

Soulful melodies

Mahesh Kale captivated audiences with his recital of devotional songs

After a successful international tour across Australia, New Zealand and Singapore, San Francisco-based National Award-winning Hindustani classical vocalist Mahesh Kale who is now on a month-long India tour across several cities, presented his acclaimed concert series, *Abhangwari* in Calcutta on July 5 at GD Birla Sabhagar.

Rooted in Maharashtra's centuries-old Warkari tradition and inspired by the sacred pilgrimage to Pandharpur, the

concert series recreates the essence of the sacred Wari pilgrimage through music. In Maharashtra, the Wari is an 800-year-old annual pilgrimage where thousands of devotees, known as Warkaris, walk for days, singing abhangs and chanting the name of Lord

Vitthala in a moving expression of faith, equality and collective devotion.

Having experienced the pilgrimage himself, Mahesh Kale has envisioned his *Abhangwari* as a way to bring that profound sense of devotion, surrender and shared energy to those who



Devout audiences filled the auditorium with their energetic chants



Towards the end of his performance, Mahesh Kale came down from the stage to mingle with his audience, chanting Lord Vitthala's name along with them

may not be able to physically undertake the journey themselves.

Presented in a packed auditorium full of music lovers, the mood inside was one of deep devotion and festive fervour, with a serene, powerful aura generated by Mahesh Kale's invocation to the Mother Goddess as he stepped onto the stage. What followed was a unique blend of classical, semi-classical and devotional music, that offered a sublime, soul-stirring experience and achieved an almost cathartic effect on the audience. Blending Hindustani classical music with traditional Marathi Abhangs, the singer's performance mirrored the energy and dynamism of the pilgrimage itself. As the evening unfolded, what began as a concert gradually evolved into a shared act of devotion with the audience becoming a part of the experience. Many swayed gently with their eyes closed, chanting Lord Vitthala's name along with Kale, almost in a trance.

The first song *Jai jai*



Kale urged his audience to chant and sing along with him, making the performance truly become a symbolic representation of the Wari pilgrimage

Ram Krishna Hari in Raga Puriya Dhanashree described the pilgrims setting out on their pilgrimage with devotion and enthusiasm. His own compositions, *Sada majhe dola*, *Ata mi ananya yethe adhikari* and *Abhangwari* captured the devout atmosphere as the pilgrims kept walking to their destination. As if taking the audience along on the journey itself, each song (from a

particular stage of the journey) also reflected the speed and pace of the progress of the pilgrims, capturing their devotion and frenzy, at the same time offering glimpses into pilgrims' reasons for going on the pilgrimage.

Narrated evocatively by Priyanshi Bansal, who brought to the life the true stories of pilgrims, the experience left the audience feeling cleansed and purified by a wave of music and spirituality. The concert ended with Kale descending from the stage to mingle with the crowd and join them in chanting God's name. "Abhang has been a part of me since childhood. As a kid, I was taught a new Abhang every week by my father. And though I never went on the journey as a child, our family would always feed pilgrims and offer them rest whenever they passed by our home. Recently, when I went on the journey myself, I was caught in the joy of the moment. It became such a valuable experience for me that I wanted to live that moment again. This led to the idea of creating the musical series, where I could also share the rich philosophy of the journey. I also wanted to share the stories of the pilgrims and pilgrimage," Kale told t2.

What excites him most about devotional music? "When you are in devotion the feeling is devoid of words. As an artiste, I express it in a certain way and that evokes a similar sensibility in my audience. It is a beautiful and pure process. What is interesting is that, it not only affects those who relate to that philosophy or understand Marathi (the language in which I sing) but others as well. It doesn't really matter in which part of the world or India I perform in, I always receive a wonderful response from my audience," said Kale.

Piya Roy

Pictures courtesy: Bigul PR

Mahesh Kale enchanted the audience with his immersive performance of songs of devotion