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Ali Akbar Khan, Sarod Virtuoso, Dies at 87

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Ali Akbar Khan playing the sarod in New York in 2002, an instrument with 25 strings.

By WILLIAM GRIMES
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Ali Akbar Khan, the foremost virtuoso of the lutelike sarod, whose dazzling technique and gift for melodic invention, often on display in concert with his brother-in-law [Ravi Shankar](#), helped popularize North Indian classical music in the West, died on Thursday at his home in San Anselmo, Calif. He was 87.

The cause was kidney failure, said a spokesman for the Ali Akbar College of Music.

Mr. Khan, who was named a national treasure by the Indian government in 1989, carried on the musical traditions of his father, Allauddin Khan, whose ashram in East Bengal produced some of India's most celebrated musicians, notably Mr. Shankar, the flutist Pannalal Ghosh and the sitarist Nikhil Banerjee.

Unlike his father, a volatile and uneven performer, Mr. Khan maintained an austere demeanor onstage while coaxing passages of extraordinary intensity from his sarod, an instrument with 25 strings, 10 plucked with a piece of coconut shell while the

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remainder resonate sympathetically.

“He was not as flashy as Ravi Shankar, but he had the ability to play a single note, or a simple passage of notes, and draw out such amazing depth,” said John Schaefer, the host of “New Sounds” and “Soundcheck” on WNYC-FM in New York. “That’s why he was able to get a world of emotion and color out of ‘Malasri,’ which is often called a three-note raga. That, for me, stands as the calling card of the genius of Ali Khan.”

The violinist Yehudi Menuhin, who brought Mr. Khan to the United States in 1955, called him “an absolute genius” and “the greatest musician in the world.”

In 1971, Mr. Khan performed at Madison Square Garden with Mr. Shankar, Alla Rakha and Kamala Chakravarty on a bill with [Bob Dylan](#), [Eric Clapton](#) and other rock stars at the [Concert for Bangladesh](#), a benefit organized by [George Harrison](#) and Mr. Shankar. The album and film of the two performances gave added exposure to Mr. Khan and North Indian music.

Mr. Khan, whose name is often preceded by the honorific Ustad, or master, was born in Shibpur, a small village in Bengal (now Bangladesh). He grew up in Maihar, where his father was the principal musician in the court of the maharajah. He began vocal training at 3 and, after studying the surbahar, sitar and tabla, focused on the sarod.

His father was a stern, sometimes brutal taskmaster, rousing his young son at dawn for several hours of practice before breakfast and continuing well into the evening of what were often 18-hour days. Allauddin Khan had elevated the status of instrumental music, previously regarded as inferior to vocal performance, by synthesizing various regional styles into a modern concert style. His son absorbed his encyclopedic knowledge of North Indian music and eventually outstripped him as an instrumentalist.

Mr. Khan’s younger sister, Annapurna Devi, who later married Mr. Shankar, developed into an equally accomplished master of the surbahar, but custom prevented her from performing in public.

At 13, Mr. Khan performed for a large audience for the first time, at a music conference in the holy city of Allahabad. By his early 20s he was music director of All-India Radio in Lucknow, broadcasting as a solo artist and composing for the radio’s orchestra.

“My father’s main purpose was to hear me play while he was living in Maihar, because I was always being broadcast,” Mr. Khan told Peter Lavezzoli, the author of “The Dawn of Indian Music in the West.” “If I played anything wrong, he would come the next day to Lucknow, straight from the train station, tell me to get my sarod and listen to me play and correct me.”

For part of a series of 78s that he recorded in Lucknow for HMV in 1945, he composed and performed the three-minute [Raga Chandranandan \(“Moonstruck”\)](#), a blend of four evening ragas, which became a national hit and a signature piece for Mr. Khan. He later recorded a 22-minute version for the album “Master Musician of India” on the Connoisseur label.

After a few years Mr. Khan left Lucknow to become the court musician for the maharajah of Jodhpur. He performed, often for hours at a time; gave lessons; and composed for the court orchestra. The post vanished after the maharajah died in a plane crash in 1948, and before long the chaos surrounding independence and partition put an end to the court system, which was already in decline.

Defying his father, Mr. Khan moved to Bombay and began writing scores for films, including Chetan Anand’s “Aandhiyan” (1952), [Satyajit Ray](#)’s “Devi” (1960) and Tapan Sinha’s “Hungry Stones” (1960). His father, a friend of the director of “Hungry Stones,” went to see the film and said: “My goodness, who composed the music? He is great.” On being informed that it was his son, the elder Khan sent a telegram of forgiveness.

By this time the younger Khan had grown frustrated with the limitations of film work and was eager to return to classical music, though he later composed the scores for “The Householder” (1963), the first [Ismail Merchant-James Ivory](#) feature film, and [Bernardo Bertolucci](#)’s “Little

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Buddha” (1993). His collaboration with Ray, in particular, had been less than satisfactory. “Ray was not a connoisseur of Indian classical music,” he told The Times of India in 2008.

Intent on exposing Westerners to Asian music, Menuhin brought Mr. Khan to New York in 1955 for a performance at the Museum of Modern Art, where Mr. Khan made what is believed to be the first long-playing record of Indian classical music in the United States, “Music of India: Morning and Evening Ragas,” for Angel. He scored another first when he performed on [Alistair Cooke](#)’s television program “Omnibus.”

Western interest in Indian music soared after Harrison took up the sitar and Mr. Shankar began touring Europe and the United States. In 1967 Mr. Khan, who had founded a music school in Calcutta in 1956, started the [Ali Akbar College of Music](#), now in San Rafael, Calif., with a satellite school in Basel, Switzerland. “Two or three generations of really fine Indian players — meaning performers of Indian classical music — have come out of that school,” Mr. Schaefer said.

Mr. Khan is survived by his wife, Mary; seven sons, including Aashish, a renowned sarod player; and four daughters. In 1989 he was awarded the Padma Vibhushan, India’s second-highest civilian honor, and in 1991 he became the first Indian musician to receive a [MacArthur Foundation](#) “genius grant.”

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: June 23, 2009

An obituary on Saturday about the sarod virtuoso Ali Akbar Khan misspelled the given name of a son who is also a renowned sarod player. He is Aashish, not Aasish. The obituary also misstated the title of the maharajah at whose court the father of the elder Mr. Khan was the principal musician. He was the maharajah of Maihar, which is in the state of Madhya Pradesh; there was no maharajah of Madhya Pradesh.

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