

# 'Vasundhara' Celebrates Mother Earth

By HEMA PATANKAR

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BERKELEY, Calif. — With the Navaratri spirit in the air – the nine nights of worshipping the Devi or divine Mother in her diverse forms – Rita Sahai and her choir of 40 singers and musicians presented an engaging program entitled, “Vasundhara, Ode to Mother Earth,” to a full house here Oct. 4. It was an unprecedented move to bring together her students of diverse ages to present the first Hindustani choir in unity to speak out for the protection of nature in the universal language of music.

“Vasundhara” was a fabulous



*The choir of singers and musicians in concert.*

performance that created not just thoughts of nature's beauty, but the experience of nature's ability to refresh our spirits. Amidst the stark economic and political uncertainty of these times, the concert brought a poignant reminder that nature is always there to nurture and inspire us.

Dressed in the dazzling colors of nature, Rita Sahai and her choir embodied the generosity of Mother Earth both visually and through their rich offering of freshly composed songs and music.

The evening was introduced with poetry about nature, from the "Prithvi Sukta" of the Atharava Veda to the poetry of Keats. Then Sahai and 20 teen choir members entered the stage in the joyful spirit of a spring festival. Their voices danced in intricate patterns with those of the men who stood behind like golden hills, and with the groups of women who sat like singing forests clustered near the musicians, the streams and waterfalls.

Their musical offering began with an impassioned prayer to Mother Earth. An ambitious piece for such a large group, they carried it with enthusiasm and comfortable skill. This was followed by "Garland of Seasons," five pieces

and five ragas woven together to create the experience of the various seasons. And indeed the spring piece bubbled with color, fragrance and freshness. In the summer piece the women's voices carried the charm of lingering summer days. And in the voices of the teens, you could hear the thunder and rain of the monsoon, and the cries of dancing peacocks. Then the men's voices echoed the rejoicing spirit of the autumn harvest season. And as the whole choir united, the majesty of winter and its long moonlit nights came alive and made one want to snuggle up and get warm.

The signature performance of the evening was "Vasundhara" in Raga Pahadi, the queen of the mountain melodies, which conveys the majesty and beauty of the mountains. Following the performances of her students, Sahai took the lead for a garland of five different songs in five different ragas evoking the multiple facets of the day from dawn to the deep of night. This led into the grand finale called "Vande Mataram, Praise for our Great Mother," in which all the voices were united.

(The author is president of Vedika Global and a bhajan singer.)