



Vocal Classical Mehfil: Preserving Musical Heritage

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Abstract:

Hindustani music has a record of achievement over the century. The fine varieties of its raagas the subtlety and complexity of its taalās and the amazing diversity of its vocal and instrumental styles and vogues are not merely marvelous in musical experimentation but also a tribute to the musical intuition and creative talent of its makers. Mehfil is a gathering of listeners who have gathered to listen to the manifestation of the musical ideas of the musician featured. The mehfil is not just a performance of an artist, but it is an emotional and intellectual interaction between the performer and the audience. Various factors have affected the growth of mehfil. Music was flourishing in India under the royal patronage. Later on with the efforts of Pandit V. D. Paluskar it gradually began deriving the public patronage. Music in India reached its zenith during the Gupta time. State patronage was always extended to music during the Gupta and Maurya period. Bhimsen a classicist by temperament and training has evolved an approach which, has achieved, a balance between traditional values and mass-culture tastes. His voice has a mass appeal and he is the king of mehfil. Bhimsenji's style is powerful and dramatic. Indeed, a few vocalists in North India's classical tradition equal him in point of sheer versatility and mass appeal.

Key words- Indian classical music, Mehfil, khayaal, gaayaki, Musical Heritage.

Introduction:

The Indian society has undergone a tremendous change in the post independence period. The field of music has also changed dynamically. Various factors have affected the growth of mehfil. Music was flourishing in India under the royal patronage. Later on with the efforts of Pandit V. D. Paluskar it gradually began deriving the public patronage. Music in India reached its zenith during the Gupta time. State patronage was always extended to music during the Gupta and Maurya period. In the Gupta period Samudragupta was a great patron of this cultural flowering as is clear by his poetic type of copper coin. Chandragupta Vikramaditya too was reputed to have been proficient in music with his own compositions. The music that we follow as Hindustani classical music today is a result of confluence of the Hindu and Muslim cultures.

Amir Khusro the Pharsi poet mixed the Hindustani and the Azmi music as per the order of his patron Sultan Allahuddin Khilji. Amir Khusro attempted to synthesize Persian music and Indian music and the origin of khayaal is attributed to him. This new Style of music was highly appreciated by the Sultan and the then existing society. But the origin of khayaal is a disputed subject. Many hold that Amir Khusro was the originator of his style, mainly based on Persian modes. Others, on the contrary, are of the opinion that it was really a further elaborated development of the more ancient form called Sadharini geeta. After Khusro, Sultan Hussain Sharki who was considered as a great

musician of his time promoted khayaal gaayaki to a large extent. It became very popular during his reign. In his times the four part dhrupad changed in to the two part khayaal. The compositions in Hindi language in the khayaal form had come close to the Urdu Gazai Sadaranga and Adaranga further enhanced the khayaal under the reign of Mohammad Shah Rangeeley and even today vocalists in their mehfil sing the khayaals composed by Sadaranga and Adaranga. This gaayaki was further enhanced with accessories like taan, murki, awaaj ki lonch and shringaar rasa which are used even in today's mehfil. Hindustani music has a record of achievement over the century.

The fine varieties of its raagas the subtlety and complexity of its taalās and the amazing diversity of its vocal and instrumental styles and vogues are not merely marvellous in musical experimentation but also a tribute to the musical intuition and creative talent of its makers. Mehfil is a gathering of listeners who have gathered to listen to the manifestation of the musical ideas of the musician featured. The mehfil is not just a performance of an artist, but it is an emotional and intellectual interaction between the performer and the audience. In the book "Sufi Music of India and Pakistan" by Regula Burckhardt Qureshi, the term "Mahfil-e-sama" has been defined as 'a gathering, assembly for listening (to spiritual music). It was a formal sufi term for qawaali assembly.'¹ Other than qawaali the gathering where ghazals are sung is also termed as mehfil. Mehfil is a term used by Persians for a small gathering where religious discourses are

held. It is a parallel to the Satsang in the Hindu community.

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The mehfil of the Hindustani classical music has a definite structure. At the same time it is also very dynamic and has passed through many vicissitudes brought about by the gradual shift of the approach of the artist and the outlook of the audience. The mehfil is varied in nature. Initially the mehfil was a chamber concert. It was traditionally any intimate gathering for the purpose of listening to music. It was also referred to as *bazm*. In the present context the scope of the term mehfil has broadened. Alladiya Khansaheb's style had precision and this fact was recognized by listeners who named it as *nakkichi Gaayaki*, style of precision. His was a personality bound style. The uniqueness of his style pleased his listeners. Without having recourse to embellishments he brought out the full force and charm of the raaga in a striking manner and won the applause of knowledgeable *rasikas*. The excellence of his performance also lay in the perfect concord between the melody and the rhythm.

Alladiya Khan was not only specialized in handling complex raagas but also popularized them. He did not bother his listeners by dwelling upon the scientific aspect of such raagas but rendered them in an easy and pleasing way. Raagas like *Shukla Bilawal*, *Bhankar*, *Laachaari Todi*, *Khat*, *Lankadahan Sarang*, *Sawani* and *Natbihag* were his forte. The oblique pattern of Khansaheb's *firat* became so popular that for this one reason the special significance of his music became established even amongst common listeners. *Bakhalebuwa* was deeply appreciated for his style and left a great impact on whole generation of musicians who had the privilege of listening to him. Perhaps the most remarkable point was that he knew how to move his audiences to tears without making recourse to light classical techniques. *Bhaskarhuwa's* mehfil used to begin at 9.30 pm and end at about 4 to 5 am in the morning. The audience would long for his next concert. It had an all-pervasive completeness in it. He popularized lesser known raagas like *Shyam Kalyan*, *Khambaivati*, *Durga*, *Bihagada*, *Kafi Kanada*, *Suha Kanada*, *Gauri*, *Pata-Bihag*, *Khokan Sawani*, *Bilsakhani Todi*, *Khat* and this is considered as his greatest contribution. He repeatedly sang these raagas in his concerts.

In his book 'Between Two taanpuras' Vamanrao Deshpande has described a mehfil of *Bhaskarbuwa* as follows; I heard his recital at *Rastaa Waadaa* in Pune organized by the *Poona Gayan Samaj* in 1920-21. *Govindrao Tembe* accompanied *Buwa* on the harmonium and on the *taanpura* by *Balgandharva* and *Master Krishnarao*. Whenever *Buwa* did an improvisation *Govindrao*

would reproduce what had been sung or he would play a matching improvisation of his own, which would inspire *Buwa* to improve on what he had just sung. The recital fed by the efforts of these 2 artists to outdo each other carried the audience to a high pitch of excitement.'² In short every member of the audience had something special to admire. When the recital was over some people touched his feet, others prostrated themselves.'³ Prof. B.U. Deodhar narrates about *buwa's* concerts as follows. 'I have attended many of *Buwasahab's* concerts. I heard him at the residence of *Shri Pendharkar* at *F.G.Jetwadi*. A number of maestros happened to be present on that occasion. This particular concert was lively from start to finish. It was music to appeal to one's intellect not something crammed and reproduced mechanically. Obviously *Buwasahab* could give an inspired performance if he had a discerning audience and the audience was right.'⁴ *Abdul Karim Khan* was a maestro who strode the musical realm for well over a generation in the early decades of this century. He not only gave a new flourish to the history of Hindustani music, but also set a novel trend in classicism by making a fundamental departure from the several contemporary styles of traditional singing. *Khansaheb* had a strong preference for emotional music and he used to discard anything, which he felt might damage the emotional appeal of his presentation. He used to avoid *bol anga* because the words of the text would be twisted in the process and consequently the emotional appeal along with the beauty of the composition would be destroyed. In his presentation *layakaari* was replaced by *taans* dominated by *gamaks*. *Khansaheb* was as adept in *Thumri* as in pure classical music.

Goharjaan was a renowned respected performer of classical music with a large repertoire of traditional compositions. 'Goharjaan was the first woman to print photographed invitation leaflets of her ticketed *jaba*. The *darbar* custom in the days of princely states was that a woman should stand while she sang but *Goharjaan* began sitting in *jalsas* while performing. For accompaniment she took *nvo sarangis* and a *tabla* but not a *taanpura*.'⁵ a live performance of the *Dewas* maestro, *Ustaad Rajabali Khan*, was featured at the mammoth *Swami Haridas Sangeet Sammelan* in *Bombay* in 1957. 'The exuberance of vigorous and often intricate *taan* patterns was amazing. Not only the raagas and their handishes but also the mode of their unfoldment, which was punctuated with well chosen *layakaari*, bore the unmistakable influence of the *Atrauli - Jaipur gharana*, of which *Alladiya Khan* is acclaimed as the highpriest.'⁶ *Abdul Waheed Khan*, ranked high among top-notchers in *khayal*-singing in his time. His approach to *khayal* was essentially technical, analytical and methodical. The first half of this century has been dominated by almost the

single figure, the great Faiyaz Khan Saheb. He used to sing the fast portion of Thumri in teentaal, wrote poetry and created new compositions of great merit. Mohan Nadkarni in his book 'Great Masters' describes Khansaheb's mehfils follows. 'In 1950, I had a chance to attend a stage performance of the maestro just a few months before his death. The venue was the spacious hall of the Marwari Vidyalaya High School in Central Bombay. He performed for more than an hour and half He reeled off brief expositions in the raagas Hameer and Jayajayawanti and the famous composition 'Babul mmorea Naihar Chhoto ni jaaye' in Bhairavi.'⁷

Anjanibai came from a family of dhrupad singers. Anjanibai had her training in Bhendi Bazaar Gharana style. She made her debut on public platform in 1899 at the famous Muzaffarabad Hall in central Bombay. This marked her rise to fame. Kesarbai Kerkar, the doyen of the Atrauli-Jaipur gharana, was one of the monumental-voices of this century. Her voice had a three-octave range reach. The broad sonorous voice could swoop from a splendid high taar-saptak to a deep resonant low mandra saptak with an incredibly uniform volume. 'Each swara was perfectly focused and she could hit any note right in the centre. Kesarbai's breath control and stamina were her prominent assets. She had a very good sense of planning her presentation.'⁸ Pandit Omkarnathji, was a very lively artist, with a most individual interpretation of various raagas. The musical contributions of Panditji are that he composed some raagas. He was one of the most colourful Hindustani vocalists to have graced the concert arena in this century. Master Krishnarao's singing style included the persuasive alapchari of Gwalior style, layakaari of Agra gharanaasi in bol banav and twists in taans of the Jaipur gharana. 'He believed that catering to the taste of the audiences was necessary. Thus he also sang his popular film songs in his concerts. He said; 'My guruji used to sing even laawani if need be. He never scorned any musical form.'⁹ The most important achievement of Baeie Ghulam Ali Khan Saheb was his understanding of the changing tastes of the audience. He did not continue in slow elaborations for hours, but judiciously mixed slow and fast, and produced more ornamentation than is common in khayal. 'His voice was unique. It had a very wide range, it was flexible and moved with ease in all tempi. Speed was prominent in his renderings. He excelled in satta taans & the distinctive feature of his taans was the use of speed in short spiraling patterns covering the whole range.'¹⁰ Narayarao Vyas was one of the able disciples of Pandit Vishnu Digamhar Paluskar.

His voice was sweet and lonchdaar. The many specialities of his vocalism were effective swara-lagisy, gamak, meend, and intricate use of kanswara. Jagannathbuva Purohit was an

outstanding musician and an inspiring teacher. Admired, respected and revered in the music circles, this virtuoso has made a good effect on the practice and development of Hindustani Classical Music in this century. Hirabai was gifted with a silvery emotion laden voice. Her music inspired a whole range of musicians, poets and writers for more than 4 decades and, this renowned Gaanakokila regaled audiences all over the country. 'She not only emerged as one of the leading lights of Hindustani music but also as a silent reformer who brought traditional within the reach of common man by organizing recitals in public halls. She broke the convention, those prohibited women from appearing on the professional dramatic stage in Maharashtra. In so doing she ushered in a social revolution by featuring plays with a mixed cast.'¹²

Nissar Hussain Khan, was a veteran vocalist of the Saheswan gharana, which emphasises virtuosity. The striking features of his music are boltaan, behlavaa and speedy taans. Ustaad Amir Khan constructed a definite approach to classical music. He freed it from the age-old restrictions. 'In 1955 in Amaravati Sangeet Sammelan he sang for three hours from 10 am. to 1.30 pm. He sang Komal Rishabh Asavari, Desi, Suhaa. For almost 40 minutes he sang only up to the middle octave pancham and he sang the entire Raaga Komal Rishabh Asawari for one and half hour. He sang a vilambit Khayaal in Manva at another concert and drut in Pooriya. At the Chhindwada Sangeet Sammelan he sang Darbari vilambit and drut and during taans in drut he suddenly halted at pancham and started drut in raaga Lalat.'¹² Begum Akhtar had an unquestioned mastery in the field of light classical music. D. V. Paluskar proved to be a pioneer in the post freedom mehfil scenario of Indian music. He represented the generation of vocalists who were a link between the vocalists of yesteryear and the contemporary vocalists. His presentation was free from acrobatics or contortions. His pronunciation was clear, and he did not use techniques like speed in presentation, rhythmic acrobatics and sargam. His concerts were always a success even if sang in a public mehfil or private mehfil.

'Then he was requested to sing the film song 'Aaja Gawata Mana Mero' true to form without a moment's hesitation D. V. Paluskar told his listeners courteously but firmly that it was a song from a film and has no place on the classical concert platform.'¹³ Bhimsen a classicist by temperament and training has evolved an approach which, has achieved, a balance between traditional values and mass-culture tastes. His voice has a mass appeal and he is the king of mehfil. Bhimsenji's style is powerful and dramatic. Indeed, a few vocalists in North India's classical tradition equal him in point of sheer versatility and mass appeal. Kishori

Amonkar is one of the leading vocalists today. She has amalgamated in her style the qualities of Jaipur Gharana as well as all the other worthwhile qualities of senior and contemporary musicians. She has continued to retain some important features of her tradition such as the types of taans she uses employment of rhythmic play, a boltaan based in the tonal values of the words of the bandish, and the presentation of the bandishes of her own gharana in mehfil.

Conclusion:

The mehfil has a glorious past and throughout the ages it has maintained a place of itself in the Indian society. Its journey from temples to the concert platform has been constructive as it has continuously shed the undesirable factors and maintained the desirable ones. The contributions of maestros from the earlier century have influenced the artists of the present century and the process is continuing. These influences have resulted in various constructive trends. Every vocalist of the present generation has been exposed to qualitative music since his or her childhood and the shraavanbhakti is displaying its fruits in their performances. There are many music circles and individuals who are organizing chamber concerts of upcoming artists and contributing in enhancing the future of classical music. The popularity of Indian classical music on the world map is now not limited to instrumental music but even vocal music is gaining popularity worldwide.

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