Interview Transcript 2: Shashwati Mandal

Interviewed by Ravindra Parchure, in Hindi, at Yale-NUS College Black Box (April 15, 2018)

Ravindra: *Namaskar* (Greetings). Today, we are here at Yale-NUS College, and we would like to know about your *gayaki* (singing style), your study of music, your *gharana* (musical lineage), and about the specific *ragas* you have presented, which we will discuss a little now.

Shashwati: Yes, indeed.

Ravindra: The concept of a distinctive *gharana* musical style, and the distinctiveness of each *gharana* is important. You are a representative of the *Gwalior gharana*. We would like to know more about the distinctive features of this *gharana* and your own thoughts about this *gharana*.

(*Gharana*)

Shashwati: My view regarding the concept of *gharana* is of a legacy of the times in which *gharana* identities have become a little blurred, and my views have developed in this context. As for the *taleem* (tutelage) I received in the *Gwalior gharana*, my gurus were quite responsive to the good qualities of other *gharanas*. They did not stop me learning about other *gharanas*. They gave me the freedom to respond to attractive features in other *gharanas*. If I liked the *bandishes* (compositions) of other *gharanas*, I could take them.

(Training)

My training was indeed in the *Gwalior gharana*, with an emphasis on the *bandish*. The form of the *raga* is revealed primarily though the *bandish*. But what happens is that – as with the globalisation of which one gets to hear a lot these days (in which isolation is difficult) – to keep oneself confined to a single *gharana* is difficult and I don't think it is desirable. It is nice that each *gharana* has its own identity and its unique features, and to sing within a *gharana* gives one's performances a special quality. But to tie oneself to the *gayaki* (performance style) of just one *gharana* would merely limit one's development: that is what I think.

There can be a lot to one's singing that is derived from other *gharanas*. One can add to one's *gayaki* through such eclecticism. To stick to only one *gharana* style as its representative is not my

preference. I believe that music comes first; *gharana*, second. That the music should be good is what matters most. *Gharana* can be a secondary consideration.

And there is one more thing that occurs to me… that when one sticks to the unique features of one *gharana*, there is risk of getting stuck in a rut, of becoming repetitive in one's *cheez* (compositions) and patterns. Constant repetition might indeed reinforce those patterns, but it can also hinder our thought-processes. And when we stop thinking, our creativity comes to an end. We remain repetitive; without new ideas and without one's own identity. Nor will we dare to experiment and try out new ideas, and even if some of them do not work out, we continue to explore other ideas.

In any case, *taleem* (training) in any one *gharana* style is essential in the early stage of development so that one has a firm foundation. With that in place, it is possible to select things from other *gharanas*. One clear foundational *shaili* (style) is needed, even if one is not going to be confined solely to that.

Ravindra: Talking of *shaili* (style), what are the distinguishing features of the *Gwalior gharana*? Could you tell us what you learnt from your gurus that is specific to the *Gwalior gharana*?

(Distinctive features of the *Gwalior gharana*)

(Tempo)

Shashwati: The *laya* (tempo) of the *vilambit* (slow part) *bandish* (composition) tends to be brisk, and the reason for that strikes me as quite logical. When you use some lines of verse in our singing, it has its own *bhava* (mood, expressive quality), and if we pull and stretch at the *laya* (tempo), then the meaning of the verse is not understood. Also, each *taal* (rhythmic beat on the tabla) has its own characteristics, and that can feel broken up. The *laya* (tempo) used currently is brisk; and was created with thought and care in its original aspect… and I like it very much.

It often happens, in *ragas* which require *vistaar* (expansive presentation), when we adopt a quick tempo in such *ragas*, then the negative consequence of that is that because the entire performance proceeds via the *bandish*, the expansive development needed by such *ragas* is not possible. Thus, there are difficulties as well as some positives to this approach. But I do like a relatively brisk tempo and adopt that in my singing. I am more flexible with serious materials and this was one matter in which my gurus were never rigid. The resulting *gayaki* (style) is alert to the selection of *raga* and *bandish*, and the *bhava* (emotional content) to be presented, and for how long. That is how we establish the *laya* (tempo) for the performance. This is one important characteristic of the *Gwalior gharana*. There is great flexibility about the *laya* (tempo). There are some *bandishes* in which the tempo is like this: (illustrates).

The slow and fast tempos are illustrated with tabla *bol* (syllables). We find this flexibility in our traditional *gharana bandishes*. Therefore, *laya* (tempo) can be described as characteristic of my *gharana*. Adopting the singing to what the *bandish* requires is another characteristic. If, for example, the *sam* (1st beat of the rhythmic cycle) is placed in the upper octave, we won't do much *vistaar* (development) in the lower octave. Some singers do that, but I won't criticise them, beyond saying that in the *Gwalior gharana*, the *vistaar* (development) is done to suit the *bandish*. The point is to explore and reveal various facets of the *bandish*.

(The use of words in singing)

The third feature of the *gharana* is the use of *bol* (how words are sung). The words of the *bandish* must be sung – not like clothes hanging from pegs, but – with full understanding of the needs of the *bandish* and the *raga*. This is logical and appealing to me personally. Next, it is important to be selective about what is done in presenting a *raga*. For example, *Malkauns* requires an extensive use of *meend* (elongated notes), but much less of *khatka* (abruptly sung notes) or *murki* (light, fast embellishments). Whereas in *Marwa*, there will be much less use of *meend* (elongated notes). In *Marwa*, the notes are straight and direct, not elongated. These are specific considerations that matter. In some cases, the notes change with each *raga*, but the *gayaki* (style of singing) remains the same. That is not how it is in the *Gwalior gharana*. *Raga* development has to match the nature and temperament of the *raga*. This is an important consideration to which I subscribe. *Meend*, *gamak*, *khatka*, *murki* (various technical aspects of vocalisation)… various types of *taan* (rapid, oscillating note-sequences)… along with various tempo changes to *taans*, all these add up to what is characteristic of the *Gwalior gharana* style. That is why it is called an *ashtanga* (8-limbed, multifaceted) *gayaki* (singing style).

Ravindra: Yes, yes.

Shashwati: We say that because every technical feature of singing is incorporated in this style.

Ravindra: Yes, and *Gwalior* is acknowledged to be the oldest of the *gharanas*.

Shaswati: From these eight facets, some that were liked especially were selected and then used in developing the various other *gharanas*. In a given *gharana*, that particular feature or aspect is well-developed. That is how the variety among the different *gharanas* has resulted. Whereas the *Gwalior gayaki* (style) is described as balanced because in it one can find all the *anga* (limbs, facets, elements) of singing.

Ravindra: You have spoken well on this topic. My next question is about the three *ragas* that are the focus of this project. These ragas are sung in all the *gharanas*. From among these, I would like to

learn from you about *raga Malkauns*. What is the unique *bhava* (emotive and expressive quality) of this *raga*?

Shaswati: The *bhava* (expressive content) is conveyed through the *bandish* (composition).

Ravindra: But what do the notes of the *raga* convey? We would like to know that from you.

Shashwati: It is difficult to balance the *bhava* (expressivity) of the *raga* and of the *bandish*. Perhaps this balancing is more straightforward in *dhrupad* than in *khyal*, because *vistaar* (development) is of the *raga*, not of the *bandish* (composition). The performance develops through the *bhava* (expressive content) of the *raga*'s structure, and in that, the *bandish* too has to be managed. If the *bandish* is: "Krishna, Madhav, Rama" (as in *Malkauns*), then it brings in *bhakti* (devotion) and *shanti* (tranquility) into the *raga*. But the other *bandish* which I sang: *ankhiyan taras rahi* (my eyes thirsted for…), it has a feeling of *viraha* (grief). And the *raga* was sung with that too in mind. But if the *raga* also has elements of playful bickering, then how to balance those elements as well presents quite a difficult challenge. *Darbari* has the *bandish*: "Anokha ladla" (referring to the mischievous child Krishna). How is one to balance that (with the *raga* structure)? This is difficult. Perhaps it has been managed by our most accomplished vocalists. But I have not yet reached that level of accomplishment.

Ravindra: OK, but what do you think is the basic *bhava* (expressive aspect) of *raga Malkauns*? Is it primarily *gambhir* (of a grave and serious disposition)? Does it convey *bhakti rasa* (devotion)? *Viraha* (grief)? If one wishes to characterise it in some way, then how might that be done?

Shashwati: It can convey all those: *bhakti* (devotion), *viraha* (sorrow), *gambhir* (seriousness) Consider the *bandish* "Pir na jani" (secular), or "Krishna, Madhav, Rama" (religious): such *bandishes* tell us what the *bhava* (emotive quality) should be. But what is not possible to convey is coy playfulness. That is not within the compass of this *raga* (*Malkauns*).

[The same notes in three *ragas*: the differences between *Marwa*, *Puriya*, and *Sohini*]

Ravindra: We have some *ragas* which share the same notes. *Marwa*, *Puriya* and *Sohoni* have the same notes, but each conveys a very different and distinctive *bhava* (expressive content). How might we differentiate between *Marwa*, *Puriya*, and *Sohoni*? What are the main differences between them?

Shashwati: What I have understood of *raga Marwa* is that originally it used to be sung in the middle and upper octaves. Afterwards the focus shifted towards the lower octave. It is said that *Puriya* is sung in the lower and middle octaves, whereas *Sohoni* is an *uttarang-pradhan* (predominantly upper-octave) *raga*. Though the note are the same, they differ on the basis of how *nyaas*

(emphasised note patterns) and *shrutis* (micro-tones) are handled in each. *Dha* and *Re* are the chief notes in *Marwa*. We dwell a lot on them (*nyaas*) in singing. Also, its notes are *chadhe huye* (raised, ascending) and *khade* (clear, bold).

[*Raga Puriya*]

Meanwhile, *Puriya* is sung mostly in the lower and middle octaves, and we dwell more on (do *nyaas* on) the notes *Ga* and *Ni*. There is a curved element in how it is sung.

Ravindra: What should I call it? A roundness to the notes…

Shashwati: Much more so than in *Marwa*. And the *shrutis* (micro-tones) around *Ga* and *Ni* are… on the lower side, because its *bhava* (expressive content) is suited to the lower and middle octaves.

[*Raga Sohini*]

As for *Sohini*, I don't think I have heard it sung for an extended period by anyone. Because the *chalan* (progression) in *Sohini* is quite quick. It is a *chanchal* (agile, quicksilver in its mood-changes) type of *raga.* Given its nature, it is sung generally for no more than 10-15 minutes, and if sung for longer periods, it can end up sounding repetitive.

Ravindra: It has a very different *svabhava* (temperament).

Shashwati: It is indeed difficult to keep *Puriya* and *Marwa* distinct from one another. If you are used to singing just *Marwa*, that works out alright, but once you start learning *Puriya*, it becomes difficult to sing *Marwa*. Or vice-versa, if you are familiar with *Puriya*, that by itself is OK, but as soon as you also start learning *Marwa*, it becomes difficult to differentiate between them.

Ravindra: Perhaps if you could demonstrate through brief examples…

Shashwati: Using short phrases to exemplify the differences, I shall illustrate through the medium of the *bandish* (composition) This is *Puriya*…

Loga wa sune… (People will hear…)

Piharawa ghata hi… loga wa sune (Beloved, my anklet tinkling… people will hear)

Piharawa ghata hi mori payal baje re (Beloved, my anklet tinkling for a moment)

B*ichhua ghata khata… loga wa sune* (my toe-ring's sounds… people will hear)

Mohammad Shah piya sada rangile (the ever-joyous and beloved Mohammad Shah)

Tumhari daras bina (thirsting for a glimpse of you)

Prana nita utha bhatakata... loga wa sune (my life ebbs away as I wander listlessly… people will hear)

[Shashwati sings the *sargam* (solfège) of the *raga*]

Ma Ni Re Sa, Ni Dha Ni, Ni Ma Ga Ni, etc…

Shashwati: This is the *bhava* (expressive content) of *Puriya*.

[*Raga Marwa*]

The *Marwa* note-pattern: *Ni Re Ga Ma Dha, Ma Ga Re, Re Ga Dha, Ma Dha, Re Dha, Re Ni Dha Ma Dha, Ma Ni Dha, Ma Ga Re Ni Dha Re Sa*. Naturally, a very different *svabhava* (temperament) is revealed here.

Ravindra: Could we have a demonstration of *Sohoni*, perhaps in the *tappa* or *tappa-khyal* form?

[The *Tappa* form of singing]

Shashwati: Yes, I will sing a *tappa*.

Ravindra: Wonderful! In fact, my next question will be about that: *Tappa* (a very difficult form involving complex oscillations on every sung syllable). A question comes to mind in this context. *Tappa* singing is a very difficult art, and there are very few people today who can sing it well, and you are one of them: you sing *tappa* with great ease. How is *riyaz* (learning/practise) done for this form of singing? The various patterns that occur in *tappa*, how are they learned and practised? Do tell us about those special aspects.

Shashwati: In the beginning, I just practise *paltas* (scales, note-combinations) in *khyal*, similarly, a lot of solid practice has to be done for *tappa*. When I went to study with my guru, he first listened to my singing, and then since it was evident that my *gala* (throat, singing) was well-trained, It was not felt necessary to do a lot of *paltas* (scales and note-combinations). Instead, he taught me the *Pallavi* form from Carnatic (South Indian) classical music. He used to make me practise that: fast… faster… and faster… in that fashion. There is a composition by S. N. Ratanjankar (*Agra gharana*):

[She sings:] G*anesham, He Nam Vande, Shastangam, He Gauri Putram Vighnesham Chadhyam.*

[She sings the same Sanskrit verse, but now oscillates every syllable in *tappa* mode.]

Shashwati: In addition to that, the *bandish* of each *tappa* had to be practised 20-25 times, without pausing on any *avartans* (embellishments) after the *sthayi* (first) of the composition. One moves from the *sthayi* (first part) to the *antara* (second part) and then back. This set of repetitions had to be practised many times, more than 20-30-35 times. Building a solid base with the *bandish* is characteristic of the *Gwalior gharana*. A solid grasp of the *bandish* is always useful in all aspects of singing. The tiny elements and nuances hidden within a *bandish* help one in getting one's *gala* (throat, voice) smooth and confident. Later, one can acquire a sense of the *gharana gayaki*. It is not true, as is believed, that *tappa* is simply a matter of taking long *taans*. *Tappa* has its own kind of *vistaar* (expansive development).

[Shahawati sings an illustrative phrase in *tappa-khyal* form.

Shahawati: *Gwalior* singers were inspired to compose many *tappas*.

[Shashwati demonstrates various *vistaars* with the opening two words ("*tuma to*") of a *bandish.*

Shashwati: Similar *vistaar* is shown exquisitely with the third word – "*saheb*" – of the *bandish*.

[Shashwati demonstrates the same *tappa* treatment for the next syllable.

Shashwati: That is how we can have *vistaar* (expansive development) in the *tappa* form. One can take a long *taan* before reaching the *mukhda* (the opening words of the composition). But the trick is to manage small fast taans linking syllables within a single phrase.

Ravindra: Also, the *laya* (tempo) can change within a taan (fast passage of several notes)…

Shashwati: Yes, that is a known feature of the *Gwalior* style. All the small *taan*-patterns in *tappa* will not necessarily have the same *laya* (tempo). This syllable-by-syllable development is taken forward step by step. Students are taught how to do *badhat* (development, progression) with one note. And the various paths towards that end. That is taught in *tappa*-singing: the various *taan*-patterns to use in progression. One has to learn how to do permutations and combinations of *taan*-patterns. Then, slowly one develops an aesthetic sense about how this is to be done. The *sahajta* (ease, fluency) you spoke of comes only as a result of long practice. Whether in *khyal* or other vocal forms, it is the result of a solid grasp of the basics.

[The *ashtapadi* form]

Ravindra: There is one more *anga* (aspect, feature) of the *Gwalior gayaki*, which is known as *Ashtapadi*. The verse is taken from the *Geet-Govinda* (of the 11th c. poet Jayadeva), and this form is

sung only in the *Gwalior gharana*, and you sing it too. Could I request you to sing an example? How prevalent is the form today? It is my impression that one rarely gets to hear an *ashtapadi* these days.

Shashwati: As far as my knowledge goes, regarding *ashtapadi*, it is not sung in any other *gharana*. *Gwalior* vocalists assimilated many types of verse into their singing. Some *cheez* (compositions) flourished, others did not. Likewise, while the *tappa* style flourished the *thumri* form (light classical, based on romantic topics) did not develop that much. Similarly, *ashtapadi* was assimilated as adding variety to the repertoire of forms, but its verses have 8 or 12 or 16 lines. These work well as poetic constructs, but with less attention to how they will fare as words to be sung. That is why it is difficult to add novelty to its set pattern of verses, and it could not develop as a form, nor acquire popularity.

Ravindra: Since they are all composed in Sanskrit, most listeners might not understand them.

Shashwati: That too may explain its relative obscurity. Yes, true. In fact, the meaning of some of the *ashtapadi* I have learnt are none too clear to me. his problem also affected the *tappa* form. The language in which most *tappas* are composed is Punjabi. Gulam Nabi (aka Shori Miyan) developed the form (in the latter half of the 18th century). Later, with additions from Hindi and Awadhi (dialect of Hindi), the language of the *tappa* form became difficult for Maharashtrians speaking Marathi. And since the transmission of music was done in an oral tradition, the words of *tappa* compositions were misunderstood, or not understood at all. The result is a diversity of delightful *tappas*, whose sense is not always clear. The same can be seem in the fate of the *ashtapadi* form. What the Sanskrit means can become a matter of research.

Ravindra: Will you be able to give us a small example of *ashtapadi*?

[Shashwati demonstrates *ashtapadi* (in Sanskrit). *Priye Charushilay, Radhe Priye Charushilay… Radhe Munja Mahimana Mahila, Priye Charushilay Radhe]*

Ravindra: Wonderful! We are very grateful, Shashwatiji… Our best wishes to you, and thanks.

Shashwati: *Dhanyavaad* (Thank you).