

Ustad Amjad Ali Khan

Musician

'Where logic ends, the link with the divine begins'

Sun Sep 07 2008



Ustad Amjad Ali Khan is a sarod player and composer who was awarded the Padma Vibhushan in 2001.

What does spirituality mean to you?

In our family, we have been classical musicians for generations. And thus, everything we are and do is connected to spirituality. Our music is all about surrendering to God and connecting with the divine. Spirituality is this constant confirmation of a supreme force. It is about entering the world like a black tunnel with the hope of a sun ray, some day.

Do you believe you are guided and protected by a superior force?

Some power, some force has guided my whole life and actions. I have seen it over and over again. There was never a moment of doubt about it as for us God plays the most important role. This was always the way in our family. My father was quite religious, he had such faith in God. He always said, just practice and surrender to God and one day you will achieve your goal in life. So in our family, two plus two never was necessarily four. Two plus two was a big question mark. It could be zero, it could be the infinite. It was therefore never about planning things and life, but about trying to obey God.

And while trying to feel that superpower, that divine force, it is important not to be led by priests of any kind. Priests are not necessarily the wisest people in the world. They get a salary, they are paid by religious institutions. We should rather always be free to think on our own and figure out what is right and what is wrong. And this process should not happen through the intellect exclusively. In fact I believe that where the logic ends, the connection with God begins.

Do you believe you have a special mission or purpose in this life?

We have been musicians for generations. So even though I was the first child in the family to receive some education in school, there was never any doubt that I would become a musician as well.

After partition, so many Indians were obsessed about becoming educated, maybe as a hangover from colonial times. But you cannot maintain your creativity while getting your BA and becoming a clerk. Otherwise it would sound like a PhD is singing or playing the sitar. You cannot excel at both, though of course there are exceptions.

So my father who was not educated but was an extremely learned man about life, taught us values, compassion, humanism, and music. We were extremely focused, from the beginning, as he was determined to have us understand the meaning of music. He was my guru and my career was shaped by his blessings. Without PR or anything, at the age of twelve, I was already touring India extensively. And music became way more than a profession, it is my life, it is my passion.

I could have easily become a music director in Bollywood and quickly made large sums of money. But there are tens of thousands of such people, and how many unique classical musicians? Every time I play I feel I receive blessings from the audience and hopefully they also feel blessed. They cry and weep at times, or even enter trance. The fact that they trust my artistry is my treasure. Their love and good wishes are like my bank balance.

What is spirituality for you in your day to day life?

I am religious in the sense that I feel the presence of God constantly. I meditate and pray, mostly through my music. When I close my eyes, with or without music, I connect with God. When I meet people, it can also be about connecting to the divine. There is a belief that you never know in what way you will see or feel or meet God. So one needs to be respectful of all human beings.

Yet, rituals are not central to me. I believe religious rituals should all be reviewed and it is the duty of educated people to make religion like a perfume, like a beautiful flavour. Because every religion has some beautiful message but too often it has gotten completely lost. Especially after 9/11, things have become even more distorted. When I travel, I feel bad for airports' immigration personnel, as for them, every person is first seen as a potential criminal or terrorist. They have lost their peace of mind.

What is the role of spirituality in your work?

Music for me is about completely surrendering to God. We do not write music, do not read it, do not plan it. We connect through that supreme power called God through sound. We slide from one note to the other, it all merges and flows, unlike in Western classical music.

There are of course two kinds of parallel worlds in music: one is pure sound, the other one is based on words. It is actually much easier to craft a popular song with the help of lyrics. If it is only about an

instrument, no mistake can be forgiven, any wrong note is immediately noticed. Both have their qualities, but there is an old saying that language creates barriers. Politicians are made or destroyed by their manipulation of the spoken word. It all can be so empty and superficial.

Whereas when we play the instrument, I feel we connect directly with the supreme power and become a conduit for the divine. We are simply a channel for it. We pass on messages from God to the audience. And once I finish a performance, I know that never will I create a similar one. Every concert is unique, every time it is about channelling something completely distinctive.

Can you share a unique experience that changed or shaped your spiritual beliefs?

Once I was traveling in Germany for some concerts and had to go back through Paris. I suddenly got a very strong and irrational urge to go back to India. My ticket, which was a cheap one, could not be modified. The lady at the Air France desk (the return flight was through Paris) even wrote a note about it as she grew impatient about my insistence to change the flight. The next day though, I was back at the counter. And something completely eerie happened: the line she had written had disappeared, the Air France person this time did not say anything and let me board the plane. I was so shocked, I was so stunned. I could not utter a word until the plane took off. I kept feeling that something would happen and someone would discover that actually we should not be on that plane and call us back. But nothing of the sort happened, and once we landed, I was told my father in law had passed away. This is why I had felt that sudden urge to come back. And this whole episode was one more proof and encouraging confirmation of the power of the divine, of the all pervasive might of God. There is a God, we just do not know how to surrender. We try to solve everything with our little brains and of course we fail. It makes me think of people locking temple premises at night: all day long they invoke God or the various gods and goddesses for help or miracles. But they do not trust God enough to take care of Himself at night, and make sure no one would violate that sacred space. When you think about it, it is actually a profound disrespect of God. If you really believe in God, you would think He can take care of Himself.

What have been your main spiritual inspirations?

Of course my father was my musical guide and my inspiration in so many ways, but I would first mention my mother, she was my first guru. Also, there were so many great spiritual beings and musicians coming through our house in Gwalior. Some of them left more of a mark than others. There was for instance this Sadhu clad in his saffron clothes who came one day. He heard me play and asked my name. I was then called Masum Ali Khan. He said my name was not Masum, but Amjad. He never came again after that. Much later, I learnt that in Arabic, Amjad is another name for God, while Masum means the innocent, which actually can be quite dangerous in this world. So his changing my name may have actually changed my whole destiny.

If you were to be reincarnated, what would you like to be reincarnated as?

As a son to my parents and a servant of music. As a musician, I definitely did not achieve everything I wish for. One needs many births to do so.

If there was one question you could ask God, what would it be?

Can You do anything about removing the hatred, negativities and maliciousness in people all over the world?

What is your idea of happiness?

Making others happy.