

Ustad Vilayat Ali Khan

Forever silent

Art
Dawud
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Arguably the sweetest of all stringed instruments, the sitar has seen a lot of development in its playing technique and in the instrument itself. Bringing most of the changes was one of the two greatest sitarists of our times, Ustad Vilayat Ali Khan (the other being Pandit Ravi Shankar), who died a fortnight ago in Mumbai after late detection of throat cancer. Khan saheb, as he was affectionately called, was buried in Kolkata, the city he lived in when he was not in his second home in New Jersey, USA.

There are two versions about his year of birth, some people insist that he was born in 1924, others claim Vilayat Khan was born in 1928. In those days births were not recorded, particularly in places like Ghouripur (now in

brilliant presentations. In the latter part of his career, he started to sing some phrases to help the audience understand what he was playing.

Some sitar buffs compare Ustad Vilayat Khan with Pandit Ravi Shankar, but that is unfair to both. It is like comparing an apple with an orange. The Ustad, being a purist, concentrated on his sitar, as he didn't approve of fusion with Western music. "How can the two come together," he would say, "western music is harmonic ours is melodic." But Ravi Shankar, like Zakir Husain, didn't believe in the Kiplingian thought of east being east and west being west. The Pandit believes that the twain can and should meet. He was, and still is, a musician of the world, so to speak. The rivalry between the two sim-

Rs600,000 for each concert, but what mattered to him more was the quality of listeners. He couldn't accept a non-serious audience. He is known to have returned the amount and packed up one evening, when he found that a part of the audience was not genuinely interested in his music

Bangladesh) where he was born, hence the confusion. His eminent father Ustad Inayat Khan, who was the son of the legendary Ustad Imdad Khan, was his first mentor, but as luck would have it Vilayat Khan was only ten when his father passed away. But two years before the tragedy, Vilayat gave his maiden public performance and did his first recording.

Vilayat's mother Bashiran Begum, who hailed from a family of eminent vocalists, took charge of her son's training after her husband's death. She helped him in shaping his musical thinking and sang phrases to remind him of the nuances of a particular raga, during his *riyaz*.

It goes to the credit of Ustad Vilayat Khan that he evolved the *gayaki ang* or the singing style. Unlike Pandit Ravi Shankar and his mentor Ustad Allaudin Khan who played the sitar like an instrument, Vilayat Khan made the sitar 'sing' *khayal* (a pure classical form) and *thumri* (semi-classical). Thus there is both lyricism and mellifluousness in his recitals. His style was emulated by many including his nephew Ustad Rais Khan, who now lives in Karachi, his two sons Shujaat and Hidayat, Pandit Arvind Parekh and the young sensation of the present era Shahid Pervez.

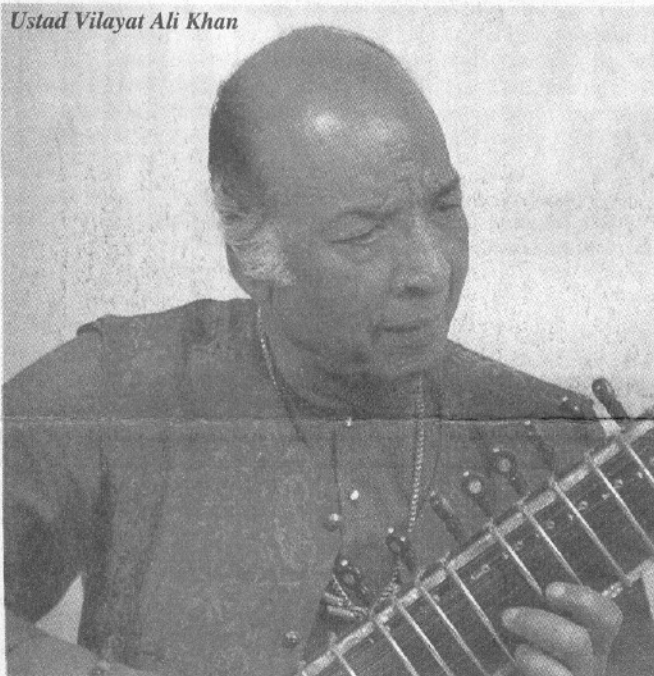
Even in his twilight years Ustad Vilayat Khan mesmerised his listeners with his

mered, but when Vilayat Khan called it a day, Ravi Shankar paid him undiluted tributes: "He was truly a great artist. We will sorely miss him."

The Indian government, not too long ago, decided to award him Padma Bhushan, but Vilayat Khan refused to accept the honour. Some of his peers such as Ustad Bismillah Khan and Pandit Ravi Shankar were given the top award called Bharat Ratna, and Vilayat's contribution to classical music was no less than either of them.

While Pandit Ravi Shankar and Ustad Ali Akbar Khan, the great sarod player, may have popularised our music in the West, Vilayat Khan was among those who introduced the musical instrument to the West. This was acknowledged by no less a person than his country's prime minister. Paying tributes to the scintillating sitarist, Mr A.B. Vajpayee said "Vilayat Khan was a child prodigy to whom goes the credit of taking the sitar beyond the shores of the country."

Not many people, at least in our part of the subcontinent, will remember that when Satyajit Ray was making *Jalsagar* (*The Music Room*), he could think of no one other than Vilayat Khan to compose the music, even though Ravi Shankar had written the



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Ustad Vilayat Khan demanded and was paid

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