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IN TUNE: "It didn't really matter to me so much how my voice sounded," says Maria Berg of recording her *Prayers Meenakshi* CD. "I just wanted to pull people into my inner heart, to the space that unfolds when I chant. It's a very personal place."

Blissful are the words of chanting chanteuse

Toronto singer aims at tuning her listeners' *chakras* with a new CD of Sanskrit chants

BY DAPHNE GORDON
ENTERTAINMENT REPORTER

WHEN Maria Berg was recording the nine tracks for her new CD, she didn't think of it as a performance. She was just doing her daily spiritual exercises.

"It didn't really matter to me so much how my voice sounded," says Berg, who has been studying meditation, yoga and Sanskrit chants for 13 years and recently spent three months at an ashram in India recording her *Prayers Meenakshi* CD.

"I just wanted to pull people into my inner heart, to the space that unfolds when I chant. It's a very personal place."

Chanting and singing are important in a number of religious practices and rituals.

The Sanskrit chants relate to the Hindu religion and many of them are devotional songs to Hindu gods and goddesses, including Shiva, Rama and Vishna.

Sanskrit, an ancient language with its roots in the Indian subcontinent, is said to be derived from 50 primordial sounds that have profound healing qualities.

"The sounds are said to be of the same vibration or frequency as the Source, or God," explains Berg, who teaches yoga and chanting in Toronto.

Berg's CD is a blend of traditional Sanskrit chants and Western-sounding beats and production values, creating an exotic, melodic sound that can be soothing and uplifting.

The technician who helped her record the tracks in India also played a variety of instruments on the CD, including sitar, guitar, bamboo flute, bass guitar and tabla drums.

The first track, called "Madhur Haastakam," is about bliss. Berg's clear, ethereal voice floats above earthy instrumentals, repeating Sanskrit words over and over.

The song translates to mean: "That which is blissful is your own immortality, to sing it again and again. Your lips are blissful, your face is blissful, your smile is blissful, your walk is blissful, your vision is blissful, your heart is blissful. That Lord of bliss is infinitely blissful."

Says Berg: "When people hear it, they say they feel full of bliss, even if they don't understand the (San-

skrit) words. You don't need to understand it to get the feeling."

Now that yoga has gone mainstream in the West, the practice of chanting in Sanskrit is growing in popularity.

Some Toronto yoga studios incorporate chants with yoga asanas, or poses, in their classes and students have started to catch on, stocking up on CDs by such masters as Krishna Das and Jai Uttal.

"When I first came back from India, I wasn't going to do anything with my tapes," says Berg, adding that she recorded the chants in a simple studio at the International Meditation Institute in the Himalayas, where she studies with Swami Shyam.

"But I have a friend who said: 'Are you crazy? This is really hot right now.'"

So she burned a CD and pressed 1,000 copies.

"There's a path of yoga for everyone," says Berg, who notes that while the *hatha* form involves mastering physical poses to reach a spiritual state, the *bhakti* form is a devotional one which centres on chanting.

"If you are a very musical person, you might be more geared to *bhakti* yoga."

Berg studied classical singing and dance before taking up yoga and meditation. But she says chanting is nothing like performing.

It really doesn't matter how your voice sounds, she stresses. Chanting is more about allowing the sounds to have an effect on your body and soul — and even on the people around you.

The act of chanting and the vibrations of the Sanskrit syllables can profoundly affect the *chakras*, particularly those of the heart and throat, Berg explains.

Chakra is a Sanskrit word for "wheel" and refers to the seven energy centres within the human body that are aligned in ascending order from the base of the spine to the top of the head. Each is related to a certain aspect of a person's life and soul.

According to yoga philosophy, if any of the *chakras* are over- or under-energized, there will be disharmony or disease in the body.

Berg believes that chants tune the *chakras*, helping to create a healthy body and a feeling of well-being.

When she performs her music live, she says, the effect on her audience is palpable.

"People really want to feel connected. This is one way to do that — and it's a way that's so full of joy."

— MARIA BERG

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Maria Berg's *Prayers Meenakshi* CD can be ordered at 416-323-3224.