

Pandit Bhimsen Joshi Voice of India

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Pandit Bhimsen Joshi

Amongst 20th century giants of vocalism, Pandit Bhimsen Joshi (born 1922) enjoys the rarest combination of popularity and stature. He has charmed three generations of music lovers with his awesome renditions of khayal, thumri, and bhajan-s in Hindi, Kannada, and Marathi. According to reliable estimates, he has probably delivered more than 10,000 concerts during his career spanning six decades, and recorded over a 100 discs. He is also the only Hindustani classical vocalist to have earned the Platinum Disc of the Gramophone Company of India (HMV).

Joshi is acclaimed as an exponent of the Kairana

gharana of khayal vocalism, having trained under Sawai Gandharva, the tallest disciple of Ustad Abdul Kareem Khan. ('Kairana' is the name of the village from where the gharana founders hailed, and the name by which the gharana is known. Unfortunately, the word 'Kirana' has come into circulation as the name of the gharana.) He is, however, a reformer of the gharana's music, and the initiator of an original and modern style, incorporating the features of several other stylistic traditions. This explains the influence he wields over younger generations of audiences and male vocalists.

The Bharat Ratna, to be conferred on him, is the crowning glory of an illustrious career. Panditji is already amongst the most decorated musicians of the country. Amongst his major awards are: Ustad Enayet Khan Foundation Award (2002), Padma Vibhushan (1999), HMV Platinum Disc (1986), Padma Bhushan (1985), central Sangeet Natak Akademi Award (1976), and Padma Shri (1972).

Childhood and grooming

Joshi is amongst the most distinguished products of the vibrant bi-lingual Northern Karnataka musical culture. He was born into a Kannada-speaking, Madhva Brahmin family of keertankar-s, hailing from Gadag in Dharwad district. His grandfather, Bhimacharya, was a keertankar. His father, Gururaj Joshi, was the Headmaster of a municipal school, and a scholar of Sanskrit, English and Kannada. Gururaj hired local teachers to coach Bhimsen privately in music as well as Sanskrit, while the school took care of his formal education. He wanted him to qualify as an engineer or a doctor, but, Bhimsen's only passion was music.

To the dismay of his parents, young Bhimsen was often found standing for hours outside a record shop on the path between his school and his home – listening to records of classical and devotional music. The defining moment of his life came when, around the age of 12, he heard a record of Ustad Abdul Kareem Khan, featuring a khayal in raga Basant, and a thumri in raga Jhinjhoti. He decided that he had to be able to sing like the Ustad, and quietly left home one night in search of a guru, with neither baggage nor money in his pocket.