

USTAD RASHID KHAN: TRADITION, INNOVATION, AND MUSICAL OPENNESS IN HINDUSTANI CLASSICAL MUSIC

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ABSTRACT

Ustad Rashid Khan (1968–2024), one of the foremost exponents of Hindustani classical music, left an indelible mark on the cultural landscape of India through his synthesis of tradition and innovation. Rooted in the Rampur–Sahaswan gharana yet receptive to diverse stylistic influences, his musical career challenged gharanabazi—lineage-based sectarianism prevalent in classical music. This study critically examines Rashid Khan’s early training, aesthetic innovations, cross-genre engagements, pedagogical methods, and cultural leadership. Drawing upon archival records, musicological analysis, narrative inquiry, and ethnographic contexts, the research highlights how he established an ethical model that privileges artistic substance, raga integrity, and creative openness. His contributions offer a paradigm for a more inclusive future within Hindustani classical music, demonstrating that tradition and modernity can coexist in dynamic equilibrium.

Keywords: Hindustani Classical Music, Rashid Khan, Rampur–Sahaswan Gharana, Music Pedagogy, Raga Aesthetics, Innovation.

Introduction

On a cold winter morning in Kolkata, thousands gathered at the Nandan–Rabindra Sadan complex to bid farewell to one of India’s most cherished vocalists, Ustad Rashid Khan, who passed away at the age of fifty-five. The flower-adorned premises and the ceremonial 21-gun salute underscored the magnitude of the loss of a voice that embodied both tradition and technical brilliance, and profound musicality. The voice so thrilling fell silent at the age of fifty-five leaving the world before the crescendo. Rashid Khan embodied a rare balance of fidelity to tradition and openness to innovation. While deeply anchored in the Rampur–Sahaswan gharana, he resisted the sectarian confines of gharanabazi. This article explores his artistic evolution, his contributions to the reconfiguration of gharana identity, and the pedagogical and cultural values that shaped his legacy.

Material and Methods

This study synthesizes information from multiple sources and methodological perspectives:

- Archival and Biographical Material: Early life narratives, gharana histories, institutional archives of the ITC Sangeet Research Academy, and public records related to awards and recognition.
- Musicological Sources: Analysis of audio and video recordings focusing on raga development, voice techniques, improvisational patterns, and stylistic markers.
- Secondary Literature: Scholarly works on Hindustani music, gharana theory, musician biographies, and journalistic accounts of Rashid Khan’s career.
- Oral Histories and Ethnographic Impressions

Interviews with students, peers, and accompanists, providing insight into his artistic philosophy and contribution to musical culture.

This triangulation of sources ensures both breadth and depth in documenting Rashid Khan’s contribution.

Research Methodology

The study employs a qualitative, interpretative framework combining:

- Narrative Analysis: Used to trace the trajectory of Rashid Khan’s musical formation and his encounters with stylistic diversity at SRA.
- Musicological Analysis: Examination of representative ragas to evaluate his approach to alaap, bandishes, vilambit, taans, bol baats, bol-taans, meend, and layakari.

c) Comparative Gharana Study: Mapping Rampur–Sahaswan stylistic features against elements absorbed from other gharanas, including structural expansiveness reminiscent of the Indore/Amir Khani style and emotive depth associated with the Kirana gharana.

d) Sociocultural Inquiry: Exploration of how Rashid Khan's cross-genre collaborations and pedagogical openness challenged gharana rigidity and democratized classical musical culture.

Study Area

The study is contextualized within:

a) North Indian Hindustani classical music traditions, focusing on raga-based improvisation and gharana structures.

b) The Rampur–Sahaswan gharana, known for its emphasis on voice culture, vilambit khayal, and systematic raga architecture and Tarana singing.

c) The ITC Sangeet Research Academy, Kolkata, a unique multi-gharana institution where Rashid Khan's musical sensibilities matured amid diverse stylistic influences.

d) Performance platforms such as the Dover Lane Music Conference, All India Radio, and collaborations in film and also light and fusion music, which shaped Rashid Khan's public persona and outreach.

Results and Discussion

Early Training and Gharana Influence

Born in Badayun, Uttar Pradesh, Rashid Khan belonged to the lineage of Ustad Inayat Hussain Khan, the founder of the Rampur–Sahaswan gharana. Under the tutelage of Ustad Nissar Hussain Khan, he underwent intensive training in vilambit khayal, voice modulation, and structured raga development. He was also the nephew of Ustad Ghulam Mustafa Khan. A strict disciplinarian, Nissar Hussain Khan would insist on voice training (sur sadhana) from four in the morning, and make Rashid practice one note of the scale for hours on end. A whole day would be spent on practising just a single note. Although Rashid detested these lessons as a child, but this rigorous disciplined training shows in his easy mastery of taan and vistar and layakaari today.

His initiation into performance at a young age testified to his prodigious abilities. Slowly his only obsession became music. He didn't want to go to school, and felt music was his only calling. He did his first concert at the age of 10 in 1978. In April 1980, when Nissar Hussain Khan moved to Kolkata, Rashid went along. He joined the Sangeet Research Academy or ITC SRA in Kolkata at the age of 14. Ustadji forever reminisced that his arrival to Calcutta in 1970s, was a decision, which changed his entire life. By 1994, he was acknowledged as a musician (a formal process) at the academy.

Young Rashid Khan, immensely talented but extremely naughty, did not hide his disapproval of living in the Sangeet Research Academy which literally caged him. To fight with boredom and monotony little Rashid would sing popular classical-based numbers of Mohammad Rafi, Talat Mehboob and Manna Dey.

Entry into the ITC SRA broadened his horizon. Exposure to diverse maestros such as A. T. Kanan, T. D. Janorikar, and Girija Devi equipped him with the ability to integrate multiple stylistic elements into a coherent artistic vision. After the death of his guru Ustad Nisar Hussain Khan in the 1990s, there was a void in performers who sang the Rampur style and Rashid swiftly filled it, storming the concert scene.

By 1994, Rashid was performing at various concerts and was soon acknowledged a maestro. In a story told in several versions, Pandit Bhimsen Joshi once remarked that Rashid Khan was the "assurance for the future of Indian vocal music".

Indeed, sheer hard work and riyaz made Rashid Khan reach the pinnacle much before others, who were still working their way up.

Musical Aesthetics and Innovations

Rashid Khan's artistry is celebrated for the convergence of tayaari (technical mastery) and bhava (expressive depth). His characteristic meditative alaaps, fluid meends, and high-velocity taans reflect a careful balance between introspection and virtuosity. His interpretations often resonated with influences beyond his lineage of Rampur Sahaswan, reflecting a broadened aesthetic mindset shaped by contact with other Gharana traditions and individual creative exploration.

It is beyond doubt that Maestros like Ustad Ameer Khan of Indore Gharana, Ustad Abdul Karim Khan and Pandit Bhimsen Joshi of Kirana Gharana had a far reaching influence on Ustad Rashid Khan's Gayaki. Specially in the Raga Badhat while singing Vilambit or Madhyalaya Khayal, these influences were distinctly visible. The 'theheran' or sustaining or resting on a particular note, his delineation of the Raga's Vaad Samvaad was particularly akin to Kirana Gayaki. Many a phandas or designs of Taans

reminds us of Ustad Amir Khan sahab's flights of Notes. According to Shubha Mudgal, the noted vocalist, Rashid borrowed generously from the different styles of pathbreaking musicians, but chose not to imitate them. It was his unorthodox approach to music that led him to finding his own voice," Mudgal added. That, along with "an irrepressible urge to be himself artistically", is what created some of the magic.

3. Keeping to Gharana tradition at the same time Challenging Gharanabazi

The Rampur-Sahaswan gayaki is closely related to the Gwalior gharana, which features medium-slow tempos, a full-throated voice and intricate rhythmic play. Rashid Khan transcended its boundaries.

"He refused to be boxed in or be bound by convention," Shailaja Khanna, his old friend and music critic, told the BBC in an interview.

He included the slow elaboration in his vilambit khayals in the manner of his maternal grand-uncle and also developed exceptional expertise in the use of sargams and taankari (play on the scale). In raag delineation, he was influenced with the style of Amir Khan and Bhimsen Joshi.

His taans were influenced by the Chauduni Taans of Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan of Qasur Patiala. The lover's lament "Yaad piya ki aaye" - once immortalised by Ustaad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan - was one of the most requested pieces of music in a Rashid Khan's concert. He was also a master of the tarana singing which was a significant characteristic of Rampur Sahaswan gharana. Rashid sang Tarana like his guru but again incorporated many a beautiful nuances into them in his own manner, preferring the khayal style rather than the instrumental stroke-based style for which Nissar Hussain was famous.

There was no imitation of instrumental tone. His famous rendering of the Yaman and Sohni Tarana stood out for the emotional overtones within his melodic elaboration and superfast variations. He had said "The emotional content is everywhere, in the alaap, while singing the bandish, or while giving expression to the meaning of the lyrics, even in first flights of notes." This brings a touch of modernity to his style, as compared to the older maestros of his gharana, who tended to place greater emphasis on impressive technique and skillful execution of difficult passages.

With the above discussion it is clear, Rashid Khan adhered to Tradition simultaneously emerging as an important countervoice to gharanabazi in classical music, a trailblazer who rose over petty gharanabaazi.

He had ever given emphasis on

a) Primacy of the Raga:

Rashid Khan upheld the belief that the emotional and structural integrity of a raga supersedes adherence to gharana boundaries. This principle enabled him to explore aesthetic possibilities across traditions. His renditions of ragas like Yaman, Bageshree, Jog, Lalit, Mian ki Todi, MaruBehag, Shyam Kalyan, Darbari Kanada, Sohini, Malkauns, Charukesi, Desh, Kedar, Hansadhvani, Madhuwanti and many more was like a plunge into the ocean of Notes. The Elaborate swara vistar was so intriguing that a number of vocalists started emulating his vistrars and Taans (though quite an impossible task), creating a signature style namely 'Rashid Khan Gharana'. His memorable performance of Raga Puriya, in Sunny Towers patronised by Jayanta Chatterjee was phenomenal in all respect.

Raagdaari, Bhav, depicting the Sombre mood of the Sandhiprakash raga, the exact sentiment, the bolbaats, boltaans, the superb climatic drut ektaal bandish namely 'Phulban ki sej bichhaon' establishes that Ustad Rashid Khan was someone who chose the supremacy of Emotions while Raga rendering above everything else, and in doing so, never adhered to strict watertight compartment of traditions. His contemporary, singer Ashwini Bhide Deshpande remembers being completely entranced by one of his performances in the early 2000s. In her own words "His exquisite exposition of Raag Jog didn't leave me for three days. His music elevated people's spirits, and soothed their souls. There are many who play to the gallery by displaying histrionics. But Rashid's singing had an emotional depth that is hard to find," said Bhide.

Rashid Khan could use the Raag lakshan namely Tirobhav and Abirbhav with unprecedented skill. While singing raga Bageshree in a musical soiree, while sustaining on the note shuddha Dha of Madhya spatak... he dexterously used the Taar Saptak sa as a kan swar...

which we know as a phrase of Abhogi. But in a flicker he would linger on the Komal Ni with great subtlety... enhancing the aesthetic beauty of the Raga to its fullest.

b) Cross-genre and Cross-tradition Collaborations-

Rashid Khan's musical openness was inspiring indeed.

He collaborated extensively with sitarist Shahid Parvez, Ghazal artist Hariharanji, fusion projects with jazz maestro Louis Banks, Carnatic musicians. He also ventured into film playback (e.g., *Jab We Met*, *My Name Is Khan*) and released a Rabindra Sangeet album, "Baithaki Rabi".

He has also experimented with fusing pure Hindustani music with lighter musical genres, e.g. in the Sufi fusion recording *Naina Piya Se* or *Aeri Sakhi mora* (songs of Amir Khusro).

His semi-classical renditions expanded the reach of classical forms without diluting their rigour. His collaborative ethic stood in contrast to the ego-driven competitiveness often associated with gharana rivalry.

c) Humility and simplicity of the Ustad

Sporting salt-pepper hair and often dressed in bright floral shirts and kurtas, Rashid Khan didn't exactly carry the air of a traditional musical ustad in his look. Even after gaining mainstream success, Rashid Khan continued to live a simple life on his own terms, without a care for the world," said renowned sitar player Ustad Shujaat Khan. He was a man who "mainly spoke in grunts, sighs and nods", a musician who did not realise his genius, and a performer who "just got up and started singing..but when he sang, you realised the greatness of his talent."

Peers consistently observed his respect for accompanists and colleagues.

He was, undisputedly, the defining artist of his generation, someone who enjoyed a kind of commercial success and public adulation that was rare for a classical singer of his era.

He commanded the biggest fee among his contemporaries and performed in packed auditoriums, in his busiest years, he was doing 20 concerts a month. The appeal of his music - cut across musical hierarchies, becoming a rare converging point for common people and the pundits.

Pedagogy and Mentorship

Through the Sakhari Begum Musical Trust, Rashid Khan shaped a new generation of musicians. His pedagogical model emphasized:

- a) Rigorous riyaz openness to diverse musical traditions
- b) Development of individual artistry rather than mere imitation.

Thus, he redefined lineage as an enabling rather than restrictive force.

Recognition and Cultural Impact

Honors such as the Padma Shri (2006), Sangeet Natak Akademi Award (2006), and Padma Bhushan (2022) affirmed his stature. Through performances at premier conferences, national broadcasts, and popular platforms India and overseas he democratized access to classical music and challenged its perceived elitism.

Legacy

Rashid Khan's legacy is multidimensional

- a) Artistic Legacy: A treasure of recordings that highlight the synthesis of structural depth and emotional nuance.
- b) Pedagogical Legacy: Disciples of Sakhari Begum Trust who embody his ethos of creative openness within the Rampur-Sahaswan framework.
- c) Ethical Legacy: A humane model of artistic practice that encourages collaboration, humility, and inclusivity.

Conclusion

Ustad Rashid Khan remains a seminal figure in contemporary Hindustani classical music. His journey illustrates that adherence to tradition can coexist harmoniously with innovation and individual creativity. By transcending the confines of gharanabazi, embracing diverse musical influences, and cultivating an open, ethical pedagogy, he reshaped the discourse on what constitutes lineage, authority, and authenticity in classical music.

Beyond being a virtuoso performer, he emerged as a cultural leader whose humanistic approach continues to inspire musicians, scholars, and audiences. His legacy charts a path toward a more inclusive, collaborative, and dynamic future for Hindustani classical music.

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