
Traditional Ghazal Concert at the Hubert Humphrey Center warms Twin Cities' music lovers on Sunday: Review of a vocal concert by Pooja Goswami Pavan

Review by Padmaja Challakere

Despite the low temperatures on Sunday, Dec 5, 2010, the Cowles Auditorium at the Hubert Humphrey Center filled to full capacity for an unusual concert. The occasion was a *ghazal* concert by a local Minnesotan artist, Dr. Pooja Goswami Pavan, to mark the release of her new CD, titled *kaise keh duuN* (“How shall I say?”). This was unusual because it was a concert of traditional *ghazals* from India and not the usual crowd-pleasing, fast-paced, electronic Bollywood music that streams over us, in my judgment, like a stimulant or a narcotic. Here was something far away from Bollywood: classical Urdu poetry sung in North Indian semi-classical style with great eloquence and delicate skill.

It was a wonderful surprise to see so many people in the audience, both informed followers of the *ghazal* art song as well as newcomers. It was also a wonderful surprise to see the assent of the audience and to witness their animated participation in a music that remained resolutely classical in both its musical rendition and in its choice of poetry. A good *ghazal* concert does not separate the performer and the audience, but calls upon both to create the mood of the moment together. And, the audience responded to the beauty of Pooja's rendition with a grace and dignity that created a moment of real vitality, so that even by this difficult measure, and not just by the number of people present, the concert was a resounding success. This makes one thing clear, that there is a hunger for good poetry and music amongst the South Asian community in Minnesota. The *ghazal* tradition is a long-established one (it was introduced into South Asia in the 12th century and goes back to 7th century Persia) and remains the most popular artistic medium for transmitting the rich intricacies of Urdu poetry. Persian and Urdu poetry used to either be recited in the royal courts or in *mushairaas* (poetry symposiums or soirees) or sung by trained musicians in courts or at *mehfils* (soirees) until recording technology popularized the *ghazal* song from the 1930s onwards, making Urdu poetry available to the “masses.” But the first recorded *ghazal* by Gauhar Jaan is as early as 1905, as Youtube will reveal.

Imagine listening to Rilke's poetry in musical sound and you get some idea of the *ghazal* art song. The subject of the *ghazal* is unrequited love—the tormented lover and the evasive beloved. But like all good poetry, it is so richly textured and layered, so rich in allusion and metaphor that it opens up to embrace broader themes such as existential grief, mysticism, metaphysical truth, and even social-political outrage. After all, the love of a disappointed lover is rather like a mystic's, in that it does not want anything, and therefore becomes a pure assent to another's experience. In its ideal form, the *ghazal* is a just such a dialogue in which there is pure acquiescence to another, to an absent other. It is a pure aesthetic object, sublime, and ravishing. The structure of the *ghazal* is made up of couplets where each twosome is autonomous, a thematically and emotionally complete poem. So one couplet may be comic,

and the next tragic, and the next one maybe romantic, another religious, depending on mood, memory and expectation, as well as an implicit recognition of infinite variety. A couplet may be quoted by itself without in any way violating a context--there is no pre-determined context, as such. The opening couplet (called *matla* sets up a scheme (of rhyme—called *qafia*; and refrain—called *radif*)) by having it occur in both lines-- the rhyme immediately preceding the refrain--and then this scheme occurs only in the second line of each succeeding couplet. It is a complex poetic form like the Villanelle or the Sestina or the Elegy. But the popular commercially successful *ghazal*, or what is called the “light *ghazal*”, while elegant at times, has had the unfortunate effect of making the poetry disappear from *ghazal*, or making the poetry and the melody so honeyed and trite that it feels like background music or elevator music. The light *ghazal* has a large fan-base which finds the traditional *ghazal* slow, heavy, and lugubrious. The lightness of the light *ghazal*, on the other hand, gets so light and so love-struck, that it empties out.

Pooja’s concert had nothing in common with the light easy mood-music kind of populist ‘light *ghazal*’ form but neither was it slow or lugubrious. It had freshness to it, alongside the strong emotion and classical rigor. Her choice of the *raga* and her rendition of the *raga* matched the mood of the words in the poem so that the poetic sound was expressed with crystalline clarity. For instance, the concert opened with a Sufi *ghazal* written by 18th century mystic poet Khwaja Meer Dard, in *raga* Puriya Dhanashree, a quintessentially evening *raga*, which predominates in flat notes and therefore matches the contemplative, spiritual nature of the words perfectly. The words to this *ghazal* are uncommonly thoughtful, in the best tradition of Sufi poetry: “Jag Mein Aakar Idhar Udhar Dekha, Tu Hi Aaya Nazar Jidhar Dekha” (“Coming into this world, I cast my eyes here and there/ Wherever I looked, it is you I glimpsed”). The second *ghazal* carried forward this spiritual ecstatic mood. It was a *ghazal* sung most famously by Begum Akhtar, a *ghazal* legend (whose life-long student, Shanti Hiranand, is Pooja Goswami’s musical teacher) for a poem written by Shamim Jaipuri, “Zameen Pe Rehke Dimag Aasmaan Se Milta Hai/Kabhi Yeh Sar Jo Tere Aastan Se Milta Hai” (“The mind soars high towards the sky/ Whenever my head bows down to touch your threshold”). With these two contemplative *ghazals*, it is as though Pooja had given notice to the audience about the nature of the concert and the place of reflection and spirituality in it. Then followed the poignantly romantic *ghazals*, including a modern *ghazal* different in sensibility from the classical *ghazal*, one written by a local Urdu poet, Riyaz Latif with this *matla*, “Har Naye Rang Mein Ruswaa Hun Mein/Ab Teri Aankh Se Chhalka Huun Mein” (“In every new way, I am infamous/ Now even from your eyes I overflow”). For her final *ghazal*, Pooja chose the most renowned Urdu poet, Mirza Ghalib’s brooding poem, “Koyi Ummeed Bar Nahin Aati/ Koyi Surat Nazar Nahin Aati” (“Now there is no hope that I can see/No face that I can envision”) and to render the poignancy of this poem (which also encapsulates the life-long struggles of Ghalib), Pooja chose *raga* Bhupeshwari, a melancholy *raga*. The

energy and coherence of her sequencing gave to each *ghazal* a density and clarity. Pooja was accompanied by Pavan Allalaghata's dexterous *tabla* and by Vikas Falnikar's harmonium.

It is the same clarity of melodic, rhythmic and harmonic lines that one finds in Pooja Goswami Pavan's new CD, "kaise keh duuN" released by innova Recordings, an independent label of the American Composers Forum, based in St. Paul, MN. The *ghazals* are inventive in their texture. In every *ghazal*, Pooja manages to attend to the pleasures of the poem while not sacrificing a single square inch of classical rigor. The music was recorded with the ambience of a live concert setting, in Delhi India. The music is presented in its raw beauty without the shadow of electronic synthesizers over it, and with no edits, post processing, or additional effects, thus retaining the feel of a live *mehfil* concert.

The formation of her musical voice began early. Dr. Pooja Goswami Pavan was born in a musical family and received her early training in *hindustani* (North Indian) classical vocal music from her father *Pandit* Surendra Goswami. Pooja is also trained in semi-classical music by the eminent vocalist *Vidushi* Shanti Hiranand, the reigning queen of *thumri* and *ghazal* and the universally acclaimed successor of the legendary vocalist, the Late Begum Akhtar. The versatility in Pooja's repertoire is evident in her ability to sing *khayal*, *thumri*, *dadra*, *ghazal*, *bhajan* and various folk genres (e.g. *chaiti*, *kajri*, *hori*). She has performed widely within the USA, including performances locally at the University of Minnesota, the Indian Music Society of Minnesota (IMSOM), the Minneapolis Central Library, the Guthrie Theater, the Ordway Center for Performing Arts and the O'Shaughnessy Auditorium, as well as for the Pangea Theater, Ananya Dance Theater and Katha Dance Theater where she has composed music for a wide variety of music, theater and dance productions.

Apart from its strong lyrics and classicism, Pooja's CD has a beautiful cover with solid liner notes that have the Urdu lyrics alongside their English translations.