

A unique voice

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Khayal singer Ranjani Ramachandran, 43, not only has excellent taleem under three wonderful musicians, but has also emerged as one of the most thoughtful and articulate musicians of her generation.

Khayal singer Ranjani Ramachandran's third guru, Ulhas Kashalkar, 63, an exceptional musical mind and equally alluring performer, always told her not to view the gharana as a straightjacket. You must adhere to its foundational ideology, but you still have room to create a unique style, he told his students.

Kashalkar's own gayaki, or personal style of khayal elaboration, demonstrates this lucidly. Structurally, it clearly reflects the style of his guru, Gajananbuwa Joshi, an all-time great musician's musician, whose vocalism incorporated rhythm in a powerful and intricate way and used a meticulously worked-out phrasebased expansion of ragas. But for the application of voice, Kashalkar chose the sweeter and more fluid style of the Kirana gharana — to cite just one of the most easily discernible ways in which he has moulded Gajananbuwa's gayaki.

“A gharana is a living tradition,” Ranjani said earlier this week in a phone interview from Shantiniketan, West Bengal, the institution founded by Rabindranath Tagore where she is an assistant professor of music. “That is why different students of the same guru can sound so different.” Ulhasji, for instance, told her to think about how best to project the rich bell-like voice that she was blessed with.

Certainly, Ranjani's gayaki, while retaining Ulhasji's key principles, is developing in a unique direction, which is what makes her an exciting singer in her generation. This is partly because Ranjani learnt from two other gurus with strong musical personalities: in Pune from Veena Sahasrabuddhe (1948-2016), a leading performer whose music had roots in the Gwalior gharana; and in Kanpur from Veenatai's elder brother, Kashinath Bodas (1935-1995). Music lovers can hear Ranjani this evening at a concert in Pune.

“I have been inspired in different ways by each guru,” Ranjani said. “To cite a few examples — I was inspired by Kashinathji's emotional appeal; the way I vocalise some phrases is reminiscent of Veenatai; and the subtle use of sukshma (fine) laya and my attempt to create a distinct design in every avartan comes from Ulhasji, who drilled his students in this skill.”

Ranjani first trained with Kashinathji while growing up on the campus of IIT Kanpur, where her father, R

Ramachandran, was a physics professor. Ranjani then learnt from Veenatai from 1996 to 2001 while she was doing her BSc in physics in Fergusson College, then an MA in music and finally full-time through a national fellowship scheme. She then went to the Sangeet Reseach Academy in Kolkata, where she trained under Ulhasji until 2006. There, she also learnt several compositions from the great thumri singer Girija Devi, who was another in-house guru.

Ranjani then returned to Pune and did a PhD on the stylistic diversity within the Gwalior gharana, from the Lalit Kala Kendra, under the guidance of Vikas Kashalkar, Ulhasji's elder brother. After finishing her thesis, she joined Shantiniketan in 2013.



Ranjani Ramachandran learnt for five years from Ulhas Kashalkar, one of India's top khayal singers

Besides her excellent taleem, Ranjani is also among the most thoughtful, independent-minded and articulate singers below 50. This could be the result of her upbringing: her constant and early exposure to science, in which questioning and refining existing theories is a central driver of progress; an equally influential mother, Vijaya Ramachandran, who is a leading social activist.

Vijayaji's NGO Apna Skool in Kanpur provides education, food and health services to the children of migrant workers in brick kilns and construction sites. Vijayaji learnt from Kashinathji and his father, and it was she who initiated Ranjani into music.

“[Ranjani is] a musician of great intelligence, sensitivity, and artistry,” wrote Warren Senders, the fine American khayal singer, jazz musician and world music scholar, who lives in Boston, in a post in the comment section of one of the Indian singer's YouTube clips. Senders is also one of the most brilliant theoreticians of music and an incisive writer.

Ranjani's gurus and Gajananbuwa are staple parts of her musical diet, but she also draws upon the art of other maestros. She is especially attracted to Kishori Amonkar, Kumar Gandharva, Kesarbai Kerkar and Mallikarjun Mansur. “I find that these musicians take the raga in directions that one has not imagined,” she said. “I get a lot of ideas from them.”

Ranjani is among those musicians who combines a steady performing career with an academic position that entails doing research and teaching. She sees these roles as mutually reinforcing. “One person can perform the multiple roles of performer, pedagogue and researcher,” she said.

“The gap between musicologists and performing musicians is widening in Hindustani music,” she added. “But every practising musician and student also thinks and theorises about his or her music. The scholar Ashok Ranade pointed out that even illiterate performers have done so through the centuries. On the other side, red-tapism needs to disappear to make institutions dynamic. We must make institutions prominent

centres of excellence for research and performance.”

Given the nuances in Indian classical music’s melody and rhythm, most experts believe it is best taught through an oral tradition and the guru-shishya parampara, not at large institutions, which have not been good at producing performers despite training hordes of students for decades.

One option is to fund individual gurus who have been successful at producing performers on their own. But to preserve this music in the long run, perhaps such gurus can benefit from the infrastructure and intellectual life that institutions can potentially provide. We must, therefore, drastically overhaul these centres or set up fresh ones.