

## MASHKOOR ALI KHAN

## “I am a student, not an Ustad”

Tracing his roots to a lineage of established Hindustani classical vocalists of repute, Mashkoor Ali Khan, an accomplished vocalist and guru from the ITC Sangeet Research Academy, Kolkata, presented a variety of old and traditional bandishes at a concert in an intimate chamber-style format in Framingham, Massachusetts, on the evening of 25 April. The concert was organised by Boston based Learnquest Academy.

Opening with a medium-tempo khayal in the meditative evening raga Pooriya Kalyan, he went on to present khayals in ragas Jhinjhoti, Shahana, Malkauns, Hameeri-Bilawal, Khamaj-Bahar, Yaman, Bhoopali set to a variety of talas and concluded with a rendition in Patmanjari. Nitin Mitta on the tabla and Ravi Torvi on the harmonium provided excellent support.

The unique aspect of the “baithak” concert was that Mashkoor Ali Khan created a warm atmosphere of shared joy between the performers and the listeners by conversing with them and giving them interesting insights into the compositions of Amir Khusro, Qawwal Bachchey, Kunwar Shyam and Bahadur Shah Zafar. For instance, in a composition in raga Yaman by the prolific poet-composer Wajid Hussain Khan (Meher piya), the poet asks God to bestow him with raga (melody) and rasa (aesthetic beauty), dhan (wealth) as well as guna (good qualities). The words of the sthayi and antara movements of the khayal cleverly corresponded to the solfege notes for each syllable.

Sthayi:

*Pagaparayniradhana, Raga rasamangey*

Antara:

*Nirasadhana rasa, parasaguna rasa, jaakomeharmangey*

For example, in the first line of sthayi movement, “*Pagaparayniradhana*”, ‘Pa’ corresponded to the musical note *pa*, ‘ga’ and ‘gey’ to *ga*, ‘ray’ and ‘ra’ to *ri*, ‘ni’ and ‘na’ to *ni*, ‘dha’ to *dha*, ‘maan’ to *ma*, and so forth.

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Mashkoor Ali Khan  
in conversation with  
Shuchita Rao

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**You were born in a family with a long line of established musicians from Kairana, the founding place of the famous Kirana gharana. Tell us about your childhood and how your training in music began?**

My father Shakoor Khan (one of the first sarangi players to be honoured with the Padma Shri award in 1973), was a well-known sarangi nawaz who held a job as a staff artist with All India Radio, Delhi. He loved Kirana with all his heart but his job required him to live in Delhi. He was the nephew of the reputed vocalist Ustad Abdul Waheed Khan, nephew of Ustad Abdul Karim Khan, the founder of the Kirana gharana. There was great jubilation in our home when I was born as my father had me late in his life after the tragic loss of some of his older children.

At the tender age of five, my father took me away from my mother, to Delhi with him. I was initially not particularly interested in music and was sad to leave my home but my father gave me the love of both a father



and a mother. He looked after my every little need and taught me music by laying me on his chest every night. I learned from him until my early twenties, which is when he passed away.

**Was there any pressure on you to learn to play the sarangi or any other instrument?**

No, my father did not let me touch his instrument because he wanted me to do what I liked doing best. Playing the sarangi could have brought me income because sarangi players were often paid to accompany vocalists, but my father strongly felt that I should pursue my interest in singing without having to play second fiddle to someone else's singing.

**Please describe your father's training methods.**

My father was a knowledgeable artist and a loving person. He taught me several ragas but not in any particular order. I began my lessons with Deshkar, went on to learn Yaman, Sankara and even Bhankaar because I liked it when I heard a family member sing it on the radio. My father taught me any raga that came to his mind with great spontaneity, including less heard ragas like Khat, Patmanjari and Patbihag. Raga Bhairav came much later in my training. He was a strict teacher. He supervised all my riyaz sessions making sure I did not practice something in a wrong manner. I was duly reprimanded and beaten if I did not develop a raga correctly. By the time I was ten, I could present a khayal in slow Jhoomra and Tilvada talas for 30-35 minutes with ease. I learned several compositions in every raga. I was always encouraged to perform before great musicians to receive their blessings and was fortunate to have performed in the presence of such legendary musicians as Amir Khan, Vilayat Khan, Khadim Hussein Khan, Rahimuddin Dagar and Ahmed Jan Thirakwa.

**Were you not scared to sing in the presence of great maestros?**

Absolutely not. I had started singing in small mehfilis from age seven. My training was so solid that I sang better in front of the maestros than what I sang at home while practicing music. I had great faith and confidence in my father's knowledge and training methods. At age ten, on the occasion of my grandfather Abdul Waheed Khan's death anniversary, I presented *Bibhas in the morning* and *Pooriya Kalyan* in the evening. I was fearless.

**When your father, a staff artist at AIR-Delhi was busy with his official duties, how did you spend your time?**

Most times, I sat in the recording studio watching and hearing performers sing and play instruments. Many

times, I fell asleep there. My father never woke me up if that happened, but would carry me home by bus or rickshaw. Sometimes, he would make me run on the lawns of the radio station so that my limbs would stretch and loosen up a bit. The station director of AIR-Delhi, the late K.K. Mathur, was very kind to me and liked my singing. He predicted a bright future for me as a vocalist.

**Did your family expect you to join All India Radio as a staff artist?**

Yes, but vocalists could only join as tanpura players if they became staff artists. Their primary job would be to play the tanpura for other artists who came to perform at the radio station. I chose to audition at the radio station and started out with a B-High grade. In addition to performing on the radio, I also taught music to earn money. Mumbai was a happening place with film music in those years. My father was invited to play the sarangi for Ustad Vilayat Khan's film, so I traveled with my father on an airplane from Delhi to Mumbai when I was just ten years old. My father also traveled to foreign countries such as Afghanistan, Leningrad and Germany as part of a contingent of musicians along with Pandit Ravi Shankar in 1964. Having witnessed these exciting aspects of a performing career in music, I was not particularly excited about joining All India Radio as a staff artist.



