

# Performing Arts of Asia

Presented by The Seattle Times and the University of Washington Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies outreach centers in partnership with the UW World Series and the UW Ethnic Cultural Center & Theater. For more information please visit online at [jsis.washington.edu/eacenter/exploringasia](http://jsis.washington.edu/eacenter/exploringasia).

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Every Wednesday, our in-paper series **Performing Arts of Asia** focuses on one style of performance art in a specific region of Asia, exploring the cultural context that continues to shape it. A complement to the *Exploring Asia: Performing Arts* project, our series runs through March 5.

## Qawwali: From Sufi Ritual to Commercial Pop

by Hiromi Lorraine Sakata, Former UW professor, UCLA professor emeritus

“Qawwali” is a form of devotional music that expresses the mystical Sufi practice of Islam in South Asia, mainly in areas of Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. The term qawwali comes from the Arabic word “qaul,” meaning “to speak” or “to say,” thus emphasizing the importance of words of these songs. Its main function is to make the listeners understand the words or message of the songs.

A translation of a qawwali text by an unknown Urdu poet for the song “Allah Hu” (“God Is!”) is given below:

When there was no Earth, no universe,  
No moon and sun, and no heaven  
When the secret of being was not revealed,  
When there was nothing, there was only you.

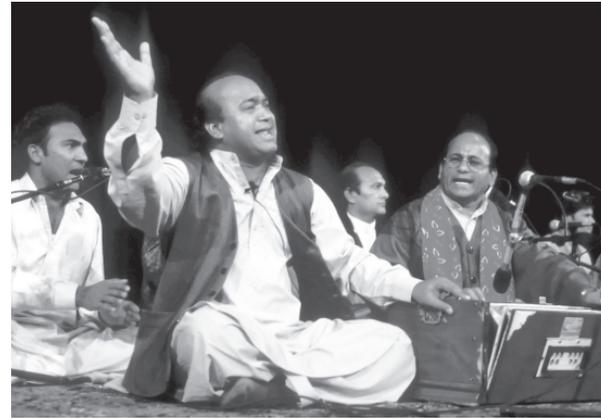
A typical traditional place of performance is at the shrine of a Muslim saint. Here, sitting on the ground and facing the tomb of the saint, the musicians perform for the saint, his representatives, his devotees and other Sufis. The audience listens intently to the songs, and when one is affected emotionally by its message, he may suddenly raise his arms, stand, or even rise to move about in a kind of spiritual or ecstatic dance.

Qawwali is performed by soloists who specialize in singing these songs with the accompaniment of a chorus and instrumentalists. For example, the famous qawwali singer Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan was born into a family of qawwali singers, and most in his troupe were closely related to him (brother, nephew, brother-in-law and cousins). A typical qawwali group is all male, and consists of a lead singer, one or two other soloists, a chorus of five

or six singers accompanied by harmonium (a small keyboard instrument), tabla (a pair of drums), and percussive hand clapping.

Today, qawwali, as a form of spiritual music sung at shrines of Sufi saints, has undergone a dramatic transformation. Now qawwali has become a secular, commercial genre performed on the concert stage for international audiences. This transformation from a ritual function to one of entertainment; from a traditional community context to an international, commercial one is credited largely to one man: the late Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan of Pakistan. He brought qawwali to the attention of young western audiences by working with Peter Gabriel and the WOMAD (World of Music and Dance) festivals. Through the media of concerts, recordings, film soundtracks and collaborative works with international musicians, Nusrat cultivated an international following that thought of him as synonymous with qawwali. Yet, throughout his life, he remained a traditional qawwali singer who continued to perform at Sufi shrines while also playing the great concert halls of Europe, America and Asia.

Although the words of the songs are of paramount importance, the rhythm of the music is also extremely important because it increases in intensity to bring the listener to an emotional climax. When qawwali is performed in concert for international audiences who do not understand the words of the songs, the driving rhythms become the focus of attention. For many young international audiences, qawwali, as seen on the concert stage or heard on recordings, is thought of as South Asian or World popular music; indeed, many in the audience are inclined to get up and dance in the aisles just as they would at a pop concert.



Qawwali Music of Pakistan: Mehr and Sher Ali perform as part of the UW World Series, April 26, 2008. Photo courtesy of the artists.

Just as American gospel music spawned a whole pop industry of soul music, traditional qawwali developed a commercial aspect which attracts young listeners and international audiences. Both forms have transcended their ritual contexts and their traditional audiences, yet, in both cases, the original spirit of devotion and energy remain intact. One does not have to be a Sufi, a Muslim, a Pakistani or of South Asian heritage to listen to and enjoy qawwali. Many examples of traditional and popular qawwali performed by Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan can be found on the Internet; in particular, an array of YouTube video clips.

## Expand Your World

- ❖ Describe the setting in which qawwali music was traditionally played.
- ❖ Why does qawwali music attract young listeners and international audiences?



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