

→ FESTIVAL PROFILE
DARBAR FESTIVAL
 VARIOUS VENUES, UK

Jameela Siddiqi marvels at the talent during the UK's premier festival of Indian classical music

PHOTOS ARHNEL DE SERRA



When it comes to the Darbar Festival of Indian classical music, I've always had to pinch myself: all it's taken is a ride north on the M1 motorway and I'm in another world. Normally, a 'darbar' (from the Persian, meaning 'royal court') of this magnitude – not just in terms of its top class music but also as a vivid example of those many cultural nuances inherent in the Indian classical music tradition itself (manners and etiquette for performers and listeners, respect and deference towards elders in seeking their permission before beginning a recital, and that perpetual self-effacement when presented with undiluted praise) – would unavoidably have involved a plane journey, complete with airport chaos, jet lag and the after-effects of truckloads of anti-malarials. But here we are, just two hours or so from London, where a chunk of the very best of Indian classical music is to be had in Leicester in the East Midlands. Of course, the location can sometimes be a drawback – the 2008 edition falls on an unseasonably cold and freezing weekend in early April. Despite having lived in the UK for over three decades, I'm clomping along inelegantly in heavy-duty jeans and boots,



Top to bottom: sitar (and tabla) player Nayan Ghosh; Kaushiki Chakrabarty and her ensemble; Dharambir Singh accompanied by tabla

hobbling from samosa to samosa, battling the freezing temperatures, whereas the real stars of the show, many of whom have just arrived from sweltering temperatures, have no problem gliding along, elegant and uncomplaining – the men in their immaculate white *kurtas* (tunics) and the women in their richly coloured Benarasi silks. But then every musician – without exception – has lost no time in telling me that it is an honour and a privilege to be invited to play at Darbar and that such leisurely fixtures sporting this kind of ambience are extremely rare – even in India, where the normal routine for Indian musicians is to play their piece and make a hasty exit to catch the next flight to the next city and next concert.

As the brilliant young vocalist, Kaushiki Chakrabarty, (a BBC Award for World Music winner) tells me: "Darbar is not just a festival. It's like a series of major concerts, a music conference and a big picnic – all rolled into one."

An apt comment, given that after the day's recitals are done and the special midnight buffet at the hotel has been consumed, there's non-stop chatter and howls of laughter coming from clusters of musicians hanging out with one another, as well as with festival guests, organisers and the press, many of whom are staying in the same hotel. While the musicians are more easily available for an informal chat (more than they would be at normal concert events where they remain well-concealed within their dressing rooms), their fans are actually very considerate in not bothering them too much, particularly before a performance.

Darbar is unique in that the musicians aren't just invited to perform, they also have a contractual obligation to remain at the festival for its entire duration, not only to inspire their peers but also to encourage young, upcoming UK talent. Apparently this seldom happens in India and the Karnatic (South Indian) vocalist Sanjay Subramanian enthuses that it's nothing short of pure luxury for him to be able to listen to yards and yards of North Indian music. He adds – most surprisingly – that this was the first time he'd heard a live recital of *surbahar* (a kind of bass *sitar*) which had just been played by Irshad Khan, son of maestro Imrat Khan.

It's obvious the Darbar team, led by Sandeep Virdee, Kulbir Natt and Dharambir Singh, has worked day and night to ensure that 40 musicians performing a total of more than 24 hours of music over three days are well cared for and provided with the best possible settings for their recitals.

As Virdee says: "Our aim is to present

the diversity of classical traditions by artists who may or may not be well-known, but all of whom are presenting their genre of music at the highest level."

The turnaround time between events



Every time a recital ends, I'm convinced it's the very best – but then the next concert happens and that also takes my breath away

is extremely tight, but backstage the atmosphere is relaxed and jovial among organisers as well as musicians – it's not at all unusual to see the maestros participating in one another's sound checks. The brilliant young sitar player, Purbayan Chatterjee, makes sure that Kaushiki Chakrabarty's *tanpura* is correctly tuned. The following day, Kaushiki takes it upon herself to stand in the middle of the auditorium to ensure that the sound levels are doing full justice to the voice of Shashwati Mandal Paul – the other brilliant female vocalist at the 2008 festival.

Although 2009 will only be the festival's fourth year, it feels like a long-established event – and a family one at that – despite the fact that the musicians change from year to year. The music at Darbar has always been absolutely exceptional, with the added thrill of being able to listen to it alongside some of the world's best Indian musicians. The performers revel in the opportunity to perform before their peers and seniors

and the audience get to experience an entirely different dimension in the listening experience by witnessing first hand the reactions of other musicians. A few sessions into the proceedings, it starts to feel like a family reunion as I realise that more than half the audience are musicians, music students and specialists in Indian classical music.

Every time a recital ends, I'm convinced it's the very best and that I couldn't possibly listen to anything else after this – but then the next concert happens and that also takes my breath away.

Darbar has always provided an educational opportunity. In my job, it's very tempting to think I've seen and heard it all, but Darbar still provides the most delightful surprises and one of these, most surprisingly, came not in the form of music, but in one of the talk sessions in which Nayan Ghosh, (who, most unusually, plays sitar as well as *tabla*) in conversation with Dharambir Singh, regaled us with the most illuminating – and often side-splitting – anecdotes about music and musicians from the days of yore. This kind of personal, first-hand information is extremely difficult to access unless you are deeply entrenched within India's musical family circles.

The main philosophy behind Darbar – the way musicians engage with one another and with their audiences – is at the core of the festival's success, made largely possible in the past by being in a single Leicester location, complete with colourful local facilities. All is set to change in 2009 when the festival spreads its wings and shares the hosting responsibilities out amongst London's South Bank Centre, The Sage Gateshead, Curve in Leicester and Yehudi Menuhin Hall, Cobham. What the festival may end up losing in cosiness and 'family-gathering' feel, it's sure to gain in new and different audiences having access to the rich tradition of Indian classical music. "It allows Darbar to make best use of some of the leading artists arriving from overseas," Kulbir Natt agrees, "and audiences across the country to get a taste of some fantastic Indian classical music on their doorstep."

There are more than 30 performances, over 50 artists performing, nine venues, several free events and a photographic exhibition at the South Bank, all taking place between March 28 and April 12. Hopefully, Darbar will deliver top quality performances yet again, while increasing its audience manifold. ●

DATES Darbar Festival runs March 28-April 12 2009
ONLINE www.darbar.org.uk

Top to bottom: past festival posters; Shashwati Mandal Paul; sitar youngster Purbayan Chatterjee



We have three pairs of tickets to your choice of Darbar 2009 concert in either London, Gateshead or Leicester* (see website for details). Please answer the following: In which English city did the festival first begin? See p5 for Songlines competition rules and address. Closing date March 6 2009. *Tickets subject to availability