

Pandit Bhimsen Joshi- a tribute to a great legend

Smitha K. Prasad

January 24, 2011 marked the passing away of one of the great doyens of Hindusthani music- Pandit Bhimsen Joshi. A Bharat Ratna winner, Pandit Bhimsen Joshi's name had become synonymous with Hindusthani classical music.

Pt. Joshi was born in Gadag, Dharwad district of Karnataka. He searched far and wide to find a guru from whom he could learn Hindusthani classical music and who could inspire him in his journey of music. He finally found that guru in Pandit Sawai Gandharva, an exponent of the Kirana gharana and a native of Dharwad who agreed to teach him.

Pt. Bhimsen Joshi started his performing career at the age of 19. Apart from being one of the most prolific exponents of Hindusthani classical music, he was also very well known for his rendition of devotional music. His rendition of *Bhagyada Lakshmi Baramma* will probably forever be present among people's music play lists. Pt. Joshi's jugalbandhis with Dr. Balamuralikrishna were extremely popular and filled with boundless creativity.

Karnataka has the distinction of being one of the very few states that is home to some of the greats of both Carnatic and Hindusthani music. Prominent Hindusthani musicians such as Dr. Gangubai Hangal, Pt. Bhimsen Joshi, Pt. Mallikarjun Mansur, and Pt. Sawai Gandharva are among those who hail from Karnataka. Hindusthani music is more prominent in Northern parts of Karnataka like Dharwad and Belgaum while Carnatic music continues to dominate the southern parts.

What made Dharwad such an important hub of Hindusthani music? The Dharwad region became part of the British East India Company's Bombay Presidency in 1818 and was thus influenced by the culture of Bombay and Pune- rather than Madras, the seat of Carnatic music. Also when royal musicians from the Mughal courts were invited to perform in their courts by the Maharajas of Mysore, Dharwad was a popular rest stop where impromptu kutcheries of these visiting musicians were arranged. Classical Hindusthani music thus flourished in Dharwad. Today, cities like Bangalore allow the confluence of both Carnatic and Hindusthani styles of music. A number of modern day Hindusthani musicians call Bangalore home and here they have set up both their teaching institutions as well as performing centers.

It is interesting to go back in history and look at the birth of the two main styles of classical music in India- Hindusthani and Carnatic. The origin of Indian music can be traced back to the Vedas (a large body of text originating in ancient India), particularly the Sama Veda. The Sama Veda consists of hymns set to musical tunes; these musical tunes initially had 3 notes or *swaras* and then later included 7 *swaras*. Until the 12th century A.D., only one form of music prevailed all through India. With the establishment of the Islamic Sultanates in Delhi, musical practice in North India came under the influence of Persian and Arabic cultures and this became known as Hindusthani (Uttaradi) music. In southern India, the original music was preserved and handed down to the current generation and is known as Carnatic (Dakshinadi) music.

Since both Carnatic and Hindusthani music arose from a common base, they have a number of common features be it common ragas or elaboration (*manodharma*) techniques. Carnatic music has borrowed a number of ragas from Hindusthani music like Desh, Sindhu Bhairavi, Kapi, Hamir Kalyani among others. Similarly, ragas like Hamsadhwani and Kiravani borrowed from the Carnatic system have now found popular acceptance in Hindusthani music.

Hindusthani music is characterized by the tradition of *Gharanas* or styles, with each *gharana* having its own unique distinguishing features. A *gharana* also helps trace the lineage of learning thus ensuring the continuity of the *guru-shishya parampara*. As mentioned earlier in this column, Pandit Bhimsen Joshi was an exponent of Kirana Gharana. The Kirana *gharana*, founded by Ustad Abdul Karim Khan, is characterized by its emphasis on melody and clarity of text pronunciation. It is perhaps these aspects more than any other, which to me makes listening to Pt. Joshi's rendition of *devaranamas* and *bhajans* such an enjoyable experience.

Pandit Bhimsen Joshi was an epitome of simplicity. He was an apt icon to be featured in the popular national integration musical of 1988:

“Mile Sur Mera Tumhara, To Sur Bane Hamara”

“When my musical note and your musical note combine, it becomes *our* musical note”

May you rest in peace O music maestro- Pandit Bhimsen Joshi! (1922-2011)

Smitha Prasad is a Carnatic vocalist based in Cary, NC and can be reached at smitha_prasad@hotmail.com