

Voices United in Celebration of Mother Earth: A Stunning Hindustani Choir Sings of Universal Brotherhood

With the Navaratri spirit in the air – the nine nights of worshipping the Devi in her diverse forms -- Rita Sahai and her choir of 40 singers and musicians presented the stunning *Vasundhara, Ode to Mother Earth* to a full house in Berkeley. It was an unprecedented move to bring together her students of diverse ages to present the first Hindustani choir, and in unity to speak out for the protection of nature in the universal language of music.

We all know that watching the sky aglow at sunset or hiking through a valley of wildflowers is so reinvigorating when our spirits are wearied. This is the kind of experience created by *Vasundhara*: a fabulous performance that created not just thoughts of nature's beauty, but the experience of nature's ability to completely refresh our spirits. Amidst the stark economic and political uncertainty that is upon us, *Vasundhara* 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 abundant choir of 40 singers and musicians 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 Rita Sahai and 20 teen choir members entered the stage in the joyful spirit of a spring festival. Their voices danced back and forth 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 a sweetly 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 or musical forms 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 amidst sweet flowers and ripening fruits. In the voices of the teens, you could hear the thunder and rain of the monsoon, and glimpse peacocks dancing. Then the men's voices echoed the rejoicing of the autumn harvest season. And as the whole choir united, the majesty of snow-clad winter and its long moonlit nights came alive and actually made you want to snuggle up and get warm!

The signature performance of the evening was *Vasundhara* in Raga Pahadi, the queen of the mountain melodies. This raga conveys the majesty and poignant beauty of the mountains. So it was perfect for this prayer that love and respect for Mother Earth, the sweet Surabhi who nourishes humanity, should resound from the snowy mountains to the seas in the universal language of song. Then after enjoying the performances of her students with visible pride, Rita Sahai took the lead for a spectacularly executed 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*, where all the voices united.

While the intention of the evening was to speak up for Mother Nature, it seemed that Rita Sahai and her choir merged so deeply with their evocative songs and prayers that they actually became the ever-generous and healing voice of Mother Earth herself. Nature herself spoke through the unforgettable performance of *Vasundhara*.