

Bringing Along Friends Who Can Add to the Beat

By Nate Chinen
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Zakir Hussain, the peerless North Indian tabla player, favors an impish strain of virtuosity. He's a fearsome technician but also a whimsical inventor, devoted to exuberant play. So he rarely seems overbearing, even when the blur of his fingers rivals the beat of a hummingbird's wings. At Carnegie Hall on Wednesday night, he managed to exude humility throughout a concert clearly stamped by his proficiency.

It was the last of his four concerts under Carnegie Hall's Perspectives series, which presents a resident artist in a variety of settings. Here, Mr. Hussain appeared in Sangam, an elastic jazz trio, and with fellow members of Remember Shakti, an Indian fusion group. At the top of the program, he noted that it was the 90th birthday of his father and guru, Ustad Alla Rakha, dedicating the evening to his memory.

Sangam, which features the saxophonist Charles Lloyd and the drummer Eric Harland, made the concert's first half an intrepid outing. The trio's first offering, "Guman," featured meditative vocals by Mr. Hussain, who wrote the song, but first came a mysterious rustle of shakers and a rumbling piano drone, played first by Mr. Lloyd and then by Mr. Harland.

On the next few songs, Mr. Lloyd was the one sounding a melodic incantation, on tenor, alto or tárogató, a straight woodwind instrument; his outpourings were imploring and soulful.

The trio delivered its share of percussive flash — Mr. Hussain was right to introduce Mr. Harland as "my partner in rhythm crime" — but the more lasting impression of the first half was melodic. This had to do partly with the pianist Jason Moran, an unbilled guest on the song "Tales of Rumi."

Partly, too, it involved the prolific Bollywood vocalist Shankar Mahadevan, who emerged late in the first half to sing "Maa" — one of his signature ballads and emphatically a pop song — with a pristine, soothing authority.

Mr. Mahadevan also sang winningly (but often wordlessly) throughout the concert's second half, alongside Mr. Hussain, the mandolinist U. Shrinivas and the percussionist V. Selvaganesh, whose specialty is the kanjira, a small hand drum with an expressive range of pitch. For a stretch, this cohort made additional room for T. H. Vinayakram, an expert on the ghatam, an earthenware pot played with thrummed fingers or open palms.

The ensemble happily tweaked tradition, opening with a supercharged take on "Hansadhvani," a classical raga. At one point, while keeping a triplet pulse with his right hand, Mr. Hussain used a drumstick to hit a rock backbeat with his left. He and his partners worked effusively, dazzling with their precision as well as with their looseness.

During the home stretch, they were joined by the banjoist Béla Fleck, one of Mr. Hussain's earlier collaborators in the Perspectives series. At first Mr. Fleck strained to find a place within the music, but on the encore, the raga "Kirwani," he hunkered down, enlivening a modal drone with flitting digressions. The piece ended in a round robin of solos, with a genial sort of one-upmanship: Mr. Hussain's sort, in other words.

Source: <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/01/arts/music/01huss.html>