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Amjad Ali Khan and Sharon Isbin Come Together in “Strings for Peace”

Scott Cmiel on February 25, 2025



A moment during “Strings for Peace” at Herbst Theatre on Saturday, Feb. 22 | Courtesy of the Omni Foundation

Sarod master Amjad Ali Khan and classical guitarist Sharon Isbin — each individually celebrated for wide-ranging taste, creative spirit, and virtuosity — joined forces at Herbst Theatre on Saturday night, Feb. 22, in a fascinating cross-cultural concert.

There is a distinguished history of collaboration between Western and Indian classical musicians. In 1963, guitarist Julian Bream performed and

recorded in England and India with sarodist Ali Akbar Khan and tabla player Ustad Alla Rakha. The Beatles did a great deal to popularize the sound of the sitar on their 1965 album *Rubber Soul*, and the great violinist Yehudi Menuhin had a long friendship with Ravi Shankar, the most influential exponent of Indian classical music in the latter half of the 20th century.



Sharon Isbin | Credit: J. Henry Fair

At Herbst, Isbin and Amjad Ali Khan played a concert very much in the spirit of Menuhin and Shankar, who famously appeared in a 1967 performance at the Union Nations commemorating the 20th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Saturday’s program was called “Strings for Peace” and even featured one piece loved by Mahatma Gandhi. But the heart of the evening, presented by the Omni Foundation and San Francisco Performances, lay in three beautiful ragas that Khan wrote for Isbin. There were also rewarding solo performances by each artist.

Isbin opened the evening with a colorful and evocative reading of Francisco Tarrega’s *Capricho árabe*. Including the piece was an apt way to allude to the influence that many believe Romani immigrants from India had on Spanish music.

The program otherwise focused on Hindustani classical music composed or arranged by Khan and performed by him and his two sons, Amaan Ali Bangash and Ayaan Ali Bangash, on sarods; Isbin on guitar; and Amit Kavthekar on tablas, always adding hypnotically complex percussion.

The sarod is a plucked string instrument, like the guitar and with a similar shape but fretless, which induces the performer to slide from note to note. Together, the two instruments create a mesmerizing sound world, the sparkling precision of classical guitar contrasting with the keening song of the sarod.



Amjad Ali Khan | Credit: Parimal Deshpande

Sacred Evening (Raga Yaman), which featured Ayaan Ali Bangash and Isbin, was romantic in nature and evocative of the beauty of a sunset. *By the Moon (Raga Behag)*, with Amaan Ali Bangash and Isbin, conjured the middle of the night and was set to a 16-beat rhythmic pattern. Both works began with a traditional alap — slow meditative music featuring improvised exchanges and establishing the tonality and mood for the following faster raga. The soloists were accompanied by Kavthekar’s energetic tablas and showed their considerable virtuosity. Isbin deserves particular praise for her openness to and mastery of the Indian classical performance style.

Khan was the wise elder of the evening, and when he took the stage for three solos, there was a palpable excitement in the audience. *Raga Ganesh Kalyan* was first performed in 1992 at the yearly Ganesh Festival and dedicated to the

elephant-headed Indian god of new beginnings, wisdom, and intelligence. *Raga Bahar* was inspired by Indian classical vocal music but still keeps one foot in the realm of instrumental music, where melodic and rhythmic expression are unfettered by literal language. *Raga Bhatyali* is composed of Bengali folk music, including a song by Nobel Prize laureate Rabindranath Tagore, intended to encourage listeners to pursue their idealistic goals even when abandoned by others. (It was one of Gandhi’s favorite songs.)

The final piece, *Romancing Earth (Raga Pilu)*, was a tour de force that ranged from introspective yearning to unbridled joy, highlighting the expressivity and skill of all five musicians. The audience of classical guitar enthusiasts and lovers of Indian classical music was united in enthusiastic applause. It was an inspirational evening.

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