

# A western maestro of the Santoor presents Raags with a touch of the occident

By Hameed Zaman

KARACHI: Dr Bee Seavers, who is a virtuoso in his own right, playing Santoor, a Kashmiri instrument (110 strings), with total command, opened his account last evening at the PACC Auditorium, presenting some of the 'Shudh' pieces, along with some lighter ones, in Karnatic idiom. The programme was sponsored by the Goethe-Institute, Karachi.

It was the second visit of Dr Seavers to Karachi, thus his performance, last evening, could hardly escape comparison with the previous one, which had simply enchanted the music lovers, for all said and done, Santoor is not an instrument really considered to be the forte of the Europeans.

In fact, Dr Seavers represents a rare combination of classical sub-continental music with the influences of his own cultural background. His treatment of Raga follows a correct format that is 'Alaap', 'Jor' and 'Jhala' ('Alaap' expresses and unfolds the characteristic of a Raag, 'Jor' is the second part of the solo exposition and 'Jhala' is the third part). He maintains a perfect balance between the melody ('Sur') and rhythm ('Laye'). There is precision and musical discipline which is so obvious that it is eloquent.

The first part of the programme based on 'Poooriya Kaliyaan' (Rupak taal plus Durat teen taal) expressed an uneasiness, giving some difficult moments to the artist — bad lighting, a broken string, awfully bad Tanpura and perhaps jet lag, for Dr



Dr Bee Seavers.

Seavers arrived early in the day and got little time to rehearse. However, as the Raga progressed, the dust settled and the splendour of 'Riaz't' took over to enhance the lyricism and warmth of the intimate renderings.

However, before I go into the technical finesse of the performance, I would like to explain a vital point for better understanding. The performing art, unlike literature or visual art, is different in the sense that it is subject to the dimension of time. In music, two kinds of time factors come in play: time as rhythm and time as the hours consumed in the performance. Whereas, in most other cultures rhythm is seen as linear progression of set beat patterns, the sub-continental traditions are unique in their concept of a cycle rhythm called 'Taala' (tempo).

Dr Seavers' rendering of Poooriya Kaliyaan was resplendent in structuring the raga, expressed in his skilled treatment, making a rich tapestry of notes and cadences of the composition. It was balanced and symmetrical, rhythm varying in the passage across the cycle. His accompanist Eid Mohannad on Tabla, added extra colour with the explosiveness of his nimble fingers, providing meaningful support to the artist.

After the intermission Dr Seavers presented "Ragvani" based on Karnatic idiom. It was on the light classical pattern. His looping phrases showed his pacing, emerging speed variation and movement patterns which progressed smoothly. The approach to the raga was delicately achieved, unhurried and restful, step by step. Salamat Ali, the master flutist along with Eid Mohammad (tabla) provided another dimension and depth to the performance.

The east-west encounter in the field of music is no longer a novelty. Ravi Shanker and Yehudi Menuhin had their share of innovation and of course, the arrival of the Beatles (John Lennon and George Harrison) in Bombay, in 1968, to learn Sitar from Mahesh Yogi was another example of such exercises which, in the final analysis, remain of doubtful value despite big names.

Yet in the case of Dr Seavers, the achievement is almost genuine. In fact, he has not just learnt the art, but has become a part of it, for there are not many Santoor players in the subcontinent. Dr Seavers stayed at the 'Charan' of his Guru for twelve

years and simply immersed himself in an alien music, becoming a 'Shudh' musician himself. His technique on the Santoor and his interpretation of classical sub-continental music is quite unique for a European musician.

Santoor draws its lineage from Iran. Originally travelling northwards to the Central Asian countries, it finally came to settle in Kashmir. The instrument has all the resonances of the typical hillside vibrations and melodic sounds, echoing amidst the lush setting. It is played with two sticks, about eight inches each. The are curved at the end. It is a string-plus-stroke instrument with a double layer of strings fixed over a wooden chamber which acts as a platform. Its resonances give body to the music. Essentially meant for folk music, it can be mastered for classical music as well. At best, it is a distant cousin of the harp. We have Mukhtar Ahmed of Azad Kashmir with us who is the maestro of Santoor and is incomparable in his own way.

Dr Seavers is a PhD in ethno-musicology, a study of different cultures and their languages, with special emphasis on the music of the subcontinent. As a multi-faceted artist, he is a composer, writer and a filmmaker. He teaches Music Science at the University of Hamburg. Initially, Bee Seavers was a jazz musician, but a visit to this sub-continent changed his entire outlook towards music. For a period of time, he stayed under the expert tutelage of several Gurus, learning the technique and the music of Santoor. He has never looked back, since.