

Seven notes that bind us all: Concert shares the healing power of music



Legendary Indian musician Amjad Ali Khan (left foreground) and his sons Ayaan Ali Bangash (left background) and Amaan Ali Bangash, collaborated with master classical guitarist Sharon Isbin for the album *Strings For Peace*. Photo: Suvo Das

Amjad Ali Khan, whose mastery of the instrument called the sarod has made him a legendary figure in Indian music, has often said that all music can be reduced to seven notes. And yet those seven musical notes, Ali Khan says, have connected the whole world, as music can bring people together in ways that something such as language cannot. But sometimes those connections cannot really come to fruition until this music is written down.

Sharon Isbin, herself a master of the classical guitar, first got to know Ali Khan when she attended a concert he and his sons gave in New York City more than a decade ago. “He has always been a great proponent of collaborations, and even before that first meeting, he suggested that we work together,” Isbin said. “I told him that I would need to have everything notated, which is not typical of the music he plays. We developed a lovely friendship, and every time we’d meet, he would talk about working together. But after about 10 years, I got the feeling that it wasn’t going to happen.”

Then, one day at the end of 2018, Isbin received several files of sheet music, which contained ragas that Ali Khan had composed, and that a student of his, Kyle Paul, had converted into musical notation. The files also came with an urgent request. Isbin needed to learn the pieces in a matter of weeks as the Khans had booked a concert tour of major Indian cities to debut these works with her two months later. “I’ve always loved Indian classical music as a listener, and I have such respect for Maestro Khan and his family as musicians, that I couldn’t say no,” Isbin said.

The quartet of Isbin, Ali Khan, and his sons Ayaan Ali Bangash and Amaan Ali Bangash, who also play the sarod, debuted in February 2019, and soon after recorded the four works Ali Khan had composed for them on an album titled *Strings for Peace*, released in 2020.

The group will perform Saturday at the Mary R. Glass Performing Arts Center in Tulsa. The concert is presented by the South Asian Performing Arts Foundation. This will be Isbin’s first time to perform in the Tulsa area (she performed with the Oklahoma City Philharmonic in 2005). The South Asian Performing Arts Foundation has previously featured Ali Khan and his sons in concert in 2007. The concert will feature performances by the four musicians with tabla, solos, as well as pieces that make up the *Strings for Peace* album. “You’re going to be hearing a lot of music,” Isbin said, laughing.

The sarod is an instrument with 19 strings: four melody strings, four drone strings, and 11 “sympathetic” strings, which are of similar weight and tension as piano strings. The fingerboard is made of metal and has no frets, as does a guitar. Because of this, players tend to depress the strings with their fingernails to create precise pitches. “Because it has no frets, it’s possible to create a very vocal sound, one that can be almost an emulation of the human voice,” Isbin said. “That is a quality I have always striven for in my own playing. And combining these very different sounds of the steel strings with the nylon strings of the guitar, the different techniques used, almost creates something like a third instrument. It’s very much a unique sound.”

Isbin said the title of the album she made with Ali Khan and his sons, and the concerts they continue to present around the world, has taken on much deeper meanings. “We chose the title months before the COVID -19 pandemic hit, and it seems applicable to that time,” she said. “But since this world seems to be convulsed with violence at any moment, Ali Khan’s belief that we can join hands and celebrate the human race through music is such a beautiful thought, and I love to think that I am able to contribute to that message.

“One thing that I’ve found so exciting about the concerts we present is that, no matter where we perform, we seem to draw audiences from all backgrounds, all walks of life,” Isbin said. “Whether they know classical or Indian music well, or not, they all find something to marvel at and enjoy. They will be experiencing something they have never heard before, and will be swept along by the power, intensity, delicacy and beauty we try to bring to this music.”