A vintage performance

Event

Isha’s 30th year celebration was made extra special with an astounding classical music performance by the 104-year-old Abdul Rashid Khan

Halfway to concert venue, we are greeted by a booming voice working the notes of Puria Kalyan. ‘This just can’t be a 100-year-old man singing’, I tell myself. ‘It must be his shishya accompanying him. I am so wrong. As we enter the 6,000-capacity hall, on the stage at the far end, resplendent in a bright saffron kurta, a black cap on his snow white hair, and a couple of necklaces around his neck, is Abdul Rashid Khan Saab, singing. It is definitely a goosebump moment. He is 104 years old.

The event marks the birthday of Sadguru Jaggi Vasudev and 30 years of Isha. It is well attended. Inside, followers sit in neat ranks and file; outside, a huge screen shows the concert in progress for those who have come late. Abdul Rashid Khan Saab sings in raga Shankara, Chaya Nat and then a rousing bhajan (Mera Rom Rom Hari Om) in Aahir Bhairav that receives spontaneous applause from the audience. It is astonishing that we are sitting listening to a Hindustani classical music concert being performed by a man who was born before the Titanic and was already six years old when the First World War broke out. That makes him, perhaps, the oldest performer in India, if not the world.

After singing for an hour almost non-stop, pausing only once to sip something out of a mug held to his lips by a disciple, Baba, as everyone calls him, agrees to meet us in his room. Seated on a cot, he smiles his greeting and graciously accepts our breathless compliments for his performance. He was five when he gave his first concert. “It was at my birthplace, at a dargah near Rae Bareli. I attribute everything I am today to the saint of that dargah,” he says.

Since 1987, he is actively involved in teaching students at the ITC Sangeet Research Academy in Kolkata, where he is the senior-most guru. The academy has recorded and preserved over a thousand of Abdul Rashid Khan’s compositions. “For 22 years, I would sit down to my riyaaz at seven in the evening, and practise non-stop till five the following morning when I heard the aazam,” he says. Now, he teaches his disciples from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. His grandson Bilal Khan, who accompanied him on the tabla, jokes saying the secret to his grandfather’s great voice is the hookah and paan! When asked who his favourite singers are, Baba Rashid Khan smiles and says, “Everyone sings better than I do. And, I love everyone equally.”

Just before leaving I want to make sure I have the ragas right. I ask his disciple Guni Das. He says I should ask his guru. I do. Baba Rashid Khan reeks off the ragas, and can’t remember only one. He looks at his grandson and disciple to help him out, but they can’t remember it either! Abdul Rashid Khan roundly scolds his younger companions for being so forgetful, looks down for a moment, shuts his eyes, and then exclaims, “Chaya Nat”!

PANKAJA SRINIVASAN