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# ‘Privileged to dream’, Qatar girl aims to emerge as a global name in music

**Gayathri Karunakar Menon, a student from Doha, has won the song-writing contest of the prestigious Berklee College of Music for the year 2020**

**F**EW can feel as “privileged to dream” right now as Gayathri Karunakar Menon, the young and talented Doha girl of Indian origin. She has earned the right to dream big. She recently won the ‘2020 Songs for Social Change’ contest held by the renowned Music Conservatory – The Berklee College of Music. It was her lyrics for the song, ‘Privilege to Dream’ that helped her pip contestants from across the globe.

Winning this coveted award means a world to Gayathri, and for obvious reasons. “This song is about our experiences as expatriates. It’s an honour to win this contest among many talented writers, and to have my story heard and acknowledged. It is a sign that our community is open-minded and willing to listen to those with diverse stories,” she told a news portal.

The results of the 10-year-old Berklee’s Songs for Social Change initiative, showed that Menon stood first among 90 shortlisted submissions of original student writings from around the world. Judges for the contest hailed from 16 different countries including the US, Qatar, Australia, England, Hong Kong, India, Macedonia, Norway, Singapore, and Spain.

Berklee is the preeminent institute of contemporary music and performing arts, offering undergraduate and graduate degree programs on its campuses in Boston, Massachusetts and Valencia, Spain, and through its award-winning distance learning program, Berklee Online. Dedicated to nurturing the creative and career potential of the world’s most inspired artists, Berklee’s commitment to arts education is reflected in the work of its students, faculty, and alumni – hundreds of whom have been recognised with Grammy, Tony, Oscar, and Emmy Awards.

Gayathri’s parents moved to Qatar in the 1990s and she is very happy for

the opportunities she got in Qatar, as also the chances her parents gave her to pursue her passion – of music.

Gayathri wants to grow in the world of music and would love to tell her stories in the form of lyrics for popular songs and singers from the West. At present, she is doing her double majors in Songwriting and Contemporary Writing and Production from the Berklee College of Music, Boston, USA.

When asked what motivated her to turn to creative pursuits, rather than the traditional route of tried-and-tested career options, she said, “Apart from multiple musical influences, I am inspired by my dad, and my aunt and uncle, who are musicians themselves. They encouraged me to choose this path.”

Who among the existing set of musicians or solo artists could do perfect justice to her songs? Will she also be singing?

She replied: “I would love to hear the artist H.E.R [American singer and songwriter] perform this song. I have a version of my song on my SoundCloud, but I don’t think I’ll be rerecording another version.”

Gayathri pointed out that she has been writing regularly for about four years now, so she has quite a few songs in her catalogue.

Talking about her school days in Qatar, she said it was around the 9th grade when “I realised that every career option I looked into seemed to be a backup plan for a career in music. My mom encouraged me to go for it and study music because she thought it wasn’t worth spending money on something that I’m not emotionally invested in”.

She added: “I’m currently a senior at Berklee College of Music. This is my final year at Berklee. I am a dual major in Songwriting and Contemporary Writing and Production. I did their

five-week summer program during my final year of school, and auditioned for their degree program. I was accepted with a scholarship, and enrolled in 2017. Berklee has connected me to a lot of wonderful people and given me some great opportunities.”

Her parents and folks back in Qatar take great pride in her achievement. “My parents, friends and extended family are always very supportive of what I do, and they are quite proud. I am very grateful to all of them.”

Has COVID-19 impacted her pursuits?

“I am fortunate to have an extended family in the US, so I have been able to stay with them during the pandemic. Therefore, the pandemic hasn’t impacted me financially. I am very grateful for that. As far as work is concerned, things are slower because we’re all isolating. But I have been doing writing sessions over Zoom on a regular basis. After I finish school, I hope to move to New York and grow as an artist and songwriter.”

“I would love to move to New York next year after I graduate. I hope to apply for my artist visa so I can continue to live here in the US. I would like to build a career as an artist and a songwriter, and write for other artists as well.”

When asked if she saw herself writing songs for Indian films, or for the Western entertainment industry, she said, “Writing is a huge passion for me, and a huge reason for that is my love for the English language. It is how I best express myself. I don’t think I can write in Indian languages as I feel like I wouldn’t be able to do justice to it. So as of now, I see myself working in the West.”

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Gayathri Karunakar Menon

## Rich tributes paid to Ustaad Ameer Khan on his 108th birth anniversary

**W**HEN it comes to the world of music and art, we come across stalwarts who have left an indelible imprint on us. But often the icons are those that create their very own style, adding unique value to the genres they worked in, and defined. Ustaad Ameer Khan was one such figure.

The vocalist, who made an immense contribution to the ‘Indore Gharana’, and is known for popularising the Dhrupad style of gayaki (singing), has inspired a large number of talents who, over the years, have gone on to become big names in the world of music, mesmerising music buffs all over the globe. A firm believer in absorbing elements from various gharanas, Ustaad Ameer Khan’s message was one of unity in diversity – in all spheres of life, of course music included.

Ustaad Ameer Khan, a self-taught musician whose grandfather was a singer in the court of Mughal king Bahadurshah Zafar, developed his own *gayaki* style influencing a plethora of singers and instrumentalists.

He also sang film songs in purely classical style (ragas), including in *Bajju Bawra*, *Shabaab*, *Jhanak Jhanak Payal Baaje* etc., leaving a deep impact on music lovers.

The music icon, who was born on 15th August 1912 in a family of musicians in Indore in India, was the recipient of the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award (in 1967) and the Padma Bhushan (in 1971). His son, Shahbaz Khan, is a well-known actor who, besides acting in Bollywood movies, has also played lead roles in several TV serials.

Rich tributes were paid to Ustaad Ameer Khan on his 108th birth anniversary this Saturday (August 15, 2020). Here are the edited excerpts of some of the reactions that reached *Qatar Tribune*:

**PADMA BHUSHAN PANDIT GOKULOTSAVJI MAHARAJ, Classical singer of Hindustani music**

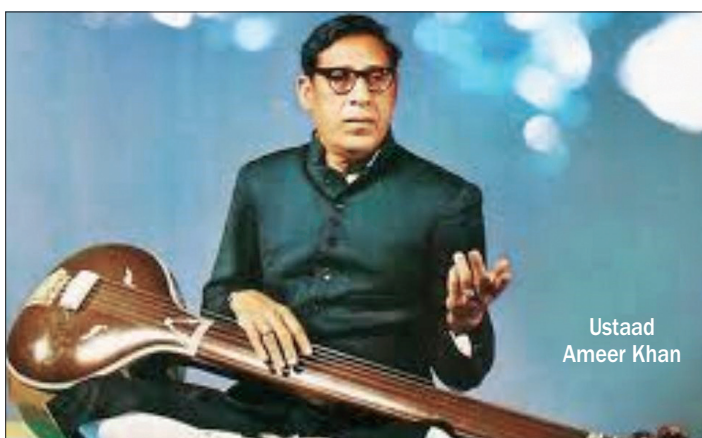
Ustaad Ameer Khan saheb was one singer who took his art to dizzying heights and popularised it among the masses. He was a very reserved person and a man of few words. Despite being very tall, he used to eat frugally.



His songs in films like *Bajju Bawra*, *Hungry Stone*, *Jhanak Jhanak Payal Baaje* and *Shabab* are just mesmerising. Initially, he didn’t believe in the classification of gharanas (schools of music). But after 1968, mainly at the insistence of people, he started saying he was from Indore [Gharana]. His Dhrupad style, which was his own creation, was majestic and people were just *fidaa* (charmed) over it.

**SURESH GANDHARV, Grade A classical vocalist of All India Radio, Delhi**

On his 108th birth anniversary, I salute the great, unforgettable, and



Ustaad Ameer Khan

my ‘dada guru’ Ustad Ameer Khan saheb. I am a disciple of Prof Ravinder Bist, who himself was a senior disciple of Ustad Ameer Khan. The Indian classical music community is indebted to Ustad Ameer Khan for giving such a precious, spiritual and rare *gayaki* form to the music world. It’s not possible to tie his singing to the realm of words. Here, I am sharing a memory of him. Once I visited Pandit Ganesh Prasad Mishra, a dear friend of Ustad Ameer Khan saheb, in Ambala. Pandit Ganesh Prasad recalled



an incident when Ameer Khan saheb once came to his house and started tuning in to his old tanpura [a musical instrument], which was in a state of disrepair. While tuning it, Khan saheb accidentally got one of his fingers bruised. Now, in a bid to stem the flow of blood, Ustad saheb pressed his finger against a quilt that was lying there in the room. For Pandit Ganesh Prasad ji, that quilt became very precious. Why? Because it had the blood stains of the legendary Ustad! Pandit Ganesh ji said he sang a great Thumri with the same old tanpura. Ustad Ameer Khan saheb was a very noble and simple man and a true secularist.

**KANKANA BANERJEE, Classical singer**

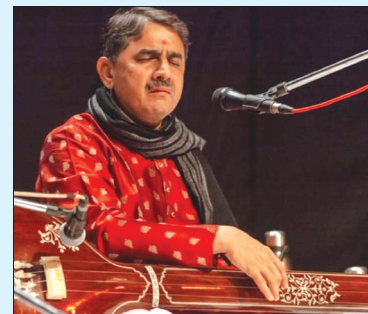
I was a disciple of Ustad Ameer Khan saheb and have lots of fond memories of him as a child. I was introduced to him at the age of 13. Khan saheb discovered a musical talent in me. During my formative years,



Khan saheb encouraged me saying I would go on to achieve an exalted place in Hindustani classical music. I rendered my first performance at the age of 14. I am deeply indebted to my guru, Ustaad Ameer Khan saheb, who guided me in this journey.

**PANDIT MAHENDRA TOKE, Classical singer**

My father, Mr Devidas Toke, was deeply influenced by Ustad Ameer Khan. In the year 1952, when he was still a student, my father sold his gold chain and ran away to Kolkata to just see Ustad Ameer Khan saheb perform in person so besotted he had become



after listening to a morning raga sung by the Ustaad. I was still a child when Khan saheb passed away. I had no di-

rect exposure to his music. But I have imbibed the sonorous, contemplative quality, the subtle architectonics of *sur* and *laya*, and the sense of poetic finesse, which are the essence of the late Ustad’s *gayaki*. I am fortunate enough to have had the direct blessings of Khan saheb. There has been no vocalist like Ustad Ameer Khan in the past thousand years, nor do I think there will be one in the morrow.

**SHAHBAZ KHAN, Actor**



Unfortunately, I couldn’t spend much time with my father. I was very young when my father passed away. As I grew up I came to know about him, about his personality. People would often come to me and talk to me about my father with teary eyes, about his skills, about his devotion to his art, his thoughts, the way he gave a new dimension to singing, all that.

He was very intense in his art, but equally, he had a great sense of humour.

He has made immense contributions to the Indore Gharana and this school of music has been churning out a large number of talents.