

Carrying forward the tradition

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Santoor player Abhay Rustum Sopori on how he uses the instrument to take music to the masses

The SaMaPa Sangeet Sammelan will see young Abhay Rustum Sopori innovating raga sangeet. The son-disciple of celebrated santoor maestro Pandit Bhajan Sopori and the much-awarded santoor exponent has around 35 releases which include music albums, videos and singles as a successful composer and vocalist as well to his name.

While talking to this accomplished, articulate and versatile artiste about his melodic journey, one actually rediscovered Kashmir, the perennially strife-ridden crown jewel of India, as the ancient meeting ground of different spiritual dogmas with related Indian musical traditions; and also as the birthplace of new gharanas. With pride, Abhay claimed, "I belong to Sopore's Sufiana Gharana, the exclusive santoor family of India that has produced over ten generations of great masters who nurtured the Shaivite, Sufiana and Hindustani classical vocal and instrumental traditions for over three centuries now. This is the only Sufi-saint tradition in Hindustani classical music from Jammu and Kashmir State."

Edited excerpts from an interaction.

Tell us about the coming together of Hindustani classical music and Sufiana tradition

My great-great grandfather Shankar Pandit, a master of Sufiana mausiqui (music), developed the 'Sufi Baaj' based on Sufiana qalam and Indian classical music. This was a historic moment where classical music returned to Kashmir Valley after centuries of exile, and our gharana got a new dimension. His son Samsar Chand Sopori, known for his robust voice, was also famous as 'Taal-Baaz'. During his riyaz, entire locality would resonate with his wasul (rhythmic instrument) and singing. His music had tremendous therapeutic effect as he too practised Naad Yoga like his father.

His son, my grandfather Shamboo Nath Sopori, is hailed as the 'Father of music in Jammu and Kashmir'. He taught several students, contributed to the first ever notation of Sufiana music, introduced Hindustani classical music as a subject in school-colleges and founded 'Sangeet Mahavidyalaya', the main music institution of the State and also the centre for holding classical concerts featuring luminary performers of the country. It is due to his pioneering and dedicated efforts that musicians enjoyed prestigious status in the State even in 1940s and 1950s.

Till 1950s santoor was not seen on the classical concert platforms!

Yes, the first-ever classical santoor concert was given by my father way back in 1953 when he was barely five. The first-ever broadcast of classical santoor too was by him on Radio Kashmir (Srinagar) in 1954. Gradually, he developed a unique style, known as the Sopori Baaj. It fulfils all the essential requirements of Hindustani classical raga rendition's tradition and is completely at par with other string instruments like sitar, sarod, etc. It is also seminal as it forms the basis on which further experimentation and work can be carried out on the santoor and its various dimensions.

Tell us about the changes incorporated to make Sopori Baaj

The traditional Kashmiri santoor, from the point of view of Hindustani classical music, is extremely limited both in terms of form as well as range. Therefore, any such attempt on the traditional Kashmiri santoor, or its rudimentary variants thereof, fails to meet with the strict grammatical and aesthetic requirements of raga sangeet. My father increased the range of the santoor from the conventional one-and-a-half to more than five octaves, balanced the 'kalam' (strickers) with 'bols' and attached the 'tarab' and 'tumba' for enhanced tonal quality, etc.

These innovations, combined with his strong base in traditional raga sangeet, allow for a systematic exposition of the raga combining both gayaki and tantrakari anga (vocal and instrumental aspects) in his recitals, demonstrating all the essential stylistic nuances such as meend, gamakas, bols, including the Dhrupad Ang with the accompaniment of pakhawaj. His recitals are known for their high degree of technical virtuosity combining highly intricate 'layakari', complex 'chandhkari', speedy 'taan' patterns running through three octaves and a melodious 'alap'.

In his six decades of dedicated work my father has explored various dimensions of the santoor, carrying out many path-breaking innovations and formally established the 'Sopori Baaj', which is the formal format of playing santoor in the realm of Hindustani classical music.

Tell us about your contribution to this family tradition

I sing and play santoor in recitals, reviving the traditional Sufiana aspect of our gharana. I have also been able to introduce the 'open string concept' and the 'enhanced sustain technique' amongst others, thereby, further establishing gayan vadan baaj and been ang on santoor. I remember, in early 2000, I was playing duet with my father in Kolkata. The legendary sarod maestro Pandit Buddhadev Dasgupta came on to the stage immediately after our concert and exclaimed, 'Show me, what have you done to the santoor, it sounds like rudraveena!.' He appreciated the jawari system that I had incorporated a few years back and blessed me saying that he sees a bright future of santoor through me.

It was like a priceless award; and means a lot to me!

Tell us about the Sopori Academy of Music and Performing Arts (SaMaPa)

With a motto like 'Jan-jan tak sangeet' (music to the masses), SaMaPa is a national level platform for presentation, propagation, and teaching of traditional music and performing arts. Acclaimed as a cultural bridge of the State of Jammu and Kashmir with rest of the country, it has created a new generation of music connoisseurs. It recognizes the contribution of artists, leaders, officials and individuals for their tireless efforts in propagating and keeping the traditional culture alive.

(The SaMaPa Sangeet Sammelan will be held at Kamani Auditorium from December 2 to 4).

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