

River of Strings – Shafaatullah Khan and the Mansfield Orchestra

A Sitar Concerto (April 20, 2007)

A review by T. Parasaran, Ph.D. and P. Swaminathan, Ph.D.

SRUTI, The India Music and Dance Society, presented a music ensemble on April 20, 2007, in the Kimmel Center. This program was different from the usual traditional classical music concerts presented by Sruti in the past. The program was titled River of Strings - a music ensemble by Shafaatullah Khan and his group. We went to the concert hoping to listen to the ensemble from the beginning to the end. However, the program started with a Tabla solo by Ustad Shafaatullah Khan, accompanied by Pundit Ramesh Mishra on Sarangi and Nick Vicente and Suraj Roychowdhry on Tanpura. Shafaatullah started with Vilambit in 16 beats. There was a display of vigorous beats followed by slow movements also called Peshkar. While the Sarangi provided the requisite background, the Ustad showed his virtuosity with fingering. Following an eloquent rendering of notes on Sarangi by Pundit Mishra, the Ustad vocalized the beats, which is similar to the “Konnakkol” of Carnatic Music. This was then translated into various Tala compositions of past masters. Finally a composition of his own in nine different notes was played by him. One of these was for a dance followed by a four beat tal.

Shafaatullah is known more for his accomplishments on sitar than on Tabla. It was not clear to us why he chose to demonstrate his prowess on Tabla even though the main title of the program was the “River of Strings” featuring him on Sitar. During the second half of the concert, Shafaatullah Khan along with the Mansfield Orchestra, conducted by Kenneth Sarch, presented “The River of Strings”. He chose the popular Tilak Kamod Raga for improvisation. The presentation was such that Shafaatullah improvised the Raga on the Sitar following the traditional Hindustani style. For this, he was accompanied by his student Amod Dandawate on the Tabla. Kenneth Sarch and the Mansfield orchestra then improvised the same following the western classical style. It was very interesting to listen to the adaptation of the Hindustani Raga by the Mansfield orchestra and to observe how the orchestra interacted and blended with the Hindustani musicians. Indeed, there were many occasions when we felt that Mansfield orchestra excelled in their presentation. Kudos to Mansfield orchestra and Shafaatullah Khan for their great effort.

This is the first time we witnessed a concert with an orchestra trained in western classical music adapting and improvising a traditional Hindustani Raga. It is always interesting to observe the novel ways in which traditional Indian classical music is adapted by completely different musical groups like the Mansfield orchestra. In the past, several great musicians like Pandit Ravishankar, Yehudi Menuhin, the Beatles, Ali Akbhar Khan etc. have presented fusion musical concerts under the title “East meets West”. Although we have not witnessed any of those concerts in person, we have listened to the recordings of those concerts. Compared to such great performances, the presentation of the “River of Strings” seems a relatively humble attempt. Shafaatullah Khan and his party have a long way to go in perfecting their techniques. They should also strive hard to start the concert on time. The following guidelines are our suggestions for future events. It is very important that such large presentations should be extremely well rehearsed in advance and all the preparations like stage set up, instrumental tuning and stage arrangements should be completed within the time frame announced in the program notes. There is absolutely no excuse for delaying the concerts because artists were not ready with their musical instruments and the instruments were not tuned properly etc.