

THE BEGINNING OF A GHARANA

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There have been very few Hindustani classical vocalists who have been able to carve out a personal path of presenting the 'khyal' which is steeped in tradition and yet has a distinct personal stamp. Pandit Ulhas Kashalkar received his 'taalim', initially from Shri Ram Marathe of the Agra Gharana and then a long and intensive training from Pt. Gajanan Bua Joshi. When he emerged as a vocalist he was immediately acknowledged for his authenticity of presentation and also for his repertoire of all those ragas with traditional 'bandishes' which were being pushed into oblivion. Here was a man with an unusual musical intellect, tradition, training and a voice which was not only tuneful but had a very serene quality. It transported the listener to a different world --- the romanticism of an ascetic with a fine sense of aesthetics. In my subjective opinion there was only one such vocalist, Ustad Amir Khan.

I have had the good fortune of being very closely associated with Ulhasji when he was in his mid forties. This is the time when an artiste starts discovering his inner soul and carves out a path for himself beyond his guru's teaching. It also goes to the credit of a guru who can sow the seeds of enquiry (jigyansa) and judgement in the mind of the disciple so that the disciple can be inspired by all the good things which he comes across in his journey of discovery. Since the year 2000 I was engaged in many discussions (guncharcha) with him espousing the qualities of vocalists of yester years. Once, he got a recording of Shri Sureshbabu Mane singing 'Shudh Kalyan' and he immediately invited me to listen to it. It was a long and beautiful recording and we spent hours discussing it in detail. Similarly on another occasion I got a recording of 'Harikauns' by Ustad Amir Khan and he listened to it three times in succession. Ulhasji then told me that he had learnt this raga long back and was hearing a rendition of it after ages. Immediately I told him that it was only he who could sing such a complex raga today. And sure enough he did, very soon, without announcing the name. As he began, he smiled slightly from the stage and we shared a very private communication.

I would say that starting around the year 2000 and until 2006 – 2008 Ulhasji was evolving with a style of singing which had a well defined architecture, had the same quality of aloofness of Ustad Amir Khan and Pt Bhimsen Joshi, but distinctly with his own stamp of interpretation. He slowed down his 'vilambit' tempo considerably and used the complete structure and emotion of a raga in his 'taankari' with different stresses (bal) at a great speed, creating a mesh of emotion and passion. Overall, his music today is soulful and highly spiritual too. This, I have often mentioned, is the creation of an independent 'gayaki' which is the "Ulhasji Gayaki" which is evident in at least four or five young vocalists who have been his disciples and are getting recognition as independent artistes. Apart from his own students, quite a few established vocalists today are also influenced by his 'gayaki'.

Can we call Ulhasji's gayaki as a new 'Gharana'

