

# Darbar Festival, Barbican review: An all-embracing performance of Indian music

Mastery upon mastery of a centuries-old and beautiful music ★★★★★



By Michael Church

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Performers during the Darbar Festival (Photo: Barbican)

The 19<sup>th</sup> annual Darbar Festival of Indian music which is currently filling the Barbican with a devoted clientele from the Indian subcontinent, kicked off with a sung invocation to the gods, followed by a solo on India's most mysterious instrument, the *sarangi*.

Being simultaneously bowed and plucked, the instrument, which can mimic the sound of the human voice, is devilishly difficult to play. And as played here by Dilshad Khan – who can trace his musical ancestry back through ten generations of father-and-son sarangists – it created an extraordinary atmosphere, reinforced by the heady chatter of the *tabla* hand-drum.

Here we were in India, for the long haul. The audience of Indian connoisseurs all knew where the musical gear-changes were – and when it was obligatory to applaud noisily – and they weren't at all fazed by the length of the first solo, which consisted of 90 minutes of non-stop improvisation. But next came a gentler introduction to Indian music, as the bewitching Jayanthi Kumaresh sang and explained how she extracted perfumed sonic charms from her instrument, the sweet-toned *veena*.




This is the 19th annual Darbar Festival of Indian Music (Photo: Barbican)

In concert after concert, hand-picked virtuosi from all over India demonstrated styles of playing and singing whose origins go back many centuries.

Classical music of this kind may be brightly coloured on the surface, but it's anchored in time, and twinned with nature. Every *raag* – or musical sequence – has its time for performance: bright raags for the morning, pensive ones for the evening, and with many linked to the seasons.

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This festival isn't all music: the audience are being encouraged to sample yoga and other well-being arts of the East. Yoga breathing is one of the elements which makes singing and playing this music a boost to health: the time-honoured form of a typical *raag* echoes the pulse of the body. And it follows a trajectory similar to that of a sonata by Beethoven or Mozart – first a slow and exploratory

piece, then one with a quickened pulse, then an even faster number, and finally a frenzy of excitement on percussion dominated by the *tabla*. The thrill of Indian music lies in the individual musician's virtuosity.

It's encouraging to know that pupils in some British schools are now able to study – and be examined in – Sikh sacred music. But India is not returning the compliment. While most Asian countries have taken European classical music to their bosom, India has not, and the reason is simple: it has no need to, because its own classical music is every bit as all-embracing and sophisticated as ours. 

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