

**Asia Society and the Aga Khan Music Initiative
Present**

In the Footsteps of Babur: Musical Encounters from the Lands of the Mughals



**Saturday, March 3, 2012, 8:00 P.M.
Pre-performance lecture, 7:00 P.M.**

**Asia Society
725 Park Avenue at 70th Street
New York City**

**This program is 90 minutes
with no intermission**



In the Footsteps of Babur: Musical Encounters from the Lands of the Mughals

Homayun Sakhi, Afghan *rubab*

Ken Zuckerman, *sarod*

Salar Nader, *tabla*

“In the month of Ramadan of the year 899 [June 1494] and in the twelfth year of my age, I became ruler in the country of Ferghana.” Thus begins the remarkable autobiography of Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur, the precocious Central Asian nobleman whose journey of conquest through Afghanistan and Hindustan—the northern part of the Indian subcontinent—laid the foundation of the Mughal Empire. Fusing cultural influences from Persia, Central Asia, and India, the Mughals created a brilliant intellectual and artistic efflorescence whose legacy remains strong today. “In the Footsteps of Babur” represents a modern-day encore of Mughal artistic synthesis. Inspired by visual images and literary descriptions of exuberant music-making in the Mughal courts, the Aga Khan Music Initiative brought together musicians who represent the musical traditions of Afghanistan and India with the aim of merging their talents, traditions, and musical instruments to create new sounds.

Babur was born into a world in which the influence of Persian culture loomed large. His birthplace, Ferghana, now a city in the nation of Uzbekistan, was in Babur’s time a principality that once had been part of the Timurid Empire (anglicized as Tamerlane), as well as to Genghis Khan. The Timurids, descended from Turco-Mongol stock, had cultivated a Persian sensibility in art, architecture, poetry, and music that reached its zenith in 15th-century Samarkand and Herat, and it was this sensibility that Babur absorbed in his youth.

As a teenager, Babur set off from his native Ferghana with a small army. His objective: to capture Samarkand, which he viewed as his family’s ancestral homeland. His attempt failed, but in 1504, when Babur was twenty-one, he seized Kabul, and the next year took up residence there. From his base in Kabul, Babur led reconnaissance expeditions eastward into Hindustan, and in 1526, his vastly outnumbered troops won

a decisive battle that gave him control of Delhi and Agra, the future site of the Taj Mahal, built by his great-great grandson, Shah Jahan. During the 16th and 17th centuries, Babur's descendants—the Mughal rulers Humayun, Akbar, Jahangir, Shah Jahan, and Aurangzeb – continued the expansion and consolidation of the Mughal Empire until it covered almost the entire subcontinent. The cultural diversity of this vast territory was reflected in the different kinds of music and musical ensembles that were patronized by the Mughal courts. Orchestras of kettledrums, cymbals, trumpets, and loud oboes whose origins were in Persia and the Middle East marked the comings and goings of the emperor. Mughal miniature paintings show a variety of long-necked lutes and spike fiddles -- instruments rooted in the Persian and Turkic cultures of Central Asia. These paintings also show indigenous Indian instruments –most commonly the *rudra vina*, also called *bin*, easily identifiable by the large gourds attached to either end of a long neck.

The legions of performers in the service of the Mughal courts may well have created their own “fusion music” jam sessions, experimenting with various combinations of instruments, sonorities, melodic modes, and rhythmic structures. Another venue for musical fusions might have been the meeting places of Sufis – followers of a mystical path in Islam –where, contrary to more orthodox Islamic custom, musical instruments were sometimes used to facilitate prayer leading to a state of spiritual ecstasy.

Following the death of Aurangzeb, in 1707, the Mughal Empire began a long period of decline, which ended in 1858 with the abdication of Emperor Bahadur II and the establishment of the British Raj. As Britain faced off against its imperial rival, Russia, in what became known as “The Great Game,” Afghanistan became a buffer zone between empires. Following the rise of Soviet power in Central Asia in the 1920s, the once porous border between Central Asia and the subcontinent hardened. The fluid movement of artists and musicians characteristic of Mughal times was replaced by bureaucratized cultural exchanges of state-sponsored performing troupes and artistic luminaries. Hoping to reanimate the synthetic spirit of Mughal-era music-making, Homayun Sakhi, Ken Zuckerman, and Salar Nader arranged to meet and explore the living legacy of their common musical ground.

Sakhi himself offers an exemplary case study in artistic synthesis. Born into one of the leading musical families of Kabul, he studied *rubab* with his father, Ustad Ghulam Hussein, a student of Muhammad Omar (d. 1980). The music he learned included both the classical Hindustani raga tradition of North India and Afghan folk and popular music. Beginning in the mid-19th century, at the sunset of the Mughal Empire, Hindustani musicians were patronized by the local ruling family of Kabul, where they created a Kabuli tradition of raga performance whose principle instruments were Afghan *rubab* accompanied by *tabla*. The addition of sympathetic strings and drone strings increased the deep, resonant quality of the *rubab*'s sound—ideal for the slow and meditative opening section of a *raga* performance. This 19th-century adaptation of the *rubab*, an instrument rooted in the music of Central and West Asia, reprised the adaptation of older forms of long-necked lutes by musicians in the early 17th-century Mughal court, who, as shown in miniature paintings, used them to play the steady drone that was then coming into fashion as an accompaniment to classical singers.

Musical Instruments

The *rubab* and *sarod* played, respectively, by Homayun Sakhi and Ken Zuckerman, are kindred instruments that reflect the fusion of Mughal-era influences yet have evolved in different ways and now display both striking similarities and contrasts in sound production and playing techniques. The Afghan *rubab* is a double-chambered lute with 3 main strings (originally made of animal gut, now nylon), 4 frets, 2-3 long drone strings, and up to 15 sympathetic strings (made of copper and steel). It was probably invented in the 18th century. In the 19th century it was also known in Rampur and Punjab (northern India). Some scholars believe that in India, the Afghan *rubab* was modified to become the *sarod*. Although it is difficult to document this precisely, it is clear that the instruments have much in common.

Though instruments that resemble a *sarod* appear in ancient Indian temple carvings and sculpture, tracing the precise evolution of the *sarod* is all but impossible, and in its present form, it is no more than 100

years old. In the early 20th century, important changes in the *sarod*'s construction and playing techniques were made by Ustad Allauddin Khan (ca. 1881-1972), father of the great *sarod* master Ali Akbar Khan (1922-2009). These changes included the addition of more strings, a second bridge, and an additional resonator. These days, the body of a *sarod* is made of teak or mahogany, the belly is covered with goatskin, and the unfretted fingerboard is metal. The metal fingerboard facilitates the glissandos (*meend*) and subtle shakes (*gamak*) that are characteristic of *sarod* performance. The instrument has 25 metal strings, ten of which are played with a plectrum made from a coconut shell. Four strings carry the melody, three are tuned to the drone pitch and serve to accentuate rhythm, and three others are tuned to the dominant notes of the chosen *raga*. The remaining 15 are sympathetic strings that resonate when the corresponding notes on the main strings are played.

The *tabla*, the most popular drum of North India and Afghanistan, is actually a set of two drums. The right hand drum (*tabla*) is tuned to the principal pitch of the solo instrumentalist or vocalist; the left hand drum (*baya*) acts as the bass and is capable of producing many tones, which can be varied by pressure from the base of the left palm. It is possible to produce a great variety of sounds from these drums, and every possible sound is represented by vocables known as *bols*. In performance, expert *tabla* players often transform the tones and rhythmic patterns of compositions into *bols*, creating a precise and virtuosic verbal representation of the drum strokes.

The *tanpura* is the essential drone instrument in all forms of North Indian classical music. It has between four and six strings and is found in a wide range of sizes. The function of the *tanpura* is to sound the first and fifth (or fourth) degrees of a *raga* scale repeatedly throughout a performance so that both the performer and the listener have a constant reference to the notes of the *raga*. In recent years, many *raga* performers have substituted electronically produced drones for acoustic *tanpuras*. In this concert, a mechanical device invented by *sarod* player Ken Zuckerman plucks the strings of a traditional six-string *tanpura*, providing both the authentic timbre of an acoustic instrument and an unfailingly consistent plucking pattern that even the best human players would have difficulty matching.

Artists Bios

Homayun Sakhi is the outstanding Afghan *rubab* player of his generation. Sakhi's performance style has been shaped not only by traditional Afghan and Indian music, but by his lively interest in contemporary music from around the world. Born in Kabul into one of Afghanistan's leading musical families, he studied *rubab* with his father, Ustad Ghulam Sakhi. Homayun has spent extensive periods in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and presently resides in Fremont, California. He maintains a worldwide concert schedule and is active in teaching *rubab* to young Afghans, both in Afghanistan and in the West.

Ken Zuckerman, internationally acclaimed as one of the finest sarod virtuosos performing today, has also been called "...one of the world's most eclectic masters of improvisation." His training under the rigorous discipline of India's legendary *sarod* master Ustad Ali Akbar Khan lasted for thirty-seven years, until Maestro Khan's passing, in 2009. He also performed with Maestro Khan in numerous concerts in Europe, India, and the United States. In addition to his extensive performance schedule, Ken Zuckerman has directed the Ali Akbar College of Music in Switzerland for 26 years and is also a professor at the Music Conservatory of Basel where he conducts courses in both North Indian classical music and European music of the Middle Ages.

Salar Nader, born in Germany in 1981, is one of his generation's leading performers on the *tabla*. A disciple of the great *tabla* master Zakir Hussain, Salar Nader frequently accompanies Homayun Sakhi as well as other performers of Afghan and North Indian classical music. A resident of Los Angeles, Nader recently appeared as an on-stage musician in an American theatrical adaptation of Khaled Hosseini's best-selling novel, *The Kite Runner*.

About the Aga Khan Music Initiative

This concert is presented in collaboration with the Aga Khan Music Initiative, a program of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, and is the second in a multiyear series organized under a partnership between Asia Society and the Aga Khan Music Initiative (AKMI). The aim of the partnership is to bring promising musical talent from AKMI's principal region of activity to the attention of American audiences.

The Aga Khan Music Initiative is an interregional music and arts education program with worldwide performance, outreach, mentoring, and artistic production activities. Launched to support talented musicians and music educators working to preserve, transmit, and further develop their musical heritage in contemporary forms, the Music Initiative began its work in Central Asia, subsequently expanding its cultural development activities to include artistic communities and audiences in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia. The Initiative promotes the revitalization of cultural heritage both as a source of livelihood for musicians and as a means to strengthen pluralism in nations where it is challenged by social, political, and economic constraints. For more information, see: http://www.akdn.org/aktc_music.asp

Production credits:

Concert curator: Theodore Levin

Program Notes: Theodore Levin and Ken Zuckerman

About Asia Society:

The Asia Society is an international organization dedicated to strengthening relationships and deepening understanding among the peoples of Asia and the United States. Founded in 1956 by John D. Rockefeller 3rd, the Society reaches audiences around the world through its headquarters in New York and regional centers in Houston, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Washington, DC, Hong Kong, Manila, Melbourne and Shanghai. A nonprofit, nonpartisan educational organization, the Society provides a forum for building awareness of the more than thirty countries broadly defined as the Asia-Pacific region - the area from Japan to Iran, and from Central Asia to New Zealand and the Pacific Islands. Through art exhibitions and performances, films, lectures, seminars and conferences, publications and assistance to the media, and materials and programs for students and teachers, the Asia Society presents the uniqueness and diversity of Asia. For more information, please visit www.asiasociety.org

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This program is part of Asia Society's ongoing initiative, *Creative Voices of Muslim Asia*, made possible by support from the Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art. For more information, please visit asiasociety.org/creativevoices



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