

'Indo-Pak sisters' enchant audience with Dhrupad performance



Framingham, Mass.-based Baithak presented two young vocalists, Aliya Rasheed from Lahore, Pakistan, and Amita Mahapatra from West Bengal, India, in a unique Hindustani Dhrupad concert accompanied by Sukhad Munde on Pakhawaj on Sept. 14. Promoted as an Indo-Pak friendship concert, a unique Dhrupad "jugalbandi" performance brought together fine musical talent from Pakistan and India, two countries that have fought several bitter wars over the past few decades.

Aliya and Amita have trained in the traditional Guru-shishya training method under the world renowned Dhrupad exponents and Padmashri awardees, Shri Umakant and Ramakant Gundecha. It was heartwarming to see Amita from India holding hands with visually impaired Aliya from Pakistan right from the beginning to the end of the concert. Pradeep Shukla, founder of The Learnquest Academy of Music in Waltham, Mass., in his opening remarks reminded the audience that music is universal and knows no boundaries. He aptly labelled Aliya and Amita as the "Indo-Pak" sisters and said that if the opening Baithak concert was any measure of predicting the outcome of the concerts to come, he was confident that the artists were well on their way to creating a successful track record. Learnquest is a co-sponsor of a three-week musical tour by Aliya, Amita and Sukhad, with concert performances scheduled in more than half a dozen cities in the United States.

Aliya and Amita presented Alap in slow, medium and fast tempos and a Dhamaar composition set to 14 beat cycle Dhamaar taal in Raag Desh in first half of the concert. In the second half,

they once again opened with alap in three tempos in Raag Malkauns and then went on to present two Dhrupad compositions set to 14 beat cycle Chautal and 10 beat cycle Sooltaal.

Surja RoyChowdhury, a concert attendee from Lexington, Mas., commented that it was the first time she heard a jugalbandi in Dhrupad by two women vocalists and said that she was impressed by the chemistry between the performers. "To hear Aliya from Pakistan sing compositions on Lord Shiva with devotion was unusual," she said.

Tina Khan who lives in Boxboro, Mass., and is originally from Lahore, called it "one-of-a-kind" concert. "I was thrilled to watch a performer from my hometown in Pakistan and I also found the holding of hands between the two women during the performance very emotional and touching. Music has brought us together — we must forget the politics between the two nations," she said.

Aliya Rasheed and Amita Mahapatra spoke to INDIA New England about their journey as Dhrupad performers.

Q. Would you call yourselves child prodigies? At what age did you start singing?

Aliya: There are no musicians in my family and so I had no musical background in the family. I started singing when I was a young child. At the age of 6, I began taking lessons and learned poems and patriotic songs. When I was in 10th grade, I started learning raga based compositions in my school in Lahore.

Amita: I started singing at a young age too. My mother is a home-maker and my father is a professor of ancient history. There are no music professionals in the family but we all love music.

Q. What attracted you to singing Dhrupad?

Aliya: In 1999, I attended a 30 minute lecture on Dhrupad at Barrister Raza Kazim's music and philosophy institute in Lahore. I had no idea about Dhrupad before that and had never heard it being sung. In 2001, I went to Bhopal to Ramakant and Umakant Gundecha's gurukul with the help of Barrister Raza Kazim, a U.S.-based Surbahar player Shubha Shankaran and her husband Brian Silver. My mother accompanied me and stayed with me for a month at the Gurukul. I loved Dhrupad and decided to learn how to sing it.

Amita: I studied Khayal singing for a long time and did my master's in music at Vishwabharati university in Shantiniketan, West Bengal. My instructor Smt. Kaberi Kar introduced me to Dhrupad singing. I was intrigued by it and wanted to learn it to sing it properly.

Q. When did you start learning Dhrupad from Gundecha brothers? Do you stay at their Gurukul in Bhopal to study Dhrupad with them?

Aliya: I first stayed at the home of Gundecha brothers starting in 2001. At that time sansthan was running at their home on second floor. A formal Gurukul building was built to completion in 2004. My mother spent the first month with me and I continued to stay and study at the Dhrupad Sansthan in Bhopal for almost four years. I wanted to learn how to sing Dhrupad in a proper manner. I learned from Umakantji Ramakantji and the Gundecha family looked after me very well all those four years. I used to get up at 4 a.m. for riyaz, practice until 7 a.m., have breakfast, resume learning and practicing from 9 a.m. until 1 p.m., rest after lunch and learn and

sing from 5 p.m. until 8 p.m. I spent an average of eight hours a day learning and practicing music.

Amita: My father took me to the Dhrupad Sansthan sometime in 2003-2004 and requested the Gundecha brothers to accept me as a disciple. I stayed in the Gurukul for four-to-five years and learned how to sing Dhrupad. My pattern of riyaz was very similar to Aliya's. Even our practice/riyaz was supervised by our teachers. They were patient teachers but also expected us to practice hard.

Q. Dhrupad has traditionally been associated with strength, energy and vigor, qualities associated with male singing. How difficult has it been for you to pursue this artform with a view to become professional performers?

Aliya: I will admit that it was difficult. The gamaks (oscillations) especially were hard to learn and master. They demand a lot of concentrated attention and whole body involvement. I am still learning and perfecting that ornamentation. In India, many women are taking to singing Dhrupad in the present times.

Amita: I give entire credit to my teachers for taking the interest in teaching us proper shruti alignment and ornamentation in Dhrupad. I agree with Aliya that many women are taking up singing Dhrupad in the current generation.

Q. Can you describe how it feels to perform a jugalbandi? Are there any challenges you face while singing together?

Aliya: I enjoy singing jugalbandi with Amitaji. We have learned from the same guru but I think I sing in my own style and she sings in her own style. Even though I cannot see her through my eyes, I observe her singing closely through my heart. I have never let my disability of blindness come in the way of my singing. I thank the Almighty for all that he has given me and sing with faith in him and his blessings.

Amita: It is a pleasure to sing a jugalbandi and also a challenge as it is a spontaneous and creative exercise. One has to pay careful attention to what our partner sings and develop the melody and rhythm pattern in a matching manner that enhances overall presentation.

Q. What kind of audience are you expecting in United States? Are you excited to perform her?

Aliya: I have performed in Pakistan and several parts of India. I am happy to come to U.S. for my first tour. All credit goes to my guru for his faith in my singing abilities. I hope our performance will go well and the audience will like our singing. I have a dream that I will take Dhrupad and the singing that my teachers have taught me to many different parts of the world. I want to make Dhrupad famous and known by music lovers all over the world.

Amita: I am very excited and am hoping that our performances will be well appreciated by audiences in multi-city tour in USA. We hope to make our teachers proud of us.

- **By Shuchita Rao**