

Three Masters: Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, Ameer Khan, Bhimsen Joshi

PRABHA ATRRE

BADE GHULAM ALI KHAN: 'KA KARUN SAJANI . . .'

It happened many years ago when I was at school! 'Ka karun sajani . . .', the notes came wafting to my ears from some distance. I suddenly stopped. The song ended; yet I could not move away from the spot. I gathered enough courage, went inside and asked, "Who was that singing?" An elderly gentleman was standing there with a record of music in his hand. He looked at me and said with a slight smile, "Read the name on the record." I read the name. The name was very much there, 'Bade Ghulam Ali Khan'. That was my first introduction to Khansaheb and his music.

His music had cast a spell on me. How frequently must have I listened to that record again and again! I had learnt accurately each and every note of that song. No matter where I went to sing, there would invariably be a request for 'Ka karun sajani' or 'Yad piya ki aye'.

I was born in a Brahmin family and that too in a city like Pune. There was no musical environment whatsoever in the house. Under these circumstances, maybe, it was still not quite so odd for me to take to classical music; but it was definitely not quite expected that I should turn to Thumri and that too of the Punjabi style—flutaty, provocative, embellished with unusual twists and turns, and yet fluid. In those days, the singing star Noorjahan was my favourite matinee idol. I was highly influenced by her singing. Every musical expression of hers was charming, limpid, melodious, bearing just the right weight and tenderly touching the chords of one's heart. She had a very special way of saying her words in an endearing manner. I had followed that path; and it was by listening to Khansaheb's records that I got acquainted with fresh turns and typical features of that path. My Thumri as it is today has grown along the same line. My love for the Hindi language goes back to the same period of my life.

It was my ardent desire to see Khansaheb and listen to him in person. The opportunity came my way later after several years. I had gone to Calcutta for a concert. Someone told me that Khansaheb was going to sing at a private gathering. I was overjoyed. It was quite late by the time I finished my programme and went to listen to Khansaheb. I could hear the notes 'Ka karun sajani' from a distance. The *mehfil* was almost coming to an end. But that voice! Even today, the memory of that voice fills my body with a sense of thrill. The host was a Bengali gentleman. The *baithak* was in a square-shaped courtyard. There was a curtained balcony that overlooked it all around, a special seating arrangement for ladies. My desire to look at Khansaheb at close quarters remained unfulfilled. But my heart was filled with

contentment even by the last Bhairavi.

There was no microphone. Yet the delicate artistry of notes could be heard clearly. There is a distinctive resonant edge (*jawari*) to Khansaheb's voice. It was there and then that I learnt that even the human voice has to be given a resonant edge like the strings of a Tanpura. Khansaheb's voice is actually quite masculine, full of weight, and expansive; at the same time soft as butter, tender, delicate, fluid, wide-ranging; on the whole, commanding.

One does not know what the natural quality of Khansaheb's voice was. But it was undoubtedly a trained voice. One never felt the distance between the lower and the higher octave in that voice, nor was its sweetness ever diminished. Contrastive exposition was a characteristic feature of his singing. While there would be a *gamak* in slow tempo going on, a quick *tana* would suddenly spurt out like a flash of lightening. While one was listening to a simple, straightforward lingering on the notes, a moment later would emerge the filigree work of a short innovative arrangement of grace notes (*kan*). Some strings of notes would be moving forward with an unexpected push of measured weight, while some would be marked with well-defined curves. There was nothing that he could not produce. His enunciation of words too used to be clear and musical because his words would retain their structure and character on any notes, lower or higher. Artists who have fully understood the importance of proper enunciation of words, communication of their meanings, and revelation of feelings that they convey are indeed very few. At least those who are particular about singing both the *sthai* and *antara* should be paying special attention to this.

Khansaheb had an extraordinary creativity. One could never predict how he would suddenly slide from one note to another. He would move from one raga to another with such ease that one would not even know where one ended and the other began. One actually faces limitations while structuring phrases in Punjab style, but Khansaheb had no constraints; even after half an hour of elaboration he would come up with something new. To experience that one has to listen to his *Pahadi* or *Sindhuhairavi*.

Khansaheb used to include *sargam* and *tanas* as well even in Thumri. But he never let that affect the basic contours of the form. His *sargams* and *tanas* came as an integral part of the song. He has even been criticised for this. When would these critics understand how an artist can easily free himself from the confining cage of so-called theory? If Thumri and Khayal were to be distinguished from each other merely on the basis of use of *sargam* and *tana*, every Khayal singer would also have been a Thumri singer. The difference between classical and light classical singing is subtle and not gross. Khansaheb favoured one particular variety of Keherwa tala. It practically consists of just four beats. Anyone could clap or tap to its beats. He used to balance his notes and words so delicately in the tala-structure that the listener would just float with it.

Khansaheb raised the Surmandal to the status of a musical instrument for accompaniment. Rarely could anyone have used the Surmandal so sparingly and effectively as he did. His voice and his patterns of notes used to stand out even better on account of the Surmandal background.

Khansaheb's gestures and expressions were as delightful as his singing. One was always amazed how such delicate notes could emerge from such a massive physique. If only one could have a *gurumantra* from such artists about the way to do *riyaz*, many mishaps in the pursuit of the art could be avoided. Khansaheb had thought deeply about every facet of music. That was evident in his singing. That is why his music will always remain evergreen and will continue to provide inspiration to new generations.

Khansaheb suffered a paralytic stroke in his later life. A living death for an artist. Amazingly, he continued to sing even with that affliction. But his eyes would occasionally fill with tears as he sang. That voice, once his obedient slave, had finally begun to betray him.

During his illness, he was once staying at Hyderabad for a few days. I had gone there to participate in the conference of the Gandharva Mahavidyalaya Mandal.

"You want to meet Khansaheb, don't you? But you have to let him hear you singing." I certainly wanted to meet him. But what about singing in his presence? That evening is still lingering in my mind. I had my head on Khansaheb's feet.

"How are you, my child?" That same voice.

No word could rise up to my mouth. I took the Tanpura and began. Khansaheb was responding wholeheartedly to my singing. I had never imagined that the listener in him would be so magnanimous and so full of affection. The Khayal came to an end. I was putting the Tanpura down.

"What's this, child? Sing that '*Ka karun sajani*' as well!"

Who had informed Khansaheb that I sing that Thumri?

My eyes filled with tears. While I was singing the Thumri, Khansaheb had kept his eyes closed. What could he have been thinking? Could it be that in this helpless condition of his he was thinking of his past? He called me to his side after I had finished singing.

"God has given you a good voice and a good brain. Keep on singing."

How lucky I was that my Thumri had received the blessings of Khansaheb!

AMEER KHAN: '*GURU BIN GYAN NA PAVE...*'

There are many who cannot manage to move along even with the times they belong to, but musicians like Ameer Khan Saheb continue to mould their art by keeping track of signs that hint at the future. They give direction not only to the next generation but also to the generations which follow thereafter. Their art knows no constraints of time.

Many of our ideas about artistic beauty are a result of cultural conditioning. Very few are the outcome of conscious thinking. Khansaheb's position is unique amongst the artists who opened new vistas of beauty by thinking about it deeply. One finds a wonderful fusion of theory and art in Khansaheb's singing.

My favourite artists during my childhood were Roshanara Begum, Bade Ghulam Ali Khan,

Begum Akhtar and the singer-actress Noorjahan. I had indeed heard the name of Ameer Khan, but had not seen him in person.

I heard Khansaheb for the first time through his recordings in 1960 when I had been transferred to the Nagpur centre of All India Radio. Khansaheb's singing was totally different in every aspect, right from the manner in which he used his voice—something the like of which I had never heard before. Although Khansaheb's style of singing came very close to that of the Kirana gharana, it was quite different in its exposition and details.

At around the same time, I had got to know Shrikant Bakre, a Nagpur radio artist and a disciple of Khansaheb. This disciple was someone who had insight, was intelligent, and always used to be lost in music. Very often we used to sing together and have discussions. Through these sessions I was gradually gaining an insight into Khansaheb's *gayaki*.

At that time I was not able to realize how close I had unknowingly got to Khansaheb's music. "Prabhatai has changed her style of singing"—when such whispering reached my ears, I started to think about it.

Had my singing really changed? My guru Sureshbabu had freely given me all that he could. After his death, Hirabai had given a professional touch to my singing. The *gurumantra*—motto—given to me by my guru was, "Whenever you come across anything good, take it". After Sureshbabu passed away, mine had become a self-instructing journey like Ekalavya. This seclusion taught me to remain detached and also made me more sensitive. Maybe that is why my mind always remained alert whenever I encountered any fresh, different artistic expression. The concept underlying Khansaheb's music had appealed to me and I had approached it fully aware of what I was doing.

The occasions to meet Ameer Khan Saheb as a person were not many. But anyone who saw him even from a distance could at once feel the refinement that was inherent in his conversation and conduct. Somehow, I never felt the curiosity to know more about his personal life. One of the reasons for this was the unique position that Sureshbabu had in my mind as guru. I could never let anyone else take that place after he died.

To this date people ask me, "Your singing has been influenced so much by Ameer Khan's style of singing! Why don't you mention his name too as your guru?" My answer is always the same, "Sureshbabu is my guru and Ameer Khan is 'like a guru' to me."

The *gayaki* of Kirana gharana is, no doubt, comparatively confined to the middle (*madhya*) and the higher (*taar*) octaves, whereas Khansaheb's *gayaki* dwells mostly on the lower (*kharaj*) octave. The terrain of the lower octave notes is, on the whole, somewhat dry and rough. But Khansaheb had made the *kharaj* so smooth, like velvety green grass, that he himself did not feel like coming out of it. That is why his *gayaki* had acquired a three-dimensional form. It is only because of this *kharaj* context that in spite of the decorative embellishments symbolic of the present times his *gayaki* never appears frivolous. Deep, soul-searching, introspective, impressive, aristocratic, superlative—these are the many epithets which could be applied to his music. Of course, Khansaheb's voice was also a contributing factor. It had a mystic touch, a resonance (*jawari*). In addition to these inherent

qualities, he also had insight.

On the stage, Khansaheb looked like a seer in deep meditation; calm, seemingly detached from the audience, with no body movement and hardly any flourish of the hand. A Tanpura on both sides and a slow beat on the Tabla used to be the only accompaniment. Occasionally a harmonium would be there, but no vocal support.

The very first note from Khansaheb came out as if from the depth of the inner sanctum of a temple, carrying with it the sanctity of the place. It would compel the listener to turn inwards and then would begin an interweaving of notes. Each note would step out with all its beauty in the context of the raga and would gradually get embellished. Grace notes and well-defined curves adorned his alaps.

Although the notes were patterned on the *merukhand* scheme, their presentation used to be highly artistic. It was not just a mathematical calculation. In the background was the context of the raga as it had appeared to Khansaheb. That is why the ragas presented by Khansaheb seemed to be different from their conventional form and to be breaking away from tradition.

The *sargam* singing (singing of note-names) in-between alaps and *tanas* could be said to be Khansaheb's *khasiyat* from every point of view. The 'change' in my own music was mainly rooted in this *sargam*. I started including *sargam* in my singing for the first time after 1960. It gave me a new orientation. I started observing the movement of notes with greater awareness. The delicacy and variety with which Khansaheb uttered the note-names and artistically linked the notes from the three octaves in a single phrase, subtly giving stress on the beats of tala through the movement of the notes, used to cast a spell.

In the delineation of a raga, *sargam* would enter with the tempo of alap and when it reached the tempo of a *tana*, the *tana* would take over. Khansaheb's *tanas*, beautiful and clear, with each note a distinct entity freely roaming over three octaves, used to create unexpected configurations involving various twists and turns in the flow of tempo. These configurations would quickly slip by and would be totally missed by the listeners if they were not attentive.

Compositions in the medium tempo (*madhyalaya*) were another special feature of Khansaheb's music. Khansaheb established his distinctiveness through his awareness of the poetry of the song-text, enunciation of the words, and careful preservation of the song's emotional content. Generally he used to sing his own compositions. The epithet that would describe them in one word is *sarvangasundar*. The compositions would stand out in respect of all the three dimensions of poetry, musical structure, and aesthetic use of tempo. Khansaheb had his own independent views on *tarana*. He gave linguistic and emotional content to the *tarana* and presented it in the style of Khayal.

In public concerts, Khansaheb sang only Khayals. As soon as one raga ended, another would begin without a pause. The pause came only when it was time for the intermission. There was no certainty that he would necessarily end his concert with Bhairavi. Occasionally, Khansaheb would sing Thumri at private gatherings. On a special request, he would

even sing a ghazal. One could sense the love he felt for other forms through his singing.

Very few persons knew that Khansaheb was well-versed in Tabla; its echoes were reflected in his *gayaki*. His handling of tempo was subtle, intelligent, and effective. What could one say to those who comment, 'Does Khansaheb's singing have any relationship with tala?' Their notion of a relationship with tala probably consists of striking the *sam* with a big bang, taking *tihais*, and wrestling with the beats of a tala.

'Khansaheb's music sounds as if he is singing just after getting up from sleep.' 'It does not move forward.' 'There is excessive *sargam*.' 'There is no link with the tala.' 'He does not sing a raga.' 'He sings only notes.' Such are the charges that critics and those who call themselves knowledgeable have frequently levelled against Khansaheb's singing. Do they know that understanding music is also an art, a *sadhana*?

One should criticize only after giving due consideration to what suits a particular type of voice or a particular style of singing. Every artist has a different model. It is not only improper but unjust to hold that all should follow the convention that one has accepted. It will not be surprising if the audience who develop their 'understanding' through the medium of what is written or what is said is misguided by such critics. What a blessing it would be if those who write about or give talks on music would conduct themselves with greater responsibility!

Khansaheb's singing was not something that dazzled suddenly. Its hypnotic effect would spread very slowly. One reason why it was so is that his singing was not aggressive and flashy. There was a total surrender, a meditative trance. Khansaheb is one artist who indulged in deep thought, had an artistic vision, carefully preserved the eternal value of music, and never ran after popularity or fame.

Khansaheb never took part in the group rivalry that is witnessed today in the field of music nor in the flattery of organizers, critics, or people who held high positions. And yet, almost every artist of the next generation has a touch of his *gayaki*. But how many artists would openly and generously accept this? Although he gave a new format to Khayal *gayaki*, Khansaheb never sought publicity for having introduced something new. Khansaheb appears to be forever great and one wants to pay a quiet tribute to his memory when today every other person is carrying the banner of having created something new.

BHIMSEN JOSHI: 'SO HI PARAMAPADA PAVEGA...'

'*Jo bhaje Hari ko sada . . So hi paramapada pavega...*' I could hear the record being played in the next room. A Bhajan that can be listened to, over and over again. Pandit Bhimsenji receives requests for this Bhajan at almost every concert. Bhimsenji seems to have been identified with this and other such Bhajans, Abhangs, and some specific ragas. It is true that as an artist attains mastery in his art, he becomes one with it, as it were.

My first memories of Bhimsenji are as a Tanpura accompanist for my guru Sureshbabu Mane. Bhimsenji used to visit Hirabai, Sureshbabu's sister. But we had rarely met face to face. I did not know him personally at that time. I left Pune in 1959 to take up a job with the All India Radio. By then, Bhimsenji had established himself well in Pune. His name too had begun to spread far and wide.

Bhimsenji's wife Vatsala had been my *gurubhagini*. I had met her frequently prior to her marriage. We used to visit each other's families. Vatsala's mother would always enquire affectionately about my progress in music and encourage me. Our meetings grew less frequent after her marriage. But I kept running into Bhimsenji at concerts and festivals, though it was just before stepping on to the stage or while tuning the Tanpura.

I was more than thrilled when Bhimsenji invited me to sing on the occasion of the thread ceremony of his son. For one thing, it was a great honour to be invited by the maestro; secondly, quite a few connoisseurs were expected to be there.

My Khayal rendition had taken a new turn after leaving Pune. My thinking, my style, and my presentation had changed considerably. I had conscientiously imbibed Ameer Khan's *gayaki* and *sargam*. My Thumri had already been nurtured on the gramophone records of Bade Ghulam Ali Khan and Begum Akhtar, much before my schooling in the Kirana gharana. After going to Nagpur, it became more mature and rich in content and expression, drawing on the Purab, Punjab, and other lighter styles.

I did not know how this new face of my music would be received. I was very tense. In the programme, however, Bhimsenji sat right in front of me, approving and admiring my performance. I received much applause. Vasantrao Deshpande, another great singer who happened to be one of the guests at this concert, always made a reference to that performance of mine in later years. "The young girl has evolved an impressive style, all her own!", he would say. I learnt only later that Bhimsenji too was an admirer of Ameer Khan Saheb and Bade Ghulam Ali Khan Saheb.

An artist's ingenuity rests solely on his voice. It does not suffice to have music in the head. It must be projected successfully through the voice. Talent has to be strengthened by hard work and perseverance. And, of course, luck is also an important factor.

Bhimsenji has been fortunate in this regard. His voice, even at this advanced age, engulfs the listener like a flood of bright light pervading the whole environment. What's more, it is a voice with a tremendous mass appeal. The Kirana artists have voices that are thin, sharp, and high-pitched. But Bhimsenji's voice is quite the opposite—broad, dense, wide-ranging, and capable of prolonged spans. And yet it can lay claim to sweetness and melodiousness—the benchmark of the Kirana gharana. Variation in tone is an asset of Bhimsenji's voice that adds to the enjoyment of his music. When he elongates the *tara shadja* or weaves a *tana* in *tara saptak* in a low tone, it is a source of unique pleasure and invariably elicits spontaneous applause.

The affinity of Kirana gharana with Carnatic music was first exhibited through Abdul

Karim Khan Saheb's recordings. Coming from Gadag in Karnataka, Bhimsenji's Marathi is marked with a Kannada accent; so also his music, with phrases and modulations having a peculiarly Carnatic flavour. This makes his music all the more enjoyable.

A *gayaki* never begins as something perfect. It attains perfection through the passage of time. It calls for continuous modification and creation. A genius is, moreover, well aware that the process of perfection is endless. This is precisely why almost all the *gayakis* of all the *gharanas* have been inevitably undergoing changes. The Kirana *gayaki*, so deeply embedded in the *gayaki* of Abdul Karim Khan Saheb, also attained new heights at the hands of later artists. Not many have accepted this fact. Kirana can no longer be equated merely with a particular type of voice production or a particular style of producing notes. The note-by-note gradual development of a raga through *alaps*, speedy and clear *tanas*, the conscious use of the *bandish*, the inclusion of *sargam*, a sudden flux of emotion in an otherwise peaceful presentation, conscious use of *laya* (tempo)—this *gayaki* has now come to be adorned with new embellishments befitting its emotional identity. It establishes rapport with the listener instantly and drenches him in a shower of eternal ecstasy. Bhimsenji's *gayaki* holds a mirror to all these changes.

It is neither possible nor desirable to lay down a rigid framework for any art. The critics of the Kirana *gayaki* must bear well in mind that in this age of fast pace and fierce competition, the Kirana *gayaki* has not only survived; it has come to be recognized and appreciated by both the classes and the masses. It may not dazzle, but it can certainly elevate one to the sublime.

The success of a concert can be gauged by what an artist presents on the stage, how often he elicits applause, and how he manages to hold the listener in rapt attention till the end. It is at concerts that the art of music truly flourishes. Bhimsenji is the king of concerts. His concert invariably means a packed audience and a shower of applause. He has contributed much in fortifying and beautifying the Kirana *gayaki*, infusing it with vigour and new life.

Bhimsenji had a recording session at the HMV studio once. I went there, with the intention of listening to the recording and meeting Bhimsenji and Vatsala. I still remember Vatsala's words at that time: "One must record as much as one can, as long as the body and voice co-operate!" How right she was! We have innumerable recordings of Bhimsenji that have enriched many a household. The Abhang *vani* took Bhimsenji's popularity to phenomenal heights. The Marathi, Hindi, and Kannada devotional songs draped in classical music have won the hearts of laymen and connoisseurs alike. What's more, his fans never quite got over him as he broke upon the glitzy world of films, along with the mass media like the radio and the television—the famous "*Mile sur mera tumhara . . .*" took him to unbelievable heights of popularity. In this entire journey of Bhimsenji in the realm of art, Vatsala has made a noteworthy contribution.

Bhimsenji seems to have been blessed by Saraswati as well as Lakshmi. Together with public recognition, Bhimsenji has been felicitated with many honours and awards by governments here and abroad. It is he and he alone who can lay claim to a popularity of mammoth proportions.

The *Stree* magazine in Marathi had once assigned me the task of interviewing Bhimsenji. The discussion was to focus mainly on male and female artists. Bhimsenji's Marathi with its Kannada accent was so pleasing to the ear! We must have talked for an hour or so. But the talk was a reaffirmation of the qualities of Kirana artists. They are humble, open-minded, self-respecting, but never self-righteous. They never talk disparagingly of other artists, but praise them for even their slightest merit.

It had been a long-cherished desire of mine to invite Bhimsenji for lunch at my place. Once, when he had a morning concert, he consented to come over to my place after the programme. It was the day of Bhogi, the day before Makara Sankranti festival. The Maharashtrians traditionally eat sesame-topped *bhakri* (bread) made of *bajri* flour. But I said to my mother, "How can we serve just *bhakri*? We'd better prepare something else!" When Bhimsenji arrived, he bowed at my mother's feet and said, "I would love to have sesame *bhakri* please!" And he did eat the *bhakri* with relish. This is the simplicity of his nature, which I have experienced very often.

I was to release *Swaranginee*, a compilation of my compositions. The publishers, as well as I myself, wished that Bhimsenji should write its foreword. Bhimsenji consented willingly, and his foreword, I must say, is one of the highlights of this book.

I have been organizing a music festival in Mumbai now for more than thirteen years in the memory of my gurus Sureshbabu Mane and Hirabai Barodekar. Bhimsenji has always made it a point to attend it. His very presence, I must say, lends a certain grandeur to the festival. In the absence of both my gurus, I consider myself indeed fortunate to receive blessings and approbation from all the stalwarts of the Kirana gharana—Saraswatibai Rane, Gangubai Hangal, Feroz Dastur, and Bhimsenji, along with the entire music fraternity!

May God bestow health and long life on Bhimsenji so that the refrain '*Mile sur mera tumhara*' may go on and on and on!