

A Mewati evening with Pandit Sanjeev Abhyankar

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(The author is a Vice President, Oracle India Pvt Ltd, Oracle Corporation. The thoughts below are his own and entirely unrelated to his employer).

When Pandit Sanjeev Abhyankar, the foremost disciple of Pandit Jasraj and today's leading torchbearer of the illustrious Mewati Gharana performed at the Sanskritik Bhavan's Sant Dnyaneshwar Sabhagruha on the 24th of February 2023, connoisseurs who had heard him at Amravati about a decade and a half ago expected his rendition to be a shadow of his legendary guru. They were proven both right and wrong. Right because he has imbibed and follows the legendary Jasraj's rich Mewati legacy and wrong because he has developed a unique style replete with innovative artistic elements of his own. Both styles were in full splendour that evening. Following the Mewati gharana's code, his alap started with "Hari Om Ananta Narayan" set to raag Malkauns. The alap was pure. The alap was authentic. This style of Mewati Gharana is reminiscent of and in fact based on Dhrupad singers of yesteryears. With the auditorium lights having been dimmed at Panditji's direction to create the mood, he started raag Malkauns in madhya lay set to Zaptal.

Panditji had gauged the mood of the audience very well. The concert was running half an hour late and the audience was ready for madhya lay skipping Vilambit. Intelligence and spontaneity are after all Sanjeevji's hallmarks. While he has proudly inherited a glorious tradition, he also has had the conviction and the strength to morph it to modern tastes and attitudes.

His rendition in madhya lay set to zaptal of "Biraha sataye mohe, bitey baras jug sam piya ke aawan mein. Patiya na bheji kahe jiyara tarasaye, nit aawat sapne mein" was a masterpiece. Panditji poured emotion into this bandish adroitly while preserving the grammar of Malkauns with its dominant Madhyam and sub dominant dhaiwat. At no point did it remotely come close to a Thumri despite his liberal outpouring of emotion into the Bandish. He always achieves this by keeping "raagdari" pristine through powerful "taans", effective voice modulation and brilliant improvisation.

Gauging the mood of the audience, Panditji started the sargams early into his rendition.

dha ni ni sa, ga ma ma dha - biraha sataye mohe ...

brought the suffering of the separated lover alive. Sohini, the organizers, had named the concert "Vasant Malika" in celebration of the ongoing majestic Basant (spring) season, so the choice of the Bandish couldn't have been more appropriate.

The dhrut bandish set to teentaal marked the crescendo of the lover's separation. While "mai to piya sang lar pachtani re. Mai to bhayi akal kee khani re. Tarap tarap ke giri sej pe, jaise meen bin pani re" is sung by all gharanas, I found Sanjeevji's Mewati style special due to its unique taans. Again here too, Panditji was least afraid to pour his heart out into a classical Bandish because he was well aware that his rendition would not deviate an inch from the grammar of Malkauns.

The audience had been enthralled and Panditji was just beginning to warm up.

Meanwhile the pangs of the lover's separation continued into raag Des , so beautifully rendered in true Mewati style.

नैनन में छबि छाई सजनी

पलकन माँहि समाई

The Mewati influence was conspicuous in the use of shuddha and komal ni one after the other.

While raag Desh can be sung in both thumri and Khayal styles , Panditji did it full justice in his inimitable Mewati khayal style. Set to addha taal "rain dina nahi chain jiya ko, kal na pare pachtaye ri" brought to life her longing for her beloved.

The dhrut Teentaal Bandish written by Saint Mirabai "barase badariya saawan kee" set to Teentaal and composed by Panditji himself was wonderfully rendered in raag desh.

Such ingenuity ! No wonder the audience had been elevated to a higher plane by now.

Demand for "abhangs" by the "Abhang Samrat" (the monarch of Abhangs) had nevertheless begun to gather momentum when Panditji concluded Desh.

The 350 or so strong crowd went gaga when he announced that he would sing three Abhangs starting with "dhyana lagle ramache".

The following Ramdas Swamy's Abhang , composed around 1650 CE , continues to provide inner peace and solace to millions.

ध्यान लागलें रामाचें । दुःख हरलें जन्माचें ॥१॥

राम पदांबुजावरी । वृत्ति गुंतली मधुकरी ॥२॥

Set to raag Bhupali and Pratiksha , the Abhang employs shuddha and komal dha in descent (avroh) to create a magical ambience. Panditji was without a doubt at his very best that evening .

The second Abhang was Saint Tukaram's "Bolawa Vitthal, Pahawa Vitthal" . An immaculate depiction of the ecstasy of the devotees mind , this Abhang is often considered a renaissance Abhang that ushered an era of devotion.

बोलावा विठ्ठल पहावा विठ्ठल ।

करावा विठ्ठल जीवभाव ॥१॥

येणें सोसैं मन जालें हांवभरी ।

परती माघारीं घेत नाहीं ॥२॥

Set to raag Haladi Basant, Hemant and Aahir lalat with incessant chanting of Vitthal (Krishna- the supreme head) , Panditji had by now transported the audience to a higher plane with his own composition.

The grand finale was marked by Sant Tukaram's another renaissance abhang "Aata kothe dhaave man " composed in Mishra Bhairavi by Panditji himself.

Chanting pandurang hari jay jay pandurang hari harmoniously , the "Abhang Samrat" (the monarch of the prayer) and his entourage had the audience almost in a trance. The Mewati gharana employs harmonious chanting by the guru and his disciples to great effect and the same was evident here. Harmony , a predominant characteristic of Western classical music , was so beautifully adapted to Indian classical by the maestro and inherited from Pandit Jasraj himself.

The audience took a minute to come out of its state of trance and when it did applause followed spontaneously and tears flowed freely until the hall was empty.