



A music scholar in love with the sounds of India

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Francesca Cassio, a scholar and singer specialized in Indian music who has lectured, performed and recorded in India, the United States and Europe, has just completed a three-day intense retreat of *Gurbani* music in Albuquerque, New Mexico. At least half of the retreat's 30-odd participants were Sikh Americans. Others, like Cassio, were westerners who are also disciples of Bhai Baldeep Singh, *Gurbani* exponent from New Delhi.

"My interest in Indian classical music and in the *Gurbani* tradition is refreshed whenever I attend retreats like the one Bhai Baldeep conducts," Cassio says.

Rome-born Cassio, 44, spent nearly two decades in Italy training in western music and performing in operas before India tugged at her musical soul. She has taught music at Italian universities and also at Viswa Bharati in West Bengal. She has a PhD in ethnomusicology from University la Sapienza of Rome, in affiliation with India's Benares Hindu University. And she is an associate professor in the Department of Music and the Sardarni Harbans Kaur Chair in Sikh musicology at Hofstra University, New York, since September 2011. It is reportedly the first *Gurbani* music chair at a university in the western world.

"My research focuses on the tradition of *Gurbani* music and its place in the traditional Indian music starting in the medieval times," says Cassio. "I study the unifying forces in this music but also study the different traditions and singing styles, say between *Gurbani* and *bhajans*. It is not just seeing the two kinds of devotionals in different contexts and languages but also studying the performance style. I got into Indian classical music because of my train-



Francesca Cassio sings at the Hofstra University Guru Nanak Interfaith Award event



Francesca Cassio with Girija Devi in 2003

sonic attraction and I was quickly crossing musical oceans. I was 20 then. I went to India and studied under Ustad Rahim Fahimuddin Dagar and also came to know the *Gurbani* tradition from Bhai Baldeep, who was also refreshing his knowledge of music under Dagar."

Last year, in an article paying tribute to her guru Dagar who had just passed away, Cassio wrote: "I had the privilege to be accepted as disciple, being educated in *dhrupad* according to the system of *guru-shishya parampara* (teacher-student tradition). Somehow it was not easy for a westerner to change the way of learning, but in the time, I appreciated the values carried by the traditional pedagogy of *dhrupad*. As Guruji used to say, '*Raga* is not a combination of notes. *Dhrupad* is not the name of a musical genre but the name of Knowledge'."

In 2003, Cassio accompanied R F Dagar in Europe for a tour of concerts and workshops. She is also very knowledgeable on *thumris* (she learned under Girija Devi), Indian folk music, and Rabindrasangeet (learning from Pramita Mallik and Reba Som).

Cassio's concerts across the globe include one in Jodhpur two years ago to mark Guru Nanak's Birthday Celebrations and at the Rajasthan International Folk Festival. She has also performed at the Indian Institute of Technology-New Delhi. At the Guru Nanak Prize event in New York this year, she led half a dozen singers and musicians in reciting Sikh hymns.

She is asked at times about her religious affiliation. She readily admits she has an Indian spiritual name but it is private. Is she a Sikh? "Whether I embrace Sikhism or not," she says, "does not affect my work as a researcher and professor of musicology."

ing as a musicologist. First it was *dhrupad*, and when I began to hear the music of Dagar brothers, I felt deep within me that something was pulling me to India. It was a