

***Ulhas Kashalkar:  
The contemporary Pandit***

After a long drought of genuine “Pandits” in Hindustani vocalism, the emergence of Ulhas Kashalkar has begun to restore meaning to the honorific. Ulhas [Born: 1955] claims this status by his scholarly approach to music, an original style, which is modern as much as it is traditional, and phenomenal strengths as a performer. His career graph exhibits the same saturnine solidity that his music has. He qualified for the broadcasting media at the age of 23, and now occupies the elite “Top” grade on All India Radio and Doordarshan. His discography begins at the age of 32, and now lists over 20 recordings released in India, USA and Europe. Ulhas serves as a Resident Guru at the prestigious ITC Sangeet Research Academy in Calcutta, and is a major attraction at the leading music events in India. He started performing abroad at the age of 38 and now commands a respectful audience in Europe, North America, and the Middle East.

Ulhas belongs to the new breed of musicians from educated families of white-collar professionals who have broken the stranglehold of heredity over musicianship. His training began at home in Amravati [Vidarbha, Maharashtra] with his father, an Advocate and a competent vocalist. Simultaneously, Ulhas earned his Masters degree in music. Thereafter, he obtained a scholarship from the Government of India to pursue training with eminent Gurus in Bombay. He spent the first six years studying with vocalist Ram Marathe, and the next six years with violinist and vocalist, Gajananrao Joshi. Marathe was a product of Gwalior and Agra grooming, while Joshi was a produce of Gwalior, Agra as well as Jaipur-Atrauli training. The catholicity and soundness of this grooming, along with his study of other vocalist traditions, shaped Ulhas into one of the few Pandits in Hindustani music today.

**The making of a musician  
Ulhas spoke to the author on January 1, 2000**

My music draws on a variety of sources. Even my Gurus brought a multiplicity of influences with them. I like great music from all gharanas. As a listener, I am also a student. But, my preferences are with individual musicians rather than gharanas. As such, I would be hard put to say which gharana's style dominates my singing. I don't consciously try singing in any particular style. I am more concerned that my music should be pleasing, and communicate the mood of the raga. My training with my Gurus and my study of other vocalists will get reflected in this effort; but this happens in ways I do not understand. And, yet, in a particular raga, you may notice a marked influence of a great vocalist whose rendering of it has made a deep impact on me. With so much recorded music available nowadays, this can happen to anyone.

Gharanas are not cages, and were never intended to be that, either. Consider the background of so many modern giants in Khayal music. They had all studied with three or four Gurus, often from different gharanas. Bhaskar Buwa Bakhle is a great example. He had studied the Agra, Jaipur as well Gwalior styles. So did my Guru, Gajananrao Joshi. Then, consider Vilayat Hussain Khan, whom we know as an Agra exponent. He listed forty Gurus. Obviously, all forty of them were not Agra vocalists!

I have heard it said that until a few years ago, my music had a Gwalior flavour and that, in recent years, it has acquired the Agra touch. This is typically superficial "trade talk", because this is not quite the way it works. Today, a vocalist, if he is good, is exposed to public scrutiny right in the

midst of the most vulnerable stage in his evolution -- the stage when he is struggling to break out of the shell of his training, and to make his own musical statement. Until then, in most cases, his training has not achieved much more than making him a good replica of his Guru. But, having been thrown into the professional circuit, he cannot risk being a poor photocopy. This often makes him try out different approaches to shaping his musical affirmation. During this period, his music can seem like a shifting patchwork of clichés. Sometimes, he might even be judged impatient, restless, or confused.

It takes a musician a long time to abstract the principles of music making which underlie his training. Because such abstraction is possible, a great Guru can produce several disciples, all of whom are originals, but also have the stamp of his, or the gharana's, training in their music. Look at the variety amongst Sawai Gandharva's disciples - Bhimsen Joshi, Gangubai Hangal, Phiroze Dastoor. Each of them is unique and yet in the same mold. But, it would be interesting to know what connoisseurs thought of these luminaries when they were twenty-five.

Even with the best of training, the process of self-discovery in a vocalist matures only around the age of forty. By then, he begins to understand his own training, the significant features of his own and other gharanas, his own musical temperament, or even the eccentricities of his own voice. This is why I discourage influentials in the music world from jumping to conclusions about young vocalists.

Today, the brightest talent is able to achieve recognition much earlier in life than was possible two generations ago. The market starts paying you early. So, it demands that a twenty-five year old should match up to the maturity of Ameer Khan or Kesarbai Kerkar at the age of fifty. Ridiculous as such expectations are, they are real, even when they are unconscious. Here lies the danger. We could easily succumb to the generalised feeling that contemporary vocalists are pushing Khayal music down the drain. To those in a hurry to judge, my request is to withhold judgment until we are forty -- until we get our act together. Our task is difficult enough for having to mature under public gaze. But, we are as serious about music as earlier generations were, and are also discovering ourselves through it, exactly as they did. But, this cannot happen overnight.

At the Academy [SRA], at the moment, I have several students assigned to me under the apprenticeship program. They are gifted and they work hard. We have internal systems for tracking their progress. Curious outsiders often ask how well my wards are doing. My answer is always the same: "Give them ten or fifteen years on the concert platform to test and build their worth. Until then, neither I, nor they, nor you, will know how well their training has worked for them".

### **The Neo Gwalior movement**

Ulhas' music is a product of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century movement, which led the Gwalior gharana of the Khayal towards Agra stylistics to shape what may appropriately be called "Neo-Gwalior" vocalism. According to authoritative music historians, the stimulus for this was the decline in the fortunes of Gwalior, which failed to produce a front-ranking performer after Omkarnath Thakur. Having given birth to several major gharanas, and disseminating its musical assets widely through institutionalised education and documentation, Gwalior was tending to become generic – a style without a style. A probable disenchantment with Gwalior triggered off an exodus in search of stylistic distinctiveness. Agra stalwarts probably welcomed the Gwalior exodus because, in the aftermath of Faiyyaz Khan's departure, Agra also faced a shrinking following.

Two gharana-s in crisis found it attractive to come closer in the hope of re-inventing and rejuvenating themselves.

The earliest, and also the most significant, amongst the exodus streams led Gwalior vocalists to the mentorship of Ustad Vilayat Hussain Khan, the tallest Agra stalwart after Faiyyaz Khan. Principal amongst them were Gajananrao Joshi, Ram Marathe and VR Athavale. The Agra-inspired Neo Gwalior movement retained its momentum for yet another generation with Jagannathbuwa Purohit [Gunidas], a disciple of Vilayat Hussain Khan, accepting Gwalior-trained vocalists like Yashwantbuwa Joshi as disciples.

Two of the pioneers of Neo Gwalior vocalism – Ram Marathe [died: 2002] and Gajananrao Joshi [died: 1987] – oversaw the grooming of Ulhas Kashalkar. Ram Marathe, though trained in Gwalior as well as Agra styles of Khayal vocalism, retained a Gwalior bias in his singing. This was probably natural because Natya Sangeet, which was his profession, was more hospitable to the melodic agility of Gwalior, than to the ponderous aggressiveness of Agra. Gajananrao Joshi was originally a disciple of his father, Anant Manohar Joshi, a Gwalior stalwart. Later, he studied the Agra style under Ustad Vilayat Hussain Khan and the Jaipur-Atrauli style under Ustad Bhurji Khan, Gajananrao mastered the violin on his own, and pioneered its performance in Hindustani music. On the evidence of Ulhas' music, his second Guru, Gajananrao, appears to have had a greater influence on his evolution.

Having made the violin his profession, Gajananrao enjoyed greater freedom and opportunity to test and forge the compatibilities between the different styles he had studied. His vocal music was prized for the richness of his idiom, which incorporated features of all the three major traditions in which he had received training. However, at vocal concerts, he often demonstrated one of the three major styles without betraying even a trace of the other two. Ulhas' music exhibits this cerebral quality in Gajananrao's music, which enabled him to integrate and differentiate stylistic tendencies at will, while retaining the aesthetic coherence of the musical product.

### **The music of Gajananrao Joshi**

Although Gajananrao's violin recordings appeared in considerable number, his vocal recordings are rare. One concert recording could be located to serve as a reference point for Ulhas. The concert features three raga-s - Jaitashree, Gaud Malhar, and Shuddha Nat. Since the raga selection, and the bandish-es are – except the Tarana -- typical of Jaipur-Atrauli, the entire concert may have acquired a Jaipur-Atrauli bias. However, it is still possible to glean from it the salient features of Gajananrao's vocalism.

Gajananrao sang in a natural voice. In the lower registers, it could become granular, and even guttural. Like several orthodox Gwalior vocalists, he occasionally used jaw movements for vocalization. The basic approach to music shows a raciness typical of Gwalior. The structure of his renditions substitutes the deliberateness of strict linearity with an engaging informality. Like Agra, his melody was frequently angular in contour, and even permitted staccato intonation. The phraseology of the raga dominates his melodic approach, without any of the cleverness or oblique quality associated with some of the major gharana-s of Khayal music. His focus was on the interesting juxtaposition of phrases with fascinating shifts of melodic or rhythmic emphasis.

His renditions were dominated by the Bada [vilambit] Khayal, with a nominal presence for the Chhota [drut] Khayals or Tarana-s. Like several vocalists of his generation, he often skipped the Drut Khayal altogether. His renditions began with a fairly elaborate alap in “Nom-Tom”

articulation, which was – in terms of in duration and detailing -- half way between a Dhrupad vilambit alap and the cryptic aochar found commonly in Khayal vocalism. Like Agra vocalists, he made his alap impressionistic rather than systematic and gave it a distinct pulse. This approach to the alap could have been especially relevant to his renditions on the violin.

In vilambit as well as drut Khayal renditions, Gajananrao's music sports a rhythmicity almost as pronounced as found in Agra vocalism, and certainly far greater than orthodox Gwalior. This was also reflected in a more frequent use of tihai-s than found in Gwalior vocalism, but perhaps less than found in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Agra vocalism.

The three Bada [vilambit] Khayals on the recording under review are rendered in Teental at a base-tempo of 23-25 beats per minute. This feature could have been derived from Jaipur-Atrauli vocalism. The demarcation between his bol-alap and bol-laya movements is unclear, suggesting the Gwalior notion of Behlava, which permits anarhythmic as well as pulsating melody in the first improvisatory movement. Sargam articulation features in his medium-density bol-laya movement. This feature belonged more squarely to Kirana than to Gwalior, Agra, or Jaipur-Atrauli in his times.

Gajananrao's tan-s were elegant in conception and complex in construction, reflecting an exceptional melodic imagination. Probably for this reason, he relied substantially more on aakar articulation for tan-s than Gwalior vocalists do. Despite the accent on aakar, he never attempted ultra-high speeds in their execution. As a result, the raga form was never exposed to the risk of "flattening out". Badhat and Ladiguthav patterns of great complexity dominated his tan-s movement. The Jaipur-Atrauli variety of two-by-two tan-s in swara-pairs also held considerable appeal for him. The mechanistic varieties of tan-s such as sapat and alankar, are almost missing from his music. He also made surprisingly little use of Chhoot tan-s, which were very popular with Gwalior vocalists of his times.

My only experience of hearing Gajananrao as a vocalist was occasioned by the need to understand Ulhas Kashalkar's stylistic pedigree. Gajananrao's Vilambit Khayal in Shuddha Nat moved me visibly, and his Tarana in Gaud Malhar had me on feet attempting a couple of dance steps. In its totality, his music provides a good reason to recall Ranade's description of Ustad Faiyyaz Khan's music as "cheerful, extroverted music, involving, and dominating at the same time". [Ranade, Ashok D. *On the music and musicians of Hindoostan*. 1<sup>st</sup> edition, 1984. Promilla & Co. New Delhi.]. Differences undoubtedly exist, as they must – because of the generational gap, the personalities involved, their grooming context, and a radically different acoustic environment. But, his approach to music was, most likely, a gift of Agra and a substantial departure from his orthodox Gwalior pedigree. As a general statement of tendencies, then, Neo-Gwalior may be defined as Gwalior with liveliness of Agra. In Gajananrao's specific case, it came with the additional infusion of a cerebral and challenging component, inspired by Jaipur-Atrauli vocalism.

### **The music of Ulhas Kashalkar**

This perspective on Ulhas' music is based on a study of Ulhas' music between 1998 and 2003. It includes two CDs recorded for India Archive Music, New York, comprising renditions of Khayals in Multani, Bahar, Shankara, and Sanjh Saravali, along with thumrees in Khamaj and Bhairavi. In addition, the author has attended several of his concerts, and studied his concert recordings of Puriya and Malati Basant.

Like Gajananrao, Ulhas sings in a natural voice, and occasionally deploys jaw-powered vocalisation. The propensity of his Guru for guttural vocalization in the lower registers has been replaced, in his case, by a certain dryness [as in “dry” wine] of timbre, which is sustained through all regions of the melodic canvas. Though lacking in the “silken smooth” quality of DV Paluskar’s voice, Ulhas’ voice culture has an effortless fluidity reminiscent of Paluskar, which is also characteristic of recent Gwalior vocalists from Maharashtra. The tendencies towards of angular melodic contours and staccato intonation are greatly subdued. Orthodox Agra is even less evident in his music than it was in the music of his Guru. However, Agra’s aggressive quality is evident in his vocalization as well as intonation. The sunny, cheerful, quality of his Guru’s music has been replaced by a more studied approach to engineering the musical experience. This is evident in the fastidious architecture of his renditions, and his Kirana-like analytical stance in the handling of the alap stage of Khayal rendition. It is also apparent in his repertoire, which prominently features Jaipur-Atrauli expertise in handling the chemistry of compound and emulsified raga-s.

The Gajananrao legacy is strongest in Ulhas’ approach to melody, the core of Neo-Gwalior stylistics. The distinctive phraseology of the raga, handled imaginatively and rhythmically, but without any cleverness or dramatic effects, remains central to his music. His sculpture is austere by contemporary standards, and relies almost entirely on meend, gamak, and khatka, with negligible use of the ornate devices such as kan-s and murki-s. The melodic development of each movement exhibits a story-telling stance, which builds phrases, sentences and paragraphs around individual melodic ideas. His music engages you in purposeful conversation and demands attention.

Though often performed at higher speeds, Ulhas’ tan-s can be as complex as those of Gajananrao, and are always considerably more imaginative than found in contemporary vocalism. Chhoot tan-s, a traditional favourite of Gwalior, have a substantial representation in his armoury. So do the rippling gamaks of the Jaipur-Atrauli variety. His narrative approach conceives the tan-s in clusters rather than in isolation, and relies substantially on short-span Badhat and Ladiguthav patterns.

Despite its proximity to Gajananrao, Ulhas’ music exhibits a stronger leaning towards Gwalior than his Guru’s did. This bias is most evident in his voice culture, his tan-s, and his preference for melodic action in the upper half of the melodic canvas. Despite this, his music is so complex and individualistic a blend of various tendencies, that the “Neo-Gwalior” label seems misplaced.

Such observations will henceforth be made with increasing frequency about significant vocalists in Hindustani music. Neither gharana leanings, nor blends of gharana leanings will remain identifiable for long. This is an inevitable consequence of the media explosion and the exponential decay of the traditional system of stylistic indoctrination. A multiplicity of stylistic influences is now an inescapable reality. In this environment, the achievement of aesthetic coherence has emerged as the greatest challenge of musicianship. And, it is this achievement that gives Ulhas the stature he has.

Ulhas' music is an original statement, which exhibits a fine musical mind at work. It is rooted in tradition without being orthodox. It is contemporary, but well fortified against the biggest risk in contemporary Hindustani music -- a drift towards entertainment. It is engaging and absorbing because of its architectural soundness, melodic richness, rhythmic dexterity, and the transparency of communicative intent.

A “Pandit” identifies himself even in the manner in which he renders a common raga like Yaman Kalyan or Malkauns. But, a look at Ulhas’ discography provides valuable insights into the musical personality. Of the 37 raga-s listed, as many as 17 can be considered rare. The list includes raga-s like Raat-ki Gunkali whose existence is known only to few living connoisseurs, and archaic versions of currently popular raga-s such as Shuddha Dhaivat Lalit. It also includes several favourites of Jaipur-Atrauli gharana, [e.g. Basanti Kedar, Lalita Gauri and Nat Bihag] conceived as uniquely intricate compounds. During my exchange with Ulhas on his rendering of Malati Basant, I discovered that he could validate his interpretation of a rare raga not only by citing the few recordings of it known to exist, but also with authoritative textual references. The surprise in Ulhas’ raga inventory is Sanjh Saravali, a creation of the sitar maestro, Ustad Vilayat Khan, which has never been performed by anyone other than the Ustad himself. Ulhas studied the raga with Khansaheb, and first performed it publicly, in the presence of its creator, in January 2003. Amongst Ulhas’ releases, is also a collection of Thumrees in various “Thumree raga-s”. On this evidence, Ulhas emerges as a versatile musician willing to make unusual demands on his audiences, and forego the rewards of familiarity to satisfy his own need to keep music creatively demanding for himself.

Of Ulhas, the senior music critic, Prakash Wadhera, [The Hindu, December 1, 2000] wrote: "To listen to Ulhas is to augment your knowledge. Though one is naturally hesitant to call one so young “a musicians' musician”, Ulhas Kashalkar bids fair to be one in not too distant a future" A greater compliment to his musicianship, however, came from the legendary Ustad Vilayat Khan, who inducted Ulhas into his legacy of vocal compositions and raga-s created by him.

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