

Manjiri Asnare-Kelkar

With the categoric steering of Jaipur-Atrauli vocalism towards romanticism by Kishori Amonkar, only an accidental modernisation could have given its orthodox idiom a fresh lease of life. Though her musicianship has yet to deliver its promise, Manjiri Asnare-Kelkar (born: 1971) could just be the accident the Jaipur legacy needed. Manjiri's music maintains a substantial stylistic distance from the last orthodox stalwart, Dhondutai Kulkarni, as well as the revisionist exponent, Kishori Amonkar. And, yet there is no mistaking the orthodox Jaipur flavour in her music.

Manjiri was selected by the Sangeet Natak Akademi for the first Bismillah Khan Memorial Award for Young Musicians in early 2007. A few years earlier, *India Today*, the influential news magazine, had hailed hers as the "voice that spans not merely two octaves, but two centuries". In less than a decade, she has established a significant presence on the Indian concert platform, acquired a following abroad, and released five commercial



Manjiri Asnare-Kelkar

AVINASH PASRICHA

A modern interpreter of an orthodox idiom

Deepak S. Raja

recordings. She became a broadcaster on All India Radio at the age of 16, after topping its nationwide talent-search, and currently occupies the penultimate "A" grade. She holds post-graduate degrees in English Literature as well as Music.

Coming to terms with a musician's risks

Manjiri spoke to the author on June 3, 2003

"My family is deeply involved with music. My grandfather was an advocate in Amravati (a town in north-eastern Maharashtra), and an excellent tabla player. He studied with the best percussionists in Amravati, and belonged to the

Gyan Prakash Ghosh lineage. The family home was never without music and musicians. Because of my grandfather's love for music, my father also got involved. He trained as a tabla player and, in his youth, stood first in the All India Radio national talent search competition."

"I was brought up in Sangli in southern Maharashtra, where my father served as a professor. He still performs regularly on All India Radio and, of course, accompanies me whenever he can. He was keen that I should study music. When I was five, I was sent to a music school to learn singing. Simultaneously, I was sent to a dance school to study Kathak. By the age of eight, I was admitted to the best music school in Sangli, run by Chintubuwa Mhaiskar, a Gwalior trained vocalist."

"I did well in both. By the age of ten, I could hold the dance floor comfortably for up to 90 minutes, and was winning dance competitions all over the state. At the music school, I was identified for personalised attention and guidance from Chintubuwa. By then, I was also teaching myself a little bit. I had become a fan of Malini Rajurkar, especially her tappa renderings. So, I bought her cassettes, painstakingly took down the notations, and perfected them by rote. By the time I was fifteen, I could present a decent 30-minute khayal, and started winning competitions and receiving invitations to perform. The time had come to choose between music

and dance. Quality dance training was available only in Mumbai or Pune. Pursuing dance after marriage and children is always a big uncertainty in our society. So, I dropped dance, and stuck to music.”

“I hit the crossroads again at the age of 17, when I graduated from high school, and secured admission to engineering college. That would have ruled out any significant achievement in music. But the path to music, too, was uncertain, as there was no top class mentor within reach. Hoping that this problem would get solved, I abandoned engineering in favour of music. The problem did get solved soon when Madhusudan Kanetkar (affectionately called Appa) retired from All India Radio and returned home to Sangli. Like all Jaipur-Atrauli vocalists, he was known to be very selective about accepting students, and had so far accepted none. He heard me and agreed to a trial period of six months. That was 15 years ago. Five years ago he moved to Pune, and, around the same time, I moved to Nashik after my marriage. But, my training continues. While we were in Sangli, I trained with him twice a day for two to three hours in each session. After relocation, either he visits us for a month at a time, or I visit him for three or four days at a time.”

“Learning with Appa was a major transition. I had, by then, studied music for almost 13 years. My basics were sound, but I had no clue about stylised singing with a stamp of

gharana pedigree. Within a month of starting lessons, I was totally lost. I had unlearnt what I knew earlier, and was struggling for a grip over what I was now being taught. One day, I broke down before Appa. He said that my learning would now begin since I realised I knew nothing. He was right. After that, my music sorted itself out quite fast.”

“Appa is an unorthodox teacher. He believes that I have to sing my own music in my own voice. He merely wishes to give me an approach, which must inevitably wither away as my musical vision takes over. He never insists that my music be exactly like his, or even conform to the orthodox Jaipur-Atrauli style. He insists I study the great vocalists of all gharana-s,

observe their special features, and adopt what I like. He encourages me to sing many raga-s, which are not sung in our gharana, but are popular today. He locates good bandishes in them, sets them to our style, and teaches me how to handle them. He does the same for raga-s performed in our gharana, but for which drut bandishes were not composed in his time. He does not give any importance to a musician being able to sing a hundred raga-s. What is important to him is that a raga’s boundaries, and the frame of a bandish, be treated as sacred. His training emphasises the spirit of the raga-s and bandishes, so that I may capture their musical potential in rendition.”

“Even my semi-classical repertoire has been developed under Appa’s guidance. He believes that I should remain actively involved with light music because that will add to the emotional richness to my classical renditions. I was interested in tappa-s. So, he compiled a repertoire for me, and taught me how to handle each bandish. I loved natya-sangeet. So, he studied that genre, and guides me on rendition. He has also studied and taught me thumri-s. But, I have performed them only on a limited scale because I am not yet entirely comfortable with the genre. Holding audience interest with unstructured melody, without the support of raga grammar, and at ultra slow tempo, is tougher than it seems. But, I am working on it.”

“I have never felt that

AVINASH PASRICHA



Appa's lack of performing experience is a handicap for me. For one, although he never sings in public, his music in private gatherings is charismatic. Secondly, in his career as a broadcaster, he has interacted closely enough with the greatest musicians of all gharana-s to understand the niceties of relating to audiences and building a career. Yes, I do make occasional mistakes in judging audiences, and deciding what to sing. This cannot be blamed on my guru. This risk is a part of a musician's life, and each musician has to manage it in his own unique way."

"In addition to the obvious aspects of professional risks, there are some inscrutable risks, too. There are some venues where I seem to repeatedly perform well, and others where I feel consistently uninspired. This has nothing to do with the acoustics, or audience profiles, or with anything one can explain. Isn't it the same with temples? Some nondescript temples transport you instantly into a different world, while some magnificent ones leave you cold! Some concert halls seem vibrant with musical energy, while others seem sterile."

"When I observe such patterns, I sympathise with our traditional belief that the performing arts have their own presiding deity or ranga-devata, which has blessed some concert platforms, and frowned upon others — why this should be so, nobody has ever told me, and I have not asked. The notion of 'ranga-devata' helps an artist to come to terms with every risk to the success of a performance that he cannot understand. Once you are in the profession, you perform wherever



Manjiri

you are invited, say your prayers to ranga-devata, calm your nerves, and begin."

"I am often asked how my training in dance helps my career as a vocalist. The obvious aspect of this is my command over the rhythmic element in music. My music guru-s have been saved a lot of effort because of this. The less obvious advantage is my understanding of body language, and what it does for my stage presence. It is not knowledge I can consciously use; but it is there, and it is working. Even though we reach more people today through recordings than concerts, the concert is still the real thing."

Manjiri's repertoire

I base my observations on a study of a CD recorded by Manjiri for India Archive Music, New York, and several concert recordings. The repertoire studied includes khayal-s in Lalita Gauri, Bhinna Shadja, Basant Bahar, Nayaki Kanada, Bhatiyar, Jaunpuri, Suddha Sarang, Bheempalas, Jaitasree,

Savani Kalyan, Sorath, Ahir Bhairav, Alhaiya Bilawal, Ajad Hindol, Malkauns, Suddha Kalyan, Basanti Kedar, tappa-s in Bhairavi and Kafi, and several renditions of natya sangeet and bhajan-s. In addition, I have also attended several of Manjiri's concerts over a period of ten years.

In khayal, she appears to allow an almost equal representation to common raga-s and the patented obtuse raga-s of the Jaipur-Atrauli gharana. However, the presence of esoteric raga-s in her repertoire is considerably larger than recent Jaipur vocalists have adopted. It would therefore appear that

she is willing to risk the discomfort of the laity to earn the esteem of connoisseurs. She does not, however, come through as an elitist either by temperament or by strategy. She is the first vocalist in many years to revive a constituency for the lively tappa genre. She obliges audiences readily with renditions of natya sangeet and bhajan-s. In its totality, Manjiri's repertoire strategy ensures the broad-spectrum appeal required to build a career in music, while retaining its esoteric end as her "positioning" statement.

Manjiri's music

Manjiri is gifted with a mellow feminine voice, which has been trained for very pleasing vocalisation and intonation in 'aakaar'. The timbre of the voice remains uniform through the entire range she handles. However, her occasional difficulty with forays into the lower octave, and sporadic audibility of her breath through the microphones suggest possible neglect of some important

aspects of voice training by her mentors.

Manjiri is a Gwalior nurtured vocalist and a trained Kathak dancer, groomed in the Jaipur-Atrauli style. Her guru, Madhusudan Kanetkar, studied orthodox Jaipur-Atrauli vocalism for six years with Bhurji Khan, the finest teacher amongst the three sons of Alladiya Khan. In Kanetkar's own words (a private interview with the author), he understood Jaipur-Atrauli vocalism "well enough to teach it, but not well enough to perform it". Thereafter, he spent his entire working life as a producer on All India Radio, during which period he studied a variety of vocal styles, and continued to broadcast as a vocalist, without ever seeking a career on the stage.

No recordings of Kanetkar's music are available as a reference point for Manjiri's music. On the evidence of Manjiri's account of her tutelage, her music, and the context, however, certain observations can be made about her musical inclinations.

Manjiri definitely does not belong to the Kishori Amonkar stream of Neo-Jaipur vocalism. However, if Kesarbai, Lakshmibai, and Dhondutai are the yardsticks for establishing orthodox Jaipur vocalism, Manjiri does not fit into their stylistic category either. Her second guru, Kanetkar, probably sang in the orthodox Jaipur style. We do not know. But, considering the context of his musicianship, his approach to grooming Manjiri, and the generational gap between him and Manjiri (almost 60 years), it was inevitable that Manjiri's music



Guru Madhusudan Kanetkar

should defy classification under either of the known Jaipur streams.

Manjiri is not a simple case of a Gwalior style musician migrating to Jaipur-Atrauli. She is a Kathak dancer *and* a Gwalior trained musician who migrated to Jaipur-Atrauli. Her route to musicianship is stylistically significant. It tilts the balance of her music in favour of the rhythmic element. As a result, her interpretation of Jaipur vocalism is too unique to be given a label. We must therefore be satisfied with calling it a modern interpretation of orthodox Jaipur-Atrauli vocalism.

Manjiri's handling of melodic contours is faithful to the Jaipur-Atrauli style, with explicit intonations relating to the rhythmic cycle in fractions of beats, rather than synchronous to them. The contours of her phrasing do, however, have a mild angularity, which is

dynamic (driven by volume and timbre) rather than melodic. She tends to emphasise the first swara-s of phrases, creating the suggestion of a pulsation even in slow tempo anarhythmic movements.

From the movements of her hands when she performs on the stage, I infer that this appealing suggestion of rhythmicity could be a choreographic metaphor, transposed from her training as a dancer. As a result, the subtlety of the relationship between melody and rhythm typical of Jaipur-Atrauli has been mildly diluted. Considering that no Jaipur vocalist below 50 has been able to

maintain this subtlety, it could also be a generational issue. In any event, Manjiri's enhanced rhythmic sensibility is not pronounced enough to exclude her totally from the Jaipur-Atrauli legacy.

Manjiri's melodic sculpture is austere and consistent with orthodox Jaipur vocalism. She deploys only meend, gamaka and khatka for intervallic transitions. The ornate kan and murki type of embellishments are absent from her music. If there is a perceptible vivacity in her music, it comes from the hint of rhythmicity discussed above.

Manjiri's temporal approach is consistent with Jaipur-Atrauli stylistics. Her music is faithful to the linearity of khayal architecture. However, she is prone to rendering alap-s of 25/30 minutes in bada/vilambit khayal-s of 40/50 minutes' duration. Such alap-s often fail to hold interest after the first 10 minutes. This phenomenon — not conspicuous in her madhya laya

MAIN FEATURE

khayal-s, generally of much shorter duration — points towards an uncertain grip over architecture, and perhaps also over the melodic potential of the raga-s she performs. These features often deny her bada/vilambit khayal-s the satisfying quality that arises from transparency of architecture and a contemporary compactness.

In tune with contemporary conventions, she routinely performs chhota/drut khayal-s after vilambit khayal-s — a recent addition to the gharana's orthodox stream. Manjiri's chhota/drut khayal bandishes are generally unusual, and often of exceptional compositional quality. Her guru was evidently a treasure-trove of bandishes, and perhaps also a fine composer.

Manjiri's taan-s exhibit a fertile imagination. She seems relatively immune to the contemporary epidemic of symmetric and geometric alankar taan-s. She rarely deploys chhoot taan-s, a Gwalior favourite. Sizzling sapat taan-s are also rare in her renderings. She has mastered the hopping taan-s of the Jaipur style, and deploys them especially for medium-density execution. A majority of her higher density taan-s, delivered in bol as well as aakaar articulation, are of the ladiguthav variety — strings of intricate passages constructed over short melodic spans, with variation of pace and tempo. In many ways, her taan artistry is comparable to that of Vijaya Jadhav-Gatlewar (see *Sruti* 277). Unlike Vijaya, however, Manjiri leaves something to be desired in the "logical" organisation of her material. Architecture again!

Credit is undoubtedly due her second guru, Kanetkar, for the flowering of

Manjiri's musical personality. We cannot, however, devalue her own talent and temperament. For all her youth, she is a musician with a rare composure and command over her creative processes. At the time of writing, her music has already achieved a high level of aesthetic coherence. It is early yet to speak of her style as a personal musical statement. But, considering her unusual trajectory in musicianship, it seems she could

only have been an original musician. Manjiri has come a long way already. And, she is only 36 yet. Indeed, she has some work to do on her voice, the exploration of the melodic potential of raga-s, and the architectural facet of her music, before she ascends to the next level of stature amongst connoisseurs. But, she seems to have enough time to deliver to her promise. ■

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