

Two Minutes With.... Usha Verma

By Tom Matthews - January 12, 2017



In 1982, Usha Verma immigrated from India to the United States with her husband and kids. She was a stay-at-home mom for a few years, all the while playing the sitar and performing at various places throughout the Worcester county. While in India, she earned her master's degree in music, which she also taught at the college level. She now works as an

outreach coordinator at the Auburn Senior Center, and was recently hired as a faculty member at the Pakachoag School of Music in Auburn, where she teaches the sitar.

What's the history behind Indian classical music? The oldest scriptures in India are known as Vedas, which literally means, "knowledge." Dating, perhaps, from 1500 B.C. there are four in number, and are comprised of sacred hymns, poetic descriptions of God, nature, rituals and blessings. Originally, they were passed on orally, memorized by Brahmin. The feeling of sacredness, a result of hearing them, has basic to the Indian classical music ... Indian classical music has Raga in it. The concept of Raga is very elusive. Any combination of note which pleases the mind is called Raga. It is, in clarification, that the combination of notes only can become Raga only if it has certain characteristics in it. A raga must have five notes. Some form of ma or pa must be present as well. A Raga must be ascending and descending. It should have strong tonal center. Certain moods are typically associated with each Raga and often time of the day or season of the year ... the sitar is originally an Indian instrument very, very ancient known as veena. In India veena is not popular anymore. What happened, in 1500 B.C., some non-Muslims came to India, and they brought their own culture, and they brought their own music. So, with the combination of veena and their own instruments, came the sitar.

What is a sitar? Sitar is a musical instrument. It's like guitar, not exactly like guitar, but it's the same, as it has frets and strings. There are seven strings on top and 13 strings at the bottom, which are called sympathetic strings. Those are for vibrations or echoes. It doesn't have any amplifier that I

need to use; it has built in amplifier, which is good. It's hollow inside, so whatever I play, the strings on the bottom, they echo or vibrate on the same frequency, and it works like an amplifier. It's hollow inside, so it's not heavy.

How long have you been playing the sitar? I started when I was 15, so maybe more than 45 years. But there were breaks you know like two or three years. Since it's my passion, and I'm still able to keep it, I'm happy about that.

Why did you choose to learn to play the sitar? There was music in my family. My father, although he did not have a familiar education ... he used to sing. He wanted me to sing, but, you know, I like the sound of this instrument. It's very soft and very light.

So, where have you performed? I have performed at WCUW a couple times, MIT, Anna Maria College, a computer company that wanted some Indian art and culture. I've played many, many places and taught students in Waltham, and done private lessons in India and with students from here.

What made you want to teach it? Well, since I have spent most of my life learning it and practicing it, I want to share it with kids. I know kids at a young age learn quickly and whatever they learn, it's always with them. So, I want to educate people here in America. [Western] students, they know a lot about Western music, but not a lot of people know about Indian classical music. So, since I have learned so much and that's my passion, I want to expand my horizon to teach and for them to enjoy it.

Is the sitar growing in popularity here in the U.S.? Yeah, it is. I see music schools and students learning it, and not only sitar, but also drums, which we call, "table." So, yes, it is becoming popular, not only in the Indian population, but also the Western.

Is it an expensive instrument? If you compare with pianos and violins, it's not that expensive. The average sitar won't be more than \$1,000 or \$1,500.

So, there are a lot of people without Indian backgrounds wanting to learn the sitar? Yes, they want to. Westerners want to learn it, too, because maybe they like the sound of it, or maybe they want to know more about Indian classical music. The instruments here, like violin and piano, their sound is a little bit louder than this one, and they can also be played as an accompaniment, but sitar is the instrument for solo performance. And only Indian classical music is played on it.

Is it a difficult instrument to learn how to play? Well, it depends, you know. Since I really wanted to learn it, I didn't find it difficult to learn. They say it's a little bit harder in the beginning, because you have to press [the strings], and sometimes it's painful until you develop callouses. You have to have a musical ear to learn it. You have to have the ear for the correct note. It is kind of difficult.