

## **Hearing my own song in Brighton Dome and the Royal Pavilion**

*Atiya Gourlay*

As I walked around the bright and brave new spaces in the Dome and seeing the exhibitions in the Pavilion, I heard Bob Marley's mellow but plaintive voice singing the words from the Bible in my ear: "How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"

I'd like to know there is a regular space for me to hear my own song in my own city. I want to be able to see and hear the sounds carried in my blood and heart out in the open, held in the musical spaces in these venues. I want to feel proud of it – I want others to hear and be enthralled.

I remember the time over 20 years ago, when I had the ambition to start a regular space hosting South Asian classical music. It seemed such an easy idea – but the energy and action required was not in me at the time. It felt such a lonely project. But today – being in this room with my fellow women of colour, responding to these cultural spaces, being prompted to recall the Indian soldiers convalescing here during WW1, I felt held and brave enough to voice what I wanted to see and say: "I want to hear my own song NOW in this space. I don't only want to talk or hear about the Indian soldiers back then."

So – what would I like to see and hear? I want to hear the ancient sounds and rhythms and melodies of South Asian classical music – to feel the coming together through the expression of the music from west to east – Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bangladesh. European classical music is afforded value and space through the hallowed quartet and orchestra – where is the trio of sitar, tabla and tampura? Well – this is a gauntlet thrown to myself.

## **Singing raag scales with Elena in Granada**

As I continued thinking, looking out at the golden horse in the Studio Theatre suspended magically in the air, I recalled the intensity of literally singing my own song – in another space, in another country.

While in Granada learning flamenco dance I came across an Italian singer who sang Indian classical raag. Sitting in her tiny home, surrounded by instruments and images of Hindu deities, we started by singing simple scales. She sang the mid-tones – I repeated. Sliding the sounds between the notes, we reached each note gracefully and without strain. She sang beautifully. I did it with intention and I tried hard with such concentration. It was difficult.

Then came the tears – sobs from deep within – suddenly and without warning. I covered my face with my hands but I couldn't hold the crying. It was spilling out. And wonderful Elena, although worried, held firmly and gently with her presence without touching me nor

comforting me, but simply letting me be. It was my grandmother, my Daadi, who embraced me and was there next to me. So strong in her light cotton sari. Her hands just like mine.

Writing this piece in Anita's Room gave me the space and time to listen to what my heart was saying about wanting to connect through joy and love with the people of my family and my land who have gone before me. Writing has inspired me to act: I created Mehfil-e-Rose Hill with renowned company [zerOclassikal](#) to showcase UK based artists performing South Asian classical music, resulting in a year's programme of South Asian classical raag music in the Rosehill Tavern, a small beloved venue in Brighton. [Mehfil-e-Rose Hill launched in September 2024](#) and has gone from strength to strength, and in May 2025 featured in Brighton Festival.

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