

HINDUSTANI MUSIC

Imagination is key

The khayal style which is versatile and highly imaginative, has grown out of diverse musical traditions.

By Priya Purushothaman

Last week we were revelling in the halcyon days of the Mughal Empire under which the arts flourished and the great Miyan Tansen became a legendary musician and composer. As one of the most instrumental figures in the history of Hindustani music, Tansen is known for his almost mystical musical genius, for the volumes of drupads he composed, and for the new raags he introduced.

While the drupad was the predominant style during this period, another reactionary style was slowly evolving, known as the khayal. We have discussed the khayal briefly earlier – literally meaning "imagination," the khayal was born out of the exchange of Persian and Arabic ideas with the Indian tradition during the Mughal period. It can be seen as reactionary to the drupad because it gives the artist greater improvisatory freedom. Within four to eight lines of composed verse, the musician has the liberty to improvise within the boundaries of the melodic scale (raag) and rhythm cycle (taal).

Compared to the drupad, there are many more acceptable ways in which the improvisation can occur – the artist can use the words of the composition, or she can use phonetics of vowel sounds. She can create patterns in which the notes are pronounced (known as sargams); she can sing rapid note patterns using words or phonetics (boltaan and tann, respectively). In the drupad format, the artist does not have such a wide variety of options – the emphasis on the structure of the composition is greater, whereas in the khayal style, the emphasis is on how the artist improvises upon the composition. Some historians

claim that the poet and composer Amir Khusro was the founder of the khayal, but it seems that no one person can be credited as its source. The khayal gradually took shape over the course of many years under various musicians.

The first documented patron of the khayal style is the Mughal Emperor Muhammad Shah Rangile. He was known to be a generous patron of the arts – it was in his court that the prolific khayal composers Niyamat Khan and Firoz Khan produced the large corpus of traditional compositions that has been passed on through generations of singers. They are known more commonly by their pen names, Sadarang and Adarang, respectively.

With the eventual dissolution of the Mughal Empire, musical patronage was left to the succeeding princely kingdoms throughout the country. The khayal genre was supported through generations of such kingdoms – this patronage was critical to its development and sustainability. In the pockets of these various princely states, musicians became more specialised and developed distinct stylistic features, and the idea of the "gharana" took shape. A gharana is a specific stylistic approach to Hindustani music that was originally passed on within the lineage of a single family. The gharanas often took the names of the princely state in which they originated – hence, some of the prominent gharanas to date are Gawlior, Agra, Rampur and Patiala.

In its purest form, a gharana involves the direct passing of musical knowledge from generation to generation within a family, ensuring the preservation of the style. In reality, it became difficult to rely exclusively on family to continue the tradition, and the system extended to able disciples outside of the lineage to carry it forward.

It is no surprise, then, that the khayal style is known for its versatility and highly imaginative format. It has grown out of diverse musical traditions, followed by increased stylistic variety due to the changing political climate of India. Today, the khayal is the style of Hindustani music that is most widely performed.

