

'THE LIVING LEGEND' BECOMES A LEGEND

A Tribute

Rekha Surya

Begum Akhtar has been called a phenomenon. Rightly so, since rarely has voice — timbre, musical intelligence and sensitivity, met in such accord. The sheer impact of the voice itself — its dynamic quality — was overpowering. Her voice — ripe, rich, deep, mature yet fresh — had character, passion and a certain vivacity.

The style she clothed this voice with was limpid and uncontrived, yet highly sophisticated and refined. She had no formulae, but at the same time, was aware of using suitable musical phrases for the words she chose to illustrate. For instance, a word expressing joy was described in a short, sparkling phrase, and a word ascribing pain or yearning was interpreted in a long, meandering phrase. Her phrasing was rounded, well-moulded, and polished.

The mark of a real musician is his ability to evoke not just *waah* but also *aah* in his listeners. One says *waah* in applauding a particular bit of virtuosity, but *aah* escapes from one only when one's soul has been stirred. Begum Akhtar provoked this in two ways by using long sweeps of notes or *meend*, covered by her heavy, languid sensuousness, and by touching a note which deviated from the structure of the *raga*, resulting in a sharp phrase. This last aroused the listener with a sudden, unexpected delight, a shiver of excitement, almost chilling one with response to her emotion.

Her voice-production contained fullness as well as delicacy, showing both *Patiala* and *Kirana* influences. She never flaunted virtuosity by using unnecessary *taans* or *harkats*. In places, her treatment of note-combinations — crisp and staccato — was inimitable. Another individualistic trait, or asset, was her frequent use of the *patti*, or momentary split in the voice.

She had perfect tunefulness — her *svara* never strayed from the *sthana* unless she intended it to. This precision of notes had a piercing, incisive

quality. When she sustained a note, its powerful effect conjured images in the listener's mind. One 'saw' the note — full, direct, uncompromised — sliding along a fine beam of light. One felt fulfilled; soothed; at peace. Her music, like the music of other great musicians, could not just be heard, but also 'seen' and 'felt'.

In spite of summoning parallel visual and mental images, her art did not have the fantasies of illusion. It was realistic, with all the wisdom, cynicism, and full realization of reality. Her desperate search for the ideal, in music and in life, imbued her voice with intense poignance. There was a wildness in her, almost a savage pain tearing her emotions asunder, which gave her voice and style so much significance. Her music, mirroring her life, conveyed a strange mixture of realism and idealism. It was both earthy and ethereal.

She searched one's mind through her singing, awakening it, and drawing from it undiscovered thoughts and emotions. Thus she crossed the void between herself and her listeners, communicating with them on a personal and musical plane, and allowing them to enter her world of subtle moods.

Hers was a concentrated voice and a concentrated style. She used this voice and this style to render *Thumri*, *Dadra*, and *Ghazal*.

Thumri is essentially lyrical. It portrays *sringara rasa* and therefore its content, both verbal and musical, is romantic in character. A *thumri* singer does not adhere strictly to the tenets of any particular *raga* — stray notes are injected to produce *asar*. Far greater musical imagination is needed in *Thumri* than in *Khayal*.

There are, broadly, two styles of *Thumri* — *Purabi* and *Punjabi*. The *Purab ang* is subdued, dwelling on notes, laying more stress on *bhava* than technique, and uses few *murkis*, taking short *taans* instead; it is angular rather than rounded. The *Punjab ang* is robust, vigorous, virile, yet delicate and intricate, being splattered with *murkis* and *khatkas*. Begum Akhtar created a style of her own, using both these styles sensitively blended.

Her improvisations, or phrases, brought out all the nuances of emotion lurking in the literary text. She chose certain words — the choice of words implied her interpretation — and then emphasised them, twisting them in various directions and revealing different shades of meaning. Her *thumris* explored the gamut of their musical and emotional possibilities.

Dadra is one of the classical, stylized forms of folk-music. As in a few *thumris*, its subject-matter sometimes has a dual motif-spiritual and mundane. Lighter and more sprightly than *Thumri*, with less musical and often more

textual content, *Dadra* has a lot of *loachlachak*, partly owing to its *tala*, *dadra*, which in itself is bouncy and spicy.

Begum Akhtar represented the sophistication of Urdu culture. Yet while singing a *Dadra*, her image metamorphosed, becoming completely rural. Her *Purbi* diction was flawless.

Ghazal is the most recent of these three forms. The word '*ghazal*' indicates a conversation between a lover and his beloved. In *Suftana ghazals*, another theme existing side by side with the obvious one, suggests a conversation between the poet and God.

Here the words are of primary importance. Music merely frames and embellishes the poetry. Therefore successful *ghazal*-singing is only possible with correct diction and enunciation, and a pure perception of the poetic content. Begum Akhtar sang her words clearly and distinctly, without unnecessary stress, thus singing them as they are spoken. Her insight and strong grip of the *ghazal* itself made her rendition penetrating.

She kept her listeners alive to the poetry by keeping them constantly expectant for the 'punch' phrase, found in the second line of every couplet, completing the poets' picture and bearing its point and essence. She would play around with the first half of the couplet, building anticipation, and then, using her innately superb sense of timing, pause for a split second. Her fingers would be a moment of tense stillness. Then she would throw the 'punch' phrase, consummating the sense of drama. Through all this, her accompanists followed her warily but surely, for the deep rapport she established with them made her silent demands understood and obeyed.

In poetry, whether subjective or objective, the poet exposes his spirit. Music unveils the musician's inner life. A level combination of both can make the *Ghazal* a highly evolved art-form. Begum Akhtar laid bare her soul, and the poet's, in her *ghazals*. This naked vulnerability made her listeners vulnerable to their own emotional wounds and experiences. One of the reasons for the popularity of *ghazal*-singing is this ability to identify oneself with the thoughts, emotions, and situations described, making it meaningful for one. Begum Akhtar made her *ghazals* even more meaningful by creating a perfect balance between music and poetry, each enriching the other. Her *ghazals* satisfied fully one's musical appetite.

When she accentuated a word, giving it significance and implication through emphasis, she did it musically rather than through shouting or whispering or crooning. She never used gimmicks.

A truly gifted painter depicts not only the colour, shape and form of a flower, but also, intrinsically, its fragrance. So also, Begum Akhtar's

ghazals were not just pretty tunes sheathing pretty words — they had a totality, an integration. *Ghazal*-singing is considered 'light music'; Begum Akhtar's treatment of it was not only serious, but profound.

In all three forms, her style exploited her voice, and vice versa. Yet there was no question of exploitation, since she sang intuitively, impulsively, instinctively, but with absolute certainty. For Begum Akhtar, to do the most natural thing in the world was to sing. In India, and in her forte, she had the voice of the century.

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Academy Award 1972, for Hindustani Vocal Music, presented by the Vice-President of India, Shri G. S. Pathak

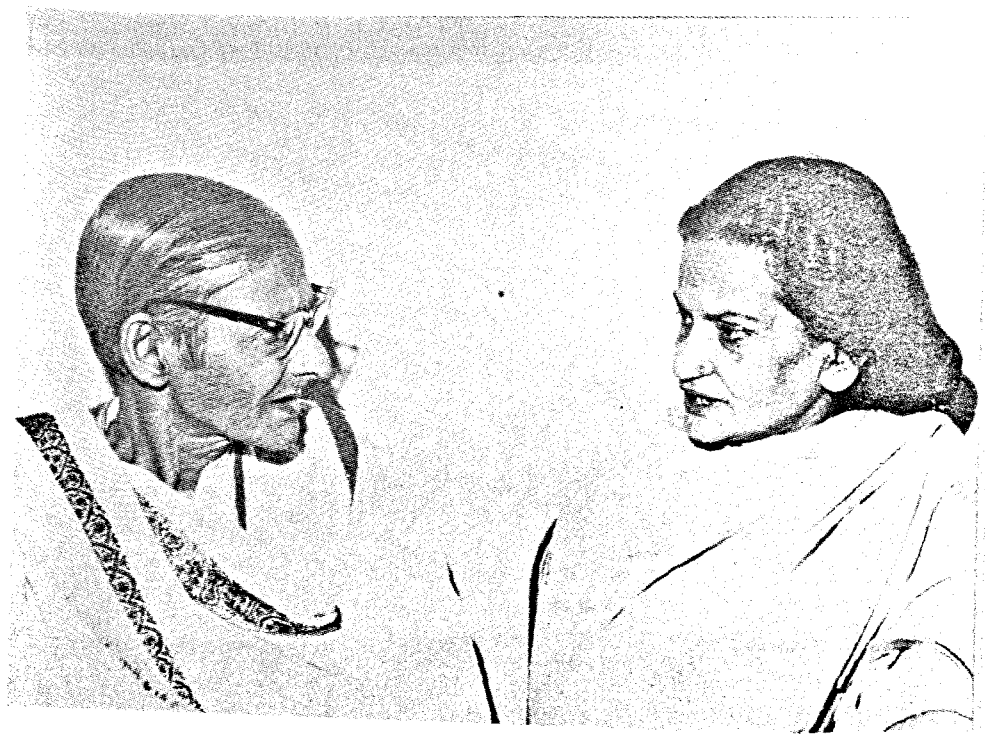


Live broadcast from Radio Kashmir, Jammu, 1954. Station Director, Mr. Iqbal Singh (left) and the young Shiv Kumar Sharma, now the Santoor maestro, on the tabla. (Below) With Shanti Hiranandani in the early '50's.





Holidaying in Kashmir (3 Photos courtesy N. Iqbal Singh)
(Below) In conversation with Tarapada Chakravarty





Broadcasting from AIR, Delhi, accompanied by Ustad Ahmadjan Thirkwa (tabla) and Ustad Shakoor Khan (Sarangi). Courtesy P.I.B. (Below) Award Winners 1972. (1 to r) T. Chinnamma Amma (Mohini Attam), Tarapada Chakravarty (Fellow), Shyamanand Jalan (Direction), Begum Akhtar, Girish Karnad (Playwriting), M. Madhava Panikar (Kathakali) and Tibet Baqal (Traditional Music).

