

Evocative Indian music alluring on frigid night

By Gwenda Nemerofsky

THE exotic touched down in the unlikely venue of Westminster United Church on Tuesday night as singer/composer Kiran Ahluwalia and friends were guest artists for an evening of evocative Indian music.

On a truly frigid night, nothing could have been more welcoming than the sojourn to other climes provided by the Manitoba Chamber Orchestra. India, Hungary and Armenia offered momentary getaways from Winnipeg at its least hospitable.

Born in India and raised in Canada, Ahluwalia learned her craft in her birth country and has written much of her own repertoire. She began, however, with *Jo Dill* by Vithal Rao, arranged by Manitoba composer Glenn Buhr, who combined prolonged, slow phrases in the MCO's strings (distinctly western) with Ahluwalia's pure and slightly warbly stylings for a contemporary twist.

Her voice is sweet and strong, with only a touch of the nasal quality associated with Indian singing. As she sang, she made gently graceful hand motions, her floating arms reaching out and adding to the expressiveness of her renderings.

Despite the subjects about which she sings — unrequited love, optimism and wanderlust — Ahluwalia has a vulnerable, almost child-like quality that is inexplicably alluring.

Yakeenan, which tells the story of a man who yearns for adventure, opened with Gurpreet Chana drumming on the tabla before Ahluwalia entered with riveting ululations. The adventure-some spirit came through loud and clear as conductor Anne Manson led the MCO in a rhythmic and driving arrangement by Buhr.

Buhr's new works, *Chant of Wind and Thunder* and *Chant of Water and Sky*, received world premieres, the latter a beautiful, pastoral song representing an idyllic day at Lake of the Woods. Ahluwalia sang in unison with the strings as modal changes transitioned into an Eastern tune, cellos taking the melody. The song came to rest softly, with Ahluwalia's lovely vocals soaring above.

The only unfortunate aspect of the performance by Ahluwalia and her ensemble — Rez Abbasi, guitar; Nikku Nayar, electric bass; Ashak Bidaye, harmonium; and Chana — was the fact that very few audience members could watch them as they played.

By custom, they were seated on the floor of the stage, effectively eliminating them from view.



Ahluwalia: pure vocal stylings

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★★★★★ out of five

The consequence of this was most evident at the end of their performance, when only the audience seated in the far right aisle of the church (closest to the performers) gave a standing ovation. Perhaps a small platform would have remedied this.

The MCO finished the evening with a stunning performance of Bartok's folk-inspired *Divertimento for Strings*. Under Manson's vigorous direction, the orchestra dug right into the generously meaty string writing, with concertmaster Karl Stobbe and principal cellist Yuri Hooker stepping up with gutsy and sonorous solos.

This was the best playing we've heard from the MCO in a long time.

➤ gwenda.nemerofsky@shaw.ca