

Rita Sahai, Vasundhara Choir and Jennifer Berezan invoke the universe

“The concert was so beautiful and inspiring!”, said Dr. Katherine Lee, Assistant Professor of Ethnomusicology at U.C. Davis, speaking about Celestial Celebrations - *Navagraha Utsav*, a magnificent concert in Berkeley dedicated to the heavenly bodies and the universe. The days of the week are ruled by the heavenly bodies in Western and Indian tradition. The heavenly bodies are also supposed to exert an influence on human lives and therefore their celestial blessings are invoked in India through chants or songs of praise called *stutis*. On October 27th, Rita Sahai and her Vasundhara choir premiered Celestial Celebrations - *Navagraha Utsav* accompanied by Jennifer Berezan, and invoked the blessings of the heavenly bodies through original compositions by Rita Sahai set to Hindustani ragas. A Hindustani choir is rare, perhaps because it is a formidable challenge for a large group to master and together present the complexities of a raga. This made last Saturday’s event at Freight & Salvage a unique opportunity to witness a spirited and skillful performance in this genre.

Rita Sahai is a brilliant composer and singer born in Allahabad, India. She was schooled in the Benares Gharana by vocalist Pandit Rama Shankar Mishra and after moving to the Bay Area she was schooled in the Seni Alaudin Gharana by sarod maestro and composer Ustad Ali Akbar Khan. The Vasundhara choir led by Rita Sahai and her senior students Smita Risbud and Vivek Anand had 40 singers - women, men and children, and was accompanied by seven instrumentalists: Rachel Unterseher on viola, Arshad Sayed on santoor and percussion, Kanwaljit Kalsi and Wallace Harvey on harmonium, Bishu Chatterji on bass and Nikhil Pandya and Krithik Puthalath on tabla. The instrumentalists were masterful in their solos and brought another rich layering of creativity and sound to the choir. Singer Jennifer Berezan joined the musicians for the second half. Rita Sahai and she share a sense of responsibility and respect for the universe and have collaborated on several performances.

The glamorous MC Subita Sudershana introduced the performance and brought the songs back into the context of the planets and the ragas all through the performance. Rita began the evening with a soulful chant of *Tvameva Mata* and five students including Rajnish Kamath, Aardaas Hora and Ajuney Hora joined her for *Gurur Brahma* in *Raga Bageshri* to honor the infinite, elders and teachers. A solfege or *sargam* line by the entire choir introduced the first group song *Udayanchal se aawat raviraj*, one in praise of the first *graha*, *Surya* or the rising sun, set in *Raga Zila Kafi*. This is a melodic raga composed by Baba Alauddin Khan, the father of Rita’s teacher the late Ustad Ali Akbar Khan. A set of *taraanaa* improvisations sung by the choir brought the composition home. *Sharad ki chaandni* set in *Raga Shahana* and addressed to *Soma* or the Moon had the women sing the *sargam* notes first followed by the children and then the men singing the lyrics. The rhythmic call and response was like the alternating light of the moon, the planets and the stars. The low harmonic sounds of *Mangalam* reminded us of Mars or

Mangal who rules Tuesday. These initial atmospheric sounds gave way to an insistent, almost martial, percussive song where the sound of different parts of the choir came in successive waves. Rita's senior student Vivek Anand's voice and Rachel Untersehr's viola introduced the plaintive sounds of *Raga Jog*. The group song to *Budh* or Mercury asked us to sing the notes of *Jog* and triumph over ill health. The children continued with a fast combination of lyrics and *sargam* notes. Rita then came in with a scintillating version of *Deem tadare deem a taraanaa* composed by Ustad Ali Akbar Khan for Rita's CD *Saawan Aayo*. Her spontaneous improvisations flowed from her effortlessly and yet offered surprising new takes on this beautiful and majestic raga. The children closed the first half with a song salutation to *Guru*, or Jupiter, the teacher in *Raga Gara*. Their *taan* improvisations were cohesive and joyous.

Jennifer Berezan, famous Bay Area singer introduced the second half with the song *In These Arms A Song for All Beings*. She first asked Rita and then the choir to join in and the combination of their soulful solos and the combined choir singing the words 'May all beings everywhere be free' was magical. Rita next sang emotionally of the beauty of tear filled eyes in *Ras ke bhare tore nain* in *Raga Khamaaj* dedicated to *Shukra* or Venus and to all artistes. Her singing brought tears to the eyes of the audience and some women in the choir. Perhaps she was thinking of the deaths of her teacher, parents and brother, all inspiring figures in her musical journey. In the next song sung breathtakingly by the women and dedicated to *Shani* or Saturn the unusual musical intervals of *Raga Puriya Dhanashri* were used in a composition asking the mind why it wouldn't stay calm and centered. The men followed with *Awadho, aisa roop tumhara a nirgun bhajan* in *Raga Mishra Todi* dedicated to *Rahu* and *Ketu* the lunar nodes that are responsible for the eclipses.

The finale was in *Raga Rageshri* introduced in a call and response by Rita and Vivek and followed by a *Raga Mala* or garland of ragas, a complex synthesis of the lyrics and ragas of all the compositions sung by the entire choir. The audience was swaying and tapping their feet to the music thanks to the expert sound and arrangements of the Freight & Salvage team, a team delighted to work on an event that was so complex and rich with the added joy of its diversity. It was a spectacular event in all aspects - visual, auditory, sensual and spiritual. The choir's coordinated outfits and smiles made Nirmal Kaur in the audience comment that when she entered the theater it looked like flowers were arranged beautifully on the stage. The flowers also sang ecstatically to the universe that night.