

Indian music at Mondavi

UCD instructor also an acclaimed composer and touring artist

By Marilyn Mantay
Enterprise music critic

Rita Sahai is a "Jewel of Music," a title conferred upon her by guru and mentor Ustad Ali Akbar Khan, in recognition of her extraordinary vocal talent.

She'll demonstrate her voice — which has been called "as stormy and ecstatic as the coming of rain after a long dry season" — during an evening of classical, devotional Hindustani music taking place Friday evening, Feb. 27, at the UC Davis Mondavi Center's Jackson Hall.

She'll be joined by instrumentalists Pandit Swapan Chaudhuri (tabla), Pandit Ramesh Misra (sarangi) and Kanwaljit Kalsi (harmonium).

The occasion also celebrates Sahai's newest album, "Meera." For the UCD music department, where Sahai teaches students in the Hindustani vocal music of her native India, it recognizes an emphasis on ethnomusicology — world music not rooted in the Western tradition — sparked by the arrival in 2002 of professor Sandra Graham.

The Feb. 27 concert is based on Sahai's CD. "Meera" celebrates the life and music of Meerabai, an enigmatic 15th century Indian saint-singer, known for her devotion to Krishna. Sahai set seven of Meera's poems to music, the melodies distilled

from ragas. In her poems, Meera was a wanderer, a seeker, and you can hear that in the singer's voice.

Sahai clearly is a consummate musician, not merely a singer but also a teacher and composer. She began to study in India for much the same reason that children in Davis begin: Her father thought she had talent.

"I used to sing everything I heard on the radio, so my father thought he should give me proper training. In my family, nobody is in music. Everybody is in science." (Sahai has a master's degree in Sanskrit literature.)

Her father provided the usual parental support — transportation and the cost of lessons — and also challenged her. At age 14, he encouraged her to compete for a national music award.

Sahai recalled that event: "My father said, 'I'll believe you're as good as everyone says you, are if you compete and win!'"

So she competed ... and won.

Her most important teacher was Pandit Rama Shankar Mishra of Benares. The light, romantic style called Benares Gharana comes from her homeland. But later, during the many years she has lived in the Bay Area, Sahai has studied with Khan Saheb, whose style — Seni Alaudin Gharana — has great rhythm and vitality. He is, she explained, her mentor.

Because a person accustomed to Western Music finds Hindustani music "difficult," Graham offered some explanation. "It is a systematic exploration of raga, which is many things: scale, melody, specific melodic patterns, ornamenta-

Music preview

Hindustani music concert

Where: UC Davis Mondavi Center's Jackson Hall

When: 8 p.m. Friday, Feb. 27

Tickets: \$14/\$11/\$8 general, \$7/\$5.50/\$4 students and children; call 754-2787

tion, mood, tones, color, season, time of day"

Performing and listening are both devotional.

Sahai said that performed music is a "systematic unfolding." At the beginning is the un-metered *Alap*. "You start low and you explore each note," Sahai said. "The *Alap* unfolds very slowly. It's unstructured and improvised. If you are the performer or the listener, you get transported to a meditative state."

And that's the way "Meera" begins.

As the piece moves forward, the progression is faster, and the tempo — marked by the tabla, or drum — moves from un-metered to metered. The voice improvises within that pulse.

The Hindustani word for meter is *tala*; there are lots of them, with, say, 10, 12 or 16 beats. Graham said that members of the audience may count the pulse on their fingers. This counting is learned by Hindustani children while they're very young, and thus seems almost innate.

Players of the sarangi, a stringed instrument that is closest to the human voice, go be-



Courtesy photo

IN GREAT DEMAND: When she's not teaching Hindustani music in the UC Davis music department, vocalist Rita Sahai tours extensively throughout the United States, Canada, India and the United Kingdom.

yond rhythmic to intuitive. When a singer improves, Sahai said. "they just know what you're going to do next."

"He follows Rita like a shadow," Graham said, referring to Misra's skill on the sarangi. Graham sounded astounded as she mentioned this.

"There's clearly a huge need and hunger for music outside the Western tradition," Graham said. But here's the catch: Sahai

said that one only can understand a type of music if one does it personally.

Taking a step toward that goal, Sahai, who has students in the Bay Area and Sacramento, now teaches Hindustani vocal music to UCD graduate students.

Maybe we of other heritages will catch up some day, with this music that preceded its Western equivalent by hundreds — perhaps thousands — of years.