

## Saffron Ensemble's Will You?



I can't get enough of the music made by Shujaat Husain Khan and Katayoun Goudarzi. Fortunately, they make a lot of music, whether as a duo or in ensembles with other musicians. The thread that runs through their music is the classical Persian poetry of Rumi presented by Goudarzi – sometimes sung, sometimes recited – set to Indian idioms “composed” by sitarist Khan. The Saffron Ensemble adds a touch of jazz to the mix, from pianist Kevin Hays and saxophonist Tim Ries, with percussion on tabla by Dibyarka Chatterjee.

A couple of Khan and Goudarzi's previous efforts – [Spring](#), a two-disc set with the two of them plus flute and table; and [Ruby](#), which featured a larger ensemble of South Asian musicians – are among my favorite releases of the decade. This is the second release by Saffron, and the musicians seem to have really hit their groove. The Western players contribute beautiful colors to the pieces and a slightly different style of improvisation, but they all seem to play off of each other quite ably, which further enhances the moving experience of listening to Khan and Goudarzi.

Katayoun Goudarzi chooses the poems for each project, and whether to sing or recite them or a combination of the two. Shujaat Khan then sketches out melodic ideas for each, which the two then collaborate on, mostly over the internet. The studio recordings generally take place with no rehearsals, a process made possible by the fact that the musicians have been playing and performing together since 2009.

The disc's 10 pieces are a mix of long works in the 10- and 11-minute range and shorter pieces. Although it starts off with the lush title track, the love song “Will You?”, the whole album seems to have a slightly darker and more foreboding feel to it than previous projects, largely due to the song that is the centerpiece, “Don't.” Even for one who doesn't understand Rumi's words, it's an emotional experience, as the protagonist pleads for the life of a loved one.

“That poem was the reason I sang on this album,” Goudarzi says. “The lyrics are saying, he's my life, don't beat him up, don't take him away. I had to portray that pain. I had to sing those lyrics with all the passion it required. If I couldn't do it right, I wouldn't touch them. That was one of the inspiring songs that made me think of singing a lot of the album.”

That song is definitely one of the most dramatic on the album, Goudarzi's expressive soprano reaching a definite emotional high. In fact, she starts at a high point and only gets more emotive from there on in this 11-minute epic. Of similar epic scale is the 10-minute episodic “A Thread.” It starts with a recitation by Goudarzi to a loosely jazz-like modal backing before the musicians settle into a more rhythmic structure over which she sings a beautiful song with sax and sitar playing call-and-response in the intervals between verses.

The other lengthy piece is the nine-minute “Void,” which opens the album's second half. After the musicians set out the theme in various combinations – piano and sax, sax and sitar, piano-sax and vocalization by Khan – Goudarzi sings. She is tracked by sitar and piano, answering and responding to her phrases, then setting off in a duet, exploring the melody and the mode and the mood, which is

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introspective, cautious. When she returns to sing, it is boldly.

But some of the shorter works are just as moving, particularly those that fill out the second half. “Let Me” in particular speaks to me. The musicians improvise and play off one another as Goudarzi very emotionally recites. This may be a version of the Rumi ghazal called “Let Me Be Mad,” one of many in which the poet compares total devotion to God with a type of madness, which concludes:

*Beyond the sanity of fools is a burning desert*

*Where Your sun is whirling in every atom*

*Beloved, drag me there, let me roast in Perfection!*

The next, “Unafraid” is an upbeat instrumental by Khan, followed by the languid “Quiet Turbulence.” Goudarzi’s recitation is set in an even more reverb-laden space than usual, making this short work very evocative. The album ends on a high note with “Disarray.” Goudarzi repeats one stanza several times as the piece begins, then the musicians take over and improvise on the intense tune that imperceptibly speeds up and gives an impression of whirling, circular, trance-like motion.

What makes this music so interesting and comforting to me is the way Goudarzi’s passionate presentation of this ancient Persian poetry interacts with the equally ancient style of music from the Indian subcontinent (and in Saffron’s case, blended with an African-American musical form), with the players improvising in the moment. Top honors go to the stars, Goudarzi and Khan. But the techniques of all involved, including the production and engineering, is top-notch. Sometimes you can hardly tell when a note sung by Goudarzi becomes one played on sitar or sax or piano. *Will You* is a sublime musical experience.

(Tames Records, 2017)

Here’s a video about the making of this album

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### [Gary Whitehouse](#)

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