

Caught between the clergy and Christina

Art
Daily Ti
25-6-0

By Mariam Qureshi

LAHORE: You would be hard pressed to find a teenager who knew the difference between a raag and a ghazal these days. Christina Aguilera and Coldplay have perhaps captured more minds than Allah Rakha and Bare Ghulam Ali Khan.

But Hayat Ahmed Khan decided forty-four years ago to battle his way past the Billboard charts and make classical music the bomb. He set up the All Pakistan Music Conference in 1960 on his own property and persuaded artists like Roshan Ara Begum to take a seat at its board. He has received the Sitara e Intiaz for his efforts.

"Allah Rakha moved abroad because of the attitude people had developed towards classical music," Hayat Ahmed Khan told Daily Times. "When he died, President Clinton wrote a letter of mourning to his wife." There are numerous other examples that Mr Khan laments. Bare Ghulam Ali Khan who was treated with contempt in Pakistan was received with great protocol in Delhi, he said. "The president himself came down the stairs to receive Bare Ghulam Ali Khan," he said.

One of the finest sitar players of Pakistan, Ashraf Ali Khan, also left for Germany and now reportedly earns \$1,000 a day.

"Musical geniuses like Roshan Ara Begum who decided to remain in Pakistan and keep expanding our musical history eventually had to resign," said Mr Khan, explaining the miserable state of the musicians who remained in Pakistan after Partition. "They realised that their art did not have an audience any more."

It has been especially hard for Mr Khan to see classical music relegated to the backstage. He came back to Pakistan with a head full of classical music, tabla playing and sur from the Gandharav Mahavidyalaya Academy in India where he studied from the best.



Hayat Ahmed Khan

"I was inspired by a Raja in Delhi who promoted classical music in India by setting up the All India Music conference," said Mr Khan. Mr Khan decided to set up the conference and invested Rs 25,000 into the project. A few other faithful patrons who voluntarily contributed to the cause were Mohammad Afzal, Masood Aziz, Irshad Chaudry and Hamid. Raja Ghazanfer Ali Khan is president, Rauf Ahmed Ansari secretary finance and Mr Khan is secretary general.

"We never start our shows even a minute later than the announced time and allow no commotion during performances," Mr Khan gave examples of the Secretary Culture Kamran Lashari and renowned singer Iqbal Bano who had to wait for the on-going performance to finish before they were allowed inside the hall.

Mr Khan is so desperate for funds for his organisation that he jokingly narrated his plan to rob a bank. "After sending a request to the Punjab government year after year, it has finally decided to grant the conference Rs 250,000," he said. "The federal government also contributes Rs 92,000 which is hardly enough to meet its requirements."

The office building of the conference committee has been built on Mr Khan's personal property, which makes him liable to pay property tax as well as pitch in from his own pocket to pay salaries.

But what kind of audiences does the music conference draw these days? "There are a few factors that hinder the healthy growth of classical music," said Mr Khan. "Two of the most damaging impediments are the popularity of pop music amongst youngsters and the prohibition of music by the religious clergy."

"At a music conference once, we were discussing pop music when a man defined it as a beat to which a monkey dances," Mr Khan said. "I interrupted him and said that comparing pop music with a monkey's dance was insulting to the monkey whose dance has much better rhythm than pop music."

Mr Hayat also blamed the clergy for the death of classical music and tried to clarify the conflict that they had created between music and religion. He explained the importance of the tabla whose beat was used to motivate Muslim soldiers to wage jihad. "Sufis used to go into deep trances because of the rhythm that the repetition of verses created," said Mr Khan. "In the same way, if an instrument like the sarangi which has the closest sound to the human voice, accompanies this rhythm, wouldn't you call that worship?"

With the onslaught of American media the only way that traditional regional classical music will survive is if it is taught at institutions, he maintained. "Efforts are being made to promote serious music in colleges like Kinnaird College, Lahore College and Gulberg College where I teach young women," said Mr Khan.

Mr Khan wishes for the days when classical music was so esteemed that Baba Dulah would down his tandoors business during the days the conference scheduled its music festival.

He quoted Aristotle: "If you want to attack a nation, alter its music." And perhaps the conference has been drowned out, at least for the time being, by the din of Christina Aguilera and Coldplay.