

'Raga Spirit 2012' Festival Makes Its Debut at UCLA

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Special to India-West

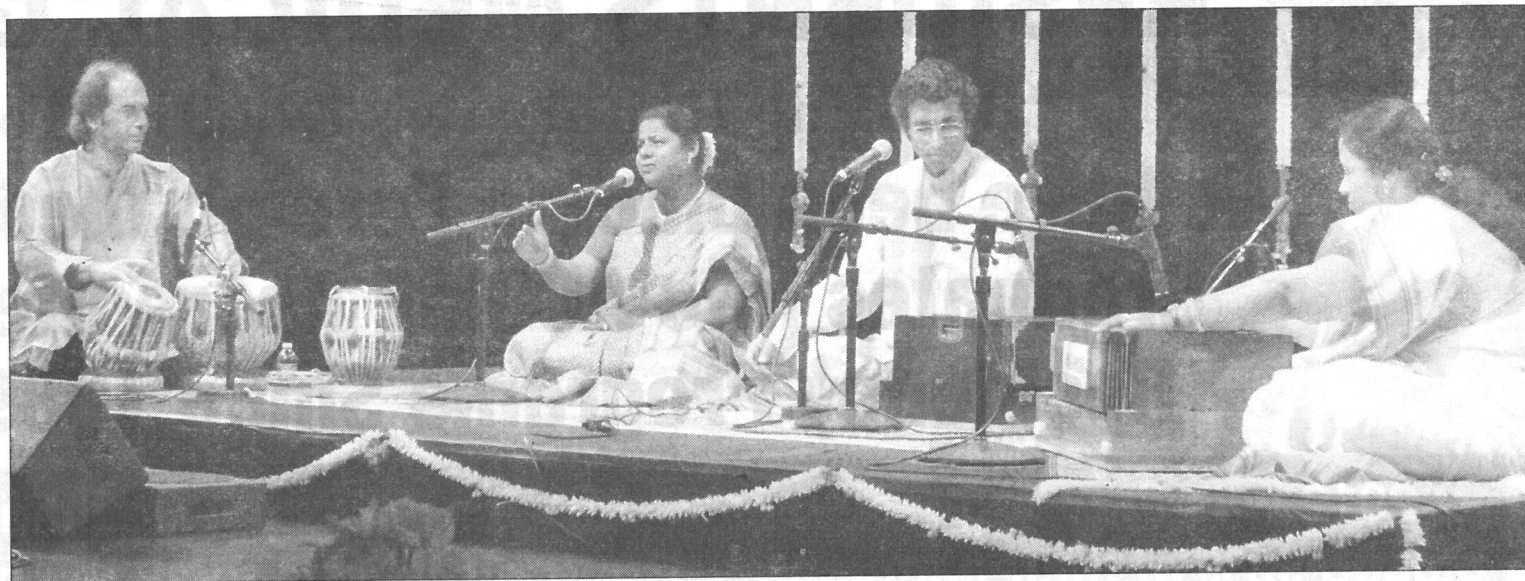
LOS ANGELES — It is not too often that concert audiences have an expert revealing the subtleties of Indian classical pieces that by most accounts are easily missed. Honorary coordinator Pt. Vijay Kichlu provided such nuances to music enthusiasts who attended the inaugural all-day "Raga Spirit 2012" festival that featured a symposium and performances Oct. 20 at the University of California, Los Angeles Schoenberg Hall.

Kichlu, who has committed his life to preserving the traditions of Indian classical music, unified efforts to fuse art and academia with filmmaker Gita Desai, who won acclaim for her comprehensive documentaries "Raga Unveiled" and "Yoga Unveiled"; Irvine-based Ektaa Center's president and executive director Harish Murthy; and Dr. Daniel Neuman, professor of the Department of Ethnomusicology within the Herb Alpert School of Music at UCLA.

Partial funding for the event was provided through one of the department's major donor, Dr. Mohinder Sambhi, who established the Mohindar Brar Sambhi Endowed Chair in Indian Music in 2004.

The first presentation of the morning began with a welcome to special guest Laxmi Shankar, the Hindustani vocalist and sister-in-law of sitar maestro Pt. Ravi Shankar who later praised the presentation as having brought back her "years of work and experience."

"Thumri Ki Kahani," the open-



(L-r) Arup Chatterjee, Sanjukta Biswas, Shantanu Bhattacharyya, and Durba Bhattacharyya performing at "Raga Spirit 2012." (Shyamal Randeria-Leonard photos)

ing lecture-demonstration symposium, was led by Kichlu, who guided the audience through an inquisitive journey of the style's linguistic, contextual and romantic evolution rooted in the 11th century pastoral community devoted to Krishna bhakti.

Although the style is often labeled as semi-classical, Kichlu added that Thumri is "stylized" and not bound by any theory.

A highlight of the presentation was the playing of rare HMV recordings captured in the early 20th century by legendary Thumri vocalists such as Mojudin Khan, Faiyaz Khan, Siddheshwari Devi and Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, amongst others. Kichlu is the executive director of the ITC Sangeet Research Academy, a classical music academy that possesses a rich and priceless collection of music in its archives built up over half a century.



(L-r) Shantanu Bhattacharyya, Laxmi Shankar, and Sanjukta Biswas pose for a photograph.



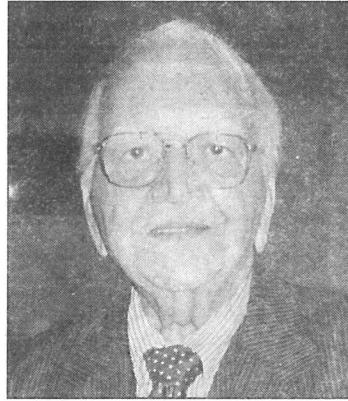
Harish Murthy and Gita Desai hope to make the Raga Spirit festival a regular event.

Kichlu laced together features of the two Gharanas or schools of Thumri called Purab and Punjab Ang. Through live recitals, the two styles were contrasted and

the audience was given a platter of performances by accomplished vocalists Sanjukta Biswas and Shantanu Bhattacharyya, who were accompanied by Kolkata's Arup Chatterjee on tabla and Durba Bhattacharyya on harmonium.

In the afternoon session, an array of instruments and vocal choices representing North Indian styles were synthesized with vocalist Sanjukta Biswas, tabla artists Samar Saha and Arup Chatterjee, and Durba Bhattacharyya on harmonium. Debashish Bhattacharya, with optimal dexterity, played strong hypnotic melodies blending raga and rhythm on a trinity of self-designed slide guitars.

The evening performances featured a Juglabandi duet with Tejendra Majumdar on sarod and Kushal Das on sitar and Subhanker Banerjee on tabla. Carnatic vocalist Aruna Sairam was accompanied by H.N. Bhaskar on violin and Patri Satish Kumar on mridangam. The evening ended with vocalist brothers Rajan and



Dr. Mohindar Brar Sambhi, a major donor to UCLA's Department of Ethnomusicology.

Sajan Mishra and their accompanists.

Desai explained to **India-West** that she was partly inspired by the total immersion at festivals that people experience in India where attendees "soak themselves till late night as the festivals begin with newcomers and end with the very best."

Desai added that she and Murthy are keen on establishing the event as a tradition in Los Angeles.