I sought her opinion on my project.

She read the same descriptive letter outlining my proposal as Bharat and Sri Pati had, and called it "compelling" in one of her emailed responses to me. She said that getting permission to photograph at the New York program, one of the things I had been asking about, was unlikely because that usually required a more lengthy process than what I had time for. She said that photo-taking permission could be granted by Amma herself, or Swami Amritaswarupananda, Amma's most senior disciple. After attending the New York program, I discovered that what Amritapriya had said about getting permission to take photos was completely accurate. She highly recommended that I visit Amritapuri, and told me I could take bhajan-singing lessons there. Like the others I communicated with, Bharat and Sri Pati, Amritapriya thought I should have no problems conducting my project as planned and was supportive and encouraging to me.

Field Report

On Friday July 12th, 2013, at about 8am, I drove from my home in Rochester, NY, towards New York City. After parking my car in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, I made my way by subway and foot to Jacob Javitz Convention Center to attend Amma's evening program. In the entrance area to the hall in which Amma's program was held, there were some tables with printed information on them and attendants ready to assist and direct attendees. The hall was utilized as five areas with the following functions:⁴ (1) the public entrance area; (2) as one walked further into the hall, the food selling and eating area; (3) a merchandise display and sale area that I refer to hereafter as "selling booths," which included event information tables along the outer walls; (4) the bulk of the space for seating in front of a large stage; (5) behind the stage, a non-public space for organizers to work, and within that area, a make-shift curtain hung to enclose a smaller area where Amma's swamis (those who were initiated into a religious monastic order, similar to a monk or priest) could sit for breaks while outside the public eye.

Shortly after I entered the main hall in the late afternoon to early evening, I saw my friend, Sri Pati. When he saw me approaching, he said, "You made it!" I told him I had brought my camera and asked him how could I get permission to use it there. I had seen signs as I entered the hall stating clearly that no photo or video taking was allowed. He suggested I roam around a bit to give him time to find the right person for me to ask about photo taking. After ten minutes or so, we found each other again and Sri Pati introduced me to Vinay, "the guy," he claimed, who could tell me how to get permission to take photos, both on that particular weekend and later in India when I intended to complete the bulk of my fieldwork.

⁴ See Illustration 1

Sri Pati gave Vinay a brief explanation of what I wanted before I filled in more details. Vinay then explained that it would be virtually impossible for me to get permission to use the camera during the remainder of the NYC program because such permission is only granted after a somewhat lengthy and formal process. With regard to my project in India, he gave me instructions to send all the details in the form of a proposal to an email address he handed me. He urged me to do so as soon as possible so their staff would have adequate time to review it, explaining that December, when I planned to visit, is an extremely busy time at the ashram.

Later, when Sri Pati and I were alone together, he suggested that even if Amma herself gave me permission to film during the New York program, her approval might not be adequately disseminated down through the chain of command within the large organization's bureaucracy. Sri Pati suggested that even if Amma or a Swami gave me permission personally at some point, a formal "OK" from Vinay's team was recommended, so that I could be given some form of identification to alert the staff that I was vetted. I did not give up my quest to take some pictures at the New York program, despite what Vinay had said, until Sunday morning, when Amma's most senior swami, Swami Amritaswarupananda (hereafter referred to as Swamiji), said "no" to my request in a private conversation we had.

Another person I recognized soon after entering the hall was Swami Shantamrita. I had met him when I lived in Japan. He was the spiritual head of the ashram in Japan and I had taken one of Amma's "IAM" meditation courses that he taught. He is American, but he speaks Japanese and Malayalam (Amma's mother tongue) fluently. Therefore, he was the person always translating Amma's spiritual discourses in Japan. I approached and asked him if he remembered me. He asked me where and when we met. When I answered his question, he recalled me, saying that when he knew me in Japan I was sporting more facial hair and no baseball cap. It suddenly occurred to me that wearing a cap while in a swami's presence

might be considered rude or otherwise inappropriate, so I promptly removed my cap and told him yes, I had recently become clean-shaven. He then asked what he could do for me. I explained my intentions to do a project in India and also that I hoped to take photos while there in NYC too. He suggested that might be possible to get photos there if I got Swamiji's permission. He said he would assist with that later.

After listening to me briefly summarize my school project, Shantamrita's initial reaction was similar to the one I got from Bharat Jayaraman, in that he seemed to assume I needed professors of music or the academically trained, so-called "schooled" musicians, to speak to, when in fact, I just needed to talk in layman terms to ensemble participants at Amma's ashram regarding bhajan music. Having lived in India for some time, he was well aware of the ashram environment and of Amma's university there. As he began thinking of whom it might be helpful for me to talk to, he mentioned that, although there were plenty of good players of Indian music there, there were not any "academics" I could speak to that he was aware of. He also said that, generally speaking, the academic focus in and around Amma's ashram was solely on the sciences, and that they have ". . . never had an expert on music and art at the university there . . ." I was gratified that he was so willing to assist me, but I found his comments intriguing as I began to wonder whether he made an inaccurate assumption about whom I should talk to and why. Bharat and Shantamrita initially reacted to me similarly; what, if anything, in the way I presented myself may have influenced their comments? What pre-conceived notions of academic research existed in their perception, and by extension, in perceptions within the culture I was researching? Another thing I found curious was that: in such a highly regarded accredited university, one that includes a school of the arts, why is there no expert in music? What would such experts be like, and did they need them?

Shantamrita thought of a good person for me to meet while in NYC, saying he wanted to introduce me to a guitarist devotee in attendance who often played guitar with Amma's regular touring ensemble, and would likely be playing later that evening. He said he would find me later to make that key introduction for me. He then escorted me over to a table, behind which there were several men working as staff members. He introduced me to an American named Gautam, who lived at Amritapuri and regularly assisted Western visitors there. Since he would be there during my visit, he might, Shantamrita thought, be able to introduce me to people in India who could help me in some way. Gautam told me he would help me when I got to India, if he could. He gave me his email address and said I should email him details of what I wanted later. Shantamrita began to excuse himself, saying we could speak again later, but before he left, I asked him again about taking photos that night. He said it was too late to do anything for that evening, but he suggested that if I came in the next morning he would help me by asking Swamiji about it then. Just before leaving to finish work on the opening remarks that he was about to make on stage that evening, Shantamrita told me he would have more time to talk later, after Amma started giving darshan.

Before the evening program began, I surveyed the stage. It looked prepared for music playing because a few musical instruments like harmonium, electric keyboard, tabla, some unidentified percussion instruments, and equipment like microphones, speakers and assorted wires seemed set up and in place. I drew a diagram in my notebook of what I saw onstage⁵. Amma's elevated square-shaped pedestal where she would sit was center-stage and the harmonium that one of the swamis would play was just to her right on the floor. On top of the pedestal (Amma's "chair," if you will), in the front corner to the right of where Amma would sit, was a pair of sticks resembling clave and two small cymbals called manjira. To her left

⁵ See Illustration 2

was a small table, behind which Swamiji would sit, with a monitor speaker to his left, and another smaller table further left with some books on it (which I assumed contained song lyrics) and a seat cushion. Swamiji would sit just to Amma's left, and further to the left, next to Swamiji, would sit another swami. In addition to the two tables and books in front of where they would sit, there were also two microphones on boom stands for them to sing into.

Just behind and slightly further to Amma's right were the tabla, one larger "bayan" and to its right, one smaller "dayan" with a cushion for the player to sit facing toward Amma. In front and behind these drums (and positioned to the sides of the tabla player) were nine more dayans, five in the rear and four in the front, and there were two monitor speakers (used for the players to hear themselves and each other) slightly behind the tabla player, one on each side (left and right) of where the tabla player would be sitting. An electric keyboard was positioned behind Amma, more or less center-stage. To its right was an empty drum holder, which looked as if it would hold a mridangam, so that if the drum were placed on it, it would be raised a couple of inches off the floor. Behind that, and angled slightly, were four drums, standing upright, that seemed to resemble congas, but they were covered with a blanket slightly hiding them from sight. I never ascertained exactly what these instruments were, but later, I went onstage to get a closer look at them. They were the same shape as a Dholak, Maddale, or Maram, but they may well have been the Madhalam and Timila, since those two particular instruments originate from and are often used in Amma's native Kerala, where Amritapuri is located. In front of these covered drums, to the right of the drum holder and just to the right behind the five extra dayan, was a mridangam sitting on the floor, with a cushion behind it, positioned at an angle and facing toward where Amma would be sitting. On the other side of the electric keyboard, behind Amma's left side, were four mikes on boom stands for singing.

What seemed apparent from the set-up I observed, even before anyone came onstage, was that Amma was to be positioned front and center, with swamis positioned level with her (at the stage-front) and on either side: two on her left side, where Swamiji would sit positioned the closest to Amma, with another sitting to his left; and one on her right side sitting where he could play the sole harmonium onstage. The tabla player had the second most prominent position on stage, and the positions of the tabla and mridangam players offered a clear sight line to Amma, in contrast to the keyboard player, who would be directly behind Amma, and the back-up singers who would sit in the rear side, seemingly too far behind to see any instructions that Amma might gesture with her face or hands.

On Friday, at 7:05 pm or so, I noticed people putting down a red carpet leading from the exit on the right of the stage up to a short set of stairs leading onto the stage. There were also individuals standing near the carpet, who were practicing motions in preparation for the Pada Puja, the traditional Indian way of welcoming a saint or Mahatma (divine soul). That ceremony involves washing and anointing Amma's feet and presenting her with a garland of flowers.

At approximately 7:10 pm, Shantamrita was sitting onstage just behind the harmonium. He began speaking in English, welcoming people and telling stories of Amma. I looked to my left and noticed an Indian man I recognized. We had met at his New Jersey house as part of my pre-program and post-program seva work for Amma's 2010 NYC event that I attended. I will never forget his generosity in giving me a tabla that is now sitting in the basement where I live in Rochester. This man was holding an umbrella and standing near the door where Amma would enter. It was raining outside. One of Amma's swamis was there too, along with Sri Pati. People were also cleaning the carpet that Amma would walk on. From these observations I ascertained that Amma would soon arrive.

I saw Amma at the doorway at about 7:27 pm. She entered the hall as Shantamrita was speaking to the audience, relating a story of Amma. As soon as Shantamrita noticed Amma arriving, he stopped before finishing his story, and announced her arrival to the audience. At 7:32, Amma sat down on the pedestal riser positioned center stage. She motioned for some young children to come closer and they gathered closely around her, some sitting on the riser with her. Amma gently patted Shantamrita on the head and then began to speak, while Shantamrita translated Amma's Malayalam language to English for the crowd. At 8:23, Amma's spiritual discourse ended and people, presumably the bhajan-ensemble members I thought, began to go onto the stage.

About 8:25-8:30 after quickly tuning, the tabla player started a beat, the harmonium sounded, and the first song began. I was so hungry after traveling all day without eating, that I left the area in front of the stage during the second song and went to the food area to eat. After eating, I walked towards the stage and found a seat in one of the many chairs provided. I listened to the music for a while. There was an Indian woman sitting next to me who often sang sweetly along with the music and seemed to know all the song lyrics. I tried to identify the instruments I was hearing. I heard a drone sound but could not figure out, from what I saw on stage, where it was coming from.

Later on during the program – or perhaps it was the following day - I found out that it was the harmonium making the drone sound. When I saw a harmonium for sale at one of the selling booths, I asked the man staffing that booth about it. He opened the harmonium up and explained how it worked, showing me buttons on the outside of the machine that can be manipulated to create, in various degrees, the drone sound I had heard. The instrument for sale was the same brand as the one I saw onstage. He said that it was “top-of-the-line” and that the price of \$1,500 was very reasonable.

All the people working at Amma's programs are doing seva. Some are uninitiated visitors who choose to volunteer their time, and others are devotees who travel along with the tour to multiple cities.⁶ In either case, sevites (as those doing seva are called) often perform more than one kind of work at Amma's events. It is not uncommon, if one spends enough time at these programs, to see the same person doing different jobs at different times, perhaps working in the kitchen at one time and selling merchandise at another.

The sevite who had talked to me knowledgeably about the harmonium was, as I found out when I went to India and met him again in Amritapuri, a renunciate named Yati. Yati was one of two devotees attending the NYC program who played guitar with Amma's bhajan ensemble throughout the North American 2013 tour. Much of the year he lives at the ashram in Amritapuri and plays with the bhajan ensembles there too. Like most of the people on the tour, he performs multiple seva duties. After I noticed him playing guitar in NYC, we spoke briefly, and he told me he played a little harmonium as well as guitar. The other guitar player present in NYC was Janapriya, of whom Swami Shantamrita had spoken, and eventually, I was introduced to him later that night by Swami Shantamrita. Like Yati, he did several seva jobs and played more than one musical instrument. As I learned more from interviews and observations over the course of the remaining weekend, I discovered that some of the bhajan-ensemble members I met could play more than one instrument reasonably well, and all of the player-participants I spoke to seemed to have a general awareness of how all the instruments functioned in bhajan contexts.

As I was listening to the music, I noticed that often, though not always, the lyrics in an Indian language and an English translation of those lyrics appeared on two video screens, one on each side and slightly in front of the stage. Later, when I sat near the band, I looked at

⁶ When I went to India, I discovered that even devotees living at the ashram have to pay their own traveling costs if they choose to go on international tours. These devotees are called "renunciates" because they have renounced all worldly pursuits, devoting themselves to a spiritual path to become a swami or swamini (a woman). Only those who have been initiated into the swami order are granted free airfare, as far as I know.

these screens either to sing along, or to silently read to myself the English translation to understand the meaning of the lyrics.

At 9:35 pm the Arati ceremony began. This widely performed Hindu ceremony symbolizes the final surrender and relinquishment of the ego to God. There are particular traditional songs that usually accompany this ceremony, perhaps the most popular being a bhajan written in the 1870's by Shardha Ram, called *Om Jai Jagdish Hare*, sometimes sung with a different deity as the focus, such as *Om Jai Shiva Shakti Hare*, or *Om Jai Lakshmi Mata*, etc. In Swaminarayan Hinduism, a Vaishnava Bhakti sect, the Arati song composed by Muktanand Swami in 1802, *Jai Sudguru Swami*, is always sung. The ceremony and the song are collectively referred to as Arati. When the Arati ceremony is performed at Amma's programs, it signals the ending of the ceremony and the beginning of Amma's darshan-giving, or it can signal the end of bhajan-singing and Amma's exit from the stage area. In any event, it features a unique song to Amma's sect that was written especially for Amma by her disciples, and it is called, simply, "Amma's Arati."

Devotees are chosen to help perform these traditional ceremonies at Amma's programs, such as the Pada Puja and the Arati already mentioned, as a form of seva. These particular seva roles are highly treasured and it is considered an honor to be chosen as a participant in one of them. At the ceremony I witnessed in NYC in 2013, two people, facing each other and standing slightly apart, each held opposite sides of a plate with a lamp of burning camphor flame on it, moving the plate together slowly and steadily in a wide circular motion directly in front of Amma. Amma threw flower petals on them and looked at them with apparent loving appreciation, as the bhajan ensemble continued to play the Arati song. A man standing behind Amma was playing what, I believe, is a drum from Kerala called an "Idakka." He struck it with a stick that is curved on one end. At 9:42, the song began to finish as Swamiji led a tempo slow-down by singing in a more soft and rubato style. As he did so,

the accompanists faded out altogether and Swamiji ended up merely chanting, rather than singing, the words unaccompanied.

The ensemble members began to leave the stage, some taking their hand-held instruments with them. The larger instruments, like the electric keyboard and harmonium, were left onstage for the time being. Then, Swamiji led all in a guided Pmeditation. The meditation lasted for approximately an hour. At about 10:56 pm, when the meditation was finished, all the remaining musical instruments and sound reinforcement equipment were removed from the stage and repositioned on the floor below in front of the stage. Chairs were carried onto the stage in preparation for Amma to begin giving darshan. The chairs were for people to sit in as they queued up to receive Amma's darshan. At the same time, pre-recorded bhajans were being played over the PA system, and two darshan lines were forming, one on each side of the stage. All of this activity was carried out and completed in a surprisingly quick and orderly fashion (I thought) by sevites.

Shortly after darshan began, I was walking in the vicinity of the selling booths when Shantamrita saw me and got my attention. He asked a man who seemed to be working (seva) as a runner for the kitchen if he had time to meet me. The man said, yes, he had a few minutes before he had to get back to the kitchen. He was named Janapriya, the guitarist that Shantamrita had wanted to introduce me to. Shantamrita politely excused himself and the man and I began to talk. I quickly explained my school project and my interest in the music played at Amma's programs, mentioning that guitar is not an instrument normally included in an Indian bhajan ensemble. I told him I was curious how he approached playing guitar with one, since the guitar is one of the two most pervasive chordal instruments, along with the piano, yet there are essentially no chords in traditional Indian music. He began responding to what I had said, as we moved towards a less crowded area.

He said if there was one thing that would help me in playing with an Indian bhajan group more than anything else, it was the ability to mimic, not to play “too much,” but to be able to first hear, then melodically copy and slightly embellish, in the moment, musical phrases sung by the lead singer. Having told him already that I was basically a jazz guitarist, he said what he was talking about was very similar to what I might refer to in jazz lingo as “call-and-response.” In jazz circles, that expression derives from African-American churches in which the preacher says something emphatically, encouraging the congregation to shout out (repeat) in unison what he had just said. A jazz musician may employ a similar technique musically with other members of an ensemble.

Janapriya said that after playing in Amma’s bhajan ensembles for about six years, he thought that perhaps he had learned a thing or two, but he prefaced this comment by saying, “. . . you know how it is around Amma . . . ,” looking at me knowingly, “. . . there should be no trace of the ego [among her devotees]” I believe he prefaced his comment that way as an effort to display humility, an attitude Amma’s devotees are encouraged to adopt, but maybe too, he said it for my benefit, as a way of informing me of the preferred attitude in Amma’s cultural milieu, if I was not already aware of it, or, as a way of safeguarding his own image if I were.

He went on to say that one or more of the swamis regularly requested him to play with them, intimating that he was their preferred choice of guitarist over the one other guitar player there who had traveled with this tour. Janapriya suggested a few possible reasons for why the swamis might prefer his playing. One was his ability to mimic appropriately, without overdoing it by playing too much and thereby (potentially) drawing listener’s attention to the guitar and away from the singer. He explained that all he had to do was repeat, sometimes with a slight embellishment, the last few notes of a melodic phrase he might hear the leader sing. Doing that, he said, showed that he was listening closely to the music going on around

him. This alertness and awareness of his musical surrounding, being consciously “in the moment,” so to speak, was another reason he guessed he was often asked to play.

Janapriya made special mention of Swami Pranavamrita. He said Swami Pranavamrita liked how Janapriya paid attention to his singing of the melody, and how Janapriya’s subtle response phrases played on the guitar were generally liked by the swamis. One of the reasons that Swami Pranavamrita seemed to particularly appreciate Janapriya’s melodic mimicking, Janapriya explained, was due to his awareness of the use and importance of gamakas. Gamakas refer to ornamentations of a musical pitch and are sometimes referred to as “shaking the note.” They are commonly applied in Indian music and used especially in the South where Amma and Swami Pranavamrita are from. Janapriya said Swami Pranavamrita was classically trained and loved using these musical note decorations. He guessed that Swami Pranavamrita considered the use of gamakas vital to the integrity of Indian bhajan music.

Sometimes, when Swami Pranavamrita utilized gamakas in his singing, Janapriya would mimic them by using a note-bending technique on his guitar. With the guitar, its player can alter the pitch of a note by “bending” it. This is done by sliding the finger, that is, pressing down on the fretboard to sound a particular note, then sliding the finger from one side to the other (in parallel motion to the frets) without removing it from the fingerboard. Each fret on the guitar is spaced a semi-tone’s distance from the adjacent one. Fingering one fret and then the adjacent one would result in sounding two notes a half a step from each other, for instance, G to G# if the finger moves upwards closer to the guitarist, and G to Gb if it moves downwards away from the player. When “bending” a note, the guitarist alters the sounding pitch by an *indeterminate* amount, and not by a semi-tone as would result from fingering an adjacent fret. The degree to which this bending technique alters the pitch corresponds to the amount of side-to-side movement the finger makes. If the finger slides

quite a bit, it is possible to alter the pitch by as much as a whole-tone. Bending guitar notes is rather simple to do and even amateur guitarists do it without necessarily being instructed in the technique. Professional jazz and classical guitarists do not usually bend notes because in those idioms, a more definitive “in-tune” pitch is preferred to one that is “bent” out-of-tune. Yet, in blues, rock, and most other popular styles of music, bending notes on the guitar is not only commonplace, but also idiomatic.

Janapriya also said Swami Pranavamrita was intolerant of mistakes and very exacting with his own music, and that he held the musicians around him to the same strict standards. Janapriya also said Swami Pranavamrita had “great ears,” wrote the best bhajans, and said that I should be sure to listen carefully to his music, if I got the chance later that night, to see if I could recognize the higher musical quality of his bhajans. I did hear Swami Pranavamrita singing later, but I had no way to know whether or not he was singing a bhajan of his authorship or not, because the authors of the songs performed are never announced.⁷

Besides the ability to mimic and listen well, Janapriya said that it was helpful, if one wanted to “fit in” and be well received by Indian musicians, to know which raga (melody pattern) was being utilized in any given song, if indeed a raga was being used at all. He said that sometimes the raga being used for a song might involve different pitches when ascending than when descending. For example, it could be pentatonic (five pitches) when rising, but seven pitches when going down; the third scale degree could be *both* major and minor in the same raga – they often seemed to him interchangeable – a major third when ascending and a minor third when descending. Janapriya said it was important to maintain the correct raga pattern (and pitch order) all the time when playing, whether one was improvising a solo or embellishing a melodic phrase.

⁷ This made determining the authorship of the bhajans I heard nearly impossible for me. Later during my research, I asked one of the more regular attendees to these programs about this, commenting that I had peeked into one of the song books that I saw sitting onstage near where the lead-singing swami’s sat, and could not read anything of the text. He told me that, to the best of his knowledge, those books contained *only* the title and lyrics of the bhajan, and not the composer’s name.

Janapriya told me that he taught a class, for non-classically trained Western musicians or for those devotees wishing to learn more about Indian music in general, in which he dealt with the importance of the raga. Though bhajans originated from Indian classical music, Janapriya suggested that bhajans had more improvisatory freedom than the most strictly traditional Indian classical music. Nonetheless, Janapriya still felt compelled to try to use the correct raga. His main point seemed to be that as long as he used only the correct notes, in the right order, and did not overplay, he could not really play anything undesirable, and that - playing only what was called for - was the key to working successfully with the bhajan ensembles he played with at Amma's programs.

Another vital ingredient to success in a bhajan performance situation, according to Janapriya, was attitude: it is helpful to be humble and inconspicuous, particularly if one is a Western novice playing in a bhajan context with native Indians. He said that this was even more important in India, since there, more so than in America, it mattered a great deal "who plays with whom when." He was alluding, I thought, to a more sensitive or well-defined sense of status-consciousness or favoritism amongst the players in India. I surmised this from both his body language and his previous comments Janapriya made about controlling the "ego." Referring to this observation, Janapriya said, with traces of disgust and resignation, ". . . all I can tell you is . . . *it happens* . . ."

Since I was not allowed to conduct formal interviews with the bhajan ensemble members in Amritapuri, I cannot shed much light on the issue Janapriya was talking about. However, I did notice that the bhajan ensembles on regular rotation at Amritapuri seemed to be comprised of consistent personnel. While in India, I met a musician who was a short-term (less than 3 months) resident at the ashram. He played bamboo flute and seemed very

familiar with Indian classical music. I played guitar⁸ with him on two occasions in his room. When I heard him play (so well) and found out about his training in Indian music, I asked him if he had ever played with the bhajan ensembles there at the ashram. He said no, commenting that he thought it was difficult to “get close” to those players, that they were somewhat aloof, and that one might have to be staying there for a long time before being “accepted” into that “close-knit” music circle. He said that there were many musicians passing through the ashram at different times, some of them competent or even professional players. Though one might think that any number of them could easily perform there, he did not think it happened very often, implying not only that bhajan ensemble members were cautious about who they let join them, but also that a guests’ musical talent or reputation would not be a major deciding factor in such cases.

Janapriya told me that the electric keyboard player never used any chord extensions like 9ths, 11ths or 13ths, and that a button on the keyboard was used to modulate to whatever key is most comfortable for the lead singer to sing in. Using a button to change keys instead of doing it manually by changing hand positions meant that the keyboardist used the hand position for (played in) the key of “C” consistently. He proposed that the keyboardist might not really know how to play in any other key, or how to play many chords other than triads and four-note dominant seventh chords. Yet even if, while he was playing with the ensemble, the keyboardist played the “wrong” chord (from his point of view), he would always follow along by using the keyboardist’s choice of chord instead of insisting on playing his version of the “right” one. To do otherwise would overstep his role in the ensemble because the keyboardist was the more senior member of the ensemble and, he said, the player responsible for determining the choice of harmonic accompaniment. I believe that were Janapriya *not* to

⁸ When I met Yati again at Amritapuri, I asked him if he knew where I might be able to borrow a guitar. He said he might. A few days later, he had arranged for me to borrow another devotee’s guitar, one Yati had been keeping in his room until this man’s return visit to the ashram. Yati had gotten this man’s permission to lend me the guitar by email, and it turned out that this man was returning to Amritapuri the same day I was scheduled to leave, so the timing of it all could not have worked out better.

follow the keyboardists' lead, he would cross a socio-cultural boundary, as well as a musical one, vis-à-vis the tacit ensemble etiquette that he perceived and wanted to conform to.

I am familiar with this kind of issue that can come up between pianist and guitarist from my own full-time playing days. Since both the piano and guitar player can clearly define, or muddle, the harmony of a song with chords, usually one of these two players takes the lead role in order to avoid harmonically "stepping on the others' toes" by playing clashing (or undesired dissonant) harmonies. Only when both players possess the very highest levels of performance skill and empathy with one another and their other musical partners do they tend to improvise simultaneously in an effective and musically pleasing manner.

The main keyboardist that Janapriya played with the most in New York City was named Swarna. I got the impression from Janapriya that he thought Swarna's knowledge of Western musical tradition was somewhat limited because it did not encompass certain *harmonic* aspects of Western music. On the other hand, he acknowledged, admired, and was thankful for (since he benefited as a band member from it) her expertise at fulfilling her role in this particular (Indian) music unit perfectly. He further praised Swarna by saying that she and her sister Anu, the tabla player, were very friendly and easily approachable. He said that they were helpful assisting him to fit in with the group, and they would most likely be helpful to me if I were to ask them about the music they played. I had talked briefly to the tabla player, Anu, once or twice before, in previous years when I had attended Amma's programs in Asia, long before my involvement with this project. Limited as that interaction with Anu was, it was enough for me to believe that what Janapriya had said to me about their kind disposition was likely quite accurate.

With regard to the notion that most of the bhajan players were not trained formally in Western music, and that the keyboardist used a switch on the electric keyboard to change pitch level because her knowledge of fingering positions was limited to the key of "C"

octave, I drew similar conclusions about the two guitarists I saw play in the bhajan ensemble because of their use of the “capo.” A capo is an external device used on guitar to change key playing, or pitch level positions, without using one’s fingers. Just as the keyboardist played in the “C” octave by changing the instrument’s pitch with a button electronically, the guitarists I saw used the capo device to do the same thing, enabling them to position their fingers on the guitar fretboard *as if* they were in the most basic “first position.” Generally speaking, Western music tradition teaches that instrumentalists must have intimate knowledge of the *entire* instrument they are playing; however, by using a guitar capo or by simply pushing a button on an electric keyboard, the instrumentalist can play at any pitch level, or in any “key,” without actually *learning* how to play everywhere on their instrument since effectively, they are always fingering notes in only one key or pitch position, “C” in the case of keyboardists and “first position” in the case of guitarists.

The first key a novice Western guitarist plays in, particularly for popular styles of playing, like folk, rock, or country, is “C” because there are no “accidentals” in the key signature and there are fewer notes to actually have to finger. This corresponds to all-white keys on a piano. Basically, the easiest keys (after “C”) to play in on guitar are those that correspond to one of the five open strings of the guitar: E, A, D, or G. When the lead vocalist sang in keys like Eb, Ab, Db, or Gb, then the guitarists I saw utilized the capo, apparently to avoid having to finger notes in those “unfriendly” guitar keys. I thought to myself that, were I ever in a bhajan-playing situation like they were, I might hesitate from using the capo, choosing to play (finger notes) in whatever key the singer was using at the time. Everytime I saw a guitarist use a capo, I assumed, just as Janapriya did about Swarna using a button on her electric keyboard, that it was used because the player’s knowledge of the instrument was limited, because I knew of no other, purely musical reason, to do it. However, that it not to say that there is not a very good reason to do it that I was unaware of.

In our conversation about Swarna's not playing "color" notes (the chord's upper extensions) like the 9th, 11th and 13th in the chords she played, Janapriya made what I thought was a particularly interesting comment. He said that if, for instance, one of the lead singers were to sing a "B" note, and the chord being played at that moment was a "C" chord, Swarna would *never ever* add the "B" note to the "C" triad to form a C-Major seventh chord, nor did he think she even knew what that chord necessarily was. Instead, she would play a "G" chord, effectively treating the singer's melodic embellishment as the third of a "G" chord rather than the seventh of a "C" chord. He went on to explain that just as the third scale degree might be altered by a half step in a song, as already mentioned, so might the seventh scale degree. So, when Janapriya used the above example of the singer singing a "B" note when the keyboard player was playing a "C" chord, that "B" note could be natural or, if called for, flatted as a "Bb" note (a flatted seventh scale degree). If flatted, Janapriya implied Swarna would play a Gminor (triad) chord instead of a C seventh (4-note voicing) chord. He said that, if he was playing in the key of "C" (from his Western point of view), the singers he accompanied sometimes treated any kind of "B" note as the seventh scale degree, and any kind of "E" note as the third scale degree, so that effectively, there was no difference between a "B" and a "Bb" or an "E" and an "Eb," because those notes were perceived, simply, as the seventh and third scale (or pattern) degree respectively, following the rule of the raga of the song.

To Janapriya, the most complimentary thing one of the swamis could say to a guitarist was: "I can't hear you!" or "Turn up!" because that meant they liked what you were playing and wanted to hear more from you. He said if they did not like what you were playing, they might ask you to turn down, or worse, to stop playing. He did not offer any specific real-life examples of this ever happening, so I was not sure if any of the swamis ever really told a guitar player to stop playing or not. I got the distinct impression though, that if they did not

like what you played, they would be less likely to have you play with them again. Janapriya's comments emphasized the importance of not playing anything that did not belong in musical context, such as playing notes completely outside the raga or the melodic pattern of the song, overplaying or embellishing so much that the lead vocal line is overshadowed, behaving with an arrogant or disrespectful attitude, not listening intently enough, and - something that he alluded to but didn't mention specifically - playing *too* loudly.

He also told me that the swamis seemed to love it when he played fast arpeggios. He did not know why that was, but he said it was relatively simple for him as a guitarist to do that. Later, when I was able to sit next to him while he played with the bhajan ensemble, I discovered that what he meant by "arpeggios" was actually the guitar technique of "hammer-ons" and "pull-offs," in which one fingered note is struck with the plucking hand, and while that finger remains pressed down on the fretboard, unused fingers from the fingering hand "hammer down" on one or more frets above the initially fingered note. The force of the additional finger or fingers coming down on the frets at a new position above the initial note creates another, higher note sound, even though the plucking hand had only struck once to sound the initial note. "Pull-off" is the reverse action, pulling off the additional finger from the fingerboard and higher note, so that the initially lowered fingered note will sound again. This simple, widely heard technique is far easier to demonstrate on a guitar than to describe with written text. The flamenco guitarist utilizes this technique very often, and even uses extra light strings to make it easier to accomplish. Popular blues and rock guitar styles, particularly the relatively new sounds of "Thrash-Metal," also employ this technique frequently. I believe it is another example, along with bending notes, of how well relatively easy and popular guitar techniques lend themselves to the playing Indian styles of music, in the way they can alter the pitch by various (nonspecific) degrees, adding a particularly emotive quality that resembles the use of Indian gamakas.

What I witnessed Janapriya doing on his guitar is more accurately described as a series of hammer-ons and pull-offs played very fast. This results in what I would describe as a “trill” rather than an arpeggio. Also, playing an arpeggio implies that each note of a particular chord is sounded strictly in an ascending chord-tone or descending chord-tone order, such as first sounding the root, ascending to the third, then up to the fifth, or perhaps descending from the ninth, down to the seventh, down to the fifth, etc. Typically, trills are not so limited in their application and may involve any type of interval that the player can manage to reach with his fingers; second and third intervals being most common.

It is interesting to note that guitar techniques such as trills, bending and hammer-on notes can result in a slight variation of pitch, essentially making what might be called a “pure” in-tune note into a less distinct pitch that could be called “out-of-tune.” In blues and other popular musical styles, this sort of pitch ambiguity can be used to mimic the human voice and help provide a highly emotive quality. Guitarists like Jimi Hendrix used these basic techniques profusely in combination with modifications to the guitar, such as the “Twang Bar,” and external electrical devices controlled by the foot, like the “Wah-Wah” pedal, to help make his electric guitar mimic sounds like that of a human baby crying or a machine gun firing. As my research into Amma’s bhajans, the musical milieu of her devotees, and Indian culture in general progressed, it became clear to me that what might sound like noise or playing out-of-tune to a Westerner could sound to an Indian person like music, and conversely, what might sound like a perfectly in-tune scale or melody to a Westerner, could easily sound completely unmusical and devoid of life and emotion to an Indian listener.

After watching Janapriya play, I thought that what the swamis may have been responding favorably to was the fast, “flashy” nature of this “trill” technique I just described. As long as only two or three notes that are part of the raga or scale being used in the song are played, there would be, presumably, no danger of playing anything wrong. Additionally, it is

significant that Janapriya used this trill technique in the parts of the song that had gained in volume, speed and intensity - the dynamic and emotional “cresting” of that song’s performance - as opposed to the softer, non-rhythmic sections like the “alap,” the improvisatory beginning section of the song. The alap is played rubato and serves to introduce the particular raga to be used throughout the song.

Before heading back to the kitchen to continue his seva work, Janapriya said it would be fine if I wanted to sit next to him while he played with the bhajan ensemble. He was not sure exactly what time he would play, and I came to feel, over the course of the weekend, that if there was a specific schedule for musical sets and a list of who would play when, it was fluid and changeable. Janapriya suggested that as the evening progressed, I should just keep an eye out for him joining the group, and if I saw him there playing, I could feel free to approach the playing area and sit down next to him. This was exciting news, since then I could not only closely observe his guitar playing, but also the dynamics and interactions of the whole group. Later, I did accept his invitation and the opportunity proved fruitful, as I shall relate.

I got another impromptu chance to talk with Janapriya very late Friday night (early Saturday morning) after the evening program had finished. Amma does not finish darshan until all the guests who wish to experience it have had a chance to, so it is quite typical for a Friday evening program to finish at 4 am the next day, and that is exactly what happened. It was sometime around 4 am when I left the hall to return to Brooklyn, and I noticed Janapriya as I was leaving. I conversed with him and he shared some more of his opinions about Amma’s bhajans. He felt that Amma’s bhajans were more flexible, free and open in practice than the traditional ones in India. I mentioned the word “fusion” and he quickly agreed, saying that was a good word to describe what he was trying to say of Amma’s musical approach. He said that, compared to traditional bhajans, Amma’s involved more harmony or

chords, and had more variety and modernity with regard to instrumental format. They included “Western” instruments like electric bass, electric keyboard and guitar, and even the electronic drum machine (the only instrument he mentioned that I had yet to hear personally).

Amma’s touring programs can feature folk and ethnic music and dance performances. Songs are sung in a wide range of languages too, depending on where the tour is operating in the world, because in many, if not all, of the cities Amma travels to, the local devotees there arrange musical tributes for Amma or special performances that often highlight the culture of that area. For example, I witnessed Japanese folk dance performances when I lived in Japan, and of course, when I was in India, I saw traditional Indian dance performances. While attending the 2010, NYC Devi Bhava program, very late at night (actually early in the morning), I was a little shocked to hear extremely loud hip-hop music being played over the PA speakers with an African-American artist, supposedly very well-known, according to the person standing next to me at the time, rapping to a pre-recorded background of popular song excerpts. I say shocked, because of the sudden contrast in style *and* sheer volume to Amma’s normal Indian bhajan ensemble. In retrospect, I think that particular hip-hop or rap performance may have exemplified a key aspect of New York’s pop or folk culture. The performing artist who had shocked me three years ago shocked me yet again when I headed up onstage to receive my own darshan early Sunday morning during the 2013 NYC program that is the subject of this field report. I will describe that in more detail later, but when I saw him a second time, I had thought to ask a sevite darshan attendee standing nearby what his name was. She told me the artist in question was rapper Doug E. Fresh, pronounced “Doug-ee Fresh,” also called: “The Human Beat Box.” I also discovered that he had performed for the last four or five consecutive years at Amma’s NYC program in 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, and 2013.

At Amma's 2011 Toronto program, I witnessed a music performance led by a famous "Country-Western" singer-songwriter based in Nashville named Jim Lauderdale. I actually met him while strolling the hotel hallway in Toronto in between programs. I saw a man with a guitar and a woman bassist devotee I had seen around talking together. Curious, I approached them and ended up playing his guitar a little. When he heard what I played, he said that he needed to learn some of the chords I was using. He played for me a song of his that he said was a "work in progress," and we discussed some various methods he could employ to finish writing the ending of his song. After he left, the bassist asked me excitedly, "Don't you know who that was?" I said, no, and she told me, "That's Jim Lauderdale, the famous Grammy-award winning songwriter from Nashville . . .!"

Later that night, I noticed her standing nearby, on the stage during Amma's darshan-giving. I had promised her I would give her one of my CDs, so I approached to hand her one. She said she had to play in just a moment, so she asked me to put it in her bass case, pointing towards where all the empty instrument cases were. I did not realize until after the next bit of live music began, when I glanced back to the stage, that she was playing bass in Lauderdale's group. The group's presentation on stage and the spot lighting used was very professional and, to me, looked like something I might see on TV's "Live at The Grand 'Ole Opry," except that Lauderdale paid verbal tribute to Amma with the announcements he made in between songs, and told the crowd that he wrote those songs and had planned that show with Amma and that Toronto program especially in mind. All the song lyrics were about positivity and universal love.

Since I first began attending Amma's programs in Asia, I had always been impressed with the music I heard, but only in America did it become obvious to me that Amma's followers included an impressive array of well-known Western artists willing to enthusiastically donate their time in support of Amma and her bhakti movement. I have also

realized how wide-ranging and diverse the music she welcomes into her midst is. In my conversations with Janapriya, he too made special mention of the apparent openness of Amma's vision with regard to music and the variegation of the artistic performances given at her programs.

I attended only three out of the five programs Amma held over three days in NYC in 2013. I missed Thursday night and the Friday morning program due to my school schedule and the commute to NYC from my home in Rochester. Yet, within that relatively short period of time, I heard an impressive variety of musical styles and instrumentation. For instance, at one time or another, Amma's bhajan ensemble included a clarinet, sometimes a trumpet (played by a woman), and electric instruments like keyboard, bass, and a Roland (brand) drum machine attached to a computer. In addition to Amma's bhajans, musical styles comprised acapella vocals, pop, rap/hip-hop, folk, rock, etc. I found it interesting that occasionally, the electronic drum machine would be used simultaneously with the actual tabla, and at other times there might even be two tabla players playing at once.

The players featured in her ensembles were a mix of gender and ethnicities too, and as this report continues, I will relate more examples that I noticed of this. One impressive ensemble I saw that will be discussed in greater detail later, was led by two Western looking folk-rock acoustic guitarists and singers, joined by an Indian lead-singer, and by members of Amma's regular bhajan ensemble, such as Anu, the tabla player. This mixed group of Indians and Westerners played a combination of originals, presumably written by the two Western guitarists, and familiar pop hits by composers like Sting, Stevie Wonder, and Michael Jackson. Janapriya's comments about Amma embracing non-traditional and "fusion-like" musical elements seemed most evident in this particular ensemble. Only after delving into this project and hearing what interviewees like Janapriya said, did I come to realize just how

out of the norm or “revolutionary” Amma’s bhajans were, when compared to the older, traditional bhajan style in India.

Once Amma starts giving darshan, it can go on for twelve hours or more. She sits in one place the whole time without leaving the stage area. Most everybody else takes breaks for the toilet, eating, shopping, and eventually, sleeping. I made an effort to keep track of correct timings in my journal, but often I would neglect to look at my watch, and in those instances, I guesstimated. Given the length of the darshan program, the bhajan ensemble members must alternate periodically. I did not make note of exactly how long each ensemble played before taking a break, but I felt as if they changed every ninety minutes to two hours. When I went to Amritapuri, I noticed that the music that Amma led regularly on Monday through Friday evenings lasted at least ninety minutes. There were three or four swamis participating in the bhajan ensembles at Amma’s 2013 NYC program. When they alternated the lead singing roles, usually, but not always, the accompanists for each swami would also change, particularly the vital roles of tabla and keyboard. At Amritapuri, whole ensembles would change so that the same members always seemed to perform together; however in NYC, sometimes an accompanist would play with more than just one ensemble, as the tabla player Anu did when she joined the two Western looking guitarists for their pop set.

I did not notice exactly when Janapriya began playing with the bhajan ensemble, but once I did see him there, at about 11 pm, I moved towards the music area. Without using words, I made my presence known to Janapriya and my intent to sit next to him. He acknowledged me while he was playing and tacitly permitted me to sit next to him. I was able to see all the players well from my vantage point. The positioning of the players was about the same as when Amma led the ensemble onstage, with the lead singers in front, keyboard behind the lead singer, tabla closest and just to the side of the lead singer, and back-up singers and miscellaneous hand-held percussion players in the rear. At that moment, a swami

played harmonium and sang, and there were two male singers to his right, one of whom sang lead occasionally, and one furthest to his right (and closest to me) who did not sing lead during that set. Behind the tabla player was a second tabla, though that player did not play often. The woman, Anu, played tabla, and her sister, Swarna, played electric keyboard. They seemed to be the primary players of those instruments, the “first-string” players as it were, but I saw others who played those instruments too.

Before each song began in earnest, I heard the harmonium player or the keyboardist play a series of notes resembling a scale. I came to believe that they did so to confirm for themselves, as well as for the other players in the ensemble, what the raga or melodic pitch pattern for that particular song was. At one point, I saw Swarna turn to Janapriya, who was sitting just to Swarna’s right, and say something like this: “. . . the scale is . . . [she demonstrates by playing it on the keyboard] but the raga has some different notes in it . . .” It seemed to me that Swarna was searching for or previewing those “different” notes in the desired raga while giving Janapriya clues to the scale pattern to be used. I noticed Janapriya watching everything Swarna was doing and listening carefully to all she was playing, apparently attempting to determine what the raga of the song was, and hence, what notes he would use.

At another time, I observed the lead-singing swami turn around and speak to Swarna and Janapriya while they were “settling on” the raga pattern to be used in the next song. I am not sure of his exact words, but it was something like, “. . . no, not that one . . . [then as Swarna would play an alteration of what she had just played, he said] yes, that’s it! It’s like the ***[inaudible to me] raga, only there are a couple different notes . . .” It seemed that the raga of the next song was similar, but not exactly the same, as one they were all familiar with. As the swami was talking to them, Swarna and Janapriya were playing various combinations of notes until they got “approval” from the swami that they were playing the correct one, or

at least, the pattern that was required even if it was not *precisely* the raga they knew. Once the approval came, they started the song.

Usually, Janapriya identified the right raga by simply listening and watching what Swarna was playing, but at other times, such as the instance I just related, direct verbal communication between members was used. Occasionally, it seemed that Swarna and other members of the ensemble were uncertain as to what pattern, or raga, the singer was using. This reminded me of how I have seen members of a jazz ensemble exhibit conjecture or hesitancy when a song, or its harmonic chord pattern, was played that not everyone in the group knew equally well, if at all.

At 1 am early Saturday, about two hours after I first sat down next to Janapriya and the bhajan ensemble, I was still there listening and observing. I had made a note in my journal that “time flies,” because even though I had been up since 5:30 am Friday, including ten hours or so of traveling, I thought the hypnotic effect I was getting from the music and the atmosphere in the room was more powerful than my tiredness. What I would describe as a “haunting” change from major to minor tonality in the song being played grabbed my attention. I looked up at the video screen and saw the lyrics: “. . . Nandalala cowherd boy of Vrindavan . . .”. I looked around at the players and noticed that Swarna was still there, but the back-up singer that was sitting closest to me had left the ensemble area and the tabla player had been replaced. I indicated in my notes: “. . . so, they [the players do] take breaks.”

I think the music and my exhaustion had sort of “carried me away,” but I became alert to the fact that I needed to check the status of the darshan line, so I would not miss my turn. I left the bhajan ensemble playing area sometime between 1 am and 2 am. Shortly after receiving my darshan, I made my way out of the hall, had a short conversation with Janapriya, who I had seen on my way out, and left Jacob Javitz Center at about 4 am to return to Brooklyn for the night. The next day’s program began at 10 am. I only got two to three

hours sleep, from 5 am until 7 am, and that was, it turned out, the only real sleep I got (in a total of 57 hours) until after I returned home on Sunday afternoon around 2 pm.

On Friday afternoon, Swami Shantamrita had told me that when I arrived for Saturday morning's program, he would assist in my asking Swamiji permission to take photos. But, when I saw Swami Shantamrita on Saturday, I did not feel compelled to mention it or push the issue. Instead, I simply greeted him with a "good morning," which was returned politely in kind. Later in the day, I also made a point to thank him for arranging my fruitful meeting with Janapriya. One reason I did not broach the subject of photo taking with him was because I felt he had already gone out of his way to assist me, by talking to me in the first place, then by introducing me to Janapriya and Gautam. Also, after receiving Amma's darshan and "soaking-in" the program environment, I felt more likely to "go with the flow," adopting an attitude of acceptance while making an effort to avoid any behavior that could be characterized as aggressive, pushy, or insistent. Instead of reminding Shantamrita of his promise, I waited to see what would happen and adopted, as much as I could manage, a policy of non-action and in-the-moment awareness.

My next journal entry said, "Sat day program," then continued with descriptions of what I had witnessed of the bhajan ensemble. I neglected to indicate timings in my journal until 2 pm Saturday, well into the morning program. At some point prior to 2 pm, I sat down next to the bhajan ensemble in the same place I had taken the night before. I noticed then that Anu was playing tabla and Swarna played harmonium (instead of electric keyboard). There was another guitar player, the one Janapriya had mentioned, Yati, and only then did I recognize him as the man who had explained the inner workings of the harmonium to me at one of the selling booths the night before. I saw a Caucasian man (American I presumed), sitting to my left and slightly behind the guitarist and myself; who was playing an instrument that looked like a clarinet but sounded very much like a flute. The way he positioned the

instrument as he played seemed unusual. It was facing straight downward, almost perpendicular to the floor, and I am accustomed to seeing it played facing straight out from one's face, parallel to the floor. During a brief break between songs, I asked him if that was a clarinet he was playing and he replied, “. . . yes, it was . . .”

This was the first time I noticed him and the inclusion of this instrument in the bhajan ensemble. It was all the more noticeable because he was getting a lot of “solos,” and some of the other musicians present watched him intently and (seemingly) appreciatively as he played. They appeared to hold him in high regard. To my ears, and compared to the other players, he was a formally Western trained musician. Later, when I went to India and talked to some of the players there, they had spoken to me of a musician whom I now suspect was this man I had observed in NYC. They had described a highly trained Western classical and jazz clarinetist who fell in love with Amma and her bhajans and played them very well. Unfortunately, I never made note of his name, if I had even gotten it.

As I listened and watched the bhajan ensemble, the lead-singing swami turned around said something to the clarinetist – I got the distinct impression he told him to “end it” – meaning to solo first, then take the lead (within the ensemble) in ending the song. He played a solo that seemed improvised, yet closely related to the main melody. The swami seemed to really like the clarinetist because he often gestured with his hands for him to solo. At another time, the swami turned to the clarinetist and said, “. . . play something!” This type of gesturing and verbal cues given by the leader to the ensemble players reminded me so much of my own experience playing in jazz combos. Listening and watching the clarinetist play also reminded me of what Janapriya had said to me about the most desirable way to embellish a melody and how important it was to follow the rule of the raga, using only the pitches and the particular pitch order “allowed” by the raga. Though I could not tell what raga was being used, or if they were using one at all, it did seem apparent to me at the time that

this clarinet player was following the musical rules Janapriya had described to me, and that, maybe, this was one of the reasons this clarinetist seemed so popular among the Indians I had seen and spoken to. All the percussionists, including the standing Idakka player and Swarna, were looking very steadily at him as he played. I felt that he was being stared at for two reasons: (1) the other musicians were appreciative and approving of his playing, and (2) they were watching for musical cues from the clarinetist, for instance, when they should play or not play something. Though this second reason might relate solely to his being given responsibility for ending the song, I believe instead that watching and listening closely to a soloist in a bhajan-playing context is, just as it is in a jazz-playing context, a desirable custom, with both musical and cultural meaning. The musical point is that what the soloist plays should indicate what the accompanists play, because that alert, “conversational” quality is how an ensemble creates a cohesive sound. The cultural meaning is that, paying attention to the soloist displays an attitude of respect, and respect is a key concept within the bhajan ensemble culture that I heard much more about from my informants as my research continued.

In response to the swami’s instructions to “. . . play something!” the clarinetist began playing a solo (unaccompanied). It sounded to me like an “alap,” a rubato introduction to a song in which the raga (or scale) to be used is introduced with embellishment and improvisation. Then, in a more definitive tempo, he played what sounded like the main melody of the song. After hearing that melody, all the other instrumentalists began playing along with him. I do not know whether the song the clarinetist played was recognizable to the ensemble members or not. Despite the impromptu nature of the playing I saw, and the way the song came about - by the swami unexpectedly instructing the clarinetist to play “something” - the *flow* of the music sounded quite smooth and effortless; I imagine this was *particularly* so to the hundreds of people seated nearby who, unlike me, due to my proximity

to the ensemble, were not privy to the band interaction I had witnessed. The fact that the song was instrumental was, I think, indicative of the respect the swami had for the clarinetist. From my experience, an instrumental piece was far less common than one with vocals, and featured instrumental soloists were less frequent than vocals and the collective musical efforts of the ensemble. I surmise that if the swami leading the group requested one of the members to solo, and to thereby assume a musical leadership role in that moment, then he must have full confidence in, and respect for, that soloist. He probably believed that the soloist would display not only the appropriate musical language, but would also adhere to behavioral expectations of the bhajan cultural milieu by exemplifying humility, respect and devotion. What became more obvious (to me) as my observations of Amma's bhajan ensembles continued, and what my past research also seemed to support, is that in order to gain inclusion in and respect from key musical participants of Amma's bhajan ensembles, one's attitude, intention, and general character played a vital role. Musical knowledge and instrumental technique alone are, I suspect, not adequate. The words of master Sufi musician, Izrat Inayat Khan, are relevant to the point I am trying to make: "The power of music depends on the grade of spiritual evolution that person has touched;" (Khan, pg. 137) "The effect of music depends not only on proficiency, but also on the evolution of the performer;" (53) "Man's state of mind can be read by his touch upon any instrument; for however great an expert he may be, he cannot produce by mere skill, without a developed feeling within himself, the grace and beauty which appeal to the heart." (57)

A song with changing metric structure and tempo caught my attention, with a slow triple meter to a faster one in four-beat units. I looked at the video screen and saw the lyrics, ". . . Gopala nacho nacho . . . Dance O Gopala O Cowherd boy . . . O Gopala who plays the flute . . ." The swami led the tempo and rhythm changes by using both gestures and verbal instructions to the ensemble. Once, he turned around and motioned with his hands to the

band, while saying something to them that I could not quite make out, except that I thought he wanted the “tala” (rhythmic pattern) changed. To indicate a desired tempo increase, he clapped his hands loudly in such a way that his hands could be seen, as well as heard, by the ensemble members. In another section of this same song, he turned to the clarinet player and motioned for him to solo. The clarinetist followed those instructions and began improvising, first over the slower tempo with the four-beat rhythm, then, after the swami began clapping his hands faster and faster, the ensemble responded by playing a quick triple-time pulse that sounded to my Western-trained ears like a 3/8 time signature, while the clarinetist continued his improvising.

I drew a diagram in my journal of where each player and their instruments were positioned.⁹ The “front-line” was as usual, the swami front and center, with three singers just to his right and the tabla player to his left and just slightly behind him. Behind the tabla were the idakka and manjira players. Directly behind and centered on left and right sides (respectively) of the swami, were the harmonium and electric keyboard players. To the right of the keyboardist were the clarinetist, guitarist, and furthest to the right, me. To the far left and rearmost were three back-up singers. In this bhajan ensemble, the back-up singers, harmonium player (Swarna), tabla player (Anu), and manjira player were women.

The keyboardist, clarinetist, guitarist and idakka player were men. The swami and the singers to his right, fronting the group, were also men. I noticed that the lead singers were usually men and the back-up singers were usually women, except when there was an all-women ensemble performance, as I noticed occasionally both in and outside of India. Anu and Swarna were present at all the international programs I have attended over the years. I got used to seeing them, and gathered that they are among the “first-chair” members of Amma’s touring ensemble. When I was in India, however, there seemed to be more players

⁹ See Illustration 3

available to staff the various ensembles that performed at the Ashram daily, and the majority of them were men. Presumably, because of the logistical costs related to touring, the touring ensemble members were kept to a minimum number. Anu visited Amritapuri while I was there, and I noticed her playing occasionally, sometimes onstage for Amma with other tabla players who were men, and at other times as part of an all-women group playing in front of the stage while Amma was giving darshan, but she did not seem to hold as prominent or as frequent an ensemble presence as she did when I saw her playing outside of India.

During the Saturday morning program (if I recall correctly, because no time was indicated in my journal), I noticed Anu sitting alone. I approached her and asked if I could talk to her. She said yes. We had met before years ago under similar circumstances, because I have always felt quite drawn to her as a musician in that context. She plays well, but never seems to play with unnecessary displays of technique. She has a rock-solid musical approach and to me, always plays exactly what is called for, not that I necessarily *know* exactly what is called for in these bhajan ensembles, but when someone else other than she played tabla, I noticed a difference in the ensemble sound and I missed her playing! I do not think she remembered meeting me before. She asked what kind of music I played and I said mostly jazz. She said she liked jazz but did not know much about it. She asked about my academic paper and I explained the project to her. I asked Anu if I could email her after the program was over, because I wanted to communicate with her more, but I did not want to take up too much of her time while she was still busy with Amma's North American Tour. All those accompanying Amma on tour get precious little sleep! Anu agreed, and we did eventually exchange emails. She communicated in emails to me that she enjoyed listening to several examples of my music that I had sent her and said that maybe we could play together in the future. When I called Sri Pati on the phone before the 2013 New York program, he said that when I went to India I might not see the same bhajan players that I was accustomed to seeing

elsewhere. He also told me Anu lived in California, and until I heard that, I had always assumed she traveled with Amma from India, having seen her playing tabla at all the programs I had attended, in Singapore, Japan, and America. I was pleased to see and exchange pleasantries with her at Amritapuri when I did go there.

Around 2 pm, during the last few hours of darshan and Saturday's morning program in NYC, I noticed a woman wearing the white clothes that some disciples wear hand deliver a note to the swami as he paused between songs. I heard the swami remark to one of the other members about the note, but I did not hear everything that was said. I believe the note was a notice to the swami that food was being (or had been) prepared for them and they could take a break to eat. Shortly thereafter, the bhajan ensemble I had been watching took a break. Pre-recorded music began, and as they began leaving the playing area, a group of twelve or more women arrived and began setting up for a new performance.

The women setting up caught my attention, not only because the group was comprised mostly of women, but also because of the unusual instruments I saw and way they were set up to be played. One of the women played a Western trumpet; one played the harmonium; and one played a stringed instrument that, from its looks, reminded me of the Chinese Erhu or Japanese Shamisen. The woman with that stringed instrument also played a conga drum placed on its side on the floor (rather than upright as I expected), which she straddled (sat on) between her legs, to strike the drum head with her hands, thereby playing it more like one would play a cajon, the Peruvian box drum, than a conga. She sat next to the only men involved in this new ensemble, the (by now familiar looking) Indian man playing an idakka while standing, and a man, seen by me for the first time, playing an African djembe (drum). In addition to the five aforementioned players, there were ten to twelve younger

looking (in their teens or early twenties) women singers. The format of this group was strikingly different than anything I had seen up to that point.¹⁰

Before they started playing, I asked the woman that had straddled the conga what her stringed instrument was. I was surprised when she said she was only introduced to it last week, and that she couldn't recall the name of it, but knew it was an *Indian* instrument. When I got home and began transcribing my field notes, I searched the Internet for it, and found two instruments it resembled by body shape: an Ektar and a Swarlabat (a rare instrument of southern India). I did not stay for their whole musical segment and I do not recall actually hearing it being played, so its proper name and whether it was plucked or bowed, remains unknown to me. What little I did recall about their repertoire was that only the women sang, and at different times, two of the dozen or so singers sang solo introductions to the songs before the rest of the group began to accompany them.

The Saturday morning program ended sometime between 4 pm and 5 pm, leaving only two hours before Devi Bhava was to begin, the final part of the 2013 NYC event. There was an announcement over the PA system that all guests should leave the premises and that any personal belongings left behind would be confiscated by security. It was an ominous announcement to me, since I had been keeping my personal belongings near the table used only by Amma's staff, even though I had no special permission to do so. I had a feeling that moving my things would be unnecessary, given my past experience with Amma's programs and what I had experienced up to that point at the 2013 NYC program.

I began thinking of what to do while waiting for Devi Bhava to begin when, as I began crossing the stage area, I heard Sri Pati say, “. . . Hriday! [My spiritual name] . . . can you help them remove those chairs from the stage?” I wasted no time in complying, because over the years I have felt an increasing sense of responsibility to “do something” helpful and

¹⁰ See Illustration 4

worthwhile at these programs, and since I had worked under Sri Pati before, in NYC 2010, he knew that I was ready to perform “seva” if asked. After removing the chairs, I asked what else I could do to help and was told that I could help arranging chairs in rows across the hall in front of the stage and putting a donation envelope and a small (empty) plastic cup centered on each chair. This was in preparation for the start of that evening’s Devi Bhava program and Amma’s ceremony for world peace, called Atma Puja, in which the divine within ourselves is honored and symbolic offerings are made to God of the five elements: ether, fire, water, air, and earth. The plastic cup was to be used during the ceremony for water (one of those five elements) that would be blessed by Amma and distributed to each person present. Amma was scheduled to enter the hall again at 7 pm, and Devi Bhava would end only after the last person wanting a darshan hug had received it. Although I left out of sheer exhaustion to make the seven-hour drive back to Rochester at around 8:00 am, before the program ended, upon reaching home and checking Facebook, I discovered from Sri Pati’s postings that the end of the 2013 NYC program came sometime between 10:30 and 11:30 am on Sunday morning.

The beginning of the evening Devi Bhava program, the Atma Puja, and the ceremony for world peace, did not, nor does it ever, as far as I know, include music. Normally, after a spiritual discourse that lasts about 90 minutes to two hours, Amma begins giving darshan, then the live music begins. At about 9:35 pm on Saturday night, after Amma began giving hugs, I sat down next to the bhajan ensemble, as I had in the past. This time, and for the first time witnessed by me on this trip, Swamiji himself was sharing the lead singing with one of the other swamis. There was a young looking boy playing mridangam who I thought sounded really good, and Anu was playing tabla. The same idakka and clarinet players I had been seeing were there too. Instruments included harmonium, keyboard, an electric bass played by a Western looking man (Janapriya had mentioned to me that there was a Westerner who

played electric bass very well), and the usual mix of women back-up singers and players of handheld-percussion (such shakers and manjira).

I noticed a man tapping with his fingers a black drum pad that was connected to a computer screen displaying a mixing board. During a break between songs, I asked him what that was, and he told me it was a Roland drum machine attached to a computer with an application installed that made various Indian drum sounds accessible. He told me he was then using the “tabla” sound function. While I was there speaking to him, which was on the opposite side of where I had been sitting, I noticed a bag on the floor next to some of the women singers. I also noticed Swamiji sort of glare at me and I quickly realized it must have been distracting and inappropriate for me to take advantage of the song break to engage one of the ensemble players in conversation, so I immediately stopped talking and moved back towards my seat on the other side. On the way back, I made a point of looking more closely at that bag I had seen. It contained handheld-percussion instruments that looked like a mix of maracas, shakers, guiro, and shekere.

I observed that Swamiji had a soft and tender-sounding singing voice at times, but at other times, he sang with higher volume and more projection: he would increase the musical intensity of the moment by singing long sustained notes over the accompaniment, gradually raising the melodic pitch by a step or so with each subsequent note until a crescendo musical peak was reached. Then, he would drop the intensity level down by singing softer and lower in pitch. With each dramatic cresting and falling Swamiji led with his voice, the accompanying players responded by adjusting their playing intensity and volume level accordingly to match his.

Most of the time, the lead singer was a swami or an adult man. However, twice during the NYC program I noticed a little girl, in the range of six to eight years old by my estimation, sing lead after tapping the swami on the shoulder and saying something to him.

Shortly thereafter, perhaps after getting permission from the swami to sing, the child sang in solo alap style before the other ensemble members joined in. We all watched intently as she sang with utter conviction and no apparent shyness at all. Those who could not see her, because they were too far away, recognized a youngster's voice after she began singing, and then their eyes too were drawn appreciatively towards her and the ensemble area. I witnessed young children singing the lead vocals more than once, in and outside of India, and those occurrences featured either a young boy or girl. I had always noticed that Amma tends to like to surround herself with children, but when I went to Amritapuri, I was told by one of the devotees there that some parents have been known to "give" their children (and pets too I was told) to Amma, apparently to be raised in her presence and with her moral guidance. When I have had the chance to observe, or actually converse with these children, I have always been *amazed* at their innocent, yet *acute* awareness and apparent intelligence. Their singing sounded very impressive to me.

Early Sunday morning, sometime close to 1 am, my lack of sleep prompted me to look for a place to lie down. I found three empty chairs in the hall that had been set up for the Atma Puja ceremony. I positioned them side-by-side so I could recline on them to get some "shut eye." After ten minutes or so, someone, likely performing seva for the program, shook my shoulder and gently told me I could "... take my time ..." in doing so, but that I needed to move further away from the stage so as not to start "... an epidemic of sleeping people ..." there. At 1:30 am, I followed those instructions and walked past the selling booths and eating area towards the main entrance of the hall. I was excruciatingly exhausted after almost two days without sleep. My search for a place to rest, preferably up and off the floor, was interrupted as my eye caught Swami Pranavamrita sitting alone in one of three chairs positioned off to the side of the main hall in an alcove.

Swami Pranavamrita was the swami guitarist Janapriya made special mention of, whom Janapriya said was classically trained in Indian music, liked frequent use of gamakas, was intolerant of mistakes, and wrote the best bhajans of all. I approached him and asked if his name was Swami Pranavamrita. He said yes, and I told him that I had heard that he was an excellent musician and I wanted to discuss music with him. We then launched into an exciting conversation, after which, my tiredness disappeared! One of the first things I remember his saying to me was that, “. . . after silence, music is the thing that brings us closest to God . . .” and that the purpose of music was to “. . . purify the mind . . .” I told him that if I had played well and someone asked me afterwards what I was thinking of as I played, I would answer, “. . . nothing, because if I am playing well, my mind is blank and I am completely in the moment . . . in fact, it is not me [the ego] playing at all: I am merely an instrument [of divine grace] . . .” He said in response, “Precisely!” I mentioned that I was told that his bhajans were the best, that he was classically trained, and very particular about the use of gamakas. He asked me who told him that. I did not divulge the answer right away, but eventually, I told him Janapriya had said those things. Pranavamrita said, “Really? He said that about me?” Then he responded in some detail to what Janapriya had told me. For instance, he said that though he was aware that many people assumed he was classically trained, he really was not. He said he liked the iconic figures of Western classical music; particularly Beethoven, who he said was one of those “. . . great guys . . .” He felt the major difference between Western music and Indian music, *specifically* the southern Indian classical music called Carnatic music, was that the latter was always made solely for God. He spoke of gamakas, the aforementioned inflections or adornments of the pitches of the raga, as expressing the “rasa” (literally translated meaning “juice”), or *emotion* of the song. He told me that it is often thought that the rasa *is* God! He said, “. . . in Western music the [diatonic] scale is sung flat [meaning “straight,” without adornments], like this: [he demonstrated for

me by singing the Western major scale straight, and he made a sort of “disgusted” face], now . . . *we* have the *same* scale, but we sing it like *this*: [then he demonstrated his way of singing it with gamakas, and with a facial expression of enthusiasm] Hear the difference? Which one do you think expresses more feeling? You see? That is where the *feeling* comes from . . .!”

Swami Pranavamrita related a little of his background by telling me some things Amma had told him. He said that he was Amma’s chief tabla player “in the beginning” - for the first 12 years - the period *before* Amma was as famous as she is now. He explained that when he started out, in the first few of those 12 years, he overplayed, sort of showing off a technique honed over years of practice. But one day, after accompanying Amma’s singing, Amma scolded him by saying this: “. . . music should come from the heart and *not* the mind, music should contain *NO musician* . . .!” He understood Amma’s words to mean that the purpose of music is to eliminate or to control the ego, not to elevate or display it. Apparently, he learned the lesson in time, because later, Amma had told him he was, “. . . God’s son . . .” He understood *that* comment to mean that his music playing, and attitude, had improved immeasurably.

I mentioned to him my inexperience with Indian music, my desire to play it, and the hours of practice that I thought were necessary to become proficient and confident in that genre. In his response, he echoed much of what Janapriya had suggested to me earlier, including the key point that one’s personal attitude [or character] is far more important than one’s skill or technique when playing music. He told me to go ahead and practice a lot, if I felt compelled to, but that I should try to do so only if mind (ego) purification was the conscious, ultimate goal of my practice. He told me to focus on that spiritual goal as I practiced, and also subtly suggested, I imagined, that if I were to play with him, my attitude would account for more than anything else, along with developing keen listening skills, alertness and awareness. He reinforced the notion that if I was not sure of what to play, it

would be best to play nothing, and that I should listen carefully to what the singer and the other players in the ensemble were doing, until I felt confident that what I played would fit musically with what they were doing. Much of what Swami Pranavamrita said to me in that conversation seemed quite in line with all that I had heard from Janapriya, and by the time Swami Pranavamrita and I had finished talking to each other, I felt as if I had heard words of wisdom “straight from the horses mouth,” so to speak.

There is another part of our conversation that I feel compelled to try to relate, but there is no reference to it in my journal notes, and my memory of it is “sketchy.” One detail of the conversation I am unsure of is whether Swami Pranavamrita was talking about Amma specifically or Saraswati, but here is the part I do recall well: he described a divine being who played a stringed instrument (likely the Veena) on a lily flower in a body of water. He asked me how was it, given her significant body weight (must be Amma I thought!), that she did not sink in that body of water? I replied without hesitation, “. . . because she has no ego . . . it is [weight of] the ego that keeps us rooted to the earth . . .”. He said emphatically, “You got it!” The next part of his story I do not recall well, but the gist of it was that even though this being was already so enlightened that she could levitate, she *still* practiced and played the stringed instrument in her hands constantly, making music that the Gods above heard and appreciated. I am guessing, and do actually recall feeling at the time, that Swami Pranavamrita was trying to make a key point about the supreme importance of music, and how the egoless, disciplined pursuit of musical perfection approaches Godliness.

Something else happened during our conversation that I believe is interesting enough to relate here. I recognized a younger Indian devotee from past programs I had attended, who seemed (I thought) to travel regularly with Amma. I met him later at Amritapuri and after speaking to him there, found out his name was Anan, a renunciate. When I refreshed his memory of this incident I am about to relate, he recalled it, and informed me that Swami

Pranavamrita was “stationed” at another of Amma’s ashrams in India, and only visited Amritapuri occasionally.

Anan had brought Swami Pranavamrita some food to eat while he and I were talking. Anan knelt down on the floor when he approached, as I believe is often done as a show of respect and humility, and placed the food he had brought on the vacant chair between the Swami and me. I recalled closely observing the interaction between these two. The younger renunciate explained that all the food was vegan; Swami stuck a finger in some of it, and after licking his finger said, “. . . no, take it back.” He also said he didn’t like chocolate, because Anan had brought a piece of chocolate cake too. Anan went off as instructed and Swami and I continued talking. When Anan returned with some different food, we were in the midst of conversation, but Anan bowed down as he had done before and tried getting Swami Pranavamrita’s attention, actually speaking to him, describing the food and asking him to try it. This time, Swami Pranavamrita did not even glance at or acknowledge him in any way and our eyes were glued on each other as we bantered intensely. But, Anan kept talking and looking at Swami Pranavamrita persistently. I certainly noticed it, but I was trying to listen carefully to what Swami was saying without letting the young renunciate distract me. Swami Pranavamrita’s apparent indifference to Anan was as if he was deaf to his pleas (which I found hard to believe, since they were so obvious to me), or as if what we were talking about was simply too important to allow him to interrupt in any way. My behavior followed the latter theory and I refused to take my eyes off Swami Pranavamrita. It occurred to me later that Swami, through the interaction I just described, might have inadvertently given me a lesson on the type of focus and concentration that is desired of members of a bhajan ensemble when the subject of attention is the music being played in the moment. Something as important as music or intimate conversation between two people should be given one’s undivided attention.

Eventually (it seemed like a long time), there was a break in the conversation, and only then did Swami Pranavamrita acknowledge the food Anan had brought. It was Indian flat bread, Poori or Paratha, with some light, watery vegetable curry that was acceptable to him. Anan seemed relieved and got up to leave, but then Swami said to him, “. . . Where are you going? Stay with us while I eat and converse . . .” or something like that. After quietly staying with us for a few moments, Anan politely excused himself to go and perform his seva duties. I considered that my own behavior in approaching and conversing with Swami Pranavamrita lacked the customary (Indian) deference or formality (the bowing down, for instance) that the younger renunciate displayed towards him, and yet, by all appearances, this did not prevent Swami from giving me 100% of his attention. I was so happy to have this unplanned dialogue with him that, as I walked away, I spontaneously threw up my hands and waved them in the air, letting out a loud exclamation of euphoria. This seemed to delight Swami Pranavamrita, because I clearly heard him chuckling behind me as I walked away.

The tiredness I felt before talking to him was gone by the time the conversation had finished. I quickly wrote down what I could recall of it in my journal. It was almost 48 hours since I had awakened from my last decent sleep, just prior to leaving Rochester early Friday morning, so my sleepiness did return and I went, again, to look for a place where I could lie down and shut my eyes. I saw from looking at the darshan queue that it would be hours before my own darshan coupon would be called, so I let myself snooze a little on three vacant chairs in the most isolated section of the eating area. I was not the only one doing that. I cannot say that I really slept, but it felt good simply to recline with my eyes shut for a while. By 4:10 am Sunday morning, about nine hours after the Devi Bhava program began on Saturday evening, Amma was still giving hugs and there were many people still waiting to receive theirs. I noticed that the music had stopped, signaling to me that the ensemble was taking a break and a new one would soon replace them.

When the live music began again, it sounded different from anything I had heard up to that point. Even though I was far away from where the ensemble was playing, and could not actually see who was playing, I immediately noticed a different instrumental format and style. I heard two guitar players that sounded as if they were leading the group, which was, in and of itself, already something unique! There were two or three voices I heard singing in harmony. The vocals were sung in English without accents. The harmonies, rhythm, and unfamiliarity of the song indicated to me that they were performing an original composition from a Western, rather than an Indian, musical tradition. The song had a jazzy, folk-inflected sound to me, and was, much to my enjoyment, interspersed with bluesy guitar licks played with gusto.

I was attracted by the music and eager to get closer so I could see who was performing. When I got closer, I saw Janapriya playing electric bass now (and not guitar). In front of him was a three-man “front line” of: an acoustic, steel string guitar player on the right; an Indian-looking singer in the middle; and another guitarist playing a hollow-body electric Gretsch guitar on the left. The blues licks were coming from the Gretsch guitar player and he played expressively. I realized that it was *his* playing that had attracted me in the first place. He and the other Western looking man seemed to be the leaders of this ensemble. Anu was playing tabla; the Western-looking clarinet player was there; there was a woman keyboardist I had not seen before playing keyboard; and someone was playing a hand-held shaker (percussion). The rest of the people sitting in the ensemble area looked to be the back-up singers from the previous group, but they were not actually singing then. I thought perhaps that they did not sing only because they did not know the music these two Western guitarist-singers were leading.

I approached the ensemble and sat down next to Janapriya as I had been doing since Friday night. I caught the very end of the original-sounding song that had attracted me there

in the first place. The next song began with a solo guitar improvisation using an open-string bass pedal. Almost immediately, it occurred to me that this guitarist was improvising a rubato alap introduction, in the traditional Indian style. Once he began a steady tempo, the Indian man in the middle sang the lead vocal to Stevie Wonder's song, "For Once in My Life." I noticed the crowd beginning to gather nearby, watching this group and listening to this popular song that must have been familiar to them. Quickly, as the song progressed, the aisles for attendees to traverse that had existed moments ago on both sides of where the ensemble was sitting on the floor were filled up with onlookers, creating a "standing-room-only" environment. The electric guitarist played in a bluesy, funky style, and used staccato notes and rhythms that were not particularly complicated, but were very effective and attention-getting musical punctuation, I thought. It felt like the whole hall was filled with happiness and appreciation (if not awe) for Amma's unrelenting loving embraces, and the music seemed to perfectly and poignantly accent all that was happening, helping to raise the emotional level to a record high for the evening.

As the crowd gathered around the band area, it seemed as if there was no room left to move anymore, yet there was certainly some dancing and jumping up and down going on at times. There were also enthusiastic verbal hoots and howls that accompanied the rousing applause after every song. I got caught up in the emotion of it all but then tried to calm myself down enough so that I could record the names of the songs I heard and make other various observations. I noticed sheets of paper with lyrics written on them and chord symbols above the words. The Indian singer did not seem to know some of these songs by heart, because he was clearly reading from one of these sheets, something that might have been unnecessary if he had memorized the songs he was singing in advance of the performance. His singing, and the performance of the band, seemed highly impromptu and improvised. He sang a very clear (no use of gamakas here) and confident sounding melody that matched the

harmonies heard, but was *not* the exact melody of the famous Stevie Wonder recording. It was embellished or altered, either deliberately or accidentally (I could not tell which), and the impression I had was that if these songs were rehearsed at all, the arrangements were not fixed – these seemed like what jazz musicians like me call head-arrangements – collective improvisations and embellishments within a specific song structure.

The Indian man's voice was exceptional, I thought, and I was clearly not the only one there impressed by his singing. When he sang, he commanded audience attention, and earlier that evening, I overheard someone ask him by name, “. . . when are you going to sing . . .?” He said he was not sure and that he would have to wait and “. . . see how things went . . .” Even before I went to India, I realized that certain bhajan players and singers within Amma's milieu had reputations that crossed international boundaries. I thought I had overheard this singer's name when he was asked when he was going to sing, but if I did, I neglected to make a note of it, nor did I recall what it was. When I got to Amritapuri and saw who I thought was the same man singing there, I went up to him and asked him if he had sung at Amma's July, 2013 NYC program. He said, no he had not. I related the particular event to him, telling him that he not only looked like the other singer, but sang very well like him too. He said with little hesitation, “. . . it was probably a man named Iswar . . .” Like the American-looking clarinetist, Janapriya, and a few other musicians, some of these bhajan players were widely known, presumably because of their high quality musicianship.

The lead sheets with chord symbols written above the lyrics were handed to the keyboard player and clarinetist. Maybe Janapriya had one too. From where I was sitting, I could read a few of the words on one of these sheets of paper: “verse,” “bridge,” and “chorus,” and under each of those three headings were the song words with chord symbols positioned directly above certain lyrics. I surmised from my own musical background that where the chord symbols were written, for example, which specific song words they appeared

on top of, indicated *when* exactly the chords were to change, so that just by reading the lyrics, one would know also the harmonic rhythm. Although it was the first time I had noticed any “reading” going on in the bhajan group during this program, I had seen such “lead-sheets,” as they are called, in the past and in fact, had used some myself on the two occasions I played guitar for Amma’s programs in Japan.

The musical program this ensemble presented seemed to alternate between original songs composed, I guessed, by one of the two guitarist-singers who appeared to be “fronting” the group, and well-known pop hits. I got the distinct impression that, while the two guest guitarists were the artistic leaders of this particular musical set, Janapriya seemed to take a *subtle* leadership role of the ensemble in its entirety. I say subtle because everything involving any ego, such as the ego necessary to exert leadership of a group, was understated. Janapriya was the only Westerner left over from the preceding group. I assumed that he was a “behind-the-scenes” leader of this ensemble because he was a native English speaker familiar with the music, the musicians, and the culture of Amma’s bhajan ensembles, plus the fact that he played bass, an instrument that, particularly in Western-oriented music (as this music was), underpins and stabilizes the group musically by delineating the roots of the chords, accents the down beats, and keeps the time generally. But something else happened to give me this impression. A man from the crowd appeared with an instrument carried on his back. He approached Janapriya and asked if he could “sit-in,” to play with the ensemble. Janapriya said, “. . . No, I’m sorry . . . another time . . .” I didn’t hear every word exchanged between them, but I heard and observed enough to know what the gist of it was. His polite, but firm, refusal to let a stranger play with them showed me that Janapriya assumed some tacit, at least, responsibility for the group overall. This type of behavior on Janapriya’s part also reminded me of similar experiences I have had when I was leading my own jazz ensemble, a genre well-known for the tradition of sitting in.

After the Stevie Wonder song, the guitarist with the Gretsch guitar sang what I thought was an original work of his, with the repeating lyrics, “. . . I just wanna sing for you . . . wanna sing from the bottom of my heart . . . from the bottom of my heart . . .” He started the song playing and singing solo, and ended the song the same way, as a soloist singing those words rubato and accompanying himself with his guitar playing. As he finished, a man sitting in the crowd just behind me started chanting those words over and over again, as if to confirm that the guitarist had indeed, sung and performed that music “from the bottom of his heart.” My emotion, the feeling I got from the music, and the crowd’s reaction to it, was running so high that all my earlier tiredness had vanished.

The next song was “Fragile,” written and performed by the famous pop singer, Sting. The lyrics included, “. . . On and on the rain will fall . . . Like tears from a star, like tears from a star . . . On and on the rain will say . . . How fragile we are, how fragile we are . . .” There was a youngish-looking (in her 20’s perhaps) woman singer who accompanied the Indian man in front. She sang wonderfully pleasing harmonies to his lead, and their two voices matched so well that I have to believe they had rehearsed this one.

Next they performed the Michael Jackson song, “Man in the Mirror,” which contains the lyric refrain: “. . . If ya’ wanna make the world a better place, take a look at yourself, and then make a change . . .” When the group got to that point in the song, the crowd seemed to go wild. Many people enthusiastically sang along with the lyrics, jumped up and down, danced, and clapped their hands in time with the music. Songs that followed included Minnie Riperton’s “Loving You” and the Carpenter’s “Close to You.”

Despite the euphoric emotions that accompanied this rousing pop set and distracted me from any purely “sober” work, I managed to make some significant observations, I believe. One, was that this was a very “mixed” group: one of the the lead singers and Anu, the tabla player, were Indian; the two singer-guitarists, Janapriya, the woman vocalist that

sang harmonies on Sting's "Fragile," and the clarinetist were Western; the group included both women and men; there were electric and acoustic instrumentalists playing both Western and traditional Indian instruments; and they seemed to incorporate into the Western pop style of this set musical elements common to Indian bhajan music.

Generally speaking, the music had a Western pop-rock-folk feel, with some bluesy jazz guitar riffs thrown in. But, on more than one occasion, the guitarist would begin the song with an introduction in Indian alap style. Since an alap is rubato and improvised, nobody could recognize the song they were about to play, despite its popularity, until after the lyrics could be heard in tempo. Something else they did that reminded me distinctly of Indian bhajans, and which is not usually done with the Western songs they covered, was that they suddenly sped up the tempo at times. A faster tempo tends to raise the intensity level. One example of this was when the guitarist, during an improvised (guitar) solo section of the song, unexpectedly sped up, strumming much more quickly, loudly and energetically. I saw the other members of the ensemble react with surprise on their faces, but Anu, the table player, grinned broadly and appreciatively, as she promptly adjusted her beat to accommodate the change in time feel.

There was also a noticeable use of dynamic contrast in their set, something that can sometimes be lacking in semi-professional or highly impromptu "live" settings like that one seemed to be. Many in the crowd recognized the lyrics and melodies of the cover songs performed by that ensemble. Yet, through alap-like introductions, tempo increases, dynamic contrasts, improvisatory passages, and impressive group dynamics and cohesiveness that included keen listening, an apparent mutual respect for each other, and sensitive, yet highly emotionally-packed playing, these popular songs were transformed into interpretations that were uniquely Indian-flavored.

Something I have always noticed about Amma's own singing and of her bhajan

ensembles in general is that, even if the players and singers led, or helped to achieve, a very high level of emotional intensity while performing, once the music ceased, there were no apparent displays of emotion or individualism from those actors involved in making the music. This is an important and curious observation to make, I believe. I have years of experience performing music in front of people. Part and parcel of my Western cultural background is the notion that it is perfectly acceptable to display pride in one's performance, and, in an audience's enthusiasm for it. We entertainers in the Western world are familiar with the (slang) concept of "swag" or "swagger," a sense of bravado on the part of the performer. But nothing, apparently, could be less desired than *that* sort of egoistic display amongst the bhajan players and the milieu of Amma's spiritual programs.

I heard very emotionally evocative music from this Western-led group I was watching early Sunday morning at Amma's NYC 2013 program. From what I observed from the crowd's enthusiastic reaction, they felt the same way. Despite despite the obvious joy and enthusiasm the song's performance garnered from an appreciative crowd there, vis-à-vis dancing, yelling, clapping and singing along with the ensemble, when the music faded into silence, the musicians faded with it – indeed – as if they were following exactly the advice Amma had once given to her chief accompanist, Swami Pranavamrita, “. . . [great] music should contain no musician . . . ”

There were two women who sang solo (acappella) at two different times very early in the morning on Sunday, and I remembered them even though when I saw them I made no notes about it in my journal. The first I heard from the back room without actually seeing her. What was so noticeable to me was that she sang in a very bold and soulful way. I do not remember what the song was, but I think it was an R&B classic. From the powerful sound of her voice and the style and conviction with which she sang, my mind's eye pictured an African-American woman with the physical heft to match her big sound. What I was hearing

was attractive enough to prompt me to move closer so I could see what was going on. When I got close to the stage and ensemble area where I could see the singer, her appearance surprised me, because she was a petite Caucasian woman. I was riveted by her singing and wondered how she could garner such a powerful sound from such a diminutive body. As it turns out, I was not the only one to have been drawn there to see who was creating these glorious sounds, for as I looked just beyond the singer to the other side of the stage, towards the aisleway leading to where the swamis stay, I saw Swami Pranavamrita looking at her too with, I imagined, the same look of inquisitiveness and admiration on his face that I had. Our eyes met briefly and I felt a bond with him, realizing that only this woman's singing prompted us to stop what we were doing and come right away to see her, he from the rear of the stage and I from the front of the hall. Fine musicians and lovers of music are always on the lookout for new and different sounds, but I felt certain that what specifically drew us there in that moment was the *emotion* (the *rasa*) this woman's singing conveyed. I continued watching the woman after she finished singing, and I got the distinct impression, from the way she reacted to the greetings and appreciation of the other onlookers, that she was quite humble, unassuming and shy.

Perhaps it was her singing that prompted another woman to sing acappella a little while later. This time it *was* an African-American woman. Her voice was good too, but I thought there was a difference in her manner. She did not seem as shy as the first woman, and I could not be sure, of course, but I thought she expected or sought some overt signs of acknowledgement or appreciation from Amma, which never came. She sang the song, *Amazing Grace* first, and afterwards, as she began to walk away, one of the bhajan ensemble members stopped her, handed her the microphone, and encouraged her to sing again. She used the mike to speak briefly. I do not recall exactly what she said, but I know she made introductory remarks about the song she was going to sing, and while looking at Amma the

whole time, dedicated the song to her. I watched Amma intently and she did not acknowledge this singer's presence in the least bit. When Amma gives darshan, it is uncommon for her to actually look at what the performers do in any given moment in front of the stage, though I have seen her do so on a few occasions. For the most part, she is quite busy attending to the recipients of her darshan and the many disciples vying for her attention about some matter or another (that can often be quite urgent and important). Her ability to multi-task is infamous! But, what struck me about this instance was the apparent difference in attitude between the first and second woman singing acappella. I thought that maybe the second woman displayed a little more ego, and I wondered whether or not, given the singer's obvious skill, that had anything to do with why Amma did not acknowledge her.

Sometime around 6:00 am or so, I queued up in the darshan line. My turn to line up to receive a hug from Amma coincided with the appearance of performing artist Doug E. Fresh, pronounced (I had been told) Doug-"ee" Fresh, as if the first and middle name were one. He is a NYC rapper who is also known as "The Human Beat Box." I had seen him perform once before at Amma's 2010 NYC program. I recalled how intrigued I was in 2010 to hear something so radically different in style to the bhajans I was accustomed to hearing. The sheer volume of Doug E. Fresh's show was disconcerting to me, both in 2010 when I first heard him and at the NYC program in 2013. In my entire history of attending Amma's spiritual programs, I have never heard anything as loud as Doug E. Fresh's show. I use the word "show," by the way, because he only "rapped" words into a mike in conjunction with excerpted selections of prerecorded background music blasting through the PA system. The musical excerpts were compiled in a way that mimicked a live DJ performance and included popular funk, R&B, and top-40 hit songs. One excerpt I specifically recall hearing was from George Clinton's Parliament Funkadelics hit song, "Flashlight," a personal favorite of mine from the funk genre. I also recall hearing at least one Michael Jackson song. I suspect "Doug-

E-Fresh” prepared the music that accompanied his rapping in advance, put it on a tape or CD, and just handed it to Amma’s soundmen to play through the PA system on cue. Since his act was completely reliant on the prerecorded musical excerpts, I do not think there was much improvisation in his show. Unlike the other music I had seen played completely live at Amma’s program, Doug E. Fresh’s show was probably highly scripted, comparatively speaking.

He engaged the crowd well, actively garnering loud vocal calls and responses, similar to what one might expect at a huge outdoor rock concert, and not the kind of thing that immediately came to my mind in connection with a religious event featuring a private audience with a holy person (essentially what “darshan” is and the sole reason most people came to Amma’s events). From where I was sitting on the stage, I could see “Doug-E-Fresh” on my left side, centered in front of the stage where Amma sat. Many people gathered closely around him and the ensemble playing area, again, resembling a rock concert in which the featured performer actively encouraged the audience to gather. As I waited in a seat onstage, within minutes of greeting Amma, I noticed that Doug E. Fresh had really worked the crowd into frenzy. He beat on his chest and simulated bass and drum sounds with his mouth, and asked the crowd to respond to the things he was saying, for instance: “. . . if you’re happy to be here, scream and wave your hands . . . ! If you love Amma, make some *noise* . . . !”

Something I have noticed with all the music at every event of Amma’s that I have been to is that all the lyrics, rap, speech, or vocalizing of any kind, are completely devoid of vulgarity, profanity, or negativity. This should not be surprising of the bhajans that Amma has written, and as Swami Pranavamrita pointed out to me in our conversation, the music they make is devotional in nature and not merely for entertainment. At Amma’s tour events, like the one I am writing about, there is always some Western-based music featured, such as the popular genres of pop (Michael Jackson, for instance) and rap. Personally, I cannot think

of Michael Jackson, or rap music, without *at least once* imagining someone grabbing his crotch or singing of drugs, sex, or violence. But at Amma's events, all the song lyrics and "rapping" is devotional in nature, about pure love, or uplifting in an instructional or inspirational way. Everything rapper Doug E. Fresh said (or rather, shouted) expressed happiness or loving devotion. The words to the Michael Jackson song I mentioned hearing earlier, "Man in the Mirror," describe a person confronting "himself" rather than someone else and effecting positive change by taking personal responsibility; the lyrics to Sting's song, "Fragile" say, ". . . nothing comes from violence and nothing ever could . . ."; The Ripingtons' lyrics to "Loving You" say, ". . . Everything I do is out of loving you . . ."; Stevie Wonder's lyrics to "For Once in My Life" say, ". . . I won't let sorrow hurt me . . . I can go where life leads me . . . I have love, I can make it . . ."

I thought the Western-led groups I saw playing Western songs had a decidedly "Indian-bhajan" flavor about them, because of the songs they selected to perform, their musical arrangement and personalized treatment of those songs, and the way they conducted themselves as players during the performances. Each song they chose to play had an uplifting, positive message contained in the lyrics. Their treatment of the cover songs was unique, compared to the original recordings, and it incorporated some of the same musical characteristics common to traditional Indian bhajan ensembles: alap introductions, memorization and improvisation, tempo and volume increases used to vary intensity levels, bass pedal tones and modal inflections, and gamakas (by slurring and bending notes on the guitar). The most notable observation I made in watching the bhajan ensembles was the *lack* of obvious displays of pride or ego by the players. Despite their emotive and energetic playing, resulting in very enthusiastic applause and other shows of appreciation and admiration by the audience, when they finished playing there was nothing at all in their behavior to suggest that they took any pride in their performance or that they, in any outward

way, *acknowledged* the crowd's positive reaction to their playing. When the song ended, they displayed the same calm, quiet, meditative countenances that I have seen from Amma and her swamis when they finished singing. In other words, whatever emotion, exuberance, and enthusiastic effort was displayed by the players, it seemed to be directed *solely* into the execution of the music itself, and not exhibited outwardly solely for the benefit of either themselves or the listeners. It was as if – recalling the story Swami Pranavamrita shared about Amma admonishing him years ago – there was, . . . *no musician in that music!*

Conclusion

Though I abided by the ashram's request for me not to engage in academic work while at Amma's ashram in India, I did fully immerse myself in the daily life and spiritual activities of the ashram and, of course, made some relevant observations that relate to my academic work. I now believe that each of Amma's touring programs I have experienced, including the one that serves as the basis for this field report, exemplifies a cultural diaspora of life as it is in Amma's original ashram, Amritapuri in Kerala, South India. Life in Amritapuri seems to revolve around the very same things that the touring programs do: seva, spiritual discourse, meditation, darshan, and bhajans. Both the touring programs and there at Amritapuri feature: every darshan program accompanied by live music; every spiritual discourse and meditation session followed by music; Amma herself leading regular live performances of bhajans; the singing of bhajans at all special programs or holiday celebrations, such as New Years Eve, for instance; reproducing the way that the bhajan ensembles set up their equipment, rotate personnel, and conduct themselves during the performance; the music, whether pre-recorded or live, being reproduced through

loudspeakers positioned far from the stage, so that even if you are not near the place where music is being performed live, you can still hear it (in the case of the ashram, you might actually hear it from outside the ashram walls and in the neighboring village area).

In my opinion, there are two main differences between attending one of Amma's touring programs and actually living in Amritapuri. One difference is of scale and duration: what occurs regularly and naturally at Amritapuri is compressed and limited by time and space everywhere else. Another difference, almost too huge to imagine, while simultaneously being almost inconsequential in terms of its effect on the attendees of Amma's touring programs, is *India* itself! There is, simply put, nothing exactly the same as completely immersing oneself into the cultural environment that only actually *being in India* can provide. However, that opens up a subject beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice to say, that in my opinion, Amma has marvelously managed to maintain the spiritual focus of her touring programs on the same bhakti principles and Indian ceremonial practices that pervade one's daily life in Amritapuri, albeit in an encapsulated form, framed in a distinctly different cultural setting.

I believe there was little difference between the music I heard in India and the music I heard at Amma's programs outside of India. At Amritapuri, Amma leads bhajans on Mondays through Fridays at 6:30 to 8pm, and the hall is always packed with people attentively listening. Amma also sings at the touring programs, but the nightly performances at Amritapuri have more of a concert flavor. At Amritapuri, it is conceivable that one could abstain from all other activities during the day and just come to the evening bhajan-singing. During the tours, on the other hand, the people are already present as attendees of the whole event, and the music seems to be somewhat more of a backdrop to that program and Amma's darshan, which is the main attraction, so to speak, of all her events. The quality and popularity of the music is at a high level in either case.

Devi Bhava programs occur mostly (if not only) outside of India; therefore I did not witness guest musical artists featured in India the same way I did at the Devi Bhava programs I attended outside India. Nor did I hear as much Western music played by the bhajan-groups in India. It appeared to me that there was a larger pool of musicians (particularly Indian ones) available to play and participate in the rotating bhajan ensembles at Amritapuri. The bhajan ensembles I saw at the ashram included the daily use of electric instruments such as the computerized drum machine, electric guitar and keyboard. Western players were also present sometimes, either as ensemble members accompanying the leading Indian singers, or as collaborators with fellow Westerners (and Indians) while leading their own particular segment of music during Amma's darshan. Even in the sacred, traditional Indian setting of Amma's ashram, Western musical elements were in evidence.

As one might expect at a spiritual hermitage and holy place of worship (Amma's family house is within the ashram walls), the atmosphere is very calm and subdued at Amritapuri. Quietude is encouraged amongst ashram residents because, as one of the ashram's informative brochures recommends in a section titled, Code of Conduct and Ashram Rules: ". . . observing silence and minimizing speech helps to keep our focus inwards." During the Monday through Friday evening bhajans that Amma leads at Amritapuri, I never witnessed the kind of active audience participation (dancing and screaming) that I have seen, at times, during Devi Bhava programs (especially those in NYC). One notable exception to this was on December 31, 2013, at Amritapuri.

On that New Years Eve, there was a special performance of a play, given by renunciates and long-term residents, depicting the events leading up to the birth of Jesus Christ. After the play, there was a lengthy spiritual discourse given by Amma, followed by bhajans. By the time the bhajans started, it was well past midnight and people (including me) were getting sleepy, since many of us had been awake for 20 hours or more by then. After

two rather slow-tempo bhajans, I overheard Amma make a comment to Swamiji, saying something about the need to “perk things up a bit.” The next song was faster in tempo, and with a more energetic feel. Amma and her accompanists steadily raised the intensity level of the song by employing tempo and volume increases, a gradual rising of the melodic pitch content, along with call-and-response-style repetitive passages that Amma and Swamiji enthusiastically encouraged the crowd to participate in. Pretty soon, the whole crowd of thousands were up on their feet singing along. Many had their hands in the air, some clapped in time with the music, and almost everybody’s body, including mine was *moving* to the music. I saw people dancing and I heard some shouting too. To say that the change of emotion and energy levels in the hall was dramatic would be a gross understatement. I looked at Amma’s face and imagined that she was thinking something like, “Now, *that’s* more like it!”

Every time I have seen Amma or any of her senior swamis lead the bhajans, whether in India or elsewhere, I have noticed them gradually raising the emotional intensity level of the music to a clear climax. Their ability to do so with their bhajan-singing, pacing and seemingly manipulating the emotional peaks of the music for the listeners’ benefit (in order to elicit the greatest emotional impact and response), is a performance characteristic that all the world’s best performers have, or should have, in my opinion. In particular, I relate it to my own experience teaching and performing jazz, in which we strive to embody that characteristic whether constructing a solo in a song or a show performance over the course of an entire evening, but I have never seen anyone who does it better than Amma. One of the main reasons I was drawn to this project is because I wanted to learn: how does she do it so consistently well, and how does she garner similarly good musical performances from so many of those around her, most of whom are not professional musicians?

When I was a child, my parents used to tell me, “. . . practice makes perfect,” and in

music school we are taught to pursue technical mastery of our instrument, but will doing all that result in our giving consistently well-received, emotionally charged live performances like Ammas? I think my parents were right that practice makes perfect, but what *exactly* should be practiced, if we want to perform music like Amma and her swamis? Many of the non-musicians playing and singing bhajans in Amma's presence at the spiritual events I have attended do so with such an impressively high level of relaxed concentration, commitment to the music, and apparent effortlessness and egolessness, that I cannot resist considering that they possess a quality more valuable to a musician like me than professionalism and technical proficiency, a quality I admire, one that may help in eliciting an overwhelmingly positive response from listeners, and one that I wish to emulate. What exactly, I wonder, is it *they* are "practicing?" I posit that, while they may or may not actually practice the techniques of music, what they *are* practicing that might make all the difference in the world to how their music is played and perceived, is the mastery (total control) of their own hearts, minds and egos, the one-pointed pursuit of the spiritual goals that form the foundation of Amma's teachings.

Most musicians strive to surround themselves with the most qualified musical partners they can, and indeed, I have often been told that the fastest way to learn and grow as a performing artist is to be in the midst of those who are actually better than I am. The weakest and least experienced member of an ensemble has, with the right attitudes prevailing, excellent opportunities to emulate and learn from those who are more experienced and qualified. Renunciates, long-term devotees, and all who are part of Amma's cultural milieu are in the midst of those people to whom playing and singing music is always an act of total devotion and dedication to God. Based on the totality of my own personal experience and what I can surmise intellectually from my observations and research, I believe that simply being a part of that milieu is what may have made the most difference in the music I heard as

well as in the behavior of the bhajan ensemble members and guests I saw perform at Amma's spiritual programs and in Amritapuri.

The living examples Amma sets with everything that she does, all the time, influences and informs her entire socio-cultural milieu, imparting spiritual values that seem to affect everyone within that milieu, and particularly those who are around her the most, such as her regular bhajan ensemble members. Past academic research of mine has shown that culture and spirituality can wield an enormously impactful effect on musicians and their music. It has also highlighted the notion, as indeed, this project's research does, that one's character and attitude is often perceived within a particular musical milieu as more important, with regard to the participatory inclusion into and acceptance from that milieu, than one's level of technical proficiency or popularity outside that milieu. I believe it is their practice of spiritual values and frequent physical proximity to Amma that, in and of itself, and irrespective of how much they may or may not practice musical technique, somehow enhances the performance abilities of the ensemble members I have seen at Amma's events.

Whether the ideas, questions, or assumptions expressed in this paper have any real academic merit or not, it does seem obvious to me that more ethnographic research could and should be done on the bhajan ensembles at Amma's spiritual programs. A resident at Amritapuri told me the bhajans I was accustomed to hearing were all written by Amma, but in my telephone conversation with Bharat I got a different impression, and not all the bhajans I heard were sung in Amma's native tongue, Malayalam, which also seemed to suggest a wider-ranging repertoire. The bulk of my observations contained herein were based on less than thirty hours spent actually watching and listening to ensembles and musical performances at Amma's 2013 NYC program. If that limited amount of time can result in my assembling this amount of information, how much more could I learn if I dedicated myself to attending and studying the performances at every program on the entire North American

tour? Had I been given permission by the Board of Directors to interview ensemble participants at Amritapuri, how much more might I have discovered? What new questions and what new research might that have led me to make?

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