

## Salar Nader and Homayoun Sakhi bring Afghan music to Oberlin

by Mike Telin



“I can’t wait to be back — Cleveland is like a second home,” tabla virtuoso Salar Nader said during a telephone conversation. “I have so many fond memories of performing at the Cleveland Museum of Art and in *The Kite Runner* at Cleveland Playhouse back in 2010. And of course working so many times with Jamey Haddad at the Bop Stop, Nighttown, and Tri-C JazzFest. And I love Oberlin — to be there with Homayoun and working

with the students is going to be a beautiful thing.”

On Sunday, October 6 at 7:30 pm in Finney Chapel, Salar Nader and rubab player Homayoun Sakhi will present a program featuring music of their Afghan homeland, pushing artistic boundaries that reflect their country’s position at the confluence of Persian, Central Asian, and Indian cultures. The program also includes Oberlin Conservatory’s Performance and Improvisation (PI) Ensemble, directed by Jamey Haddad.

On Saturday, October 5 at 1:00 pm, Nader and Sakhi will present a public master class in Stull Recital Hall. Click [here](#) for more information. Both events are free.

Nader said that Haddad has been a longtime friend and mentor since meeting in the Pyrenees Mountains of Spain in 2007. “World music DJ Shafi Saba brought us together, and it was like we were long-lost brothers by the time we played the show. Ever since then he has always been so welcoming. The thing that I learned from him and people like Stanley Clark, is that they all have a similar attitude when it comes to welcoming the different musics of the world.”

Nader was also influenced by his teacher, Ustad Zakir Hussain, and his grandmaster teacher, Ustad Alla Rakha. “Between the two of them, Alla Rakha being the partner in crime with Ravi Shankar and the other being the co-founder of Shakti with John McLaughlin, they helped pave the way and open up a lot of doors for what I’ve been doing. It’s a fun conversation because there’s a lot of improvisation that we do in our music.”

Nader and Sakhi look forward to bringing that fun conversation to their Oberlin residency. “We’ll work with students and have some discourse about the different sub-genres within Afghan melodic and rhythmic traditions. And we’ll culminate with a concert that will feature Jamey’s ensemble.”

In the percussion world, the tabla is a relatively young instrument at roughly 200 to 300 years old. The instrument was first used during Sufiyana chants, Vedic chants, and music in temples. Both the Hindu and Islamic traditions used the instrument mostly for spiritual practices.

“It was a rhythmic instrument where you would be reciting and chanting various Shlokas or Sufi Kalam,” Nader said. “My teacher said it was first a spiritual tradition, until the mid-19th century when it was concertized and you had Ravi Shankar and Alla Rakha playing at Woodstock and the music became entertainment. Although we still say this is not meant for entertainment — at the end of the day, that’s what happens although it is a spiritual music that’s being performed.”



How did Nader discover the tabla? You could say that he was never not around the instrument. After his parents fled Afghanistan during the Russian invasion in 1979, they settled in Hamburg, Germany, where Nader was born. “We had a set of tabla in our house and a lot of the refugee families at that time would connect with their cultural traditions through song, dance and musical performance which took place in the home. So I grew up in that type of environment.”

Fast forward a few years, Nader and his family resettled in New York, and then in the San Francisco Bay Area. “I was about 7 years old when I noticed a VHS tape with Zakir Hussain performing with John McLaughlin and I said, ‘I want to meet that man,’” he recalled.

After learning that Zakir Hussain taught a public class twice a week in Berkeley, he convinced his parents to take him. “I thought I was a big shot walking in the class with

my father carrying my instrument. And he looked at me, and was like, ‘You play the tabla?’ And I said yes, I do. So I sat down and played a few rhythms for him and he approved and from there I began learning from him.”

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