

MULTI-MEDIA EXHIBITION ON HINDUSTANI MUSICIANS: RE-ENGAGING WITH ARCHIVAL MATERIAL

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ABSTRACT

Music is a performing art, but music-making has always led practitioners to engage in multi-faceted roles for interpreting, transmitting, and propagating the music they practice. North Indian classical music, commonly referred to as Hindustani Music, has several musicians who have not only been performers but have also engaged in myriad roles of music-making. This article describes the process of curating a multi-media exhibition around the work of three such musicians, who were multi-faceted practitioners of the *khyal* form, a predominant genre of Hindustani music today, and in the process, attempts to reflect on music history and archive from a practitioner's perspective. This paper also discusses combining different archival materials, including biographical details, descriptions of musical tutelage, influences, individual expressions, photographs, audio recordings, and video sources, and curating an exhibition around this material.

Keywords: Archive, Exhibition, Gwalior Gharana, Multi-media, performance practice

Introduction

Hindustani classical music has a rich history of several practitioners who performed, transmitted musical knowledge through teaching, founded music institutions to systematize and popularize music, and authored books and articles on musical matters. Abdul Karim Khan of Kirana *gharana* was an exemplary guru and performer. Some of the iconic vocalists of the 20th century who shaped the aesthetics of the form, such as Gangubai Hangal and Bhimsen Joshi, belong to this lineage of *khyal*. Khan was also a musician who thought of new ways of propagating the art form at a time of shifting patronage. He was one of the earliest musicians to curate and organize performances in the early 20th century. He also collaborated with music scholars, Deval and Clement, in their investigation on the concept of *srutis* (microtonal intervals).¹

Vilayat Hussain Khan, a scholar musician and guru of Agra *Gharana*, composed several *khyals* and authored 'Sangeetagyon ke Sansmaran' a valuable source for biographical information on hereditary musicians, thereby providing insights from a practitioner's perspective. Kumar Gandharva, a thinking and brilliant musician whose practice was based on his research, experimented with the format of presentation, produced many iconic thematic concerts *Geet Varsha*, *Geet Hemant*, *Geet Vasant*, and *Ritu Raj Mehfil*s based on songs of spring, gave his interpretation to Kabir's nirguni bhajans and made it a part of Hindustani music concert repertoire, created new ragas called *Dhun-Ugam* ragas and composed, wrote and published his compositions.² Ulhas Kashalkar, a contemporary master and senior *khyal* vocalist, has spent more than two decades as a *guru* at the ITC Sangeet Research Academy in Kolkata, sharing and transmitting profound musical knowledge to future generations of Hindustani musicians. Ashwini Bhide Deshpande, a well-known vocalist, performer, and *guru*, has published her work of notated compositions.³ There are several other examples of musicians engaging in multiple roles.

In this reference, a multi-media exhibition bringing together text, audio, and video materials as a means to focus on the contributions of Hindustani musicians, was curated by me in two different locations in Santiniketan and Kolkata. The curation of this exhibition became imperative to understand the overall engagement of musicians and their roles in the socio-cultural context of everyday life. The exhibition also attempted to interpret archival materials as an interdisciplinary encounter.

The exhibition focused on the work of well-known *khyal* vocalist Veena Sahasrabuddhe and her family, including her father, Shankar Shripad Bodas, and brother, Kashinath Bodas. Sahasrabuddhe was one of the most prominent and authentic voices of Hindustani classical music with an impeccable career as a performing artist and a practice dedicated to all the aspects of music making, which included composing, teaching, engaging in institutions as a pedagogue, and writing on music. Her father and guru, Shankar Shripad Bodas, was trained in the Gwalior *gharana gayaki* and was a pioneer in the field of music education. Her brother Kashinath Bodas carved a unique niche as a *khyal* singer with a distinctive style and was a prolific composer. The exhibition was interdisciplinary and involved conversation and collaboration with visual artist and pedagogue Sanchayan Ghosh, a faculty member of Kala Bhavana at Visva Bharati University in Santiniketan. It provided fresh ways of sharing archival material of musicians, expanding the conventional idea of an exhibition.

Gwalior *gharana* and the Bodas legacy

Shankar Shripad Bodas belonged to the Gwalior *gharana* and was a disciple of Vishnu Digambar Paluskar, who is widely recognized as one of the pioneers for propagating Hindustani classical music amongst the masses in the early 20th century. Gwalior *gharana* is one of the earliest *gharanas* in *khyal* vocalism, tracing its roots to Ghulam Rasool. Haddu Khan, Hassu Khan, and Natthu Khan, descendants of the founding family of the *gharana*, taught extensively within and outside the family and contributed towards propagating the Gwalior *gharana gayaki* (musical style). Vishnu Digambar Paluskar, one of the most prominent luminaries of the Gwalior *gharana*, was a disciple of Balkrishnabua Icchalkaranjkar, who, in turn, belonged to the teaching lineage of Haddu and Hassu Khan.

Paluskar taught several students, many of whom became eminent practitioners like Vinayakbua Patwardhan, Omkarnath Thakur, D.V. Paluskar, Vamanrao Thakar, and B.R. Deodhar, to name a few. He sent his disciples to different corners of the country to establish music schools and teach, and propagate the art form. Gandharva Mahavidyalaya, founded by Paluskar in Lahore in 1901, has now grown into a large network of more than 250 branches nationwide and abroad.

At the behest of his guru, Shankar Shripad Bodas (1900-1986), settled in Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh in 1926 and carried on his guru's mission of teaching and propagating classical music there. Born on 23rd April 1900 in Sangli, a small town in Maharashtra, he was the eldest of ten siblings, including two brothers and seven sisters. He and his brother, Laxmanrao Bodas, were inclined towards music from a young age. They subsequently studied with V.D. Paluskar and had extensive training in the Gwalior *gharana gayaki* and in the various aspects of music making, such as notating compositions and repairing instruments. At a time when there was no conducive environment for classical music in the largely industrial town of Kanpur in the early 1920s, Bodas taught students of all ages and devised innovative methods to introduce classical music, particularly to children. His method of teaching *khyal* to older students was systematic and gradually introduced the different improvisational techniques of elaborating a *khyal*. He would often write the details of the *raga* and notation of the *vilambit khyal*, accompanied by *tanans* and *bol-tanans*, in a student's music notebook.

He was appointed as the first music teacher in Pandit Prithvinath Inter College and worked tirelessly towards the inclusion of classical music at the graduate and post-graduate levels in several institutions such as Surendranath Sen Balika Vidyalaya and Juharidevi Girls P.G. College. Along with his contemporaries like Lalmani Mishra and Thakur Jaidev Singh, Bodas co-founded organizations like Sangeet Samaj in 1927 and Gandhi Sangeet Vidyalaya in 1948 and invited eminent practitioners from all

over the country to perform, establishing Kanpur as an important cultural hub. He also frequently contributed articles on music in Hindi, Marathi, and English in several journals like Sangeet Kala Vihar.

His son Kashinath Bodas (1935-1995) was an accomplished vocalist of the Gwalior *gharana* and a brilliant composer. Trained by his father in vocal music, he was also adept at playing the *tabla*. He was greatly attracted to the *gayaki* of Kumar Gandharva. The importance and role of the tanpura, subtle voice modulations, specific vocalization patterns, and command over *sapaat tanas* (fast melodic runs) are some aspects that he imbibed and assimilated in his *gayaki*. He provided vocal accompaniment to D.V. Paluskar on several occasions from the late 1940s to the mid-1950s and was inspired by the virtuosity, discipline, and emotional appeal of his music. His other mentors included Balwantrai Bhatt of Banaras and his uncles, Laxmanrao Bodas and Prahladrao Ganu. Gifted with an exceptional voice, well-rounded and weighty, Kashinath ji's *gayaki* was a fresh interpretation of his training, presented with a sense of ease and effortlessness. He made significant contributions as a composer, and his compositions spanned a wide range of compositional forms, including *khyal*, *tarana*, *geet*, and *bhajan*. He set to music the works of several contemporary Hindi poets.

Apart from attention to proper pronunciation and sound knowledge of Hindi and its associated dialects, Kashinath Bodas had an inherent ability to capture the essential mood of a song and compose accordingly. He performed in many prestigious venues in India and abroad. He toured Afghanistan (Kabul) and Europe (Amsterdam, Vienna, Frankfurt, Paris) as part of the cultural delegation of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR). He was the Head of the Department of Music, Mahila Mahavidyalaya, Kanpur, and also taught privately to several students. Two of his commercial recordings have been published by Rhythm House, Mumbai. From 1986 onwards, Kashinath ji organized the Shankar Shripad Bodas Samaroha in memory of his father for nine years (till his untimely demise), inviting many eminent artists from all over the country.

Veena Sahasrabuddhe (1948-2016) was a representative of the Gwalior *gharana* and one of the most sought-after vocalists of Hindustani music. Besides training from her father and brother, her other mentors included Balwantrai Bhatt, Vasant Thakar, and Gajananbua Joshi. Apart from *khyal*, she was an exponent of *tarana* (a compositional form comprising syllables borrowed from instrumental and percussion music like *dani*, *tadani*, *yalala*, *dir*, *dir*, *daani*) and was also well known for her soulful renditions of *sagun* and *nirguni* bhajans. As a prolific performer with more than forty labels to her credit, she also taught music privately to many advanced students and at several institutions like the SNDT Women's University in Pune and for brief periods at the IIT Bombay as an adjunct Professor and at the IIT Kanpur as an Artist-in-Residence.

While remaining faithful to the salient features of the Gwalior *gharana*, which emphasizes an open-throated voice production, Sahasrabuddhe, gifted with a powerful and sharp voice and a wide vocal range, gave an individual interpretation to her *talim* and emphasized on the emotional appeal of the raga. Her voice intonation, understanding the subtlety of sur and singing of *nirguni* bhajans in her inimitable style, were attributes of the influence of Kumar Gandharva's *gayaki*. She also deeply admired the *gayaki* of Kishori Amonkar. She had a vast repertoire of compositions by several contemporary *khyal* composers. She published 'Nad-Ninad,' a book of notated compositions of her family, and 'Uttaradhikar,' a compilation of writings by herself, her brother, and her father. Her versatility as a composer is acknowledged through several of her *khyal* compositions and *taranas* in ragas like Shankara, Vachaspati, Madhuvanti, Kaunsi Kanada, Narayani, and a few bhajans. She curated and performed thematic concerts along with her students, such as 'Ritu Sangeet,' a concert of compositions based on the

six seasons, and 'Krishna Sandhya,' which included Surdas padas composed in different ragas by her father.

Several members of the extended Bodas family were eminent practitioners and scholars of Hindustani music. Shankar Shripad Bodas was the eldest in a family of two brothers and seven sisters, several of whom were deeply engaged in music. His brother Laxmanrao Bodas successfully established and operated Gandharava Mahavidyalaya, a music school in Karachi, till 1947, after which he settled with his family in Bombay. Laxmanrao's son, *tabla* player Anant Bodas, who lived and worked in Siliguri, West Bengal, was a disciple of Amir Hussian Khan. His other son, Narayan Bodas, was a vocalist and an exponent of the Gwalior *gharana*. Laxmanrao Bodas' nephew and disciple, Ashok Da. Ranade was an eminent scholar-musician and ethnomusicologist. Ranade also trained under Gajananbua Joshi, Pralhad Ganu, and B.R. Deodhar. Pralhadrao Ganu was a composer, vocalist, and a *dilruba* player and was married to Laxmanrao Bodas' sister, Yogatai Ganu.

Designing the exhibition

As a practitioner belonging to this tradition of Hindustani music and having learnt from Kashinath Bodas in Kanpur, Veena Sahasrabuddhe in Pune, and Ulhas Kashalkar in Kolkata, the idea of a multi-media exhibition came about initially to commemorate the 75th birth anniversary of my guru, Veena Sahasrabuddhe. But, more broadly, the exhibition was multi-layered, and it represented the multiple roles of performer, teacher, author, composer, and propagator that the members of the Bodas family played in Hindustani music performance practice.

The exhibition featured a variety of archival materials sourced from private collections and public archives. Exhibition materials included original manuscripts of old notation notebooks in different scripts (handwritten notations by Shankar Shripad Bodas, Kashinath Bodas and Veena Sahasrabuddhe), rare audio recordings (digitized audio material from 78 rpm records, cassettes and recordings of live concerts), video featuring excerpts of interviews and live concert recordings, and photographs sourced from private collections (from family and students) and the public archives of Dr. Ashok Da Ranade Archives in Pune. The above exhibition materials were featured in fifteen specially designed digital prints. Exclusive spaces within the exhibition area were intended for listening to rare audio recordings of the Bodas family. The exhibition featured a twenty-minute video which included excerpts of conversations on music by Veena Sahasrabuddhe and concert recordings, put together and shared especially for this exhibition by ethnomusicologists Martin Clayton and Laura Leante from the Department of Music, Durham University, UK. Clayton and Leante have conducted extensive research on Hindustani music and musicians, collaborated with Sahasrabuddhe for over two decades, and have a substantial archive of her music and interviews. As mentioned earlier, the exhibition was designed and interpreted by visual artist and pedagogue Sanchayan Ghosh. The notion of collaboration and not exclusive roles of the researcher/curator and visual artist was crucial to interpreting this work, as explained by Ghosh:

To translate a musical history into a critical and immersive engagement of audio and visual experience, the overall design of the exhibition space had to go beyond the process of display. So, a specific scenographic restructuring of the space of the gallery was required. To achieve that, the panels were reproduced as digitally printed scrolls, and the language of collage was applied to create a multilayered experience of the different contents. The scaling up of specific images like portraits and performance moments of the individual musicians was synchronized with the collage of their biographical images and

notations and comments into a choreography of multi-textual experience of space, image, text, and sound. (Ghosh)

The first edition of the exhibition was held in Kolkata at the Jadunath Bhavan Museum and Resource Centre (a unit of the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta CSSSC) from 10th-14th September 2024. The exhibition was inaugurated by eminent scholar and critic Samik Bandyopadhyay and senior sarod exponent Anindya Banerjee. Bandyopadhyay spoke about his experiences as a Hindustani music listener and on the music culture in post-independent India, and Banerjee gave a historical account of Gwalior *gharana* roots and practitioners in Bengal. Over the course of five days, the exhibition received a very good response, and it was well attended by a diverse group of audiences, including historians, scholars, ethnomusicologists, music and dance practitioners, visual artists, and students. For instance, historian Prachi Deshpande remarked:

Exhibition has provided a close-up look at the transmission of the Gwalior *gayaki* within a family through many different kinds of sources like notation notebooks, excerpts of publications, photographs, rare audio and video recordings, and more. It has been a delight for both musicians and historians to see this material representation of a deep commitment to the art of Hindustani music. It provides a fresh approach to discussing *gharana* lineages, tradition, and musical memory. (Deshpande)

The exhibition culminated with a specially curated concert by me, where I sang compositions of my gurus in raga Dhani (compositions in *rupak tala* and *drut teentala*), raga Marwa (a *tarana* in *madhyalaya teentala* followed by a *bandish* in *adachoutala*), *Tarana* in *drut ektala* in raga Miyan Malhar and two *nirguni Kabir bhajans*. I was ably accompanied by Ashoke Mukherjee on the *tabla* and Gourab Chatterjee on the *harmonium*.

The second edition of the multi-media exhibition was held in Santiniketan at the Art Gallery, Nandan Museum in Kala Bhavana, Visva Bharati University in Santiniketan from 4th-12th March 2025. The exhibition's location also changed the process of sharing the archival materials. While the first edition of the exhibition was held at a venue comprising a single large room and a smaller video space, the second edition of the exhibition at Nandan Museum was held at a gallery with four different spaces within. The exhibition materials were distributed accordingly. The entrance corridor included the curatorial note along with an introduction to Gwalior *gharana* and details of its lineage, leading to the main larger room, which was divided into three zones focusing on the three musicians and audio listening spaces. The third room included original manuscripts of notation notebooks and enlarged prints of selected notations in different scripts. Hence, the music notations became the primary content of the room. The next room parallel to this space included a live demonstration of Hindustani music in video format. The inclusion of multiple elements in the exhibition enabled the viewers to engage with the space and archival materials in different ways and make their own choice of moving around the exhibition and building their narrative.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed the multi-faceted roles that Hindustani musicians have played with specific reference to the Bodas family of the Gwalior *gharana* in *khyal* vocalism. I have also discussed a new approach of sharing a variety of archival material focusing on the contributions of these musicians through the curation of a multi-media exhibition. The paper provides music practitioners and viewers with fresh ways to create a holistic notion of music history and dissemination as a scholarly and performative experience, and also to actively engage with archival material.

References

1 For more information about Abdul Karim Khan and his music practice, see Ranade 56-81.



2 Kumar Gandharva published his notated compositions in Anup Raga Vilas (volumes 1 and 2).

3 Raag Rachananjali part 1 & 2 are compilations of notated bandishes composed by noted vocalist Ashwini Bhide Deshpande.

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