

ABUL KHAIR LITU

The man who thought of it all

The contribution of Abul Khair Litu to the promotion of the arts of Bangladesh, as well as its culture and music cannot be understated. The great man has worked tirelessly on many projects, and one which has gained great prominence over the last 6 years was his revolutionary idea to reintroduce classical music as a mainstream attraction rather than a niche art, with the annual Bengal Classical Musical Festival. The widespread recognition that the festival has garnered internationally is testament to the fact that one man's adamant power of will can indeed be a catalyst of change. In this interview, Star Showbiz talks to the Chair of Bengal Foundation about the origins of the festival, his future plans and much more.



Abul Khair Litu with the late Girija Devi

Thank you so much for your time. How did you come up with the concept of the Bengal Classical Music Festival?

Even though we hosted the first Bengal Classical Music Festival in 2012, I had planned for a classical music festival of this scale for a long time. You might remember that we organized regular classical music workshops back in 2000, with Ustad Mashkoor Ali Khan and Shanti Sharma teaching the students at that time. They taught on a one to one basis in a small house, and maybe stayed for a month or two before going back. Many senior artists joined the initiative, but the results weren't as I had hoped, as I believed that more young people should learn classical from a very young age. As a matter of fact, many of the legendary names responsible for making classical people popular worldwide are from Bangladesh. Names like Ustad Allauddin Khan, Ustad Vilayat Khan, Ustad Ali Akbar Khan, Pandit Uday Shankar, Pandit Ravi Shankar, all have their roots in Bangladesh. Given such a rich foundation of the practice of classical music in Bangladesh and seeing how the genre had become non-existent, I felt it was time to revive the practice of it. I wanted to take a leap of faith and call the biggest eastern classical music maestros of our time for the festival. When I initially made the proposal, everyone was highly skeptical of the initiative. One cannot really blame them for their incredulity as eastern classical music is known as 'chamber music' where even an audience of 5000 people is quite a far fetch whereas I wanted the event to take place in a stadium, for 4 whole nights (which from 2013 stretched to 5 nights and more impressively, 55 hours of programming). Nobody was ready to believe that this particular plan of mine could come to fruition. I discussed the matter with Luva (Luva Nahid Choudhury), with Mati bhai (Matiur Rahman) of Prothom Alo and Mahfuz Anam of The Daily Star and although all of them thought my plan was quite ambitious they supported me on this. As a matter of fact it was because of Prothom Alo and The Daily Star's media support and the hype that was created by them through their media coverage that helped spread the news of this festival. I got the idea for registration from Farhad (Farhadul Islam) of Blues Communications, whereby we would be able to assess how many people are interested in such an event as well as how many people actually turn up. About 30,000 people had registered, and after the first iteration of the event, I realized that we still had passion for classical music, but we could not find the artists or the occasion to express that. Thus the success of the first Bengal Classical Music Festival was sealed.

What, in general makes a certain festival successful?

A festival is an art in itself. You'll notice that a person's attention span is usually quite short and not many people want to understand that. The way I look at it is if we were to attend a festival

which demands our presence through the night or even for a long period of time, what would we look for? What would we want in that festival and what would make it interesting for us? I strongly believe that the moment we put ourselves in the audience members' position I think the approach changes. We know that if one needs to stay all night, they will need proper bathroom facilities, a good food court, and other interesting ways to engage the mind when the main event may get a bit weary. However, the main focus of the event should not be lost and we put LED screens all over as a reminder and this also helps the audience members to not only keep enjoying the music but also acts as a gentle reminder for them to return to the main area for a performance of their liking. It gives me immense pleasure to see how the audience reacts to each performance. The mere fact that this audience sits through 55 hours of programming says a lot about their ability to appreciate the good and finer things as well as the

unable to give us the stadium because of His Holiness the Pope was supposed to hold an event there. Also I believe they had reservations because of the sound for the 5 nights and how it was an inconvenience to those living in that neighbourhood. Thankfully, however, the sound is no longer a problem as we primarily witnessed at Abahani Grounds thanks to the software Noise Calc which is engineered by the best German technology to transform the loud music to ambient sound and almost a hum beyond the set periphery. I would like to mention the contribution of Blues Communications specifically here as they worked extremely hard to keep the noise down to a permissible level, without which we perhaps could not have had the festival this year. I am especially grateful to our honourable Finance Minister Mr. Abul Maal Abdul Muhith, who had never thought for a second that the festival will not take place this year. I am also grateful to the Cultural Affairs Minister, Mr. Asaduzzaman Noor,



fact that the entire venue full of literally thousands of people listen to the entire performance of Pandit Hariprasad Chaurasia in pin drop silence fills me with hope and tells me that the people of a nation as this cannot ever walk on the wrong path or be engaged in wrongdoings. Our efforts and thoughts speak for themselves and the mere fact that there are now an average daily turnout of about 55,000 people is a strong testament to that fact and the Bengal Classical Music Festival now stands affirmed as the largest classical music festival in terms of duration of the programme, number of performers on a single stage and audience capacity.

There was a lot of talk about the venue and the festival had to eventually be moved to the Abahani Grounds. Could you tell us what went on?

Many of what is being said and which has come back to us in terms of hearsay is quite simply that hearsay. From our understanding the Army was

and the Chairman and all members of Abahani Limited, without whose support it would have been almost impossible. I am specifically most grateful to the honourable Prime Minister without whose directives Bengal Classical Music Festival 2017 would not have taken place. There are always challenges and obstacles which will come up in life and the difference is in how we handle that and cope with it. There could be many people who may say that there was still some sound and they were disturbed by it but I believe we need to rise above our difficulties and look at the greater good in events like this, which I strongly believe is now more of a national event which all Bangladeshis feel proud of. I am just very thankful to all involved that we could finally host the Festival this year at the Abahani Grounds. What would you say is the ultimate aim of Bengal Foundation?

I am glad you asked. In terms of the classical music festival and its aftermath, we set up Bengal

Parampara Sangeetalay in 2014 in order to help nurture the practice of classical music in Bangladesh. We engaged some of the best classical gurus in their fields and gave scholarships to more than 100 children. I had said previously that we want to set up cultural centers across the country. We are about to start the construction of one in Ashulia and more will follow. I believe that if we, along with the help of other institutions and government agencies can set up about 2000 centres nationwide, each with its multifunctional aspects, crime rates will go down drastically as they will engage the youth in various ways. Bengal Classical Music Festival is just merely one arm under the Music programme of the Foundation. It is true that the Foundation engages in almost all the different aspects of the arts and has activities throughout the year to diligently promote the arts of Bangladesh to first its own people and then secondly to an international audience, be it visual arts, music, literature, architecture, crafts or theatre, and along with any and all who have an inherent interest in and passion for the arts, eventually our reach are the people who are in a position to receive and appreciate our work. These are the opinion makers and shapers of the country, like teachers and their students, doctors, engineers, politicians, journalists, artists, architects and so on. We believe that if we can help mould people's sense of the aesthetics and expose them to a certain level of the arts then they in turn will project that to the people they have an influence on and hopefully this chain reaction will help in not only enriching our sense of the arts but also contribute positively in a society by pulling people away from crimes and other dishonest practices. We strongly believe that a refined and learned mind cannot and does not give in to the base instincts as easily and refrain from wrongdoings. That is the whole simple basis on which the Foundation has been set up and it operates. There is a lot which can be achieved through art and culture, in terms of bringing people together, enlightening them, educating them, improving people's quality of lives and thereby even having an impact of how other countries view us as a nation, as a people. Like I always say, we must use our own resources to enrich ourselves and we at the Foundation will continue to strive to do so for as long as we can.

I think I must mention here that although these visions may come from me, I am very fortunate to have such a strong and committed team at Bengal Foundation who are driven more by their passion for the work they do than anything else. The team is meticulously led by Luva (Luva Nahid Choudhury) with other dedicated members like Hasnat Bhai, Zeenat (Zeenat Chowdhury). I'm also grateful for the support and counsel of Dr Anisuzzaman as well as a learned Board of Trustees.

Interviewed by Rafi Hossain