

Art of the Afghan Rubâb and Tabla at Finney Chapel (Oct. 6)

By Peyton Avery



On October 6, in Oberlin's Finney Chapel, tabla artist Salar Nader and rubâb player Homayoun Sakhi brought the music of their Afghan homeland to life in a performance that resonated deeply with cultural heritage and artistic innovation.

The evening's compelling program featured the talents of Oberlin's Performance and Improvisation (PI) Ensemble, a multidisciplinary group breaking down the barrier between classical music and jazz.

The collaboration between Nader and Sakhi was a profound exploration of Afghanistan's musical identity, reflecting its historical position at the intersection of Persian, Central Asian, and Indian cultures. The two musicians engaged comfortably with the audience, saying that they tried not to rehearse together to allow for a more natural performance.

From the moment the rubâb's strings sang under Sakhi's virtuosic hands, the listener was transported into the heart of Afghanistan's rich musical landscape. Nader's tabla added rhythmic complexity and layers of color, creating a seamless dialogue between the two instruments. Together, their technical and musical prowess was a testament to their deep understanding of the traditions they passionately represent.

What stood out most in the performance was its emotional depth. Every phrase spoke not only of personal mastery but also of a greater narrative — resilience in the face of adversity and a celebration of cultural continuity. During this time of political unrest in Afghanistan, music of any kind is banned, so being able to play and share it is a fantastic experience, Nader said. The interplay of sorrow and joy in the duo's compositions reflected a longing for a homeland while embracing the possibility of a future that honors the past.

The Oberlin PI Ensemble, guided by the two master musicians, brought fresh energy to the now-crowded stage. The group, primarily made up of students, brilliantly blended

their Western instruments and techniques with the improvisational freedom that is the hallmark of Afghan music. The ensemble impressively adapted to the nuances of this cross-cultural collaboration, adding another layer of richness to the evening's performance. Their contributions, both as accompanists and active soloists, transcended borders.

The concert was a masterclass in musical storytelling, combining technical skill with emotional resonance. Salar Nader and Homayoun Sakhi provided a transformative experience that left the audience with a deeper appreciation for the beauty and complexity of Afghan music and the enduring spirit of its people.

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