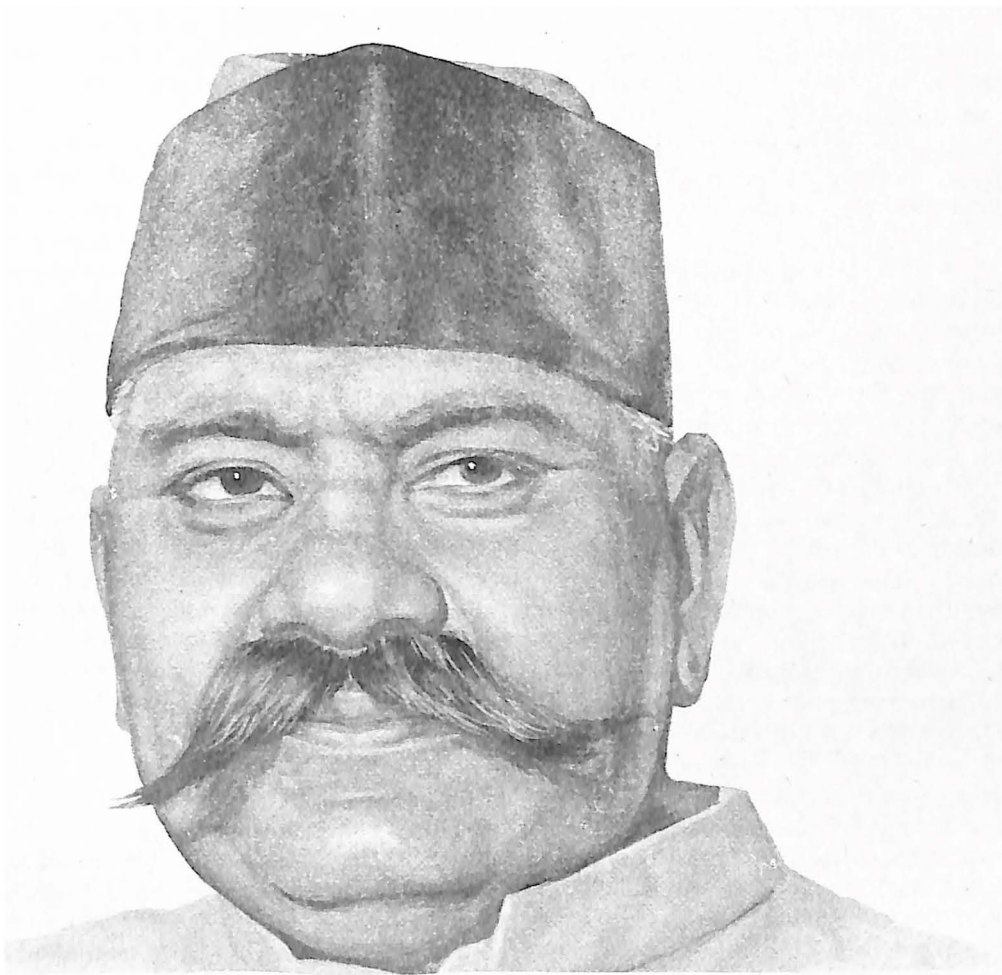




Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan

(1901 — 1968)

Ashok Ranade

[To mark the occasion of the eightieth birth anniversary of Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, we are including in this issue an assessment of the Ustad's distinctive contribution to Hindustani vocal music.]

— Editor]

I heard him for the first time at a concert in Bombay in 1948. He opened the concert with the *raga* Kedara and, within seconds, he touched the *Mandra Madhyama* with such clarity, strength and sweetness that there was a spontaneous and overwhelming response.

The Ustad's voice was unique. It had a very wide range; it was flexible and it moved with ease in all tempi,—possessing all these and similar parameters of a good voice. Without exception, the voice gave his music an unmatched

lucidity. Perhaps it could be better described by a term from Sanskrit *Sahityashashtra*: *Prasad*. This quality enables a work to express and convey import in an unobstructed manner. The Ustad's voice made his music unambiguous. There was no need to reconstruct or imagine his musical design in order to enjoy or assess it because it was perceived clearly and easily. The veil of a faulty voice production was totally absent in his musical endeavours.

This lack of musical ambiguity was also obvious in other ways. For example, the Ustad's enunciation of words was also unambiguous. His approach to the pronunciation of words was marked by an element of leisure. He formed all the vowel sounds and the consonants that shaped the words in an unhurried fashion. Even the joint consonants in words like *Premaki* (*Thumri* in Sohoni), *Tatsat* (in the *Bhajan*, *Hari Om Tatsat*), *Swami* (in the *antara* of the *Kheyal* in Malkauns), were not glossed over. What was more amazing was that he could maintain this same quality even when the words were pitched on high notes. As a rule, vowel sounds tend to become indistinct at the higher notes. The fact, that he could keep them undistorted at higher pitch-levels speaks of an extraordinarily well-coordinated voice production. This was evident in his *Tarana*-singing. Generally, the grouping together of unusual, rather prosaic and often unintelligible consonant sounds might have compelled other musicians to become forced and harsh. However, the Ustad could retain his 'singer-at-ease' quality. The edges of the words were never lost or rounded off in his singing. They were carefully chiselled into unblunted, individual shapes.

Another instance of the essential unambiguity of the Ustad's singing was the care he bestowed on the values of individual notes as tonal entities. It is a truism to state that every melodic phrase in *Alap*-s, *Tan*-s, etc. has component notes that are also important as individual, tonal entities. They have their own identities which need to be expressed as such. But a careful listening to various musicians reveals a rather disconcerting phenomenon. It seems that, in the case of most musicians, only those notes which are structurally important are given their full value. For example, it is found that quite often the initial or the end notes of a phrase or sometimes an initial note of a sub-section is given individual attention and weightage. Especially in *Tan*-s, most musicians tend to concentrate on giving an impression of speed, with only a suggestion of note-values. The excessive and misdirected use of *Gamak* can also be regarded as a notorious example of this type of ambiguity. The Ustad's music did not suffer from any of these lapses. In his case, whatever the length and tempo of the *Tan*-s and the proportion of the *Gamak*-s involved, the values of the individual notes remained intact. He was never 'slippery' in his *Tan*-s, or merely sonorous in his *Gamak*-s. The melodic line was always clear in its entirety, the component notes were given their full value and the termination points were never allowed to appear abruptly. This was all the more surprising because in the Patiala *Gharana*, which he represented, fast and intricate *Tan*-s constitute a speciality.

It is difficult to describe the *Tan*-s which played such an important part in the total make-up of the Patiala *Gharana*. But the Ustad has been fairly extensively recorded and it is possible to relate these observations to his recorded music. It is obvious that speed was given pride of place in his renderings. As is usual with vocalists in possession of a light and flexible voice, he excelled

in *Satta Tan-s* (that is straight *Tan-s* covering at least a range of one octave). But the distinctive feature of his *Tan-s* was the use of speed in short, spiralling patterns, covering the whole range. While a *Satta Tan* impresses with its power and surprise through the act of shortening the tonal space instantaneously, the spiralling variety of the Ustad's singing accentuated two elements: the shortened tonal space and the intricacy of the design involved. The tonal space was accentuated because the octave note or the termination point of the *Tan* was approached with a decidedly gradual movement. Besides the intricacy of the design was brought into relief because the spiralling progression invariably repeated the basic pattern. Obviously, the chances of perceiving the complexity of the patterns are better because the pattern is repeated at different pitch-levels. The total effect is naturally one of surprise and exuberance.

It is here that the influence of the *Tappa* form becomes obvious. We know that this form is flashy and intricate in intent and fast in movement. Therefore it succeeds in producing the effect of an aural dazzle but not of any sustained power of music. Punjab is reputed to be the home of this form and it was not surprising that the Ustad should have incorporated aspects of the *Tappa* in his *Tan-s*. Significantly enough, he did not sing the *Tappa*. It is clear that it would have been musically repetitious for him to render *Kheyal* with *Tappa*-oriented *Tan-s* and again present *Tappa* as an independent musical item. His *Tappa*-oriented sections were prominent in *Chota Kheyal-s*. In a way, this was inevitably so because it would have been both difficult and unaesthetic to fill up the large temporal spaces of the *Bada Kheyal* with *Tappa*-like *Tan*-patterns. His fast *Chota Kheyal-s* in Todi (*Bhor Bhai*), Malkauns (*Aye pi more*) are good instances of how frameworks originally set in a fast tempo could facilitate effective emergence of fast and intricate *Tan*-patterns.

Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan was not, however, only known for his *Kheyal*-singing. In fact, in the opinion of many musicians, his place as a singer of *Thumri-s* is to be rated higher than as a *Kheyal*-singer. Though this estimate may not be quite tenable, the argument creates an interesting situation. It seems to me that in his case all the three forms exerted a reciprocal influence. Though he did not sing the *Tappa*, curiously enough, it was this form—one that was not included in his active repertoire—which deeply impressed both the *Kheyal* and *Thumri* in his music. His *Thumri-s* borrowed the flashy contours of the *Tappa* and in spite of the musicological argument in favour of eschewing *Tan-s* and intricacy in the interest of sustained emotional appeal, the Ustad did succeed in winning recognition for the twin-elements of exuberance and emotionality by his *Thumri*-singing. When he appeared on the Indian musical scene in a major way in the late forties, Benaras and Lucknow were the only established *Gharana-s* in *Thumri*-singing. (Perhaps one could also add the two exemplified by the Agra and the Kirana musicians. These could respectively be termed manly-erotic and *Kheyal*-oriented). This is really not the place for a detailed analysis of the three *Gharana-s* of *Thumri*-singing. But it can be stated that Benaras with its high seriousness and poise and Lucknow with its minute delicacies and *Ghazal*-orientation had created types that were in danger of becoming too rigid. The *Thumri* texts, the procedure of presentation, and even the norms to be followed by the accompanists, were achieving the status of stereotypes and new interpretation was rendered difficult if not impossible. This impasse

had to be met with musical ingenuity and for this task the Ustad intuitively chose the way of impressing his *Thumri* with a *Tappa*-orientation. He was the right person to do this successfully because his voice was ideally suited for the delicate balancing act that was involved. Any laboured introduction of *Tappa* features in *Thumri* would have made it impossible to keep the spell of the words intact. Since he could effortlessly interweave the complex, abrupt and fast-tempo *Tappa* patterns in his *Thumri*-s, the evocative power of the words was not adversely affected. His *Thumri* compositions were naturally set in a faster tempo and were often different from those current in the other two major *Gharana*-s mentioned earlier. In short, there was a cyclical influencing process operative in his music. His *Tappa*-s influenced his *Thumri*-s which, in turn, influenced his *Kheyal*-s. Perhaps the Ustad also felt that his contributions to *Thumri*-singing were indeed more original, because he has presented *Thumri*-s even in *Raga*-s like Sohoni. In the light of these instances, it can be deduced that he did not regard *Thumri* as a musicological category but as a legitimate, aesthetic way of viewing all musical material. This sort of attempt at extending the effective area of *Thumri* to *Raga*-s traditionally reserved for *Kheyal* would have added a new perspective to the existing hierarchy of musical forms. The attempt did not take root, but that does not lessen the value of his explorations.

The Ustad did not make any claim to be a 'learned' vocalist. He repeatedly stated that he knew only a few *Raga*-s and this was borne out by his rather limited effective repertoire. He sang *Prachalita* and, in the main, mood-oriented *Raga*-s. Fortunately most of his 'patent' *Raga*-s have been recorded. I remember that apart from these *Prachalita Raga*-s, he sang *Aprachalita Raga*-s like Shukla-Bilawal, Khat (Punjab Ang), and Gunji-Kanada etc. It is also reported that he knew about 15 varieties of *Pahadi*—a folk melody used copiously for lighter compositions. One wishes that these, too, had been recorded. As suggested earlier, he had blended *Tappa* with his *Kheyal* and *Tappa* is known to have its origins in the songs of the camel drivers of the Punjab region. Thus more extensive recordings of his folk repertoire would have certainly shed better light on the creative process which helped him to reinforce his insight into classical music with first-hand knowledge of folk expression in music. It appears that he knew traditional compositions but not too many of them and that could be one of the reasons why he composed new compositions using the name Sabrang in them. It is, of course, possible that he felt that traditional compositions were not particularly suitable to his view of music. In effect, he sang what the listeners seemed to know and he may be said to have more belief in originality than in novelty. It appears to me that this is important enough to warrant attention. When he arrived on the musical scene, standardization of music education was well under way and popularization of music through the mass media was also an accomplished fact. Hence the trend among musicians was to dazzle and puzzle the listeners. One of the easier and more obvious ways of achieving this was to emphasize one's own knowledge of *Aprachalita Raga*-s. The Ustad did not follow this easy road to recognition and insisted on creating surprises within the area of the known—in matters of *Raga*-s, *Tala*-s and the compositions. He never seemed to address himself to the connoisseur. In fact, his unspoken faith appeared to be that if you can move the layman then the learned will also be moved. Apart from singing sweetly, effortlessly and simply, he also grasped one more truth about the 'ordinary' music lover. This kind of listener likes to have his 'ears' filled while he is listening to music. Artistes can do this (as they have done) by using more volume,

more tonal colour and swifter and more successive stimuli. The Ustad relied on continuous sweetness. This was how his *Swarmandal* seemed to contribute to his *general liking* for a musical aura. An unbroken, subdued but rich circle of sound was provided by the instrument which matched his voice better than a bowed stringed instrument like the Sarangi.

As a performer, he had perhaps one major defect and that was a certain degree of casualness in the music he presented at larger conferences. In such gatherings, he tended to repeat what he had already popularized through his records. On such occasions he did not seem to take any creative risks whatsoever. On the other hand, in smaller *mehfil*-s, he was a totally changed musician. Then he exhibited an earnestness of purpose that transformed his music.

The Ustad used to say that music should be likened to playing, dancing or rhythmic movements of waves etc. The impressionistic attitude reflected in such remarks also indicated his inclination to de-ritualize music and, in a way, make it less serious and more enjoyable. It could perhaps be that he did not want to be serious about music all the time. He certainly justified this unusual approach by some extremely fresh, appealing and easy-to-digest music.

Select Discography

Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan

Sr. No.	Raga	Text-Line	Record No.
1.	Gunkali	<i>E Kartar</i>	HMV EALP 1258
	Malkauns	<i>Eree kab</i>	"
		<i>Ab yahi bhed</i>	"
2.	Gujri Todi	<i>Bhor bhai</i>	HMV MOAE 5004
	Desi Todi	<i>Manwa larje</i>	"
	Bhimpalas	<i>Begun aye</i>	"
	Kamod	<i>Chhand de</i>	"
	Pahadi	<i>Hari om tat sat</i>	"
	Kedar	<i>Naveli nar</i>	"
	Jaijaiwanti	<i>Binati ka</i>	"
	Darbari	<i>Bhaj re</i>	"
	Adana	<i>Jaise kariye</i>	"
	Malkauns	<i>Mandir dekh</i>	"
	Paraj	<i>Latak chale</i>	"
3.	Thumri-s	<i>Kankar mar</i>	HMV MOAE 5005
		<i>Aye na balam</i>	"
		<i>Saiyan bolo</i>	"
		<i>Yaad piyaki</i>	"
		<i>Prem ke phande</i>	"
		<i>Prem ki mari katar</i>	"
		<i>Ketena birakhi raat</i>	"
		<i>Tirachi najariya ke baan</i>	"
		<i>Prem agan</i>	"
		<i>Naina more taras</i>	"