

Ustad Vilayat Ali

Khan dead

By Jawed Naqvi

NEW DELHI, March 14: Sitar maestro Ustad Vilayat Khan, who ruled the world of Indian classical music as a widely adulated monarch for more than five decades, died in Mumbai on Saturday after a brief bout of lung cancer. He was 76.

His close associates and family members said the end came at the Jaslok Hospital in Mumbai and was peaceful.

This reporter heard Ustad Vilayat Khan in Amritsar on Dec 5, 2003, when he had to inexplicably leave the stage briefly but returned soon to continue the



concert. His right index finger, used for wearing the painfully hard wire plectrum or *mizrab*, bled that evening and he remarked: "*Aaj laho kuchh zyada hi bah gaya hai* (Blood has flowed a bit excessively today)". But he carried on singing and playing. His last public concert was a duet with the ageing Shehnai wizard Ustad Bismillah Khan on Dec 27 in Kolkota, when they played Raag Yaman, an evening melody.

Music critic Gowri Ramnarayan recalls how, when he was only 11, Vilayat Khan, with his tousled hair and crumpled clothes had come to Delhi from Kolkota to meet Mr Z.A Bokhari, the director-general of the All India Radio (AIR).

"I am Vilayat Khan, son of the late Inayat Khan Sahib," he had said proudly, suppressing his sobs. "If you try to send me back, I'll run away again."

not been able to play as perfectly as he did. Perhaps that's why I had to make my own style."

His veneer of simple contentment hid an unpredictable temper, an artiste's ego, creative frenzy, eccentricity, and an astonishing range of interests.

Visitors would be stunned by his collection of guns, pipes from England, China and Japan, crockery from the Czar's and the Kaiser's tables, iridescent cut-glass from Venice, Turkey and Bohemia, chandeliers painstakingly assembled by the Ustad himself. In his younger days, he had been an accomplished billiards player, horseman, swimmer and ballroom dancer.

The Ustad was consistently opposed to any fusion of Indian and Western music because of the fundamental difference in their approach to tone. One is harmonic, the other melodic. "On the piano you can play the Moonlight Sonata and on the sitar you can play raga *Chandni Kedara*. Don't mix them up," he would say.

Paying an emotional tribute to Vilayat Khan on Sunday, his lifelong rival sitar guru Pandit Ravi Shankar said: "He was truly a great artiste. We will sorely miss him."

Those who saw their rivalry exploding into the public arena recall how during a national concert in 1950, Ustad Vilayat Khan and Pandit Ravi Shankar played a duet at the famed Red Fort.

Ustad Allaudin Khan late, doyen of the Maihar Gharana of musicians and Ravi Shankar's teacher (and later father-in-law) was watching. At one point as they approached the fast paced crescendo, Ravi Shankar broke the main string of his sitar.

Allaudin Khan slapped him, but also hurled a few expletives at the young Vilayat Khan, who heard him out with humility.

Those misunderstood essays were the beginning of Vilayat Khan's unique contribution to Indian classical music, the style of sitar playing now called *Vilayatkhaani Baaj*. This is the *gayaki ang* or fully-fledged vocal

Mr Bokhari, who was later to head Radio Pakistan, decided to care for the fatherless child, to nurture and enrich his musical talent.

After all, young Vilayat Khan was the scion of the Ittawa Gharana whose stalwarts traced their line back to Tansen of Emperor Akbar's court.

Mr Bokhari not only provided shelter, clearing a garage for the child's quarter, but also engaged him as an AIR artiste at Rs 10 a month.

This was after he answered the question, "Can you play the sitar you are carrying around?", with an immediate burst of Raag Bhairavi. Staff members gathered to listen. Senior sitarist Hyder Husain Khan of Jaipur Gharana exclaimed: "Arey! Inayat Khan is still alive. Here, in this boy."

Father Inayat Khan had died too early to have trained son Vilayat (born 1928), though the child had learnt enough to accompany him on the stage. But the father left a fire, constantly stoked by mother Bashiren Begum, daughter of a family of eminent vocalists in Saharanpur and Nahaan.

In the evening of his life, Ustad Vilayat Khan loved to indulge in the virtual reality of memories, of a past which anchored his growth, inspired his creative departures. "Too much tradition makes for dead wood. But I don't want so much progress as to lose my identity," he would say and laugh.

The Ustad said once: "Only (the legendary vocalist) Khan Sahib Abdul Karim Khan was my father's equal in *laydari* (rhythm) and *surilapan* (sweetness). I've

style, which he innovated, perfected and passed on to a school of disciples.

He wrought a total change in the dimension and impact of the music by modifying the base, frets, bridge and strings of the sitar. Only then could it handle the tremendous power of the right hand strokes, the long intricate oscillations, the lyrical fluidity, the *ititarkis* of *khyal* as well as the *thuniri*, exactly as the voice produced them. In short he gave a new direction to north Indian music.

He once told this correspondent that it was nearly impossible to pick up his intricate style of stroking the sitar if he did not verbally explain the nuances. "You can put a dozen TV cameras on my *mizrab*, but until I tell you with my mouth what I am doing, no slow motion replay is going to be of any use."

He decried showy drumming for the same reason. "All this *sawaljawab razzmatazz* which Ravi Shankar introduced, why, the sitarist performs, the drummer performs, even the audience performs! (Tabla players) Alla Rhakhaji and Zakir Husain dare not do it with me. If anyone tries tricks, I make him sweat. Once Kumar Bose said that playing *tabla* for me was death. He could not give the beat for a simple gat I played in *teen taal*!"

Ustad Vilayat Khan is survived by a son, Ustad Shujaat Khan, accomplished sitar player. One of his two daughters is a popular singer of *ghazal* and *thumri*, while his brother Ustad Imrat Khan is the last remaining great player of the *Surbahaar*, a heavier, more resonant version of the sitar.