



# Arts & Entertainment

## 'When the eyes begin to see, the ears listen'

Mushtari Begum Festival of Indian Classical Music and Dance returns to Massey Theatre Sept. 24

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"Music is not art. Music is divinity."

That is the insight that helped shape Cassius Khan into the renowned musician that he is today.

"Divinity is when there is no face, name, religion," Khan said. "Divinity is being in tune with the universe, and I can immediately feel the connection, the vibration to the universe when I sing a raga or play my tabla. It brings me great joy."

The spirituality that informs Indian classical music brings, its magic and its healing properties, attracted New Westminster's Khan, whose tabla playing is known throughout the world of Indian classical music.

He spent his early childhood striking his fingers on pots and pans, turning everyday utensils into percussion instruments.

Since then the musician has been a pioneer in representing Indian classical music on the world stage, along with his wife, Amika Kushwaha, who is a renowned Kathak dancer.

The couple have made great strides in giving Indian classical art forms renewed prominence.

The couple takes great pride in their roots and

### Onstage

**What:** Mushtari Begum Festival of Indian Classical Music and Dance

**When:** Saturday, Sept. 24, 7 p.m.

**Where:** Massey Theatre, 735 Eighth Ave.

**Tickets:** \$35 regular; \$18 students and seniors; free for children. See [www.ticketsnw.ca](http://www.ticketsnw.ca).

in offering a platform for Indian classical music to shine in Canada.

Khan, an instrumentalist and a vocalist, has also represented Indian classical music, a genre often invisible to the public, at organizations like the United Nations in Geneva, garnering recognition for the soulful music.

The couple have made music and dance a part of their lives, having practised and breathed classical arts for over three decades.

"If my wife is standing around, the next thing you know, her footwork patterns are going, she's thinking of a composition," Khan said. "Or if I'm standing around, I started humming a tune or when I'm sitting, I start playing on the table. It happens unconsciously,

music is just who we are."

The path to global recognition has not always been smooth. The couple have had to overcome years of racism and other difficulties along the way.

"With the music that we were performing, we were alienated from different parts of the community," Khan said. "Even from the western community. We had to be strong and persevere through to keep doing what we love to do, and keep the classical music and dance alive."

The couple believe that classical dance and music have a unique, transcendent power that can lift audiences into an ethereal world, without the need to understand the language or the history or the culture.

According to Kushwaha, the dance is like a flower in that "there's so much inside that one little action that you can take it to a spiritual level or any other level that connects with you."

The intricate footwork, the puzzle-like patterns, the compositions and the "abhinaya" (expressions) in the dance form are a feast for the eyes, making the art form one of a kind, according to the musicians.

Despite their consum-



**ART AMBASSADORS** Cassius Khan and Amika Kushwaha will perform at the Mushtari Begum Festival on Sept. 24 PHOTO CONTRIBUTED

ing love for the arts, the couple faced a bleak time during the pandemic.

It was one of the leanest years in music, Khan said. "We were called non-essential, and that took a toll on us. Everyone was worried, the government put restrictions and we just didn't feel like practising. In fact, I didn't even listen to any music."

A realization of their responsibilities as ambassadors of a rare and important art form spurred them to begin performing again.

### MUSHTARI BEGUM FESTIVAL 2022

Mushtari Begum Festi-

val, a husband-and-wife-run music festival, was conceived in 2012 to create awareness of Indian classical music and dance in this country, and, more importantly, to create opportunities for artists and musicians who don't have a platform in Canada.

Despite obstacles after two years of pandemic darkness, and with strong support from Massey Theatre executive director Jessica Schneider, the festival is set to allow the musicians to shine once more.

True to the festival's motto, "When the ears begin to see, the eyes listen," Khan hopes the au-

dience will be able to hear and feel the rhythmic bond between the drummer and dancer, and understand their symbiotic relationship.

They hope that festival continues to inspire people of colour to embrace their identities and keep the classical music and dance alive.

"I think once people realize that we are all one, when people realize that skin colour and cultural barriers are not something that defines a human being, and when there's more love and tolerance for each other, things can really open up for everybody."



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