

MUSIC, FOREVER

- Musicians of genius belong to the ages, and to the world

POLITICS AND PLAY: Ramachandra Guha



Bhimsen Joshi (1922-2011)

As you come out of the Doe Library of the University of California at Berkeley, and turn right, the road slopes downwards and continues until the west edge of the campus. Beyond, the San Francisco Bay is, on a clear day, quite visible. It is an arresting view, best experienced in the early afternoon, when, if you exit the library precisely at the hour or half-hour, you hear the university's campanile pealing behind you, feel the row of stately trees alongside you, and see, in the far distance, the waters of the Pacific gleaming silver in the setting sun.

One afternoon in 1997 or 1998, I came out of the library after a satisfactory day's work. The campanile was silent, but then I heard a sound more surprising as well as more arresting — the baritone of a beloved singer whose voice I recognized but did not expect, at that time or place, to hear. I followed the sound to its source. A pick-up truck was parked at the side of the road, with a driver in overalls at the wheel. Seeing my look of wonderment, he pointed at his cassette recorder in explanation of his state of pleasure, which was also mine. He then said, "Bhimsen Joshii!" I nodded and looked rightwards; the bay had never seemed more beautiful before, or since.

When I was a student in Delhi in the 1970s, those who loved cricket were consumed by two debates — whether G.R. Viswanath was, under all conditions, a better batsman than Sunil Gavaskar, and whether for the sake of his better fielding and batting skills, Srinivas Venkataraghavan should be chosen for the Indian Test side ahead of his fellow off-spinner, Erapalli Prasanna. The latter were the conventional or popular choices; the former offered by those who considered themselves more discerning, above the instincts of the herd. Those who listened to classical music were likewise consumed by two controversies — whether Vilayat Khan was a more variously gifted sitar player than Ravi Shankar, and whether the sweetness of his voice and the subtlety of his interpretations made Mallikarjun Mansur a greater singer than Bhimsen Joshi. Here too, the popular vote was generally for the second of the two musicians in these pairings, whereas those who fancied themselves more learned (but who, in fact, may merely have been more pretentious) leant towards the first named.

I vigorously participated in these debates, but the sides I took (or the names I preferred) are irrelevant. In retrospect, what must be stressed instead is our staggering good fortune. We, who grew up in the 1970s, were exceptionally blessed to watch Gavaskar and Vishy bat, Venkat and

Prasanna (and Chandrasekhar and Bedi) bowl, Ravi Shankar and Vilayat (and Ali Akbar Khan and Nikhil Banerjee) play their respective instruments, and Mallikarjun and Bhimsen (and Kumar Gandharva and Kishori Amonkar) sing.

My own love of these cricketers and musicians combined a serious interest with a keen sense of proprietorship. After all, Vishy, Prasanna and Chandra lived in my home town, Bangalore, whereas Bhimsen, Mallikarjun and Kumar Gandharva originally belonged to my home state, Karnataka. They all came from towns or villages within a hundred-mile radius of Dharwad, as did another trinity of magnificent vocalists — Gangubai Hangal, Basavaraj Rajguru, and Puttaraj Gavai. The last named was the least known outside the state but venerated within it, both for his teaching skills and for having risen above the handicap of being born blind.

How and why Dharwad became a nucleus of shastriya sangeet awaits explanation. It was part of the Bombay Presidency, and thus subject to influences from those two great musical centres, Pune and Mumbai. Even closer were the towns of Kolhapur and Miraj, where some famous (Muslim) teachers of music had settled, at the invitation of princes who were patrons of culture. Since Dharwad falls broadly in the region known as ‘South’ India, perhaps these vocalists also drew to some extent on the Carnatic style of music. We do know for certain that they were deeply influenced by folk traditions and by medieval saints. Both Bhimsen and Mallikarjun liked to sing songs composed by Purandaradasa, whereas Kumar Gandharva reinterpreted Kabir with great feeling and sensitivity for a 20th-century audience.

When I visited Dharwad some years ago, I was too shy to make contact with M. Venkatesh Kumar, who is now the best known, certainly the most gifted, and (although it pains me to say this) just possibly the last representative of the Dharwad tradition. (Readers of this column may associate me with certitude, even arrogance, but when it comes to meeting with or speaking to classical musicians I am timid beyond words, for I know them to be immeasurably greater than even the best writer can ever be.) Some years ago, I stood next to the contemporary singer I most admire, Ulhas Kashalkar, at the check-in counter of the India International Centre in New Delhi. I was struck silent, when I should really have (a) obtained his autograph; (b) at least told him how much I admired his music.

I would not meet Venkatesh Kumar, but, when in Dharwad, I did ask a friend to direct me to a store which stocked musical CDs made by local, less known, companies. The store lay in a narrow street in an old, old market; its owner told me that it was a long time since someone had come looking for classical rather than film music. As a result, his holdings in that direction were now depleted, but I did yet find two treasures, a selection of the songs of Puttaraj Gavai, and a recording dating to the 1960s of Bhimsen Joshi singing Yaman.

Bhimsen’s obituarists will no doubt stress the sheer power of his voice. The adjectives ‘majestic’ and ‘imperial’ shall surely be used. This power and range were best expressed in ragas such as Shankara, Durga and Maru Bihag. The Yaman I bought in Dharwad, on the other hand, conveyed a reflective, ruminative quality that he also possessed, even if it was less on display in his later years. The subtlety of his musical understanding and the surprising tenderness of his voice are also manifest in some quite lovely recordings of Chhaya-Chhaya Malhar, Maluha Kedar, and Yamani Bilawal, the last being among my all-time favourite pieces of music.

Born and raised in north Karnataka, of properly Kannadiga stock, Bhimsen Joshi spent the last decades of his life in Pune, where he spoke Marathi to his friends and often sang the abhangs of

the poet-saints of medieval Maharashtra. His true ethnic or provincial provenance thus became a matter of controversy. He is claimed as Maharashtrian by Bal Thackeray (and by better people too), whereas chaps like me insisted that he belonged instead to the state of Vishy, Pras, Chandra, Mallikarjun, Gangubai, and Puttaraj Gavai. The dispute is perhaps petty and immaterial. For my fellow Bhimsen rasika in Berkeley, that red-bearded driver of a U-Haul truck, had never been to India in his life. Cricketers and writers are known by decades and claimed by countries, but musicians of genius belong to the ages, and to the world.

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