

## MUSIC

PRABHA ATRE

### Low-Key Virtuoso



Atre: a non-commercial approach

**D**R Prabha Atre, 45, vocalist, is a simple, unassuming person, not given to talking about herself. Watching her go about the modest Mahim flat, worrying about the carpenter not coming in, or the snacks being served right, it is difficult to imagine the same woman on stage at a concert—dignified, even a little aloof, and totally in command of her performance. “She has cultivated her stage stance to perfection,” says one of her students admiringly. “In fact,” says Prabha Atre, “it was Hirabai Barodekar who taught me how to present, how to apply what I had learnt from her brother, Suresh Babu Mane.” Atre would accompany Hirabai on her concerts, and listen to the famous voice mould a raga in her inimitable style. However, it is not only Hirabai’s influence that is discernible in Atre’s music. She has sifted nuances from several Gharanas, particularly those of Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, and Amir Khan. Today she sings with a certain simplicity that, though universally appealing, appears deceptively superficial.

“That is only an illusion,” says D.N. Nerurkar, veteran tabla player, who has often accompanied her. “It is difficult to play with her, because her music has such fine patterns that you have to concentrate to understand them. I think only the discerning can fully enjoy the intricacy of Prabha Atre’s singing.”

**Academic:** Among musicians, however, Atre has never been particularly prominent. One of the reasons could be her association with the SNDT University, where as the head of the department of music, she takes post-graduate classes. For her peers, it is something of a sacrilege that classical music should be bandied around within institutions not devoted exclusively to the performing arts. Atre presumably lacks the talent to perform without institutional support.

This, at least from Atre’s point of view, is very ironic. Her motive in teaching at the university she claims, is essentially to popularise the art. She

feels in a sense, duty bound to “hand on whatever she has received.” Unfortunately, because she is too non-commercial in her approach—a contrast to the softsell that glamorises the same work being done by other artistes, she has to forgo the adulation.

However, Atre has been striving to spread her music to the grass-roots level. “No longer can music stay confined to the private chambers of the initiated elite,” she says. Which is why, while other more popular musicians write books about themselves, have music societies in their names, and

celebrate the anniversaries of their gurus, Atre prefers to spend her time, and her energies singing.

Atre has never made her music exclusive. She has no inhibitions about singing for the Gujarati Stree Mandal at Santa Cruz, or the local club at Vile Parle. And steadily, if a little slowly, her fans have burgeoned. Admittedly, only music lovers attend her recitals. She is not enough of a ‘star’ or a media craze to attract the image-conscious.

Surprisingly, it was the one disc which she has cut for HMV, which sent her rocketing to fame. The music became popular literally overnight and HMV brought out several editions of the LP. Naturally, everyone wanted more, but there was a strange silence from the Atre end. “I had a difference with the organisation,” explains Atre awkwardly, “but soon now, I shall be recording again.”

In any case, if the sales of that record are any indication, Atre is probably doing as much for the promotion of classical music, as any other musician with more slick organisational techniques. “I can’t afford to have my own music conferences,” admits Atre, simply. “Which means that I do not get invited to other conferences by artistes, because it is a question of mutual promotion,” she adds. And that, in a nutshell, is the reason why she has been left behind.

Not that she is complaining. She was enterprising enough to finance herself on an introductory tour of the United States, where opportunity and fame come easier for musicians. Now with vocal music becoming almost as popular as instrumental music, there is no dearth of invitations. And every two years or so, Atre too joins the bandwagon on the trips to the west, to perform, to teach and to absorb from their music.

**Innovative:** In spite of her mild exterior, Atre is fairly unorthodox, “I believe there is no harm in adopting a few things from the west,” she says. “Take their training in voice culture, for instance. I heard some pop music there,” she adds, using the word ‘pop’



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very gingerly, as if it were blasphemous. "I was amazed at the way they can change their tonal techniques to suit the mood of each piece. Here, nobody cares whether the voice is sweet or harsh."

In spite of her apparent amenability in matters of fusion, she maintains that traditional music should be preserved. "It is where you belong, where you want to come back," she says, groping for the right simile. "It is the take-off point for a flight to different directions," she says finally.

Some of her forays have been in the realm of light music. Naturally, she is now a bit reticent about that, and in fact, tries to play it down. "I don't sing light pieces anymore," she says hastily, "otherwise audiences don't want to hear anything else." At one time, though, just after completing her doctorate in music, from the Gandharva Mahavidyalaya in Pune, Atre took up a job at AIR as a producer of light music programmes. "I never knew I would take to a career in serious music at the time," she admits. In fact, Atre has done her law at Pune, with a view to practising at the Bar.

**Accidental:** "Music has come along accidentally into my life," she says. It was for her ailing mother that a diversion was sought with the tuition of music. "She, however, flatly refused to continue with the lessons. Just casually, I took it up. I was twelve then," she recalls. Even then, for Atre, music was more of a hobby. It was only on coming to Bombay with her parents in '66 that Atre felt lured to the highly competitive world of the performing arts. Then too she started out at a disadvantage. She was not entering the front doors of the charmed circle. AIR and a degree in law, add to that a non-musical background—her parents were both in the teaching line—forced her to use the side entrance singing ghazals on AIR, giving recitals for small audiences, Atre groomed herself slowly for the limelight that was to come. Which makes it doubly creditable that she has achieved so much.

Now of course, it is Atre who



Vocalist Atre: dedicated, demanding and brilliant

dictates the terms on what she should sing. "She never compromises on her standard," says her student Tazim. "She is nothing short of a perfectionist." Tazim, who has been studying music under Atre for almost two years, first heard her record in Canada. "I was totally taken," she says, "and I decided then and there that I would come down, look her up, and learn classical music under her." When she finally traced Atre in Bombay, she was surprised to find her so approachable. In fact, she still hasn't got used to it yet. "She is so unlike other musicians I have

known. After a concert, I feel so awed by her performance, that my familiarity with my guru sort of makes me uncomfortable, if you know what I mean," she adds. And that is exactly what constitutes the two faces of Prabha Atre. On the one hand, she is the woman next door, fussing about the home, commuting by local train to Churchgate, and on back-slapping terms with her students. Then, suddenly on another level, there is the teacher, and the artiste—demanding, dedicated, brilliant, and as Parveen Sultana puts it, "great." —Robini Nilekani