

Lamont School of Music presents

A Celebration of Kathak

20 Years of the North Indian Classical Ensemble

Sarah Morelli and Shilpi Nikhil, directors

With guest artists

Sri Jayanta Banerjee, sitar

Sri Satyaprakash Mishra, tabla

Friday, February 27, 2026

7:30 pm

Frederic C. Hamilton Family Recital Hall

A Celebration of Kathak

This evening marks twenty years of kathak study and performance at the University of Denver, beginning in 2006 with the founding of the North Indian Classical Ensemble by Sarah Morelli in her first year on the faculty. Our program reflects ongoing work shaped by the teachings of Pandit Chitresh Das and carried forward through sustained practice by students and musicians here at DU and beyond. We are grateful to share this continuing tradition with you.

1. Rangmanch: “Coloring of the Stage”

Performers: Sarah Morelli, Shilpi Nikhil, Sanya Mohanty, Helena Bolle, Aish Bhavan

Musicians: Jayanta Banerjee (sitar), Satyaprakash Mishra (tabla), Aarna Dhawan (recitation)

Rangmanch, literally “coloring the stage,” is a traditional opening that prepares and defines the performance space. Through mudrās (hand gestures), rhythmic movement, and ritual enactment, the dancer performs a pūjā, invoking the forces of creation, preservation, and transformation: Brahma, Vishnu, and Maheshvara.

This version was developed by Pandit Chitresh Das and first performed at DU in 2014 by a committed group of students: Carrie Jennings, Cailey Salagovic, Becca Moritzky, Katrina Yoshida, and Rose Martin. As is customary, we begin with Rangmanch to establish intention and attention for all that follows.

2. Fundamentals: Tatkār Kramalaya, Tihāīs, and Tatkār ki Bandish

Performers: North Indian Classical Ensemble, Kathak Foundations Level Dancers

Tatkār, the foundational footwork pattern of kathak, is the first rhythmic language learned by every student. Tonight, our dancers present tatkār in multiple speeds, a practice known as kramalaya. As the subdivision intensifies to four steps per beat, they demonstrate tihāīs, rhythmic phrases repeated three times to resolve precisely on sam, the first beat of the cycle.

A “Tatkār ki Bandish” reconfigures the syllables of tatkār into a composed structure, showing how even the most basic material can generate complexity and play. For generations of students, these elements have formed the groundwork for embodied rhythmic understanding and expressive freedom.

3. Thāt

Performer: Sarah Morelli

Thāt is not a fixed composition but a mode of performance: a cultivated space of improvisation unfolding in the moment. Rooted in the refined aesthetics of North India’s court traditions, it emphasizes poise, restraint, and nuanced expressivity (nazākat and andāz). Stillness, gaze, and the measured placement of weight become as significant as virtuosity, as each rendering unfolds uniquely through rhythmic play, swift turns, crisp stances, and intricate footwork.

This particular thāt explores khanda jāti, subdivisions of five, within the 16-beat tintāl cycle. Rather than the more common symmetrical divisions of 2, 3, 4, 6, or 8, the rhythmic play emphasizes 5 and 10 subdivisions per beat. These asymmetrical groupings create propulsion and tension, demanding deep internalization of pulse from dancer, tabla artist, and sitarist alike.

A central section is a lārī, literally a “string” or “chain,” which develops a rhythmic theme through evolving variations, weaving ideas together like beads on a garland. The piece then moves into traditional compositions adapted to explore khanda jāti’s five-based structures.

4. Tarikita Sequence & Solahgun Tihāīs

Performers: Kathak Progressions Level Dancers

Set in drut laya (fast tempo), this piece highlights “tarikita,” a foundational virtuosic footwork pattern in kathak. Crisp articulation and rhythmic precision carry the dancers through increasingly dense layering.

The sequence builds toward solahgun tihāīs, phrases rendered at eight steps per beat, demanding exceptional control and stamina. The final tihāī weaves stepping turns and heel pivots before resolving on beat one, sam.

5. Kathak Yoga

Performers: Sanya Mohanty and Aarna Dhawan

Kathak Yoga, developed by Pandit Chitresh Das and his disciples, integrates rhythm, melody, and movement into a single embodied practice. The dancer recites the tāl, sings the repeating laharā, and executes intricate rhythmic phrasing simultaneously, demanding sustained coordination of mind, breath, and body.

Central to Pt. Das’s artistic vision, Kathak Yoga represents a disciplined integration of the form’s core elements. It is explored more fully in the ethnography *A Guru’s Journey*.

Tonight’s performance features natavarī tihāīs drawn from Pt. Das’s “16 tihāīs” sequence, in which each tihāī begins from a different beat of the tintāl cycle. Originally cultivated as an inward, self-refining practice, Kathak Yoga becomes even more demanding in performance, requiring focus, stamina, and clarity from these young dancers.

6. Tete Kata Gadi Gena Sequence

Performers: North Indian Classical Ensemble

“Tete kata gadi gena” is a foundational rhythmic phrase shared by kathak and tabla. In this piece, the dancers move through multiple speeds, progressively intensifying its density within the 16-beat tintāl cycle. The final acceleration renders eight bols per beat, requiring exceptional stamina and balance.

7. Holi Tarānā

Performers: Pre-Professional Level Dancers, North Indian Classical Ensemble

A tarānā is a Hindustani musical form built from abstract rhythmic syllables woven into melodic composition. Set in rāg Manj Khammaj and inspired by Holi, this tarānā celebrates color, renewal, and līlā (divine play).

Holi is a springtime festival during which communities mark one another with vibrant powders and colored water in gestures of affection and joyful abandon.

In kathak nritya (narrative dance), a dancer may embody multiple characters regardless of gender. Here, the performers move fluidly between Krishna and Radha as sung lyrics describe their playful celebration of Holi.

8. Khammāj Tarānā

Performers: Shilpi Nikhil and Academy Pre-Professional Level Dancers

The music for this tarānā was composed by the eminent sarod maestro Ali Akbar Khan. Khansahib founded the Ali Akbar College of Music in the San Francisco Bay Area, a vital center for the study and transmission of Hindustani music in North America. One of his senior disciples, Dr. George Ruckert, arranged the composition for ensemble performance in the US, adapting Khansahib’s material while preserving its intricate rhythmic play and subtle melodic turns. Challenging even for seasoned artists, the piece was performed over several decades by Pandit Chitresh Das and his dance company.

Having studied with Khansahib, Dr. Ruckert, and Pandit Chitresh Das, Sarah Morelli returns to this work often, both as a traditional solo and in collaborative settings, including performances with the Temporal Taal Collective, the Johns Hopkins Symphony Orchestra, and DU’s Lamont Wind Ensemble. It has become a valued part of Denver’s kathak repertoire, reflecting ongoing processes of composition, transmission, and reinterpretation within a living lineage.

9. Concluding Pranām – “Bansuri Baj Rahi”

The program concludes with pranām, an offering of gratitude to teachers, musicians, audience, and the art form itself. Often described as a “meditation in motion,” pranām invites the dancer to attune to something larger than the self, acknowledging the earth upon which we dance and the oral tradition through which knowledge has been passed from generation to generation. We warmly welcome all current and former students of kathak to join us for this pranām.

Performers

North Indian Classical Ensemble, Winter 2026 Members: Elizabeth Bangiyev, Jordan Frye, Mahee Kulkarni, Pras Sapkota, Subrahmanyam, Tarini Sharma

Guest Dancers

The guest dancers performing this evening are part of a nonprofit kathak school founded by Sarah Morelli in collaboration with DU graduates who sought to continue their study beyond their university years and to make sustained kathak training accessible to the broader community. Originally established as Sureela, the school operated as Leela Denver during the Covid years and will soon return to its original name. Sureela, meaning “in tune” or “melodious,” reflects the school’s commitment to attunement: to rhythmic and melodic alignment, to study within a direct lineage, and to cultivating the whole artist.

Foundations Level Dancers: Anisha Biradar, Avni Dixit, Deepti Powar, Gopa Mukherjee, Kavya Vedurmudi, Prisha Singh, Shefali Verma

Progressions Level Dancers: Ajanta Bhattacharjee, Brinda Rajendrakumar, Dhara Shaikh, Ishika Thakre, Jyoti Upadhyay, Manisha Pal, Mira Logan, Nimisha Upadhyay, Nittraa Dhawan, Priti Upare Thakre, Raya Gupte, Sayujya Nikhil, Shruti Sharma

Pre-Professional Level Dancers: Aarna Dhawan, Aish Bhavan, Helena Bolle, Sakshi Gadgil, Sanya Mohanty

Artist Biographies

Sri Jayanta Banerjee is an internationally acclaimed sitarist and composer whose performances have reached audiences across India and around the world. In addition to the sitar, he is proficient in sarod, harmonium, and keyboard, and is also an accomplished vocalist. He is the founder and curator of the festival *Sambandh*, which brings together dance, music, and theatre in celebration of the baithaki tradition. The festival has featured over one hundred musicians and dancers.

Jayanta has performed extensively at major festivals in India and internationally, including appearances across Europe, Australia, Malaysia, the United States, New Zealand, Fiji, Canada, Oman, and the United Kingdom.

His performances in the United States have included venues such as the Hollywood Bowl, REDCAT (Roy and Edna Disney/CalArts Theater), the Palace of Fine Arts, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, and the National Centre for the Performing Arts in Mumbai, among others. His compositions have also been broadcast on radio platforms in the United States. His music has been associated with the Art of Living Foundation, and his sitar recordings are featured in the Apple Inc. app *Nagma Live*.

In addition to his performing career, Jayanta Banerjee has presented lecture-demonstrations and taught at universities internationally, including Oakland University and the University of Denver. He is also trained as a sound engineer and maintains his own recording studio, with expertise in sound and video production.

Sri Satyaprakash Mishra is the son and disciple of critically acclaimed tabla artist Pandit Kalinath Mishra of the Benares gharana. Known for his versatility and expansive range, Satyaprakash is a sought-after accompanist among many of India's most celebrated music and dance artists. He is a B-High graded artist of All India Radio and Doordarshan, India.

He has performed across India and internationally with luminaries including Pandit Chitresh Das, Sunayana Hazarilal, Suresh Wadkar, Shankar Mahadevan, and Anup Jalota. His performances have been featured at prestigious festivals such as Saptak, Chakradhar, and Harivallabh, as well as at major international venues including Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, The Broad Stage, and the Green Music Center.

An artist and entertainer alike, Satyaprakash's style is marked by technical brilliance, sophisticated layakari, and broad appeal. In addition to performing, he is a dedicated educator, training a new generation of students around the world in the art of tabla through regular classes and workshops.

Sarah Morelli is a kathak dancer, scholar, and Professor of Ethnomusicology at the University of Denver's Lamont School of Music. Her artistic practice is grounded in extensive training with kathak master Pandit Chitresh Das and Hindustani music maestro Ali Akbar Khan (voice and sarod), as well as senior disciples including Pandit Rajeev Taranath, Dr. George Ruckert, Gretchen Hayden, Steve Oda, and Madhuri Devi Singh.

As a performer, Sarah has presented full solos and leading roles at venues including the Royal Opera House in Mumbai, LA's Ford Amphitheatre, Philadelphia's Kimmel Center, and the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Puducherry. She is a founding soloist with the Leela Dance Collective and a member of the Temporal Taal Collective, which brings Indian classical music into dialogue with jazz and global traditions.

In Colorado, she is founder and director of Leela Denver, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, formerly known as Sureela, dedicated to cultivating the next generation of kathak artists and audiences through sustained training, mentorship, and public performance.

Sarah also maintains an active scholarly profile. She serves as President of the Society for Asian Music and Book Reviews Co-editor for the journal *Ethnomusicology*. Her monograph, *A Guru's Journey: Pandit Chitresh Das and Indian Classical Dance in Diaspora* (University of Illinois Press, 2019), and her co-edited volume *Music and Dance as Everyday South Asia* (Oxford University Press, 2024), reflect her ongoing commitment to the embodied and inclusive study of South Asian arts. For information about studying kathak, please contact: sarah.morelli@du.edu

Shilpi Nikhil has trained in kathak for nearly two decades in both India and the United States, studying within two major lineages. She began her training under Jigyasa Giri of the Lucknow gharana and, for the past decade, has immersed herself in the California gharana tradition of Pandit Chitresh Das. Since 2015, she has studied closely with Dr. Sarah Morelli in Denver, who continues to guide her as guru and mentor.

In addition to her performance work, Shilpi has contributed to Dr. Morelli's research through Hindi–English translation, including material featured in *A Guru's Journey*, an ethnography of Pandit Chitresh Das's artistic legacy. A committed educator, she is busy as faculty at Leela Denver, Founder and Artistic Director of Celestial Dance Academy (teaching light classical dance and kathak-influenced choreographies), and this quarter as Adjunct Faculty Instructor for the DU North Indian Classical Ensemble.

Shilpi recently presented a traditional kathak solo under the guidance of Dr. Morelli, accompanied by the distinguished musicians appearing in this evening's program—a significant milestone in her ongoing artistic journey.