

2 Styles In Pakistan For Lovers And Sufis

Love songs from the mountains and devotional songs inspired by the desert made for a fascinating double bill of Pakistani folk music at the Asia Society on Saturday night.

The program, presented Thursday and Saturday, unveiled two kinds of music rarely heard outside Pakistan. Zarsanga, a songwriter and singer from Pakistan's Hindu Kush mountains, and the Qurban Fakirs of Shah-Jo-Raag, musicians who perform at a Sufi shrine in southern Pakistan, both made their North American debuts.

Zarsanga is known in Pakistan as the Voice of the Pathan, a nomadic people who occupy the mountainous border area where Pakistan meets Afghanistan. Because her tribe migrated from highlands in summer to plains in winter, her songs blend traditional styles from both areas. They are at once austere and forceful; as her voice trades concise modal lines with a harmonium and a rabab (lute), two drummers on dholak and tabla drive the music with fierce syncopation.

The lyrics were tales of lovers who risked family disapproval, tribal differences and poisonous snakes to be together. While Zarsanga's expression was impassive, her voice was fervent and penetrating. An unaccompanied song revealed all the nuances of her delivery: quavers, trills, breaks and yelps that were both impassioned and steely. And with the instruments pushing her voice, she soared, clear and strong, as if emboldened by love. Eventually a man stepped on stage to dance, whirling to the music's momentum.

The fakirs of Shah-Jo-Raag sing from sunset to sunrise at the shrine of Shah Abdul Latif in Sindh, in southern Pakistan. The shah was a Sufi saint who wrote mystical poetry in the early 18th century. The fakirs — six men dressed in black and each playing a damboor, a five-stringed lute akin to a sitar — have carried on family traditions of singing at the shrine; they also have day jobs.

Each selection had a similar shape. One fakir played out tentative melodies on a damboor. Soon the others answered him by plucking out a chiming drone note on their damboors, at first in free time and then more rhythmically. Qurban Ali Azad, the leader, began intoning poetry in a raw voice, leaping up to high notes. Then he sang call-and-response lines with the other fakirs while the damboors chimed. The voices rose, calling out "Allah!" rippling and sliding through the chants, overlapping and reaching higher; the drone surrounded them like a downpour of consonance. But with its otherworldly pacing, the music was better suited to worship than to a concert.

The New York Times
World Music Review
By
Jon Pareles



ZARSANGA AND MUSICIANS

Zarsanga is known in Pakistan as the 'Voice of the Pathan'. The word "Pathan" is a 'plainsman' term to describe the fiercely independent highland tribal people who call themselves "Pukhtun" and straddle the 1000-mile mountain borders of Afghanistan. Speaking an East Iranian language, Pashto, the Pathans have developed a rigid code of honor which revolves around revenge, hospitality, generosity, and sanctuary to fugitives.

Zarsanga was born in the mountainous village of Khaze in the Northwest frontier. She and her family now live outside of Peshawar at the foot of the mountains. She began making up her own songs in the traditional folk style when she was still just a young girl. In 1965, she began singing on Peshawar radio, where she quickly gained popularity for her strong singing voice and poignant lyrics. Her reputation was finally established in 1974, when she became the singer of choice at important Pathan weddings. Accompanied by a group of five traditional musicians, her performances have brought critical acclaim throughout Pakistan and in Europe, where she has appeared at the Avignon Festival in France and festivals in Germany. Her performances at the Asia Society's Festival of Song mark her North American debut.

Zarsanga's nomad style stands out from the mainstream music of the Pathans. She comes from those tribes that spend the summers in high altitude pastures of the Hindukush Range and winter in the plains of the Indus Valley. She is able to synthesize the powerful and raw musical idiom of the high mountains of the Hindukush with the softness of the plains, retaining the vitality of the mountain folk style of singing known as *gharai sandara*. Her songs are in a Northern folk style originating from the mountains, and she sings a more mainstream style of the *tappa*. Pathan music and poetry are inseparable: A musical composition immediately evokes a poetic form of the same name to any Pathan listener. Popular poetry is rendered as song dealing mostly with love and war (Zarsanga chooses only to sing love songs). Very often, Sufi religious songs blend with straight forward love songs and are sometimes indistinguishable from each other.

The central instrument of the Pathans is the *rabab*, a lute with five gut strings plucked with a wooden plectrum over a set of brass or steel sympathetic strings, the *tabla*, a pair of small kettle drums similar to but larger than the North Indian tabla (the lower-pitched drum has a disc of wholemeal dough spread over the center of the goatskin head of the drum), and the ubiquitous harmonium. A small double headed drum, the *dholak*, is also very common, as is the *daff* (tambourine).

A favorite place for music is the *hujra*, the male clubhouse, where men gather to chat, sing and play music. Female singing usually occurs separately at weddings and at other happy occasions. Zarsanga is exceptional in that she performs in both settings.

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Nishar Khan,
Director,
Pashtun Cultural Institute, Inc.,
1370 66th Street,
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Dear Mr. Khan,

In response to your letter regarding the presenting and promotion of Pakistani artists in the United States, World Music Institute has indeed presented a number of Pakistani musicians over the past 15 years.

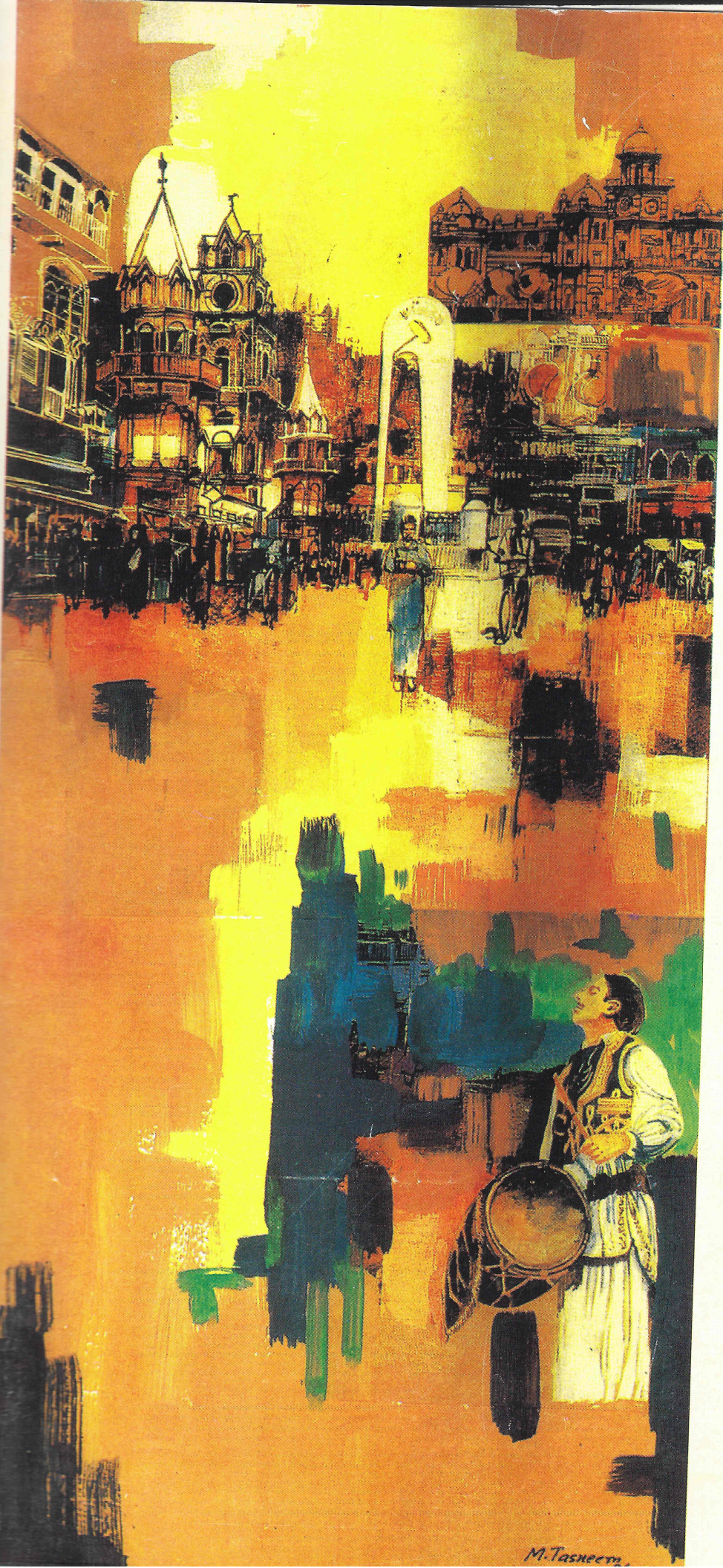
Artists we have presented include the Qawwali singers Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, Mehr Ali/Sher Ali; classical artists Salamat Ali Khan, Nafees Khan and Ashraf Sharif Khan; the Sindhi Sufi singer Abida Parveen; and the Baluch Music Ensemble of Karachi featuring Omar Sori, Karimbakhsh Nuri and others. We were honored to present Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan at Lincoln Center in 1993 as part of his first U.S. tour in which he visited 10 cities. We presented him three more times at the 1,500 seat Town Hall and also, in a concert of classical khyal, at Alice Tully Hall, Lincoln Center. We coordinated the first U.S. tour of the Baluch Music Ensemble of Karachi which performed at colleges and universities across the country under WMI's auspices.

It has always been a great pleasure working with Pakistani artists and we hope to continue to build interest amongst Americans for the rich and diverse music of Pakistan. We hope sometime in the near future to produce a festival of regional music of Pakistan. We have not yet had the opportunity to present Pathan music but we did have the good fortune to co-produce the debut U.S. concert by the great Pashtun singer from Afghanistan, Nashenas at Queens College in 1992.

I hope that we can work together with the Pashtun Cultural Institute in the future to promote the music of Pakistan and thus to build a closer understanding between Pakistanis, Americans of Pakistani descent and all other Americans.

Sincerely,

Robert H. Browning
Executive & Artistic Director



M. Tasneem

PASHTUN CULTURAL INSTITUTE, INC.

