



Society Interview

Amjad Ali Khan: 'The best-loved musician of India!'

At the age of five, when he started playing the sarod he was marked out as a child prodigy. At ten he was holding public performances. Today, Amjad Ali Khan is 35 and already an Ustaaad, a much coveted informal title given to a maestro out of love and admiration. He is securely established as a leading musician of the country and not even his most bitter critics doubt his mastery over the instrument he plays.

Yet all success stories spawn suspicion and Amjad's is no exception. The catch is pegged on various factors. Some say that he was born in a famous gharana and as Ustaaad Hafiz Ali Khan's son he didn't have to struggle the way others have to. Others accuse him of being a mercenary who demands a very high price for his concerts—and gets it. The orthodox object to his Hindu wife and ostentatious lifestyle.

And there is the other side of the story. Friends who vouch for his warmth and generosity. A lady who played hostess to him during a concert tour abroad and swears that he is a very simple man ("I could serve him scrambled eggs and get away with it.").

At the end of it I am confused but curious. His house in a fashionable South Delhi colony is closed in by high and rather forbidding wrought-iron gates. The name plate says "KHAN" in a simple but striking assertion of the man's identity. I am ushered in by one of his pupils—he has 10-12 of them who

room freely around the house. While we wait for Khan sahib, Vishwajit tells me that he was spotted by Ustaaadji at a music concert in a small Bihar town. It was subsequently arranged that Vishwajit come and live at Delhi so that Ustaaadji could guide him personally. There is no time-table for the lessons. In continuation of the guru-shishya tradition, the pupils are adopted as children by the teacher and learn from him through the years.

Though Vishwajit does not actually live in Ustaaadji's house, he and the other pupils drop in anytime they feel like and stay as long as it suits them. "We are like a big family, Ustaaadji is like God to us, we tell him everything and he sorts out our problems," he explained.

When Khan sahib enters the room, Vishwajit touches his feet and vanishes. In his pearl grey kurta pyjama he looks cool and elegant. His answers, uttered in a soft Urdu accent leave me wondering. Here is a man who adopts his pupils as his children and yet does not expect his own children to become musicians. A man who charges exorbitant rates for a public performance and not a paisa from his pupils. A man who practices assiduously everyday and still believes that he can only give a good performance if Allah blesses him with his dua. A man who grants that music directors have ability but would never become one himself.

The image is complete. There are contradictions but no disharmony.

You come from a family of musicians and you were inducted into classical music at the age of five. Did you ever feel that you had been denied the opportunity to find your own vocation in life?

I think I was fortunate that I was born into a family of musicians. It is very difficult for a person to learn music if the atmosphere is lacking at home. On the other hand, a person can learn only if he is interested and naturally inclined. It happens so many times that brothers and sisters who grow up in the same atmosphere turn out to be people with widely varying interests and vocation.

Would you like to see your own children become musicians?

I would like to see my children continue a family tradition that goes back to six or seven generations. But I also realise that being a classical musician is not a financially viable proposition and I will not stand in their way if they choose another profession. These days there are so many temptations, I think I have overcome them, but for the children it may be difficult.

When you say that you have overcome temptation, are you referring to lucrative

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commercial offers that you have rejected?

Yes. As a film music director for instance I could have earned 100 times the amount I earn now. It is not a bad thing, there also you need ability but it is a different approach to life. We classical musicians thrive on the love and *izzat* that people give us.

Have the fortunes of classical musicians declined with withdrawal of State patronage under the Princes?

Many of the Princes did not even understand music and could not assess the worth of an artist but yes, they had a sentimental attachment to music and honoured the musicians at their courts. To that extent the system was good and even mediocre musicians could make both ends meet. On the other hand, it had a severely limiting influence on musicians who were really good. The common people could never hear them and travelling was difficult.

What about the effect of Westernisation?

The younger generation may be Westernised but they are very interested in Indian classical music as well. A very large section of the audience at any classical music programme consists of young people. Anyway, I don't understand it when people say that they don't enjoy classical music because they don't understand it. An understanding of *sur* is essential in order to enjoy any kind of music, so that when these people listen and stamp their feet or dance to pop music they are not really understanding the music, they only think they understand. They should be made to realise that they can appreciate film music even more if they learn *sa re ga ma*.

You have performed abroad very often, how do foreign audiences compare with Indian audiences?

Foreigners are much more restrained. There are no *wah wahs* and we miss that. They are very inquisitive and what surprises them about Indian classical music is that there is no notation and during a solo performance the conductor, performer and composer is one person.

Indian artistes performing abroad often say that they have to compromise on the purity of the classical notions because foreign audiences lack the knowledge and the patience to sit through a long performance. Is that true?

Yes, but I would not call it a compromise. I perform according to the need of the situation. I am called to perform in schools and colleges in India and I never refuse because I hope that I can arouse interest in classical music. I play an abridged piece so that people who are listening for the first time can sustain their interest. I don't think it is necessary to dwell on the *alaap* for an unduly long time as musicians seem to be doing these days just to prove that they know classical music.

How do you cope with your celebrity status? Does it ever come in the way of something you'd like to do?

Frankly I don't know what people expect of me, I behave the way I want to. Yes, sometimes I do feel that people are unnecessarily constrained with me. They don't like to visit me at home because they think that I will be disturbed. I think if I had an office they would feel more encouraged to offer their views. I have taken certain steps in an effort to reach out to my audience. Up to now the text on L.P.'s used to be in third person. The musician is the sun, moon and stars, that kind of thing. I have insisted that I be allowed to address myself to my audience directly. I have written that I am open to their comments I receive many letters in response to this and I always answer them.

Is it a fact that petty jealousy and professional rivalry are a part of the classical music world?

This is unfortunately true. Musicians actively avoid meeting each other. There is a lot of mistrust and suspicion. Let me give you an example. I decided to hold a music festival in my father's memory a few years ago. Normally the performances at such festivals are not paid for but my father had not approved of this practice while he was alive and I don't believe in extracting free performances out of anyone so I insisted on paying all the musicians at their normal rates. Instead of being happy about it they started questioning my motives in paying them. There was even the question of where I had got the money to pay them. My only motive in arranging the festival apart from its sentimental value was to get the country's best musicians together. Is it surprising that I don't hold music festivals anymore? It is much simpler to honour my father's memory by having prayers at home.

What do you think of music critics?

Some of them prescribe to peculiar notions of what a musician must be like and expect everyone to conform to them. They are not satisfied that a musician is great unless he is wearing a torn kurta and chappals, even genuine music lovers have to be unshaven and ragged. Recently I played in Bombay at the Tata Theatre. It was a morning concert and the hall was full. The audience included film stars like Amitabh, Jaya and Rekha. Do you know what the music critic of the Times of India had to say about this? He claimed that there was a lot of artificiality about the audience and hence the artiste could not establish rapport with the audience. Instead of being happy that all kinds of people are attending music concerts these days he is making such remarks. Tell me, can I stop people from attending my concerts?

Critics have alleged that you do not play at small concerts which pay less?

I know of the existence of several music



circles which have monthly sittings. I admit that I do not play there but if they are genuine music lovers they will come to hear me wherever I play. It is not a question of admission rates being too high either. The highest denomination tickets may be any amount but the lowest tickets are always Rs. 3-5.

What do you feel about your audience?

I love and respect my audience tremendously. I always start my concerts punctually, though I know of several musicians who do not put in an appearance until an hour after the scheduled time because they want to show how important they are. I appreciate the fact that people come to listen to me but I am also aware of their time constraints. I know I cannot go on playing endlessly into the night, people have to go and work the next day. This reference to the audience reminds me of an incident that occurred in Rome last year. We, an Indian sitar player of international repute and I, had gone there to take part in an international conference. Soon after we arrived, a man visited me in the hotel room and asked what I would like printed after my name in the publicity material. I answered that my name was enough but he insisted that something had to be added to it and informed me that the Indian sitar player has asked that 'Musician of the Century' be appended to his name. In fact, the Italian was under contractual obligation to append that title to the name of my partner. I was surprised but realised that I would have to think up of something to satisfy him. So I thought deeply and came up with 'The best loved musician of India'. It is a non-aggressive kind of statement and I like to believe that I am loved by my audience.

—Vinati Tikku