From India to Ealing – musical journey honoured in archive project

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Benares Baaj tabla playing has a rich heritage linking India and the UK but, up till now, no historical archive has existed because accounts of the tradition were passed down orally or kept within the Gharana or school where it has been developed. The tabla is a North Indian percussion instrument comprising two hand drums of differing sizes used in classical, devotional and poplar music.

Opening up its long history with an extensive education programme will enable a wider audience of Indian musicians and dancers, fans of Indian music, and museums specialising in the history of music from the sub-continent to learn much more.

Sue Bowers, Head of Heritage Lottery Fund London, said: “This project will create a lasting legacy for the story of the Benares Baaj by documenting its journey from India to London and creating an accessible archive of this tabla-playing tradition, alongside a programme of activities to increase knowledge and foster understanding.”

The project will be run by Ealing-based Pandit Ram Sahai Sangit Vidyalaya (PRSSV). It will focus on the work of the late Pandit Sharda Sahai, former head of the Benares Baaj Gharana. A digital archive and learning centre will be created using a rare collection of material from Pandit Sharda Sahai, his disciples and music followers - including more than 100 audio and visual recordings, 200 photographs, and notebooks with over 500 compositions. This material will be supplemented by artefacts dating back to the 19th century and oral interviews with musicians.

The Benares Baaj (Benares is the name of the city where this school of tabla music originated – baaj refers to the style of playing) was introduced into the UK in 1960 by direct descendants of the musical-style’s founder whose descendant, Pandit Sharda Sahai, lived in Ealing from 1991 until his death last November.

The project has already attracted the support of the British Library’s sound archives and, in addition, it will create an accredited training scheme for up to 50 volunteers through courses developed with help from the Open College Network. A training programme will include support from the V&A and Horniman Museums, the Gunnersbury Park Museum and the Ealing Local History Centre. Ealing Council is helping to refurbish a space at the Dominion Arts Education Centre, Southall, to be used as the Benares Baaj Learning and Research Centre.

A touring exhibition will also be created visiting six venues, including the School of Oriental and African Studies, The Nehru Centre and the Dominion Centre.

A schools workshop programme has been developed with Harrow Music Service to support the world music component of the National Curriculum (which makes specific reference to the Benares tabla tradition). PRSSV aims to work with six schools in Harrow and Ealing, engaging at least 400 students.

The project was launched on 21 June by Ealing, Southall’s MP Virendra Sharma at Portcullis House, House of Commons. Welcoming the project Mr Sharma said: “It is appropriate that this archive is brought together and is located in Southall, where both Pandit Sharda Sahai and the organisation have links for over 20 years. The supporting touring

exhibition, schools and community activities will also contribute to raising public awareness and the sharing of this great heritage."

Dr Frances Shepherd, Honorary Director and co-founder of PRSSV, said: "We are delighted to have the opportunity to increase access and awareness of this important musical heritage from Benares, and highlight its ongoing contribution to the UK's cultural heritage."

Further information

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