

AN INTERVIEW WITH

Zeenat Chowdhury

Zeenat Chowdhury is a Director at Bengal Foundation and the Managing Director of Bengal Express Ltd, and is responsible for directing the Bengal Classical Music Festival. After the 6th iteration of this national music celebration, Star Showbiz sits down with Zeenat Chowdhury for her opinions and behind-the-scenes discussion about the annual event.

Congratulations on the recent 6th iteration of Bengal Classical Music Festival. Regarding the festival itself and the whole cultural arena of the country, what do you consider the greatest achievements?

According to me, there are two rather prominent achievements; one is that every year, we see more of a younger audience, and the second is how people's behavior seems to change when they enter the festival grounds. In the first year, we had young volunteers who had no particular interest in or exposure to classical music. But by the fifth day, after having listened to classical music for the 4 nights it seemed to have grown on them. Listening to this music all day must have been tough for them as they never had such exposure to this genre before. And I'm happy to say that every year there is a growing number of a young audience who love either sitting on the bleachers or sitting on the ground and taking in this music. Secondly I love how a sense of discipline seems to dawn on anyone who enters these grounds. People do not litter, they happily and calmly stand in line albeit for coffee or water or the toilet facilities. People seem to make a conscious effort to not only enjoy the music and the ambience of the festival but also contribute themselves by being a positive part of that ambience.

As for the cultural arena of Bangladesh, I truly believe that there has been an actual revival of interest in classical music. Last year we had a promo in which a story of a father and daughter was portrayed where the father had always wanted to learn music but couldn't, but the classical music festival somehow decided for him that he should encourage his daughter to learn the sarod; and strangely enough this was a story which seemed to echo true in the hearts of many of the audience members.

Yet another notable achievement of this particular festival, which many women have voiced to me is the safe and organized environment built for all those who love to attend the festival. It makes me proud to see and know that single women feel no threat or danger roaming around alone in the festival grounds at any given time through the night. The environment of classical music brings about a certain transformation of attitude in people, which gives us hope. **As a member of Bengal Foundation what do you have to say about this achievement?**

The response and love this initiative has gotten from people is in itself an achievement. The intention was always the revival and practice of classical music and to an extent we believe the festival has been able to achieve that. I have

always felt a certain sense of pride being associated with an organization which I believe constantly strives to contribute positively towards the country and its people, under the leadership and guidance of both our visionary Chairman Mr Abul Khair and our Director General Ms Luva Nahid Choudhury; and this festival happens to be an added feather in the proverbial cap.

Are there any special plans for the next Bengal Classical Music Festival?

I believe we are always trying to offer an experience slightly different from the previous year's. It seemed that the people seemed to appreciate the different venue this year as well as what the grounds and set-up had to offer. Needless to say the support that we receive each year, especially from the Army, the Dhaka Metropolitan Police, Traffic Police and all other government agencies and associates, is commendable and something we wholeheartedly appreciate. This year was



the same and as always it is this support which goes a long way towards the success of the festival.

Is there anything else you want to share with the readers?

I don't know if people realize the amount and volume of work that goes into organizing an event of this scale. There are so many people working diligently behind the scenes to deliver this level of meticulous planning and execution. There are many people working really hard towards achieving this success we all enjoy. The experience is humbling and something that makes all of us very proud, and honestly, many ask us about how tiring these five nights are, but I always say that there seems to be this burst of energy that we all get from somewhere and we look forward to working for this festival every year, and we hope we can continue to deliver our best always.

Interviewed by Rafi Hossain



Tahmida Afroze

Tahmida Afroze is the Senior Associate Architect of Abashan Upodeshta, an architecture practice closely associated with Bengal Foundation. She has shared her experience in designing the facilities for Bengal Classical Music Festival, held at Abahani Grounds, Dhanmondi. This interview sheds light on the many challenges faced by the organizers.

Thank you for your time. Please share your experience as the architect of Bengal Classical Music Festival 2017 held at Abahani Grounds, Dhanmondi.

Bengal Foundation has been hosting the classical music festival at the same venue – the Army Stadium – since 2012. Over the years we had perfected the layout of the facilities at that venue but last year presented a problem because it was a challenge to come up with a completely new infrastructure plan within a very short time. I have to say the effort was worthwhile as the festival was very well received; one of the important considerations was that the venue was more accessible to the public. The size, access points and locality of Abahani Grounds was entirely different, and it demanded a new level of thinking. It is not just enough to ensure that spaces are functional. It is far more important to give the audience a memorable and rich experience.

What are the challenges you faced due to the change of the venue? From a design point of view, would you say the facilities were better at Abahani Grounds, compared to the Army Stadium?

Abahani Grounds provided us an enormous scope in terms of positioning the facilities in the best possible way. The only thing we missed was the surrounding gallery. The best part of Abahani Grounds was that it is surrounded by lovely greenery. The second issue was having enough toilets for the audience, as there were none available on or close to the grounds. We built a toilet block from scratch with all modern amenities, something that was well received by the attendants. Furthermore, The Chairman of Bengal Foundation was very keen to have a structure resembling a gallery which would help the audience to recreate the experience of a stadium, thus we built a 150 ft long gallery. We wanted to exploit the opportunities presented by the large grounds and make an interesting architectural statement while maintaining the ambience and the festive mood. That was

the hardest part!

How do you think Bengal holds such a big event with such great efficiency, each year?

It's about good teamwork, precise direction and strong leadership but most of all it's about the shared vision we wish to achieve. Many agencies have to work together – my

office, the Foundation's design, content, AV, facilities and IT teams, Bengal Express, ICE Media, Blues Communications, partners and external stakeholders, the core management team, etc. In light of the serious limitations that tested our capacity last year, I believe it is not just efficiency but our good intention and love for what we do that made it possible to finish everything on time.

How long did it take to finish everything after getting the permission?

We received permission to use the grounds in mid-November. Redesigning started right after; planning and detailed design took about a month. We probably moved in a week before the event, for construction. Blues Communications did their part of the structural set up of the periphery walls, the stage with the lights and sound, the audience area, the food court, while we worked simultaneously on the pavilions, the audience gallery the bathroom facilities and laying the extensive walkway.

Would you like to share some words about the festival with our readers?

My experience was very fulfilling last year. We worked with Bengal Foundation in a similar event called Bengal Cultural Festival in Sylhet last February. That really helped us in terms of idea generation and improvisation. As an architect it is important to be able to connect with people and understand them better. I appreciate the human connection that such large-scale people-centered events make possible. I want to thank the audience of Bengal Classical Music Festival for their enthusiasm and cooperation. Without them we would not have been here today.

Interviewed by Rafi Hossain