

Ustad Shahid Parvez in Pakistan

Ustad Shahid Parvez visited Pakistan from August 10 to August 23, 2006 for a series of concerts organized by the Rauf Ansari Foundation and the All Pakistan Music Conference (Lahore Chapter). His performances brought about a sea change in perceptions about what our traditional music can be. Not only were the performances a stunning display of technical virtuosity, they also displayed musicianship of the highest order, full of contrasts and balances. All who came to listen to him feel blessed to have been there.

The public performances- at the Alhamra Auditorium in Lahore and the Pakistan Institute of International Affairs, Karachi- followed the pattern of extensive development of a major raag, displaying the whole range of technical and emotional aspects of the chosen raag- replete with lyricism, aggression, gamaks, and laikari of the highest order, followed by a completely lyrical presentation of lighter raags.

The audience at both the places included all the professional sitarists I know of as well as several musicians.

I had requested Shahid Sahib to play only well known raags and compositions. The well-known raags and compositions have survived because of their inherent architecture. Moreover, this familiarity makes it easier for all to relate to the music, to appreciate how the artist avoids technical pitfalls- for example the resolution of the phrase Pa Ni Sa, common to both Desh and Jai Jai Vanti- and how he rephrases the traditional compositions and introduces new ideas. The result was that the music found resonance amongst the entire audience and made it an unforgettable experience for every one present there. Shahid Sahib got standing ovations in Lahore at the conclusion of all the pieces he played.

I could see Ghazala beaming with pride and satisfaction. Pride at having managed most successfully an event of this magnitude; satisfaction for having done it as her father Hayat Sahib would have wished her to do. These performances were under the banner of the Rauf Ansari- Hayat Ahmed Khan Memorial Concerts, to commemorate the ideals and vision of these founding members of the All Pakistan Music Conference.

There were also two house concerts, one at my friend Manzur ul Haq's house – in Lahore- and another at Mrs. Saffiya Beg's house in Karachi. I had told Shahid Sahib that Manzur is a connoisseur of western classical music, is a great admirer of Wagner, and that most of the invitees would be first time listeners. He took this into account and played completely lyrical Bageshri and Charukeshi and, on the request of Beena, daughter of the well known musicologist Raza Kazim, a thumri in Khamach. As an exception, he also sang the phrases of the thumri, so that the listeners could hear what exactly the gaiaki ang is. To create a good atmosphere, care had been exercised to invite a fair number of very knowledgeable listeners- Farrukh Bashir, Sarah Zaman, Parvez Paras and Mr.Raza Kazim's family. After the performance, Furrukh told me that this was the other side of the coin, that the Ustad had transformed sitar into a sarangi. I could feel that all those who were there were completely won over. Sajida Vandal,

Principal of the National College of Arts, was so enthusiastic that she wanted a performance for students within the next few days. Sarah Zaman also wanted another house concert. Unfortunately, due to previous commitments, this could not materialize.

In Karachi, he stayed at my home and I had a few moments alone with him. I told him that in his Bageshri dvd as well as the one he played in Lahore, the phrase- Re Ga Ma Pa Ga Re- which is normally not associated with Bageshri, is noticeable and said that since I could hear this, surely he must also be all the more aware of this and whether this was an example of poetic license. He replied that this indeed was poetic license, which can only be taken when one has reached a certain stage in musicianship; that he does this as long as the over all conception of the raag is not disturbed. For the same reason, in Karachi, he introduced, very briefly, a phrase of Aanandi, which was resolved immediately by a characteristic phrase of the Raag he was playing, namely Behag.

I also asked him whether music can be spontaneous. He replied that making music was a cumulative process, involving intensive hard work and hard listening, and with these prerequisites, at times of inspiration, it is possible to create something instantaneously. As a professional mathematician, this resonated very well with me and I could see parallels with the creative process in my own subject. He also said that it is better to think deeply about what one is going to play, otherwise there is the danger of the music degenerating into random incoherent phrases.

The Karachi concert was organized at a very high professional level. Mr.Salman Alvi and Mr. Aamir Riffat (of PIIA) made outstanding arrangements. What was most gratifying was the support from the corporate world, thanks to the efforts of Mr.Alvi and my brother Humayun.

In Islamabad, the scheduled concert had to be cancelled due to delays in the visa. However, as Shahid Sahib, contrary to all expectations, succeeded in obtaining a visa and had already bought a ticket for Islamabad, an alternative had to be found. My friend Shehzad and his younger brother Sheri, who himself is learning to play the Sarod, took it upon themselves to receive the artists from the airport and look for suitable accommodation for them. They invested a great amount of time and effort in making everyone feel comfortable in Islamabad. Shahzad also did a two-hour interview of Ustad Shahid Parvez. He has promised to make this public very soon. All music lovers look forward to it.

Since a public concert in Islamabad – in the current climate- was not possible, a studio recording with a very select invited audience consisting of musicians and connoisseurs was arranged. Instrumental in all this were Dr.Taimur- of sarangi.info- and his friend Khurram Waqar. I had not met Dr.Taimur before, knew him only through his marvelous web site. I had a hunch that he would know a good recordist and a studio. Indeed this turned out to be so and the recording was done at the home studio of Khurram, who himself is a well-known guitarist. The home studio was transformed over night beyond recognition and the equipment and the technical competence of the recordists was up to Shahid Sahib's standards. Dr.Taimur has listened to the finished product and is quite satisfied with it. This will soon be released as a DVD.

I want to conclude these reminiscences with some purely personal observations. The whole visit was an accumulation of miracles. First, Shahid Sahib got a visa on the same day that diplomats from India and Pakistan were being expelled. His public performances had to be rescheduled on working days and despite the odd hours, the halls were jam-packed. The artists were misinformed in Islamabad that they had non-reporting visas. Their visas were valid up to August 22, whereas PIA had given them return tickets for the 23rd. All this was discovered a day before their departure. Thanks to music lovers and bureaucrats in Islamabad, notably Mr. Javaid Ali Khan, the whole complicated matter was resolved within a few hours. Shahid Sahib was visibly touched by these gracious gestures of kindness and hospitality and he left Karachi with very positive impressions about Pakistan and its citizens.

The whole purpose of inviting an artist of this calibre was to demonstrate that the work of a genius can be appreciated at some level by everyone, that our music is second to none and it deserves to be supported by the corporate world and the ordinary citizen. I have a feeling that these objectives have been met.

Shahid Sahib has promised to return soon, not simply as an artist but also as an organizer of an Indo Pak Music Festival, with artists of comparable calibre from both the countries. This augurs very well for the future.

All who had the privilege of spending time with him were touched by his simplicity, directness and sincerity to his art- seeing him practicing or reflecting about music or teaching his students, who had come all the way from Canada to enjoy the experience of Shahid Sahib perform in his milieu.

When it was time to say good-bye, some of us were overcome with emotions, for we knew that we had been privy to something very special. His music is still reverberating in my mind and heart as I write these lines. We all wish him a long and productive life.

Hassan Azad
Karachi, August 24, 2006