



## Dover Lane Music Conference, Kolkata

Oliver Craske goes without sleep for four nights in the West Bengal capital to experience a rich musical tradition that persists in a great city of culture

Of all Indian cities, Kolkata (formerly known as Calcutta) was the most shaped by its colonial encounter, emerging as a modern hybrid of Bengali culture and European liberalism. This is the city of the Bengal Renaissance, of Rabindranath Tagore and Satyajit Ray, and its citizens are renowned for a fierce pride in their culture. Every other person you meet seems to be a poet, artist, filmmaker, dancer or musician.

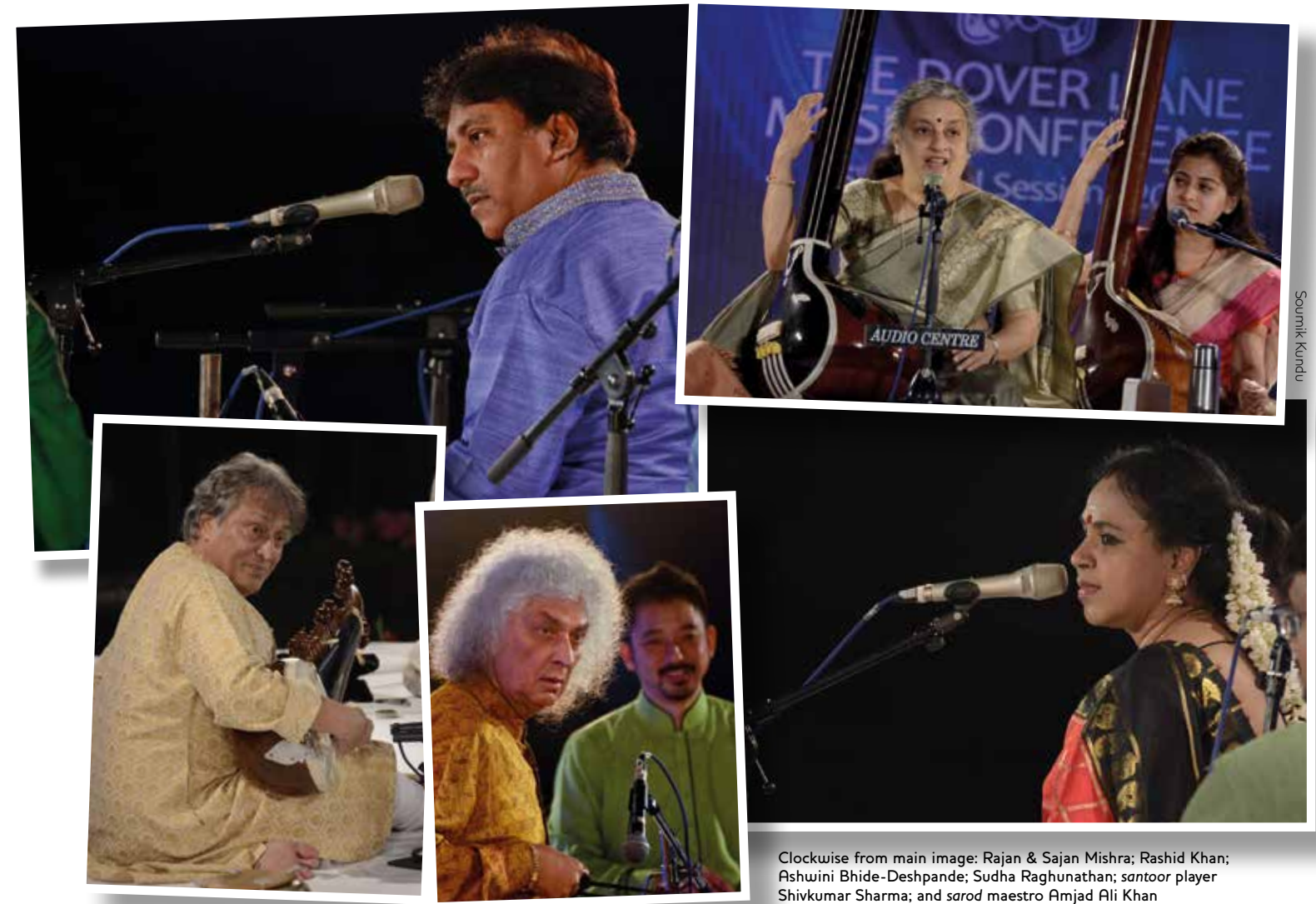
All-night festivals are one of Indian classical music's distinctive traditions, allowing ragas of the night and morning to be performed at the appropriate hours. Once there were dozens of such festivals in Kolkata, but times have changed. "Only a few are surviving," says Bappa Sen, general secretary of Dover Lane Music Conference, the city's foremost remaining example. "In other parts of the country the night-long concept is disappearing steadily." Kolkata is probably where it clings on

most successfully, resisting the demands and distractions of modern urban life.

In the old style, Dover Lane still describes itself as a music conference, but it's a place to hear classical ragas, not lectures. It is named after the street where it was first held, in 1952, at Singhi Park, the residence of Narendra Singh Singhi. It was part of the wave of festivals that emerged after Independence, when Indian classical music evolved from a courtly art form into a modern profession based on broadcasts, record companies and public concerts. After Dover Lane had outgrown Singhi Park, the gardens of Vivekananda Park played host, before it moved to its current venue in 1991, Nazrul Mancha, adjoining Rabindra Sarobar lake and close to the old movie studios of the south Kolkata neighbourhood of Tollygunge (inevitably known as Tollywood). Today Nazrul Mancha is a newly revamped 4,000-seater indoor auditorium.

Dover Lane takes place over four nights, starting around 9pm. There are four or five acts per night, each appearing before a backdrop that is, appropriately enough, an architectural mash-up of Georgian half-moon windows sat atop Mughal-style columns. The audience wander in and out at will, which can be distracting, especially during disputes over who is sitting in the correct seat. Outside there are stalls selling food and CDs all night. Stimulation is provided by hot tea or coffee, tasty snacks and music. No alcohol is served. This is a single-venue festival, and nobody sleeps here, unless they get too comfortable in the new reclining seats during a peaceful *alap*.

The line-up's particular strength is in vocal music. With some notable exceptions, Indian classical vocalists have historically not travelled abroad with as much success as their instrumental counterparts, but in India the voice is considered to be the root form of all



Clockwise from main image: Rajan & Sajjan Mishra; Rashid Khan; Ashwini Bhide-Deshpande; Sudha Raghunathan; santoor player Shivkumar Sharma; and sarod maestro Amjad Ali Khan

music, and at Dover Lane singers regularly make up about half the bill. This year they included Jasraj, Ajoy Chakrabarty, Rajan and Sajjan Mishra, and Sudha Raghunathan, who presented the only Karnatic (South Indian) music during this largely Hindustani (North Indian) festival, while the singing of Ashwini Bhide-Deshpande was infectiously joyful. While she gives opportunities to her velvet-voiced disciple during 'Jhinjhoti', it's like watching a sublime but playful masterclass unfolding on stage. Another highlight is the popular Rashid Khan, who closes the third night with a 90-minute set beginning at 5am. Singing 'Bhairav', the dignified raga of the early morning, in his deep, rich timbre, Rashid seems to usher us back to the musical soiree of a *zamindar* or *nawab* a century or two ago.

Dover Lane's ethos reflects pride in what has become an elite institution. "This is the premier organisation catering for the highest order of Indian classical music only," says Bappa Sen. "And it will never shift from this format." It consistently books established artists, but gives occasional slots to rising stars. It also holds a separate annual talent search contest in music

and dance, the young winners of which are bestowed with their awards as part of the opening ceremony. Otherwise proceedings are mercifully free of the drawn-out 'felicitations' that are a curse of arts events in India.

The crowd love it when artists take requests, calling out for their favourite ragas. "I've been coming here for 51 years," says the maestro Shivkumar Sharma, provoking an ovation from the second-night audience, "and you never let me get away without playing 'Pahadi'." He grants them their wish with a sweet *dhun* melody. It's brief, but that's all there is time for after his earlier transcendent rendition of 'Bageshri'. This builds gradually over 90 minutes until, with Anindo Chatterjee masterfully accompanying on *tabla*, wave after wave of shimmering tones cascades from his *santoor*. Shivkumar clearly feels the magic himself, as he explains that "some divine power takes over and this body becomes a vehicle."

Tickets for the festival go on sale just two weeks beforehand through three city outlets. Prices start at 1,200 rupees (£15) for seats at the back, and rise to 14,000 rupees (£175) for premium seats at the front. This year, the first

two nights clashes with another all-night festival on the other side of town, the Uttarpara Sangeet Chakra Conference, but Dover Lane sells out anyway; although, since the only tickets available are for all four nights, there are some empty seats for every recital. The audience is largely local, middle class and knowledgeable. Few youngsters attend. There is no online booking facility, but you can reserve tickets from the UK by contacting Dover Lane's office direct.

At 4:25am on Dover Lane's final morning, Amjad Ali Khan finishes 'Raga Durga', files his nails to ensure a smooth contact with his *sarod's* metallic strings ("It is not to beautify myself," he explains), and moves onto 'Malkauns'. It's time for me to leave. Outside, as I meander my way around the slumbering Uber drivers, there is a rare peace, soon broken by the dawn chorus of crows, applying their own drone over the city, laying the ground for another day of life improvised Kolkata-style. ♦

+ **DATES** The next Dover Lane Music Conference will run from January 22-25 2018  
+ **ONLINE** [www.doverlanemusicconference.org](http://www.doverlanemusicconference.org)