

Zakir Hussain, Royal Festival Hall, review

By Ivan Hewett, classical music critic, 21 MAY 2016

Since Ravi Shankar's death Zakir Hussain, the maestro of the two small hand-played drums known as *tabla*, has become the presiding genius and global ambassador for North Indian classical music. Last night he appeared at the Festival Hall as part of Alchemy, the Southbank's festival exploring cultural links between the Indian sub-continent and the UK.

When the 65-year-old but eternally youthful Hussain appeared in immaculate Burgundy-coloured silk one felt a great surge of affection from the packed and very mixed audience. Hussain welcomed on his co-player Nilandri Kumar, the young white-clad player of the Indian lute or *sitar*, and reminded us that for the next 40 minutes he would be the accompanist, and Kumar the star.

Kumar turned out to be a truly wonderful player. First he conjured a rhapsodic meditation from the musical formula or *raga* known as Sri, associated with dusk and the rainy season in India. It always sounds sad, because of its drooping phrases which pull yearningly at 'wrong' notes, but I've rarely heard it sound so extravagantly melancholy as it did on this occasion. Eventually Hussain joined in as the music gathered pace, the two engaging in a witty banter where the rhythmic cycle seemed to disappear and then miraculously reappear, the two coming together on a down-beat with a smile of playful complicity.

In truth this was the evening's highlight, though the headline event was still to come. This was Hussain's new concerto for tabla and orchestra entitled Peshkar, here receiving its UK premiere with the BBC Concert Orchestra. It launched off with a tentative air, not quite sure if it was bluesy or pastoral in a Copland-ish sort of way. The orchestra's leader Charles Mutter trailed little wisps of melody, answered by the wood-winds, while Hussain marking out the rhythmic pattern underneath.

Only when the piece moved into a fast tempo did it find its feet. Suddenly it became thrilling, the orchestral players under conductor Zane Dalal flinging off jagged melodic patterns with admirable panache, Hussain matching them stroke for stroke. The festival's name Alchemy points to a hoped-for fusion between East and West; here, for a moment, one actually felt it.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/music/artists/zakir-hussain-royal-festival-hall-review/>