

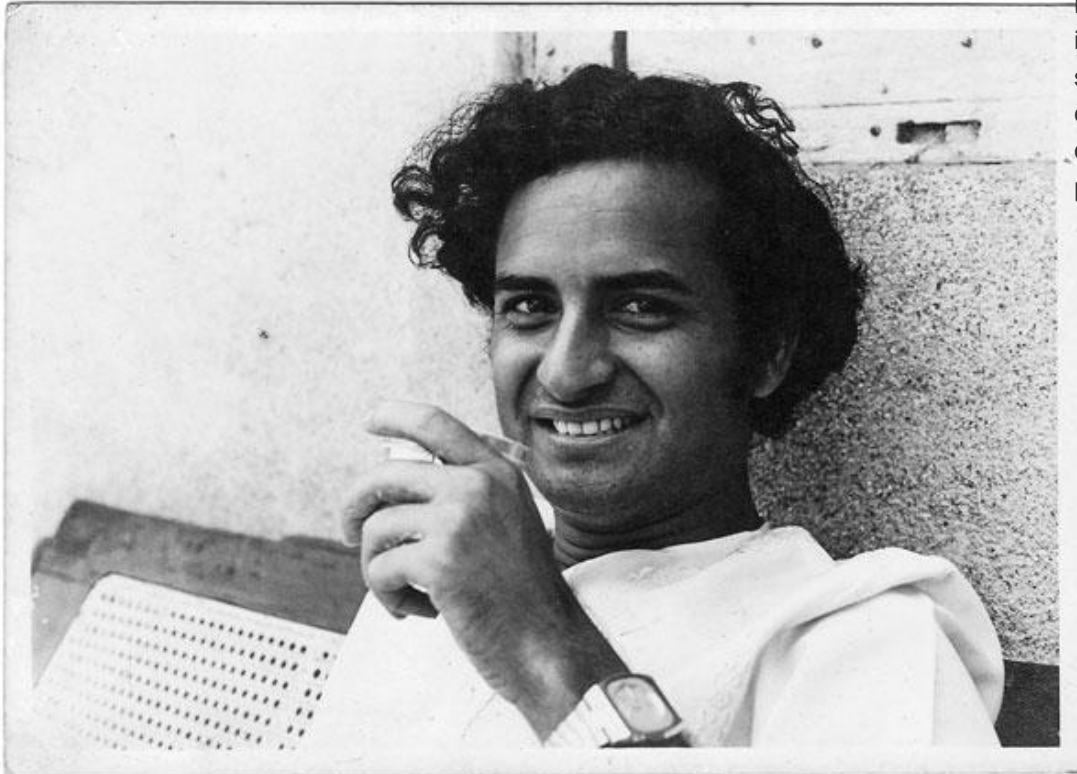


A Fine Balance

How Ulhas Kashalkar became one of the greatest musicians of our time

By Sumana Ramanan | January 1, 2015

Courtesy Ulhas Kashalkar



Kashalkar's genius lies in his inventive yet rooted artistry. In a sweet, malleable voice, he channels an intellectual disposition into emotionally powerful renditions.



ONE

MINUTES BEFORE THE LIGHTS DIMMED and the Hindustani vocalist Pandit Ulhas Kashalkar walked onto the stage at Mumbai's National Centre for the Performing Arts, the eminent singers Ashwini Bhide-Deshpande and Padma Talwalkar took their seats in the front row. The vocalist and veteran critic Amarendra Dhaneshwar sat a few rows behind them. Other listeners looked around to see who else had come. Several younger singers were there as well: Noopur Kashid, Rutuja Lad, Amita Pavgi-Gokhale and Saylee Talwalkar. The turnout for Kashalkar's concert, held last September, was not unusual; for at least a decade, he has been considered a musicians' musician. Still, expectations were high: what would the maestro sing for this audience?

Kashalkar's performance was dedicated to *jod* ragas, a particularly challenging melodic form. When singing a *jod* raga, the musician must fully elaborate two conjoined ragas—the complex melodic modes at the centre of Indian classical music. Each raga evokes a range of moods, and in a *jod* raga, the musician moves from one to the other only through their common *swaras*, or notes, attempting to keep the ambience of each distinct. Even while presenting a single raga, the singer faces the challenge of sustaining an emotional intensity, so that the rendition does not lapse into dry, mechanical exercise. This is all the more difficult with a *jod* raga because the technical skill plays an even greater role: here, the singer must also switch fluidly and surprise the audience with twists and turns. But Kashalkar, cutting a trim and graceful figure on the NCPA stage, made it look easy. With his characteristic mellifluousness, he sang four *jod* ragas back to back: Lalita Gauri, Shiv Kalyan, Malkauns Bahar and Jayant Malhar.

Kashalkar turns sixty on 14 January. At this milestone, still considered a midpoint in the career of a Hindustani classical musician, he is in formidable command over his form—*khayal*. Among the vocalists who perform it, barring Kishori Amonkar, he is unmatched. Kashalkar's following may be smaller than that of the younger but already celebrated Ustad Rashid Khan, possibly because he lacks the rich timbre conventionally associated with a good voice. But Kashalkar's genius lies in his inventive yet

rooted artistry. In a sweet, malleable voice, he channels an intellectual disposition into emotionally powerful renditions. Over the years, he has forged his own distinctive style, which is dynamic without relying on dramatic flourishes. It is recognisable by its finely chiselled idiom, which incorporates a rich blend of influences, including the three gharanas, or schools of music, in which he trained: Agra, Gwalior and Jaipur. Kashalkar has himself trained at least eight vocalists of a high calibre, something few performers at his level accomplish. These singers, and the younger ones he continues to teach, represent a vital part of his legacy.

“All musicians look up to him,” Bhide-Deshpande told me during an interview at her home. “I look at him as a standard. If you are unsure, you listen to him and see how he approaches a raga. It can be very reassuring. One reason is that his *taleem*”—training—“has been impeccable. Second, he is a thinking musician. He won’t sing one way blindly because his guru did it. He will ask, why is this phrase in this raga? At the same time, without sacrificing his focus on classical music, he has a popular following.”

“Kashalkar’s is an amazing intellect applied to music,” Deepak Raja, a Mumbai-based musicologist who has written three books on Hindustani music, told me. “He has long performing experience, a huge repertoire and combines a high level of expressive and contemplative excellence. This is why he is the only true maestro of his generation.”

Amlan Das Gupta, a professor of English and a scholar of Hindustani music at Jadavpur University in Kolkata, who has set up a digital archive with more than six thousand hours of classical recordings, echoed this thought. “Kashalkar’s importance goes well beyond his performative skill,” he said. “You are listening to a great mind.”

Many *khayaliyas* only become better with time, and what is exciting for listeners is that Kashalkar continues to push the boundaries of his art. “He is constantly attempting to go further,” Das Gupta said, “to approach ragas in new ways, to re-imagine them. This makes him not just a remarkable khayal singer, but one of India’s greatest musicians.”

In the twenty years that I have been listening to Kashalkar, his concerts have been both highly consistent and impressively varied. Even on a scratchy YouTube clip I once saw—of Kashalkar in full flow at a 2011 function in Goa commemorating the birth anniversary of his guru, Gajananbuwa Joshi—his effortless mastery shines through a stirring rendition of Raga Adana. This raga is sung in the middle and upper octaves, and follows the main piece, once the voice has fully warmed up. Kashalkar sang three compositions in Adana, scaling ever greater heights but stopping well before he had exhausted his creative resources. The two supporting musicians, his student Shashank Maktedar and his son Sameehan, spent the better part of the 25-minute rendition looking stupefied at what was unfolding before them. At one point, Kashalkar leaned towards his son, indicating that he should sing. Sameehan merely stared back. It was not his fault. What was the use of him striking a match when his father had already set the house on fire?

ULHAS KASHALKAR LIVES with his family on the campus of the Sangeet Research Academy in south Kolkata’s Tollygunge locality. Compared with its gregarious Bengali *bhadralok* counterpart, the upper-caste and middle-class Maharashtrian culture the Kashalkar family comes from is one of quiet reserve, even aloofness. Kashalkar is particularly reticent, but after some cajoling, he agreed to let me visit him at the SRA, a modern gurukul with an illustrious roster of past teachers, such as the Agra gharana’s Latafat Hussain Khan, the Jaipur gharana’s Nivruttibuwa Sarnaik and the Kirana gharana’s Hirabai Barodekar. Although Kashalkar’s background is eclectic, he came on board over two decades ago as a resident guru representing the Gwalior gharana.

Over the course of a week last October, the soft-spoken singer gradually opened up, helped along by his wife Sanjeevani, who turned out to be quite the raconteur. In his Nagpur-inflected Hindi, Kashalkar reflected on his evolving style, his role as a teacher, and the practice of his art as a khayaliya.

Khayal, along with dhrupad, is one of the two main genres in Hindustani classical music. A fusion of Indian and Persian influences, khayal is thought to have originated as early as the thirteenth century, and blossomed by the eighteenth century, notably in the court of the Mughal emperor Muhammad Shah “Rangila.” A khayal presentation in one raga is an intricate exercise in improvisation that usually consists of a *vilambit*, or slow, composition, followed by a *dhrut*, or fast, one, each set to a specific tala, or rhythmic pattern. The singer elaborates upon a raga through verses of usually two to four lines in a Hindi dialect.

This elaboration consists of two broad modes of melodic improvisation: *aalaap*, a slow unfolding, undertaken in the first half of a presentation, and *taan*, fast-paced patterns of notes, sung in the second. The improvisation also has a rhythmic dimension. Called *laykari*, it is the singer’s creative dialogue with the tala. One aspect of laykari is the manner in which the singer arrives at the *sam*, the tala’s first beat, in each *avartan*, or iteration of the rhythmic cycle. Each arrival on this sam generates a frisson of expectation in the audience for the next landing, thus keeping listeners in a state of perpetual anticipation.

Except for child prodigies such as DV Paluskar, even someone who begins training at the age of five requires at least two

decades to become a good khayal singer. “In earlier times,” Kashalkar told me, “people used to tell musicians not to even attempt singing khayal before forty. Until then, one’s music doesn’t mature.” Getting to the next stage and developing a unique style is even more arduous. Few make this transition.

I asked Kashalkar why he had focussed so steadfastly on khayal, to the near exclusion of light classical forms such as *thumri*, *tappas*, *bhajans* and *natya sangeet*, which may have widened his popular appeal. “I derived the most satisfaction from khayal,” he said. “One can do so much with it. Even now, I feel there is so much left to explore. Besides, it took me so long to master khayal itself, there was no time to do other things. And you *can* make a name for yourself by focussing on khayal. Just look at Mallikarjun Mansur. He knew how to sing natya sangeet, Kannada *vachanas*, etcetera, but he decided to sing only khayal and never once changed his course because of external pressures. Yet he gained such a great reputation.”

In khayal’s abstractness lies its appeal, Kashalkar said. “Because very little is fixed, it allows the individual artiste a lot of scope for improvisation. This is why the same artiste can sing the same *bandish*—composition—in the same raga several times, and each time its effect will vary. If everything is fixed, then the effect will also be fixed and predictable. You can take khayal to increasingly higher heights. That is what makes our music so special.

“The aim is not to merely reproduce what your guru sang. If imitation were the only aim, one could do it the minute one’s taleem ends. But it takes a very long time to apply your mind to what you have learnt and develop your own style. So if someone tells a singer, ‘You don’t sound like your guru,’ he or she should consider it a compliment. DV Paluskar learnt from Vinayakrao Patwardhan, for instance, but their presentation of the same music was so different.”

Among the many remarkable features of Kashalkar’s style is the way he has integrated elements of three gharanas into a seamless whole. The main khayal gharanas are Agra, Gwalior, Jaipur-Atrauli (often referred to just as Jaipur), Kirana, Patiala and Rampur-Sahaswan. Kashalkar selectively chooses elements of a gharana that he believes are its strength. For example, when it comes to *bol baant*, an improvisational technique that splits up the words of a composition in various ways rhythmically, Kashalkar draws from the Agra gharana, while for taan designs he looks to the Jaipur gharana.

Until about a decade ago Kashalkar would render different ragas in the styles of different gharanas during his concerts. “I stopped doing that after a while because it began restricting me,” he said. “If I commit to singing in one gharana, then I cannot use an element of another gharana even though I think that might enhance the exposition of the raga. For instance, if I announce that I am singing something the Jaipur way, then I cannot use *tihais*—repetitions of phrases three times—“to come to the sam, even if I feel like doing so, because that is not part of that gharana’s style.” But the extent of integration also depends on the raga, Kashalkar said. “If I have learnt a raga in the full Jaipur style from my guru, especially the complex and rare ones that this gharana specialises in, such as Raisa Kanada or Shuddha Nat, then I won’t destroy its stylistic integrity just because I want to incorporate elements of other gharanas.”

Kashalkar’s taans, those fast patterns of notes, exemplify his ability to assimilate a variety of influences. To cite just one example, he incorporated balpej taans, a particularly complex class of taans found in the Jaipur gharana, into his music by listening to recordings and attending concerts of Nivruttibuwa Sarnaik. In 1992, Kashalkar was singing a sequence of these taans at a concert outside Mumbai. The respected sarangi player who was accompanying him, the late Abdul Latif Khan, simply put his instrument down and told the audience, “*Aise taan sarangi ki bas ke bahar hain*”—These taans are beyond the sarangi. Moved both by Kashalkar’s virtuosity and Khan’s honesty, the audience broke into thunderous applause.

TWO

IN THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY, a musical revolution swept across western Maharashtra. This region’s princely states, such as Kolhapur and Aundh, had avid patrons and were magnets for classical musicians at the time. The khayal form began spreading rapidly in the area, with the towering figure of Balakrishnabuwa Ichalkaranjekar as one of its leading propagators. Ichalkaranjekar, who was born in 1849 in Sangli district’s Bedag village, went to Gwalior, the seat of khayal’s first gharana, to learn from the great masters there. He returned to Maharashtra well before the turn of the century, settling down in Miraj, a town famous for its string instruments, such as the tanpura, sitar and sarod.

Ichalkaranjekar’s numerous students, who spread khayal further, included giants such as VD Paluskar, who founded the Gandharva Mahavidyalaya in Lahore in 1901, and Anant Manohar Joshi, whose son Gajananbuwa later became Ulhas Kashalkar’s guru. As khayal took root in this region, Marathi *sangeet nataks*, musicals that used raga-based accompaniment called natya sangeet, were also flowering. Sangeet natak troupes, mostly based in Mumbai and Pune, employed classical ustads and pandits from all over the country to train their actors.

Ulhas Kashalkar was born in 1955 in the tiny town of Pandharkaoda, far away from this musical hotbed, in the cultural and

economic backwater of Yavatmal district in Maharashtra's eastern Vidarbha region. In Kashalkar's time, Pandharkaoda was a humble but peaceful place, with a population of probably not more than 26,000 people—roughly the figure cited in the 2001 census. His was one of about a dozen Brahmin families in the town, which had a mix of communities, including Telugu speakers and Marwaris. Most people tilled the land, in addition to carrying on modest trades.

Kashalkar's father, Nagesh Dattatreya Kashalkar, was a lawyer with varied interests outside his profession, including music. Originally from Malvan, in the state's coastal Konkan region, he had spent time in Satara and Pune, in western Maharashtra, before getting a law degree in Nagpur, the state's winter capital, and settling down in nearby Pandharkaoda. As Kashalkar senior made his way from Konkan to Vidarbha, he soaked up western Maharashtra's rich musical culture. In Pune, he listened to the greats of natya sangeet, such as Bal Gandharva and Master Krishnarao. He studied for about a year under Matangebuwa, a musical descendant of Ichalkaranjekar's in Satara, but was largely an autodidact.

In Pandharkaoda, the Kashalkars were the only ones who had anything to do with classical music, and theirs was the only home with a tanpura, a tabla and a harmonium. The townspeople borrowed these for bhajan or kirtan programmes. Ulhas was the youngest of six siblings, all boys, and their father gave them all classical music lessons in the evenings, after coming home from court. (Two other Kashalkar brothers also became professional musicians.) Soon, other town residents wanted their children to learn music too, so Kashalkar's father opened a local branch of the pan-Indian Gandharva Mahavidyalaya. Kashalkar's mother also got involved: when Ulhas, as a boy of six, was too shy to sing, she would accompany him on the harmonium to put him at ease.

Kashalkar's father took him to natya sangeet competitions, first across Vidarbha and then across the state. For four years in a row, he won a top prize at a prestigious competition in Pune. The judges' panel included PL Deshpande, a giant of Marathi letters who wrote extensively on music, and who told the young Kashalkar to get in touch if he ever needed advice on his musical training.

At Pandharkaoda's only college, Kashalkar studied music as one of five subjects. During the summers, he began going to Mumbai to learn from Pandit Ram Marathe, the great natya sangeet exponent and classical musician. On finishing college in 1976, Kashalkar moved to Nagpur to get a masters degree in music from Morris College, living by himself in a rented room. Training under the Gwalior-gharana singer Rajabhau Kogje and the musicologist PN Khardenavis, he graduated with two gold medals—one for standing first in music, and the other for topping the whole university. "They offered me a lecturer's job," Kashalkar recalled. "Although that would have given me stability, I wanted to become a khayal singer. And to do that I knew I needed much more training." So at the age of 23, he moved to Mumbai in search of a guru.

GAJANANBUWA JOSHI WAS A VOCALIST and violinist of staggering musical depth, and one of the most sought-after gurus of his time. Born in 1911, he had learnt from giants of three different gharanas: his father Anant Manohar Joshi and Ramakrishnabuwa Vaze from the Gwalior gharana; the Agra gharana's Vilayat Hussain Khan; and Bhurji Khan, the son of Alladiya Khan, who founded the Jaipur-Atrauli gharana. Although Joshi's family was from Aundh, he lived in Mumbai and its environs for much of his performing life.

The city became a huge centre for Hindustani music from the early to the mid-twentieth century, as the gradual disintegration of the princely states and the landed aristocracy had deprived classical music of its primary sources of patronage. After a period of uncertainty, new sources of sustenance sprang up in Mumbai, and to a lesser extent in Kolkata. These included earnings from ticketed concerts, gramophone recordings, teaching in music schools such as the Gandharva Mahavidyalaya, giving private tuition to members of an emerging middle class, and finding patrons from new mercantile classes, such as the Gujarati Seths. Eventually, these changes made it possible for people from the middle classes to become not just listeners but also performers of khayal, which until then had been a form of chamber music performed mainly by members of hereditary musical families for privileged audiences.

When Kashalkar arrived in Mumbai in 1978, he went straight to Joshi. But, by then, Joshi was in his late sixties, and suffering from high blood pressure. He had more or less stopped performing and teaching, and turned Kashalkar away. Kashalkar returned to Pandit Ram Marathe, who had taught him during the summers, but Marathe was very busy with his own career, and only able to teach intermittently. After a few months, Kashalkar decided to approach Joshi again. This time, the master relented, and thus began one of the greatest guru-*shishya* relationships of contemporary Hindustani music.

With the help of two scholarships amounting to Rs 600 a month, Kashalkar rented a small flat in Dombivli, the suburb just outside Mumbai where Joshi was based. For the next five years, Joshi poured himself into his student, taking him everywhere and teaching him during every spare moment. For the first seven months, Joshi worked with Kashalkar on only one raga, Yaman, often the first one taught to beginners. For Kashalkar, who had arrived with two MA gold medals under his belt, this was humbling. "He taught me numerous bandishes and taranas in a variety of talas in this one raga until I had mastered all of them,"

Kashalkar said. “I then realised that our music just cannot be learnt in a classroom, only in a guru-shishya setting.”

Today we have an incredible window into this relationship: a benevolent soul, the late GP Thatte, recorded many of Joshi and Kashalkar’s lessons, and later uploaded them to the internet. Most of these audio clips are from three months in 1980, when Joshi travelled to Nashik to tutor the well-to-do Thatte. Joshi took his star pupil along to sit in, and taught him during the visit too.

Joshi had developed a highly sophisticated pedagogy. It included the use of *sargams*, or note patterns, to help students master a raga’s *chalan*, or characteristic gait, and build on this to improvise. In one of Thatte’s clips, for example, we hear Joshi drilling Kashalkar in the majestic Darbari Kanada, often called the king of Hindustani ragas. Starting with a few simple phrases, Joshi pushes his student to create ever more complicated patterns while gradually increasing the tempo. For over twenty minutes, Kashalkar follows his teacher’s lead, starting with some of the raga’s core phrases, such as *sa-dha-ni-pa* and *sa-re-ga-ma-re-sa-re-sa*, and embellishing these with just a note, then a few notes, then a longer phrase, until he establishes an entire soundscape.

Joshi also insisted on his students learning the basics of the tabla to help them master rhythm. Before every lesson, for twenty minutes, he made Kashalkar recite tabla *bols*, or syllables, in various talas, and taught him to create variations within the *kaida* and *rela*, both compositional forms for the tabla. “This method helps students overcome their fear of tala once and for all,” Kashalkar told me.

It was upon this rock-solid foundation that Kashalkar further built his skills. His energy as a student had also rejuvenated Joshi, to the extent that he started performing and accepting students again for the few years before his death, in 1987.

Four years before that, in 1983, Kashalkar ended his taleem. A year short of thirty, he decided he needed to apply his own mind to everything he had learned. He also needed a steady income. He got his first job, as a programme officer, with All India Radio’s music division in Ratnagiri, 330 kilometres south of Mumbai. There, he married his colleague Sanjeevani, who worked in the features section. In 1985 they were transferred to Pune, and in 1987 to Mumbai. Kashalkar continued to perform on the side throughout, but it was a difficult juggling act. In Mumbai, the couple rented a flat in the suburb of Badlapur, and every day commuted two hours each way, in the city’s crowded suburban trains, to AIR’s downtown office.

An exhausted Kashalkar would go home every night and do *riyaaz*, or practice, for a couple of hours, but it rapidly became clear to him that his music was suffering. “My singing was not progressing the way I wanted,” he told me. “After one’s musical education, one doesn’t get programmes all at once. Initially a job helps, but the risk is that one can get stuck there.”

But in 1989, upon Kashalkar’s life stage entered a *deus ex machina* in the form of Madhukar Gaikwad, the director of AIR’s Mumbai station. A gifted administrator, Gaikwad had heard that Kashalkar was a rising talent. After consulting PL Deshpande, who had followed Kashalkar’s career, Gaikwad summoned the singer and Sanjeevani to his office. He suggested that Kashalkar quit his job to focus on a performing career. The Kashalkars demurred, for financial reasons. Sanjeevani recalled that Gaikwad then handed each of them a pen and a sheet of paper, and made them separately list the upsides and downsides of quitting. After a couple more meetings, he convinced Kashalkar to at least take some time off. “What does Ulhas need?” Sanjeevani remembered Gaikwad asking her. “He is a Brahmin who is perfectly happy eating *varan-bhaat*”—lentils and rice—“every day. I am sure both of you can manage on your salary.” Gaikwad, who retired as director-general of AIR and now lives just outside Mumbai, went into peals of laughter as he recollected the episode. “Ulhas was already standing on the edge of greatness,” he said. “All I gave him was a gentle push.”

Thus began the most crucial period in Kashalkar’s life. Over eight months, exhausting all his leave, he sat alone in his flat doing *riyaaz* for up to seven hours a day. His locality did not have tabla players, so in addition to playing the tanpura with his right hand, he began playing one half of the tabla, the *dagga* or *bayan*, with his left hand to keep the beat. There were no electronic tablas or tanpuras at that time. This ambidexterity was not unprecedented, but rare enough to bring the reputable Gwalior gharana singer Veena Sahasrabuddhe to his doorstep to see it for herself during this period.

The hours of singing were only one part of Kashalkar’s *riyaaz*. He spent the remaining time listening to recordings, thinking about new taan patterns and working out how a raga might be elaborated. “Practising does not mean only training your voice,” he said. “You also have to spend time in reflection. Moreover, you have to continue doing all this even if no programme comes your way for months. You should never do *riyaaz* for programmes; only to sing well.” After passing his own test of fire, Kashalkar quit his job in 1990, rented a flat in Thane—another suburb where he had family and friends—and settled down in the hope of focussing on his *riyaaz*, and on the programmes that came with his growing reputation. But life had other plans.

EVERY WEEKDAY MORNING, when he is not touring, Kashalkar holds classes at his home in Kolkata, teaching between five and ten students together, so that they can also learn from one another. He has followed this routine since arriving at the SRA in 1992, a year after its director, Pandit Vijay Kichlu, offered him a job just as his career was taking off in Mumbai. Kashalkar moved

to the other end of the country intending to stay only a few months. But this stay extended to five years, and then became indefinite as the family put down roots and integrated fully into its adopted city. His wife continued to work at AIR in Kolkata until her recent retirement. She and Kashalkar's son speak Bengali fluently, while Kashalkar has a working knowledge of it.

Seated on the floor of the family's music room one morning, I listened to Kashalkar guide a student from Kolhapur through Raga Yaman. As she improvised, he began telling her which notes to rest on and, in the manner of his own guru, how to spin out taan patterns before arriving on the sam. "You can build your taans from your aalaap patterns," he told the young woman, who was among half a dozen students who had turned up for class that day. "Also, a raga is not just a group of notes. It is a collection of phrases. Two ragas can have the same set of notes but very different phrases and chalans. Can you give me some examples?" The students responded: Bhoop and Deshkar, Todi and Multani, Darbari and Adana.

On another day, he instructed a young woman who had arrived just a week earlier from Bengaluru. She sang a vilambit composition in Raga Miyan Ki Todi, and then began improvising. "I think you are struggling as you hit the upper *sa*," he told her patiently. "*Aakaar* practice"—rendering the scales with an open mouth—"should help. Also, you should never lose the purity of the note, however fast you sing."

Kashalkar has taught about twenty students during his stay at the SRA. In addition, a few established singers, such as Manjusha Patil, also regularly travel to Kolkata for his guidance. Kichlu, who headed the SRA from its founding in 1977 until 2001, told me Kashalkar "is not only one of the country's finest performers, he is also one of the academy's most sought-after and successful gurus."

Kashalkar didn't just learn music from Gajananbuwa Joshi, but also how to teach it. "Gajananbuwa used to say: 'You can't only sing; you will also have to teach one day. Observe me. Watch how I am correcting my students and explaining things to them,'" Kashalkar recalled. "Even though he also taught his son Madhukar, he gave all his students everything he had. That's why he became such a great guru."

Kashalkar's students similarly swear by him. "I became a completely different person after my time with him," the vocalist Shashank Maktedar, one of Kashalkar's first students at the SRA, said. Maktedar joined the SRA at the age of 21, and spent eight years there. "He taught me much more than music. He taught me how to think and how to live a musician's life."

"He is probably the best guru in Hindustani music today," the singer Ranjani Ramachandran, who studied with Kashalkar for nearly five years, told me. "He recognises each student's strength and gets him or her to exploit that. He's very shrewd in estimating your level. For example, he began by teaching me how to fill an avartan, then how to make it aesthetic, and further how to make it expressive. Even though he is a traditionalist, he would tell us not to get bogged down in grammar and gharanas, to absorb as many influences as possible. He doesn't talk much—what he says is concise, precise and extremely analytical. In these senses, he's also very modernist."

Kashalkar is a rare combination: an uncompromising purist as a performer who is wholly free of dogma as a teacher. "Many musical styles will flourish," he said. "Amir Khan had a serious, introspective style, while Bade Ghulam Ali Khan's was more aggressive. That is how it should be. Each of them will appeal to different audiences. As long as there are no gimmicks, all styles are fine. But if you have adopted a certain approach and that does not make you hugely popular, then you should not begin changing it for that reason. You have to be prepared that you may not get crowds and a large number of performances."

THREE

COMPARING ARTISTS, especially across eras, is fraught with problems. The context changes so much. Yet asking who occupied a similar position to a contemporary great in a preceding generation can help us understand the present-day musician's significance when we lack historical distance. In Kashalkar's case, the inevitable connection is with Mallikarjun Mansur, the singer from Dharwad, who died in 1992 at the age of 81, and was one of the greatest khayaliyas of the twentieth century.

Kashalkar, like Mansur, stands out for his steadfast commitment to the khayal form, with a disregard for fashion and popular demand. As Mansur did, he also has a command over complex and rare ragas. Furthermore, Kashalkar's music is defined not by an especially deep, ringing voice, but by a relentless search for a raga's soul. Kashalkar's down-to-earth demeanour and a touching lack of self-importance also recall Mansur. For these reasons, the two artists both have a fanatical following of knowledgeable listeners.

The aim is not to crudely compare artists, but to explore why two individuals with similar musical values express them so differently. For if the chain-smoking Mansur's singing seethed with unbridled intensity, the abstemious Kashalkar's music is about elegance and restraint. With Kashalkar, the passion lurks just below the surface, creating its own tension but rarely spinning out of control.

Their renditions of two related ragas, representing each at his best and both available on YouTube, illustrate this difference. In one clip, Mansur sings Nayaki Kanada, a raga in which he consistently outdid himself, with each version he performed becoming a masterpiece. By the time Mansur hits the climactic sweet spot of the upper *sa* and the tempo increases, he is practically screaming with untamed ferocity, without sacrificing musicality. Kashalkar's artistry is a sleek contrast, shining through in two clips of him singing Kaunsi Kanada–Nayaki ang. Both recordings illustrate the sculpted beauty and unrelenting ingenuity of Kashalkar's taans, as well as the delicately dramatic manner in which he lands on the sam.

If I were pushed to say what I miss in Kashalkar's music, it is that, even at its most scintillating, it stops short of becoming visceral. While finding his own voice, Kashalkar smoothed out the rough edges of Joshi's vocalisation, and with it perhaps also some of his teacher's raw energy. This is a matter of taste, because Kashalkar's polish might be precisely what most of his fans find exquisite. Those who quibble are likely to be people above the age of forty who have heard the great khayaliyas of the previous generation, who performed in a very different environment and for vastly different audiences and tastes.

Looking at the forces that create a singer's aesthetic yields valuable insights into historical forces, and into the relationship between life and art. "Kashalkar made a choice about how to articulate his sur in a particular way, definitely not to become popular but as an aesthetic decision," Amlan Das Gupta, the Hindustani music scholar, said. "But the artiste finds his voice within a particular socio-cultural context, and some forces are greater than the artiste."

Mansur became a singer in the 1930s, an uncertain time when the old structures of patronage were crumbling and new ones were still in their formative stages. Kashalkar, however, became a performer in a more stable, if less exciting, environment, Das Gupta said. The protocols of taleem and performance have changed considerably across the two periods, and some would say that the "middle-class-isation" of classical music has influenced taste profoundly, he added.

Luck and circumstance also play their roles, as do caste, class and education. Mansur enjoyed the focussed attention of a guru, the Gwalior gharana's Neelkanthbuwa Alurmth, at around the impressionable age of 11; Kashalkar had to wait until he was 23. Mansur was a Lingayat, part of a radical monotheistic sect that worships Shiva, and his formal education was meagre. Kashalkar is a Brahmin with a decorated post-graduate degree. While Alurmth was also a Lingayat, Mansur reached maturity under two Muslim gurus (sons of Alladiya Khan). Kashalkar happened to learn only from masters from his own caste, Maharashtrian Brahmins, a community that by his time had for a variety of reasons come to dominate vocal music.

Then there is personality. Anyone who chooses classical music as a career is a risk-taker, but Mansur had a reckless streak. Apart from his lifelong addiction to tobacco, in his almost insane pursuit of music he abandoned his wife for long periods, leaving her to fend for herself and their eight children. "Music was like a madness," Mansur once said. One should not underestimate the psychic toll that such a life can take on a person. It infused Mansur's music with an aching quality that sometimes makes listening to him unbearable.

The level-headed Kashalkar, in comparison, is a paragon of middle-class rectitude, with an idyllic domestic life. It is inconceivable that he could have become what he is without the support of his remarkable wife. Kashalkar's prudence stopped him from seeking Mansur out as a guru, an idea he considered but abandoned because he was unsure of the maestro's credentials as a teacher, and did not therefore want to risk moving to Dharwad.

THE INSTITUTIONAL RESOURCES AND FINANCIAL security offered by a position at the Sangeet Research Academy suited Kashalkar, who grew as a performer from this stable platform. If in the early 1990s his audience was dominated by discerning listeners, it came to include a wider swathe of people as he became synonymous with musical excellence and, by the yardstick of high classicism, a pan-Indian star. Official recognition also came his way with a Padma Shri in 2010, though this award was perhaps an instance of damning with faint praise.

Kashalkar's success points to the importance of institutional support for allowing artists to flourish. It also validates the worth of national festivals and local music circles, which arose in the early twentieth century, in creating audiences for rising musicians. It was at an ITC-SRA Sammelan in Kolkata in the early 1990s that Partho Datta, a Delhi-based academic and music lover, first encountered Kashalkar. "I had never heard him before," Datta recalled. "He sang a wonderful Shree. I was stunned by his sheer melodiousness and laykari. After a long time, actually after Mansur passed away, I felt that I had heard someone who combined high intellectualism with emotional power. I never miss his concerts."

Over the past ten years, Kashalkar's career has also shown how private patronage has evolved. Affluent music lovers now regularly invite Kashalkar to sing at *baithaks*, or chamber concerts, for private audiences. Whether in small rooms or big halls, these various forms of support have allowed Kashalkar to constantly offer his listeners something fresh, and he has transitioned from being a master of a demanding tradition to reimagining and extending it in distinctive ways. At a concert in Mumbai in 2012, he sang an uncommon composition in the complex raga Khat, which he had learnt from KG Ginde when the late singer was

visiting the SRA in the early 1990s. Kashalkar rendered the bandish, composed by Ginde's guru, SN Ratanjankar, in his silky style, thrilling the audience. In February 2014, in the same city, Kashalkar sang another rare composition, in the jod raga Malkauns Bahar, which he learnt from a recording of the late Sharadchandra Arolkar, of the Gwalior gharana. He surprised even seasoned concertgoers.

Even when Kashalkar presents a more frequently heard raga, such as Yaman, you get the feeling he is exploring it anew for himself each time, and in the process giving listeners a richer portrait of the raga to take home. "Each time one sings a popular raga, one can pick a new bandish, which automatically suggests a different approach to the elaboration because each bandish emphasises its own set of phrases or is concentrated in a particular octave," Kashalkar said. "Or you could pick a new tala or *laya*"—tempo. "Alternatively, you could focus your creative energies on one aspect of the improvisation, such as the aalaap, taans or bol baant, to give the elaboration a special character."

At the September concert dedicated to jod ragas, he presented a composition of Ramashreya Jha's in Raga Jayant Malhar, which he had learnt from the composer himself. Jha sang it about five years ago at a private baithak in Kolkata that Kashalkar attended. The baithak's host, Jayanta Chatterji, told me that "the very next morning Ulhas-ji turned up at my home with his notebook and pen and told Jha-saheb to teach him the composition."

At the behest of the legendary sitarist Ustad Vilayat Khan, Chatterji asked Kashalkar to present Khan's composition in Raga Sanjh Saravali, at a January 2003 celebration in anticipation of the maestro's seventy-fifth birthday. Kashalkar said he would, but only if he could have a few sessions with the illustrious musician. Khan agreed. When he finally heard Kashalkar sing it in concert, the notoriously hard-to-please sitarist was so excited that he kept jumping in his seat at the end of every avartan, according to people who were in the audience. When Kashalkar finished, Khan told him, "Ulhas-ji, *aapne mere Sanjh Saravali pe chaar chaand dal diye hain.*" You added a special sparkle to my Sanjh Saravali.

OVER AND OVER AGAIN, people spoke of Kashalkar as not just a superlative musician but also a person with immense mental poise. At one concert of his in Chennai a few years ago, the organisers failed to arrange two Miraj tanpuras—something any serious Hindustani musician would take for granted, let alone someone of Kashalkar's stature. What they gave him instead was a single half-sized Tanjore tanpura, which produces a more muted sound. "He looked crestfallen," a Chennai-based musician, who did not wish to be named, told me. "But he did not say a word. He made the best of it and went on to sing beautifully."

Now at the threshold of sixty, when people in other professions prepare to retire, Kashalkar retains the humility and spirit of someone just getting started. When he is not singing, he is by temperament a listener. One of the people Kashalkar credits with helping him accomplish a sense of inner calm is the late Datta Bhaiya Kulkarni, a spiritual man and fellow Maharashtrian who befriended the Kashalkars many years ago. "Datta Bhaiya Kulkarni did not lecture us or give us sermons. In ordinary conversation he conveyed his philosophy about how to lead one's life and how to handle day-to-day tensions," Kashalkar told me, explaining that this spiritual teaching changed his music. "It is not the case that all musicians are at peace with themselves," Kashalkar said, smiling, when I expressed surprise that he needed spiritual sustenance. "When I listen to myself singing when I was young, some of it sounds restless," he said. "One's state of mind and personality are bound to influence one's art."

Today, Kashalkar relies on a few close well-wishers to give him advice. But by this point, he said, a musician should mostly be his own best judge. "I don't have to listen to my recordings. I can tell even while I am singing whether I have fallen short or not."

He has intentionally chosen not to have a crowded concert calendar and performs about twice a month, accepting only half of the offers that come his way. But I could tell that beneath his understated manner, he still relishes performing. "I do register the presence of the audience," he said. "When I was young, senior artistes used to come to some of my concerts, such as KG Ginde, Bhimsen Joshi and Dinkar Kaikini. I used to take it very seriously. When I saw them, I used to tell myself, I will have to sing with great responsibility. I didn't want them to think: his guru is so great, but look at what he is doing. Today, too, I do look around to see who has come."

As Kashalkar himself enters the pantheon of Hindustani classical greats, there is a sense of milestones yet to come on the road ahead. For instance, many admirers look forward to seeing Kashalkar leave his imprint on one or more ragas, the way Amir Khan arguably did with Marwa, Faiyaz Khan with Ramkali, or Mallikarjun Mansur with a number of rare ragas. At one point, I asked Kashalkar how he felt about the frequent comparisons between him and Mansur. "Mansur was a giant, and I am not in his league," he said. "But naturally, the comparison is music to my ears. Even god likes praise, and we are mere mortals."