



On Pandit Rajshekhar Mansur and his Music

- Vijayendra Rao

Pandit Rajshekhar Mansur, the great singer of the Jaipur-Atrauli Gharana passed away in May this year. I was privileged to have been his student. Tomorrow, December 16th, is his 80th birthday, so I thought I would write a short article about his music, with excerpts both from his music and writing– he was not just a wonderful singer he also wrote clearly and beautifully (You can hear more of his music, and read his writing, on his website: <http://rajshekharmanсур.com>).

Like his other students, I called Guruji Sir, so that is how I will refer to him.

Sir was the son and primary student of one of the greatest musicians of the 20th century – Pandit Mallikarjun Mansur. He did not consider himself a “professional” musician because he made his primary living as a university professor in Karnatak University in Dharwad where he retired as Chair of the English Department.

The Jaipur-Atrauli gharana

The Jaipur-Atrauli gharana was founded by Ustad Alladiya Khan in the late 19th century. Alladiya Khansahib was a polymath - a scholar of Arabic, Persian and Sanskrit in addition to various dialects of Hindi and Hindustani, and a tremendously erudite musician. He was trained as a Dhrupad singer and performed for many years as one, and also had a close kinship with the Agra Gharana.

There are various legends about how he “invented” the Jaipur-Atrauli Gharana, but what is clear is that at some point in the late 19th century he started moving away from Dhrupad to Khyal and developed a distinct style of Khyal – which, following the origins of his family near the town of Atrauli in modern UP and their subsequent employment as court musicians in Jaipur, began to be called the Jaipur-Atrauli gharana.

What is the Jaipur-Atrauli gharana, and what are its elements? As Sir used to tell us, all gharanas build from the same fundamentals of raga and laya (rhythm). The difference is one of emphasis and style. Purity of sur - which Sir preferred to call “ragaswara” making the point that each note in a raga only takes on meaning when it is embedded within the context of the raga. Sir would teach us to think of the entire raga when singing any given note in the raga – emphasizing its microtonal elements which could differ from raga to raga, thinking about how to approach the note in the context of the raga, how much to “rest” on it, etc. He never followed the Bhatkande structure of That and vadi/samvadi because he believed that these led us away from understanding ragaswara and the meaning of the raga. This prominence given to the ragaswara and purity of sur – perhaps reflects the Jaipur-Atrauli gharana’s affinity to Dhrupad.

More than other khyal gharanas, the Jaipur-Atrauli gharana also gives great importance to the bandish (composition) most of which were either composed by Alladiya Khansahib or modified by him. It emphasizes laya – and the permutations and combinations afforded between melody and rhythm within one avartan (one rhythmic cycle). So the journey to Sam (the first beat in the rhythmic cycle) from the beginning to the end of one avartan – is very important: creativity needs to be expressed in that short journey. Raga performance starts without a preliminary alaap, the initial performance of the bandish and subsequent improvisations are done in vilambit laya (slow rhythm) which allows the complexity of the ragaswaras to be properly expressed and delineated – akin to an alaap. Like in Dhrupad and the Agra Gharana, sargams within the context of a performance are not permitted – Nom-Tom alaap and sargam are, however, employed for teaching and practice.

It is characterized by new approaches to well-known ragas such as Bhairav, Bhoop, Bhimpalas, Gaud Malhar, Gaud Sarang, Marwa, and Shri.

And the resurrection of old, now rarely sung ragas such as Vibhas, Malavi, Ek Nishad Bihagada, Sampurna Malkauns, Barari, and Khokar – which have come to be known as aprachilit (uncommon/rare ragas).

Something the gharana is particularly well-known for are jod – merged/jointed - ragas which are usually (but not always) the creation of Alladiya Khansahib. In the Jaipur-Atrauli gharana the

separate identity of the ragas that constitute the jod raga are not emphasized. The jod raga is taught as a distinct raga in its own right with no clear pattern of where one raga ends and another begins.

A few examples are Basanti Kedar, Lalita-Gauri, Khat. And families of ragas, such as those merged raga Bilawal: Yamani Bilawal, Sukhiya Bilawal (a combination of ragas Savani and Bilawal), Kukubh Bilawal, and JaiJai Bilawal. And a slew of ragas merged with raga Nat: Kedar Nat, Nat Bihag, Savani Nat. The raga Shuddha Nat (a favorite of Rajshekhar Mansur) is especially interesting because it combines raga Shuddha Kalyan with raga Nat to form a raga that sounds like nothing like either of them. Shuddha Kalyan (which is considered a speciality of the Kirana gharana is also sung by Jaipur-Atrauli musicians) is itself is a derivative of the pentatonic raga Bhoopali (which omits Ma and Ni from the seven notes and thus is known by some wags as raga No Money) by adding back Madhyam and Nishad in the descent.

Examples of some Sir's performances of these ragas are provided below.

Mallikarjun Mansur and the "Mansur style" of the Jaipur-Atrauli Gharana

Sir's father/guru's initial training was in the Gwalior gharana with Pandit Neelakanth Bua Alurmth in which he became an accomplished performer cutting several 78rpm records, but in his 30s he sought guidance from Alladiya Khansahib because he was drawn to the Jaipur-Atrauli gharana. Alladiya Khan directed Mansur to his eldest son Ustad Manji Khansahib who had a deep and lasting influence on him. Manji Khan died just two years after giving Mallikarjun Mansur during which he gave him rigorous and extensive taleem, and Mallikarjun Mansur continued his training with Manji Khan's younger brother Ustad Burji Khansahib. But the Mansur style is really the Manji Khan style which is an uber, souped-up version of the gharana. It features intense melodic creativity within the avartan, playing with rhythm, with great priority given to aaghat – forceful vocal flourishes and strokes.

Raga performance in the Manji Khan style therefore has three dimensions: melody, rhythm and aaghat. This creates enormous potential for permutations and combinations in improvisation and allows for the great creativity in performance that Mansur was known for.

Pandit Mallikarjun Mansur was of course one of the geniuses of 20th century music and the only representative of the Manji Khan style of the gharana, which he combined with a few elements of the Gwalior gharana.

Mallikarjun Mansur had very few students – the vocalist Pandit Panchakshari Swami Mattigatti who passed away in 2013 was an early disciple, and the well-known sarodist Pandit Biswajit Roy Chowdhury received a few years of training from him. Sir, however, was the only one who benefitted from the full measure his taleem.

Sir, of course, grew up with music which – as he said – was like the air in his parents' house, He started his formal training with his father at the age of 16, which continued till his father died almost four decades later.

The fact that he did not earn his living from music gave him a certain uncompromising freedom. For instance, he refused to sing bhajans or vachanas like his father did, refused even to sing drut compositions believing that everything that could be said about a raga could be demonstrated in one bandish at varying speeds.

Here is an excerpt from Sir's description of his training with this father:

"My taleem from my father-guru was in the most unorthodox, but the most effective manner - than the general method of teaching-learning processes. He decided to teach me after he heard - to his surprise - that at the age of 16, I had sung Malkauns in my annual class day in college without any formal training. (His tablaist, Basavaraj Bendigeri, had reported the matter to him because he had accompanied me on tabla) Incidentally, my father never wanted me to be a professional musician because of the travails he had gone through as professional musician. He wanted me to become a doctor, but I didn't become one.

Although my father-guru was an indulgent father, as Guru he was a very exacting teacher and a strict disciplinarian before whom I would shudder. In taking taleem from him there were no quarters given nor taken. I would see him in a different role/avatar. There was no father in this Guru when he began teaching a particular raga. There neither was a son when I was learning from him. It would be a purely guru-shishya relationship. At the stipulated time, I would enter the room (there was no music room in the two bedroom house), put out the darri, take the tanpura, try to tune it (I didn't know how to tune in the beginning stage and I would struggle to tune it perfectly...How lucky modern students are with the electronic tanpura!) He would enter and give final touches to the tuning of the tanpura or he would ask me to fine tune it before him.

After a few initial ragaswaras in the lower octave, he would begin to sing the bandish of a raga a few times and ask me to follow him. Many times I would not know the name, the swaras involved, no vadi/samvadi of the raga, what angas were involved, whether it was jod or sankirna raga. Nothing ! No introduction to the raga. It would be like being pushed into the raging ocean from a cliff, when I did not even know swimming! I had to flay my arms wildly and beat my legs and be scared, but I knew the instructor was there to help me swim. I simply had to follow him blindly until I got some idea of the way the raga went. He would repeat the bandish some ten times with me following him. No pen or notebook to write down the notes. He would say "the ragaswaras must be written down or etched in the mind, not in books". This was a purely aural-oral tradition through which he had learned and he wanted me to learn in the same manner. After he taught me the bandish, asking me to practice it by myself, he would saunter out to

smoke his beedis or have a cup of tea, but always with one ear on my practice and suddenly coming to correct if I went wrong.

Once or twice, he would forget I was practicing and would be oblivious of it for 20/30 minutes and he had to be reminded by my loving mother to attend to my singing. I still remember once he had given me a taan pattern to practice in Bhimpalās and he went out. He came after 30 minutes and said " good, the taan pattern has become pukka". That spiraling taan pattern has not gone out of my mind even today and when I employ it, I remember him with nostalgia. What a great Guru, straight from the heavens!

After I had got the bandish, he would come in to teach the badhat/progression of the raga. He would teach the badhat phrase by phrase, not note by note. Sometimes, while teaching he would take the 'dagga' and play the tala. At other times he would call Basavaraj Bendigeri. My guru had enormous patience to instill the nuances of ragaswaras and phrases until I got them right. He would not let me off until he was satisfied that I had got them right. My mother would sometimes intrude to say "Let the poor boy eat something. He must be hungry". To which he would say " Eating at eating times, singing at singing times". My mother would walk out with a sad face. This kind of taleem continued for years ! It's interesting to note that nothing would be said during the teaching-learning session. All that had to be said, he would say through his singing."

Sir was a sensitive person, and a well-read intellectual – both in his thinking and in his orientation to music. He did not have his father's vocal range which made him focus less on the filigreed tans his father was famous for, and traversing up and down 3 or 4 octaves, and more on the key elements of the Manji Khan/Mallikarjun Mansur style – aaghat, and complex melodic and rhythmic creativity. This made his music searching, gentle, introspective, and more romantic than his father's.

Music was Sir's religion, his life, a vital part of his being. Unlike his father, he was a man of the world – educated in the UK, and a highly respected English professor for so long – which made him a fantastic teacher, and an articulate spokesperson for the gharana.

He is survived by his wife Smt. Komala Mansur, his three daughters – Sangeeta, Mamata and Kavita, and two grandchildren. His musical legacy continues with his senior students Mithun Chakravarti who is a graded artist with AIR, and Chandrika Murali Kamath. Priyadarshini Kulkarni also studied with him for several years.

I will end this article with some video and audio examples of Sir's music, including some wonderful interviews with him about his music, and his father's music.

Music:

Let me open with a video from the early 1990's of Sir singing the famous Jaipur-Atrauli bandish "Nara Hari Narayana" in the morning raga [Vibhas](#), recorded by Doordarshan Kalaburgi.

Shyam Benegal made a beautiful short film picturizing an anecdote about Pandit Mallikarjun Mansur where Sir played his father and sang raga [Ek Nishad Bihagada](#)

A video performance of the aprachalit raga [Khokar](#).

A more recent video of a performance of raga [Shri](#) with the poignant bandish – कहाँ मैं गुरु ढूँढना जाऊँ - Where do I go to find a guru?

[Omenad](#), a wonderful musician's collective conducted a multi-part interview with Sir on "Durlabh Swar ki Khoj" (the search for rare swaras) in Hindi with a distinguished panel of musicians: [Part 1](#), [Part 2](#), [Part 3](#) and [Part 4](#).

Another [interview in Kannada](#) (with English subtitles) conducted by the musicologist Manu Chakravarti.

Audio recordings of raga [Sukhiya Bilawal](#), [Shuddha Nat](#), [Sampurna Malkauns](#), [Gaud Sarang](#), [Nayak Ki Kanada](#), and [Malavi](#)

And the music from his first CD, featuring ragas [Todi](#), [Lacchasakh](#), [Barari](#) and [Godhan Gauri](#)