



Bengal Foundation

Bengal Classical Music Festival

The largest festival of Indian classical music takes place in the Bangladeshi capital of Dhaka. **Simon Broughton** tests his stamina to hear some of the world's best musicians who play until the early hours of the morning

Perhaps it is a surprise to learn that the biggest festival of Indian classical music isn't in India at all, but Bangladesh, and it attracts audiences of 50,000 people. But the Bengal Classical Music Festival in Dhaka subverts expectations in many ways. "Nobody in India has done anything on this scale," admits *sarod* player Amjad Ali Khan, and he dedicates his closing performance at last year's festival to "all the great Bengali artists of Kolkata and Dhaka."

The facts and figures are remarkable. The festival lasts five nights, and includes 37 concerts and 160 artists. Tickets are free, but you have to register in advance. Each concert lasts 11 hours, starting at 6pm and ending at 5am with audiences up to 50,000 for the most popular artists like Amjad Ali Khan and *bansuri* player Hariprasada Chaurasia.

The festival is organised by the Bengal Foundation, who have been promoting visual and performing arts, cinema, literature and crafts in Bangladesh for over 25 years. All its

events are free. But while it's making South Asian classical music (and dance) a stadium event, it's certainly not cheapening it, but instead offering the highest quality.

"There's a real renaissance happening here," says singer Aruna Sairam. "As soon as I walked onstage there was an incredible connection with the audience." *Santoor* player Shivkumar Sharma lamented the predominance of Bollywood music and rock in India and said: "if only they could come here and see the reception of classical music."

I have to say I was sceptical at first – not about the numbers, which are clear as soon as you enter – but whether you could get the intimacy and concentration that this music

"It's my ambition to put Bangladesh back on the map of classical music"

needs. But the Bengal Foundation has invested in a state-of-the-art German sound system, so that even if you're sitting far from the stage the sound is of the highest quality. And while there isn't the intimacy of, say, London's Darbar Festival, this really is reaching a mass audience – a lot of them young. There's a buzz around the festival too – it's the place to be and to be seen.

For those that want to concentrate on the music there's a seated area under a vast tent and the performances are also relayed on screens. But the festival is also a social occasion and people sit on the terraces of the stadium itself where they can eat and chat as well as listen to the music. Of course, no one is going to listen intently to all 11 hours and there's a nice informality about the event with people drifting in and out, going to smoke, eat and chat. Needless to say there's plenty of good food available. After an energising chicken curry, I was astonished to find myself sitting down at 3:30am for a 90-minute classical recital.



Clockwise from top left: Bangladeshi singer Supriya Das; *sarod* player Tejendra Majumdar & violinist Ganesh Rajagopalan; *sarod* maestro Amjad Ali Khan; the festival draws crowds of up to 50,000; Karnatic singer Aruna Sairam; below: Uday Bhawalkar with students



Travel to Bangladesh courtesy of Nabuab Abdul Latif Trust, UK & Rumi Khan

Indian classical music was originally performed all over the subcontinent, of course, but since the partition in 1947 it has received markedly less support in Pakistan and Bangladesh than in India itself. Abul Khair, chairman of the Bengal Foundation, says he realised how many great names of Indian music were born or grew up in what is now Bangladesh – Ali Akbar Khan, Ravi Shankar, Vilayat Khan, Nikhil Banerjee to name just a few. "These were gurus who popularised classical music all over the world. So I realised it must be in the blood of the people of Bangladesh. This made me think I want to bring back that legacy."

People were sceptical at first, but Khair's belief seems to have paid off. Last year's festival included some of the best performances of Indian classical music I have ever seen. There was the elegant Kaushiki Chakrabarty (featured in #111), one of the most captivating singers on

earth, animating the music with her hands as if sculpting the sound in the air; the powerful Karnatic singer Aruna Sairam, always engaging and dynamic, who concluded her recital singing the words of Bangladeshi national poet Kazi Nazrul Islam; and an unusual *jugalbandi* (duet) of *sarod* (Tejendra Majumdar) and violin (Ganesh Rajagopalan), which was an instrumental *tour de force* with a



spectacular solo from *tabla* player Yogesh Samsi, a new name to me, who was accompanying many of the instrumentalists.

But what about Bangladeshi players you may ask? It's certainly the festival's intention to showcase them as well and I was particularly struck by the young singer Supriya Das, as well as *sitar* player Nishit Dey, who played a curious and beguiling *raga*.

"A festival doesn't bring back the legacy, it just generates an interest," admits Khair. "So we have also set up a music institute." The Bengal Parampara Sangeetalaya, as it's called, already has several great maestros going there to teach. The *dhrupad* singer Uday Bhawalkar only has two students at the ITC Sangeet Research Academy (the music school in Kolkata), but 16 in Dhaka. So maybe we'll hear Bangladeshi musicians from the institute appearing in India and on international stages before too long. "It's my ambition," says Khair, "to put Bangladesh back on the map of classical music."

And if you head to Dhaka for the festival, what else does the city have to offer? It's a vast metropolis of 12 million people with the Army Stadium, the festival venue, situated in the north near the well-to-do districts of Banani and Gulshan. While there are historic remains like the Lalbagh Fort and Ahsan Manzil (Pink Palace) in Old Dhaka to the south, there's nothing architecturally to compete with Kolkata

or Delhi. What makes the city of Dhaka so special is the friendliness of the people and the fascinating labyrinth of the old city. You can spend hours exploring the markets, workshops and commerce along the (sadly polluted) Buriganga River.

Because of its line-up and size, the Bengal Classical Music Festival is something that anyone interested in South Asian music should see. This year, for the fourth edition, there is a great list of artists including Bombay Jayashree (Karnatic vocal), Ajoy Chakraborty (vocal), Shujaat Khan (*sitar*), Ganesh and Kumaresh (Karnatic violin), Tejendra Majumdar (*sarod*) and many more.

For those interested in travelling further, there's a festival of Baul music around the same time – the Poddohem Dham of Lalon Shah that takes places under a giant banyan tree in Sirajdikhan Munshiganj, about two hours south of Dhaka. I haven't yet been, but it looks like a truly atmospheric event. ♦

+ DATES This year's festival will take place from November 27-December 1
+ ONLINE www.bengalfoundation.org