

**Asia Society and the Lahore Literary Festival
Present**

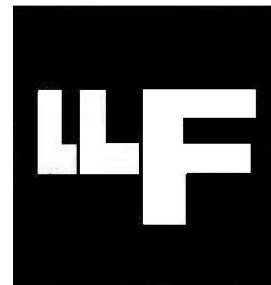
Fareed Ayaz, Abu Muhammad Qawwal and Brothers
Part of the Lahore Literary Festival in New York 2018



**Saturday, May 12, 2018
8:00 P.M.**

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

This concert is approximately 90 minutes with no intermission



Fareed Ayaz, Abu Muhammad Qawwal and Brothers are masters of Qawwali Sufi music as well as classical genres such as *tarana*, *thumri*, and *khayal*. They belong to the Qawwal Bachon ka Gharana of Delhi, a music school founded in the 14th century that remains the best-known *gharana* today. Weaving together devotional and secular traditions, Ayaz and company have been bringing South Asian music to international audiences for over 30 years.

About Qawwali

Strong voices and explosive hand-clapping characterize the devotional music known as Qawwali. An ensemble of usually 12 male performers convey a religious message through music and song based on mystic poetry by Sufi masters. The texts usually deal with divine love (*'ishq*), the sorrow of separation (*hijr*, *firaq*) and the union (*visal*), these concepts being symbolically reinforced and illustrated by the music. Qawwali blends Iranian and Central Asian poetic, philosophical and musical elements into a North Indian base, combining popular music with classical traditions. Following the same pattern of combination and blending, the texts cover Arabic and Persian, but the main text body is usually in a simple idiom form of Indian languages: Urdu, Hindi, Purbi and Panjabi. Qawwali is derived from the Arabic word *qaul*, meaning "belief" or "credo." Qawwali is spiritual in essence; it is the devotional music of the Sufis to attain trance and mystical experience - originating in the 10th century and blossoming into its present form from the 13th century onwards.

The Setting

Although Qawwali has today become part of mainstream music, it is traditionally a part of Sufi ritual at the shrine of a saint on a Thursday evening. Large gatherings of Qawwals are held at the death anniversaries of Sufi saints, in which their death is celebrated as marriage with the Eternal (*'urs*). Groups of Qawwals play day and night, the best performing at the end.

The dialogue between the audience and the musicians is central to the performance of a Qawwali, and the performers often repeat and dwell on portions which strike a resonant chord in the audience. The impact of vigorous hand-clapping both repetitive and forceful tends to produce in the audience a trance-like state. Persons experiencing the trance brought on by Qawwali often speak of an experience of flying. Flight is also the imagery used in several Sufi texts in their endeavor to achieve divine union.

Drawing and holding the attention of an audience is the skill that the performers of Qawwali attain. They claim that Qawwali breaks the barriers of language and draws people closer to divinity. They do this by attempting to alter the state of consciousness of the audience in order to make them more receptive to the content, which is of a syncretistic and mystical nature. The form has been perfected over the centuries and is claimed to lift the audience to exaltation even if they do not understand the words. Form and content are linked in Qawwali and a complete appreciation is possible only with a knowledge of both. For example, when expressing the pain of separation from a distant beloved in content, the lead singer changes the music to long stretched pieces to emphasize the distance, while words expressing union are compressed in a rapid rendition.

The Instruments

In the past, the instrumentation of the Qawwali was a double-headed drum (*dholak*) and a bowed lute (*sarangi*, *dilruba*) and an earthenware pot. The instrumentation today consists of a pair of hand-pumped harmoniums in the front row, supported by either a *dholak* or a pair of drums (*tabla*) in the middle of the second row. The larger left drum of the *tabla* is given a coating of freshly-

kneaded dough (*atta*) in the center to give it more resonance. In the case of the *dholak*, the inside of the membrane on the left side is coated on the inside with a special glue mixed with oil (*bhed*) for the same effect. A large earthenware pot (*ghara*) is sometimes also used for the rhythm with anklets tied on the wrist of the pot player (*ghungru*), as well as the iron rings on the fingers to strike the side of the pot. A booming sound is created by striking the mouth of the pot with the open hand, sharp percussive sounds by hitting the rings against the sides and the tinkling of bells by shaking the wrist in midair. Clapping by the performers completes the instrumentation.

The Music

The Qawwali opens with instruments playing the main tune of the item to be performed, the *naghma*. The *naghma* permits musicians to tune their instruments and to develop a musical Consensus. The *naghma* also introduces to the audience the main elements of the melody to follow. In the course of the *naghma*, the harmoniums, accompanied by the drums and claps, have an opportunity to show their art and skill in the absence of voice. The beat also follows the main rhythm cycle used in the main body of the item and is fast. The *naghma* ends with an abrupt silence. In the silence, the lead singer may tell the audience about the item he is going to present. The silence can be gently broken by a very short singing without any words or rhythm (*alap*).

When words appear for the first time, they present a Persian quatrain (*ruba'i*) or a Panjabi couplet, the *dohra*. Technically, the *ruba'i* is the Persian term for a quatrain with a specific meter and rhyme pattern. In the Qawwali however, it may be any number of lines in any of the Qawwali languages. The *ruba'i* or *dohra* opens with a couplet sung by the lead singer with the harmonium, the claps and drums are muted. The couplet is repeated by the main accompanist. The content of the *ruba'i* is linked to that of the main Qawwali, but is usually the work of another poet. The *ruba'i* also establishes the general mood of the Qawwali, which picks up from the *ruba'i* with a startling entry by the drum, followed a few beats later with the entire clapping ensemble.

The main Qawwali starts in a moderate or slow beat (*vilampat*) and finally develops to a faster tempo (*drut*). There is one major refrain (*takrar*) throughout the Qawwali and it is this refrain that gives any particular Qawwali its name. The Qawwali generally chooses one text by a single poet (a *ghazal* by Amir Khusrau in Persian, a *kafi* by Bullhe Shah in Punjabi, or any contemporary poet). However, couplets from other poems by the same poet are permitted in the main text. If a couplet or line is taken from any other poet and chosen to highlight the concept or feeling being conveyed in one part of the main text, this auxiliary verse is known as *gīrah* (literally, a knot) in the Qawwali. The *gīrah* is usually delivered as an intensive emotional interjection. *Gīrahs* are often more of a chanted recitation than a tune, although the same beat is retained; however, an accomplished accompanying singer can present a *gīrah* in a specific *rāga*, usually the pentatonic *Pahari*. The lead Qawwali launches a refrain and hands it over to the chorus while resting and preparing for his next solo, which is either a *gīrah* or the next couplet of the main text. The *gīrah* repertoire ranges from couplets from Amir Khusrau, Usman Marwandi, Bu Ali Qalandar, Bullhe Shah, Shah Husain to those composed by the main singer himself or even a “divine” inspiration (*amad*) during the Qawwali.

The development of the Qawwali follows the normal pattern of the song in North Indian music: the composed piece in both instrumental and vocal music generally has two sections, *astai* and *antara*. The former is the main part of the composition and is said to be usually limited to the lower and middle register, while the *antara* extends from the middle to the upper registers.

Excerpted from the liner notes from the recording Qawwali, the Essence of Desire (BUD92611-2) by Adam Nayyar, Director of Research at Lok Virsa (National Institute of Folk and Traditional Heritage), Islamabad, Pakistan.

About the Lahore Literary Festival

The Lahore Literary Festival (LLF) is one of South Asia's premier cultural events. LLF explores the dialogue and interface between literature and the arts that shape our cultural, social, economic, and political frameworks. The Festival aims to bring together, discuss, and celebrate the diverse and pluralistic literary traditions of Lahore—a city of the arts, activism, and big ideas.

About Performing Arts at Asia Society

Asia Society's Performing Arts Program is an intrinsic component of Asia Society's commitment to sharing vital aspects of Asian culture by placing creative expression at the center of a more comprehensive understanding of culture. Whether it is experimental artists exploring new territory or traditional artists bringing to life the voices of a great legacy, the Performing Arts Program has created a powerful platform for connecting and engaging with Asian culture within a deeper cultural context. We have presented extraordinary artists from renowned names such as Lang Lang, Tan Dun, Abida Parveen, Shen Wei, David Henry Hwang, Sardono and Malavika Sarukkai, to the latest emerging voices. Beginning in 1957, with New York's first performance by Indian maestro Ravi Shankar, the Performing Arts Program has since presented over a thousand performances, including original commissioned work from Asian and Asian-American artists, as well as American artists influenced by Asia, such as Phillip Glass, DJ Spooky and Vijay Iyer. From Indonesian hip-hop to electronica from Shanghai; experimental dance to the deeply moving traditions of India's *Kuttiyatam*, Burmese *Zat Pwe*, we foster artistic exchange and provide creative opportunities for artists. For more information, please visit AsiaSociety.org

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