

INTERVIEW

## IN THE LINEAGE OF THE ETERNAL NOTE: INTERVIEW WITH JYOTI HEGDE



Jyoti Hegde playing Rudraveena. JYOTI HEGDE

JYOTI HEGDE is an Indian classical musician, known for her mastery of the Rudraveena in the Dhrupad tradition and her artistry on the sitar. Vidushi Hegde holds the distinction of being the first Indian woman to play the Rudraveena. A disciple of Dr. Bindu Madhav Pathak, Pandit Indudhar Nirodyji of the Agra Gharana, and Ustad Asad Ali Khan Sahab, she represents the Khandarbani lineage of the Dhrupad tradition. She is the founder of *Veenagram*, a Gurukul rooted in traditional musical pedagogy, located in Sirsi, Uttara Kannada. This interview carries discussion with Vidushi Hegde on various such life events.

---

**It is a great honor to interview you for Anveshanā. We must admit, we are a little nervous speaking with you—the first woman to play the Rudraveena. May we begin by asking about your early years? Was there an artistic atmosphere in your household? And how did you come to choose music among the various forms of art?**

**Jyoti Hegde:** It's humbling to be part of a lineage where the Rudraveena holds such deep reverence, and I understand your nervousness—but I see myself simply as a seeker on this path.

To answer your question, there was no formal background of music in my family. However, my father played a crucial role in sowing the seeds of my musical sensibility. As a child, he would make me sit and listen to *Aakashvani*, and the voices of great maestros would fill our home. I was brought up on the music of legends like *Vidushi Gangubai Hangal*, *Pt. Bhimsen Joshi*, *Mallikarjun Mansur Ji*, and many others. Those early listening experiences became the foundation of my inner musical world.

Interestingly, music came into my life quite coincidentally—as a subject I chose at university. Until then, I had excelled in various fields like sports and dance. But once I stepped into the world of music at the age of 16, it felt like everything else gently faded away. Music didn't remain just a subject—it became my calling, my passion, and eventually, the very axis around which my life began to revolve. I began my musical journey with the Sitar, which gradually paved the way to the Rudraveena. This was a transition that became the true turning point of my life.



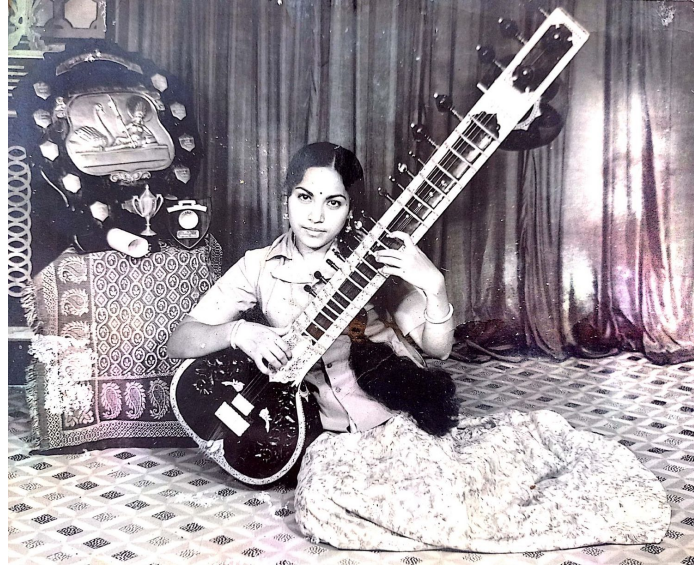
Jyoti Hegde with her parents. **JYOTI HEGDE**

**It was quite rare, back then, for a woman to choose music, let alone Rudraveena. Could you tell us about Rudraveena and its spiritual significance? What were the prejudices, if we can call it that, against women choosing this instrument?**

**JH:** People often describe the journey of pursuing an art form—especially a rare one—as a struggle. But I've always felt that when you truly love something, even the greatest inconveniences feel tiny. For me, the desire to learn the Rudraveena was so strong, so deeply rooted, that what others may call “struggles” became simply a part of my path—a meaningful journey in itself. Like any journey, it had its straight roads and unexpected detours. When I took

up the Rudraveena, I had no idea that I was possibly the first woman to do so. Nor did I ever feel the need to claim such a title. To me, the instrument never asked who was playing it—it only responded to sincerity and passion. There is nothing about the Rudraveena that a woman cannot play. When the urge to learn is genuine, gender becomes irrelevant. What matters is dedication.

The Rudraveena holds profound spiritual significance. Its deep, meditative resonance naturally invites stillness and introspection. Historically, many seekers have used it as a tool for their own spiritual practice, or *sādhana*. In fact, that very quality is what allowed the veena to find its place in the Dhrupad tradition, which is itself deeply rooted in devotion and inner exploration.



Jyoti Hegde with Sitar. JYOTI HEGDE

**You had been practising in Sitar before Rudraveena. How and why did you refocus and choose Rudraveena? Moreover, what are the differences between the two instruments, and in which of the two do you find more inspiration?**

**JH:** It was purely by chance that I first encountered the Rudraveena, that I was already learning the Sitar at the time and had no idea that my Guru also played the Rudraveena—until I saw him perform it at a college program. That moment changed everything for me. It was the first time I heard the sound of the Rudraveena, and I was instantly captivated. The sound lingered in my mind—it was haunting, profound, and unlike anything I had experienced before. I didn’t think twice; I knew I had to learn it. I requested my Guruji to teach me, but it took a great deal of convincing and, of course, a test of my sincerity before he finally agreed. The journey from there is something I’ve spoken about in many of my earlier interviews—but that moment, that encounter, was truly the turning point.

As for comparing the Sitar and the Rudraveena—it’s not quite fair, because the Rudraveena is, in fact, the ancestor of the Sitar. They belong to different eras and traditions. Technically, they are very different instruments, each with its own *swabhāva*— or inherent nature. The Sitar is graceful and versatile in its own right, but I found my true voice in the sound of the Rudraveena. The Rudraveena has a deeply meditative quality. Its resonance carries both masculine strength

*“It was the first time I heard the sound of the Rudraveena, and I was instantly captivated. The sound lingered in my mind—it was haunting, profound, and unlike anything I had experienced before.”*

and feminine grace. My Guru, *Ustad Asad Ali Khan Sahab*, once beautifully described it as ‘embodying the essence of *Ardhanārīśvara*—a perfect balance of the masculine and the feminine’. That description resonates with me deeply. The Rudraveena has everything my soul seeks—it is not just an instrument to me, but a spiritual companion. Looking back, I believe that moment when I first heard it wasn’t just an artistic choice—it was a destined call.

**Who were your gurus around your blooming period? How did they help you in becoming one with the music that you chose? Were they always from Dhrupad?**

**JH:** My musical journey began under the guidance of *Dr. Bindu Madhav Pathak*, who was my first Guru. It was with him that I started learning the Sitar, and it was also under his tutelage that I was first introduced to the Rudraveena. For a few formative years, I absorbed training in Khayal style and the Rudraveena’s stylistic elements from him. Though his background was rooted in the Khayal tradition, his approach laid a strong foundation for my understanding of melody, discipline, and musical aesthetics. Later, I was introduced to the Dhrupad style, which brought a significant shift in my musical perception. I began learning the basics of Dhrupad under *Pandit Indudhar Nirody ji* of the *Agra Gharana*. He opened the door to this profound tradition for me. To deepen my understanding and refine the nuances of the Dhrupad style, I then came under the guidance of the legendary *Ustad Asad Ali Khan Sahab*, one of the greatest Rudraveena players in the *Khandarbani* tradition. Each of these Gurus has played an irreplaceable role in shaping who I am as a musician. Their contributions are immeasurable, and I carry their teachings with deep reverence.



Jyoti Hegde with her guru Dr. Bindu Madhav Pathak.

JYOTI HEGDE

In Indian classical music, the Guru is more than a teacher—they are the light that shows the path. While not all of my Gurus came from the Dhrupad paramparā, each one brought unique insights and dimensions to my learning. Together, they helped me become one with the music I eventually chose as my life’s path.

**What is the importance of a guru in music, art, or simply life? Does there always exist one (or more)?**

**JH:** In music, or in any art form, a Guru is very important. A Guru doesn’t just teach you techniques—they help shape your thinking, your discipline, and your connection with the art. They guide you not just in music, but in life too. In my journey, every Guru I’ve had has come at the right time and helped me move to the next stage. Each one has taught me something





Jyoti Hegde with her guru Ustaad Asad Ali Khan. **JYOTI HEGDE**

different, and I carry their teachings with me every day. I do believe that everyone has one or more Gurus in life— sometimes in the form of a teacher, and sometimes as an experience or even a moment that changes you deeply. A Guru can take many forms, but their presence is always special.

**What was your first ever public performance? Do you remember the hour? How does an artist think before appearing in public for a performance? Is she nervous, or is she inspired mostly? Or is she sometimes clueless about what may happen? And, what is your ritual before performing?**

**JH:** My first ever public performance was a very special moment, but honestly, I don't remember the exact hour. I was performing for the *Yuva Vani* program organised by *Aakashvani*—it was my debut. What I do remember clearly is the feeling before stepping on stage. As artists, before a performance, our mind enters a very different space. It's calm, focused, and deeply connected with the raaga we are about to present. Ideally, it should be a meditative state—free from distraction and noise. In the green room, I usually stay silent. I prefer not to talk or meet anyone before going on stage. I just stay with the music—mentally tuning into the raga, going over the feel of it, and absorbing its mood. Yes, sometimes there is nervousness, sometimes inspiration flows strongly, and sometimes we really don't know how the performance will unfold. But that uncertainty is also part of the beauty—it keeps the experience real and alive. For me, my only ritual before performing is silence, and being completely with the music. That's where I find my grounding.

**You became a disciple of Ustad Asad Ali Khan Ji in the Khandarbani gharana of Dhru-**

**pad. What is the meaning of ‘gharana’ in music? And what about the Khandarbani gharana in Dhrupad made you follow it?**

**JH:** A gharana in Indian classical music is like a musical family or a school of thought. When you become a disciple of a Guru, you naturally become part of that musical family—one that carries a certain style, a certain way of understanding and expressing music. Over generations, when a particular style is passed down, shaped, and nurtured, it forms a tradition—that’s what we call a gharana. It becomes like a musical signature. But even within the same gharana, every musician’s style is unique because music reflects who you are. Your personality, your emotions, your inner world—all of that comes through your music. So while two artists may belong to the same gharana, they might still sound very different.



Ustaad Asad Ali Khan with Rudraveena

©WIKIPEDIA COMMONS

When I went to learn from Ustad Asad Ali Khan Sahab, I honestly didn’t know he belonged to the Khandarbani tradition of Dhrupad. I was simply drawn to his style of playing—it moved me deeply. I didn’t go looking for a specific gharana, I just wanted to learn from him. Later, I came to know that his playing belonged to the Khandarbani of Dhrupad. What drew me in was the balance in his music—it had power, but also a beautiful emotional depth. He often said that ‘music should be like a sea of emotions, and it’s up to the artist to choose which wave they want to bring to the surface’. That idea stayed with me. His thoughts about music, about the instrument, and about expression really touched me. That’s what made me fall in love with the Khandarbani style of playing the Rudraveena—it felt honest, deep, and complete.

**How was learning from a great exponent of Rudraveena, Ustad Asad Ali Khan Ji, for you? Who else was learning under him at that time? How was his teaching, and do you remember any anecdotes to share with us about Khan Sahab?**

**JH:** Learning from Ustad Asad Ali Khan Sahab was a completely different experience compared to learning from my other Gurus. For one, there was a big geographical gap—he lived in New Delhi, and I was in Karnataka. In the beginning, this made things a little difficult, so Khan Sahab suggested that whenever he came down south for concerts—in Bangalore, Mumbai, or anywhere nearby—he would call me, and I could travel to him with my Veena and an escort. So, a lot of my taalim happened in hotel rooms, green rooms, or wherever he was staying. I learned from him like that for nearly seven years. It was not just formal training—it was a complete experience. I got to see his lifestyle up close, his way of thinking about music, and his strong connection with tradition.

*“His music had that kind of power—you may not understand it intellectually right away, but your soul knows.”*

Khan Sahab came from a royal musical lineage, and that reflected in his presence, his discipline, and the way he carried his music. His command over the Rudraveena, over raaga, and over language was something I deeply admired. He didn't just teach notes or compositions—he taught how to live music, how to

carry yourself as a musician. There are many small memories that I carry with me—like the way he would describe a raaga not just through notes but through emotions, or how he would say that music must have a sense of royalty and grace. It was not just learning; it was growing in his presence.

**Khan Sahab had wonderful interpretations of Raagas. How did you inspire yourself? When did you start interpreting raagas on your own? Moreover, did you understand Khan Sahab's bhakti rasa and the divine call very early?**

**JH:** Khan Sahab's way of looking at a raaga was truly unique. It wasn't just about the structure or notes—it was about emotion, mood, and presence. Every raaga had a soul in his hands. I remember how, when he played *Kanada* or *Malkauns*, there was such a powerful masculine energy in the music. It would feel like a deep, grounded force. And then, when he played something like *Khamaj* or *Bihag*, he would shift completely—his playing would become gentle, graceful, full of sweetness. That ability to bring out the true rasa of a raaga, and to switch so naturally between masculine and feminine energy—that was something I admired deeply.

At that time, I don't think I understood everything consciously. I didn't fully grasp the bhakti rasa or the divine aspect of his music in words. But I felt it. It moved me deeply. His music had that kind of power—you may not understand it intellectually right away, but your soul knows. As for my own journey of interpreting raagas—that came slowly. For a long time, I simply absorbed. I didn't try to interpret—I just listened, practiced, and stayed close to the music. But gradually, something shifted. I began to feel the raaga not just as something to play, but as something to converse with. I think that's when my own interpretations began. They were not imitations anymore—they became reflections of how I felt inside. Khan Sahab's influence stays with me even now. His deep connection with emotion, his understanding of the divine call within music—that's something I still carry, and continue to grow into.



Ustad Asad Ali Khan and Jyoti Hegde. **JYOTI HEGDE**

**What gravity does music have in terms of traditions, spirituality, and divinity? Somebody—like you, who immerses themselves in music spiritually, how does the world become for you?**

**JH:** Music, for me, is not just sound—it is a way of living. It carries deep tradition, because every note we sing or play comes from a long line of masters who kept this art alive with dedication and love. That connection to tradition itself brings a sense of grounding. Spiritually, music is like a path. When I'm fully immersed in it, it feels like prayer. There is silence, peace, and something that connects me to a space beyond the everyday world. It helps me go inwards and also upwards, towards something divine. When I am in that space, the outside world fades away. There is no noise, no rush—just the music and me. In those moments, the world becomes quiet, full of beauty, and everything feels more meaningful. Music becomes a bridge between me and something greater.

**You have mentioned elsewhere that during the Mughal period, the Khayal tradition became more apt for performers in the courts, which led to more use of sitars. In comparison, the Dhrupad style benefited the Rudraveena, which unfortunately had a slow run after its golden period. How do these political events shape the music, the listeners, and the performers?**

**JH:** Yes, political and cultural shifts have always had an impact on the arts, and music is no exception. During the Mughal period, the atmosphere in royal courts began to favour styles that were more decorative and expressive in a lighter way. That's how Khayal started gaining popularity—it allowed more freedom in presentation, and it suited the taste of the courts. Instruments like the Sitar, which are more versatile in that context, naturally found more space.

On the other hand, Dhrupad is deeply spiritual and meditative. It was always more connected to temples, royal patronage of a different kind, and personal *sādhana*. Rudraveena, being very introspective and subtle in sound, was ideal for Dhrupad. But as court music moved towards performance-based forms, the Rudraveena started to fade from the public stage. These changes affect not just the music, but also the audience and the artist. Listeners began expecting a different kind of experience—something more immediate, more dramatic. Performers had to adapt, and many shifted towards what was in demand. But I believe that every tradition has its time, its cycles. The spiritual depth of Dhrupad and the Rudraveena can never disappear. They are like quiet rivers—always flowing, even if not always seen. And now, slowly, there is a growing respect again for that kind of depth and stillness in music.

*“The Rudraveena has everything my soul seeks—it is not just an instrument to me, but a spiritual companion. Looking back, I believe that moment when I first heard it wasn't just an artistic choice—it was a destined call.”*



**In your opinion, what is the role of patience and discipline in mastering Indian classical music?**

**JH:** In my opinion, patience and discipline are essential to master Indian classical music. It requires years of consistent practice, dedication, and an openness to learning. Even when you feel like you're close to the goal, you realize that there is no final destination. Music is not something you "achieve"; it's a never-ending journey. To truly walk this path, regular practice is key. It's not about attending classes once in a while—it's a way of living, a continuous process. Indian classical music isn't a hobby; it's a discipline that shapes your entire life, every day. The journey itself becomes the destination. Nowadays, I often find students coming to me and telling me what they want to learn next, which is quite amusing because traditionally, it's the guru who decides what to teach and when. It's important to remember that learning music requires patience. You think you've reached a certain level, but then you realize there are countless more steps to take.

Every time you feel like you've reached a peak, you discover that there's an even higher one waiting for you. This is why patience is so crucial. Art, especially music, is a subtle thing. It involves understanding minute details and abstract ideas of beauty that can't be rushed. The student needs to understand that it's not about quickly reaching an endpoint, but about experiencing the journey and growing with it.



Jyoti Hegde with Rudraveena. **JYOTI HEGDE**

**Do you think there are multiple myths about music among people? There are many, for instance, about Rudraveena and women. We can guess it is mostly because of power dynamics and our population not being educated in music. How do you think we can combat these?**

**JH:** Yes, there are certainly many myths about music, especially around instruments like Rudraveena and the role of women in classical music. Some of these myths come from outdated power dynamics, social structures, and a lack of

understanding about the true nature of music. Rudraveena, for example, has often been seen as a "masculine" instrument, which is a misconception. Music itself is beyond gender, and anyone with the passion and dedication can connect with any instrument, regardless of gender. Another myth is that classical music, especially the deep spiritual traditions like Dhrupad, is only for a select few or those with specific backgrounds. This limits people from understanding its universal appeal and beauty. The lack of widespread education in music

also contributes to these misconceptions, as people are often not exposed to the depth and versatility of classical music.

To combat these myths, education is key. We need to create more opportunities for people to learn about music—not just in schools but in communities, through media, and public performances. Educating people about the rich diversity and inclusivity of music can break down these barriers. The more people see women performing on instruments like Rudraveena, or hear the depth of Dhrupad, the more myths will fade. Additionally, fostering open discussions and encouraging women to take up all kinds of instruments, including ones historically dominated by men, will help change perceptions. Music, at its core, is about expression and connection, and it should be free from the constraints of myths and stereotypes.

**Moreover, music has become a daily consumption among the masses. However, mostly new music - hip-hop, rock, and so on. What do you think distinguishes classical music from other forms of music, especially the systems of music that have emerged recently?**

**JH:** Classical music, especially Indian classical music, is fundamentally different from newer genres like hip-hop or rock—in its depth, structure, and purpose. While modern music is often created for entertainment and instant enjoyment, classical music—both in its creation and listening experience—demands a deeper level of immersion. Indian classical music, for example, is based on intricate systems of *raagas* and *tālas* that are designed to evoke specific emotions and connect with the listener on a different level. The process of learning classical music is long, requiring years of disciplined study to understand the nuances and subtleties of rhythm, melody, and expression. The emphasis is on depth, connection, and an almost meditative experience, rather than quick consumption. In contrast, popular music today is designed to be more accessible and consumable in a short amount of time. It focuses on catchy rhythms, lyrics, and immediate gratification.

*“Music, at its core, is about expression and connection, and it should be free from the constraints of myths and stereotypes.”*

Genres like hip-hop and rock have their own energy, creativity, and cultural relevance, but they don’t have the same structure or emotional depth that classical music carries. What truly distinguishes classical music is the journey it offers. Every note, every phrase is a story waiting to unfold, and it’s not about a quick fix—it’s about cultivating a lifelong relationship with music. The system of improvisation in Indian classical music, for example, allows for a personal expression of emotion and spirit, where every performance can be unique and deeply personal. In short, classical music is about a deeper, more thoughtful connection to sound, while modern genres cater to more immediate emotional or social responses. Both have their places in the world.

**Tell us about your students. How did they find you? How do you choose students?**

### What is the most important lesson you give them about music?

**JH:** I currently have about 45 students from all around the world, and they come from different backgrounds and regions. It's wonderful to see them progressing and doing well. I have a Gurukul named Veenagram where we all live together. When someone approaches me to learn Rudraveena, I always make sure to be upfront about the challenges of the instrument. I tell them that it's a long-term commitment, and if they're not ready to fully dedicate themselves, it might not be the right time to start.



Disciples paying respect to their guru Jyoti Hegde.

JYOTI HEGDE

Once you pick up the Rudraveena, there's no turning back. Some of my students dedicate all their time to the instrument, while others balance it with their professions. But what's encouraging is seeing the younger generation take an interest in it. I'm confident they will carry forward the legacy of this art form even better than we have.

As for my teaching methods, they vary from student to student. Each individual has their own pace and way of learning, so it's important to adapt the approach to suit their unique needs. A good teacher recognizes that every stu-

dent learns differently, and the way they absorb knowledge will reflect back on the teacher. So it's important to be flexible and patient in guiding them. You cannot have the same method for everyone. I often lightly say, some have a habit of catching a flight while some enjoy the pace of a bullock cart. Both are fine in their own ways!

### Are there any memorable performances that you have done? Where were they and why are they close to you?

**JH:** There have been many memorable performances, but one that stands out is my performance at the *Darbar Festival*<sup>1</sup> in London. It's not just about the place; it's about the entire experience—the sound system, the ambiance, and of course, sometimes it's also about the listeners. Darbar Festival has the best sound system I've ever encountered, which is rare to find in India. What makes it even more special is the listeners—they are so knowledgeable about music and aware of what's happening on stage. This creates an environment where the artist can truly connect and perform at their best. The arrangements at the festival are also

<sup>1</sup>Darbar Festival is currently the most prestigious platform of Indian Classical Music that happens once in a year in London. Performed in 2014 (<https://youtu.be/qGutd8VAUec?si=WAPaRirVEMN2ciGZ>) and 2023 (<https://youtu.be/PfEPZE9w7M?si=INDwSl8oNsMao2SG>).



Jyoti Hegde with Rudraveena. JYOTI HEGDE

incredibly well-organized, which allows the artist to focus entirely on their performance. I had a truly memorable experience there, not just in 2016, but also during my recent performance in 2023. It was a space that allowed me to immerse myself fully in the music, and that's what made it unforgettable.

**Have you ever performed in Kanpur?**

**JH:** Yes I have performed in Kanpur on numerous occasions—so many, in fact, that I've forgotten a few of them. However, I clearly remember my first concert there, which was organized by IIT Kanpur, though I don't recall the exact date. I have also performed a jugalbandi performance with *Shri Satish Chandra ji* on the sitar—a Sitar-Rudraveena duet—in the year 2020. Another performance I recall was in 2018, for the College of Management Studies, Kanpur. These are just a couple of the concerts that come to mind.

**There is a connection between Yoga and music, which you have often expressed. Could you tell us more about this, Sangeet Sādhana, Naradeeya Shiksha (on which we believe you have worked), that is required for a musician?**

**JH:** I truly believe that yoga and music are deeply connected, especially when it comes to playing Rudraveena. When I started learning with Ustad Asad Ali Khan Sahab, I discovered the powerful link between yoga, specifically pranayama, and playing the Rudraveena. The instrument's close connection to the body is unique—when you hold the Rudraveena (traditional style of holding Rudraveena), it rests directly on your body, and your breathing patterns directly affect the sound you produce. To play it properly, you need to maintain a steady, calm breathing pattern, and that takes practice. This is where the practice of yoga comes in. The

discipline and control over your breath through pranayama and Omkar sādhanā are vital for mastering the Rudra veena. Yoga helps you connect deeply with your instrument and control your breath, which is essential for producing the best sound. It's a different kind of sādhanā that supports the journey of a musician, especially in traditional styles like Rudra veena.

**We know and realise that music holds a very special place in your life, but besides it, do you also practise some other hobbies or any other form of art?**

**JH:** In my childhood, I learned Bharatnatyam and was quite good at painting. But when music entered my life, it became my sole focus. However, these days, I have many other hobbies that I enjoy. I'm involved in farming and gardening, and I still find time to paint occasionally. I manage everything by myself at home. We have a large orchard of arecanut, and we also plant black pepper, cardamom, and a variety of other spices. Each year, we grow sweet corn, which my students enjoy, and I love experimenting with different recipes. These hobbies keep me grounded, fresh, and connected to nature, which indirectly helps me stay in tune with my music.

**We, at Anveshanā, aspire to encourage a needful attention between different forms of scholarships. Be it music or sciences, we often have a required aim to find the meaning of our life in these disciplines. But many times, people struggle with all sorts of things. In concluding thoughts, please tell us about how one should aim to bring life to its meaning (in whichever discipline). Moreover, do you wish to give any suggestions to young people who are pursuing music?**

**JH:** To bring life to the meaning in any discipline, be it music, art, or any other form, it's essential to dive deep into its essence. The true meaning lies not just in the technique or the end result, but in the process itself. One must understand the purpose behind their work, connect emotionally with it, and constantly evolve. In music, this means not just learning the notes, but understanding the emotions, the culture, and the tradition behind the sound. You must not only perform, but live the music, breathe it, and let it transform you.

*"To bring life to the meaning in any discipline, be it music, art, or any other form, it's essential to dive deep into its essence. The true meaning lies not just in the technique or the end result, but in the process itself."*

For young people pursuing music, my advice would be to stay patient and dedicated. Music is a lifelong journey and it's okay if it takes time to truly master it. Don't rush. Be open to learning from everyone, especially from maestros. Cultivate discipline in your practice and remember that setbacks are part of the journey. Also, never forget to enjoy the process. It's not just about the destination but the beauty of the path you take along the way. Keep your mind open, and stay curious—music will teach you more than you can imagine.