

The tabla nawaz

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Ustad Alla Rakha, the tabla maestro, died in February 2000. He had remained fairly active till his last days - his tabla filled many silences, whether he was on or off the concert platform.

Ustad Alla Rakha's ever-present (and never pasted) smile in a way told a double-story: one was about his own delightful adventure with the tabla, and the other of the triumphant march of an instrument which was not as highly regarded two centuries ago as it is today. The prestige any musical instrument acquires depends on two factors: its associations and secondly its own performing capacity. Unlike the pakhawaj/mridang, tabla did not enjoy sacred associations. It had no place in the hallowed Shiva and tandava-dance mythology. Tabla was mainly associated with recreational music-making and specifically with the dancing of professional women, 'the nautch-girls', as the British described them. I do not understand why Parvati's association with lasya - the delicate element in dance - was not invoked to sanctify these 'dancing women'. Tabla needed telling of the second story - that of its inherent competence as compared to the pakhawaj. Ustad Alla Rakha was one important co-narrator in this collective venture.

As Ustad Alla Rakha grew in stature as an instrumentalist, the instrument also grew with him. I heard him in dingy basements as well as in posh auditoria - he and his playing was always at ease. He was a person who preferred learning as he went along. For example, he took the risk of extempore performance when instrumentalists around him were producing heavily pre-composed music. In a unique 'double' jugalbandi (which I heard in Marwadi Vidyalaya in Girgaum) he and Pt Kishan Maharaj were accompanying Pt Gajananrao Joshi (violin) and Pt Ravi Shankar (sitar). Both the main artists revelled in complex rhythm work. The audience, consisting of many eminent musicians, keenly followed which artist responded to what musical stimuli and how. After all this was a veritable musical debate between specialists! Tihai - thrice repeated tonal/rhythmic pattern before coming to the concluding sam of the tala - predominated. While Pt Kishan Maharaj reeled off dazzling tihai, Sitara Devi, the famous dancer, raised her hand and said aloud, "He is playing all dance." Ustad Alla Rakha, on the other hand, composed tihai on the spot and played - even at the risk of

falling short of a perfected expression! His approach was the same when he accompanied Ustad Allaiddin Khan with Ustad Ali Akbar and Pt Ravi Shankar playing with their Guru! It is clear that Ustad Alla Rakha went – on experimenting and learning and thus was able to turn his hunches into theories, which finally transformed a '*Punjab ang*' in tabla-music into a full-fledged Punjab gharana. It is indeed an achievement.

His sun-drenched musical sensibility was a result of many things. Firstly, because he came from Punjab - a region which likes being 'earthy'. Secondly, he enthusiastically worked in genres of dance-music, theatre music and film music before centering on art music. It is overlooked that he composed music for at least 40 Hindi and three Punjabi films. If his film music is analysed it will bear out that he was successfully coming out of the Lahore gharana of Hindi film music, well established mainly due to the work of Ghulam Haider, the ace film composer. Finally, he was not afraid of globalisation of, and in, music. For him musically 'foreign' flavours were not imported cultural invasions. Once I asked him "Do you know how to play nagara?" "We used to play it and enjoy it very much," he answered with a glimmer in his eyes while nostalgically speaking of festivities in Punjab villages. Mind you, he did not say "I used to play and it was beautiful."
