

IN QUEST of HARMONY

In a nostalgic, introspective, first-person account for **MARWAR**, **Himani Dalmia**, a scion of one of India's oldest industrial families, talks about her ongoing journey as a student of Hindustani classical music, her relationship with her guru and her family's overarching inclination towards the arts.

Himani Dalmia is a businesswoman, author and musician. She is currently the vice president of Dalmia Continental Pvt. Ltd. (DCPL), a leading premium foods company that has pioneered the popularity and use of olive and canola oils in India. She is also the author of *Life is Perfect*, a critically-acclaimed, coming-of-age novel set in contemporary Delhi that was released in 2009. She was a member of *The Times of India* Edit Page team and wrote prolifically on culture and society. Himani has been a student of Hindustani classical music in the style of the Patiala gharana since the age of six and performs often, both solo and with her guru. She graduated with honours in English from St Stephen's College, Delhi, and holds a Master's degree in South Asian Literature from the University of Oxford.

Himani accompanying her guru, Vidushi Malti Gilani, during a Sabrang Utsav performance at India International Centre in New Delhi



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hen you are 80 years old, this gift will stand by you,” says my guru often. Her silver hair, held back in a small, determined bun, falls in wisps around her face. Her face is still striking, even with its deep lines and folds. Her beauty would have been no ordinary thing in its prime. “When all the trappings and bustle of youth are gone, your music will give your life richness,” she adds.

I have no doubt in her prophecy. If there could ever be a role model for aging gracefully, it would be my Hindustani *shastriya* sangeet guru, Vidushi Malti Gilani. It has been 20 years since my first lesson with her. She was my third guru and, to my pre-teen eyes, the most forbidding yet. My first teacher had been a kurta-pajama-clad



*Left: Paternal grandparents, Ramkrishna and Saraswati Dalmia
 Below: Ustad Raza Ali Khan, current khalifa of Patiala-Kasur gharana, performing at Himani's wedding sangeet*

My grandfather, Ramkrishna Dalmia, was one of the pioneering industrialists of modern India. However, today, my family consists almost entirely of writers, artistes and academics.

gentleman in his thirties, who prolifically taught me enough *bandishes* to fill up three notebooks in three years. My mother often sat with me during those lessons to prevent his nodding off while playing the harmonium, but I hardly blame him for his somnolence. One cannot teach a seven-year-old anything more than the words and melodies of songs, which, for a classical musician, is like laying out ingredients repeatedly without doing any actual cooking. My second teacher, an affectionate and charming lady, tried to take my cousins and me to the next level by introducing us to the tanpura and the tabla. She preferred to use practical *petis* or electronic boxes that simulated the sound of these instruments for our lessons. She taught us a plethora of classical and semi-classical songs, but we were not able to continue our lessons with her for more than a year because her own professional music career took off at lightning speed. Today, she is one of the best-known musicians in the country: Shubha Mudgal.



My mother now began the quest for a new guru and found Vidushi Malti Gilani, one of the senior-most disciples of the legendary 20th-century maestro and doyen of the Patiala Kasur gharana, Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan. Maltidi, as I call her, was regal and graceful, always dressed stunningly in a Kanjeevaram sari, a string of pearls and *kundan* earrings, with a signature red bindi drawn by hand. She wore arresting red-frame spectacles and, on occasion, Versace and Prada sunglasses of outlandish designs. She was always friendly and loving, but from the very beginning, had a different approach to my musical education. Maybe it was because I was finally old enough or perhaps because that was the only way Maltidi could teach; but the way I understood music was entirely deconstructed by her. Maltidi was a purist and did not believe in electronic instruments. She spent the first 20 minutes of every class tuning the tanpuras and teaching me how to tame these wilful instruments. She had a tabla player present for every lesson, some less-than-satisfactory ones in my early years and later a senior musician, Ustad Nawab Ali, who became an integral part of my musical training.

Lessons with Maltidi were always detailed; no simple melodies for her. In my very first class, I was introduced to the concept of taal. I would spend entire lessons just reciting *dha dhin dhin dha*, while one of the less-than-satisfactory tabla players, alternately drowsy and impassioned, rapped away at his instrument. Entire lessons dedicated to singing a single line followed. Soon, Maltidi introduced me to *taans*. Again, entire lessons comprising one *taan* repeated countless times until it rolled off my tongue and wrapped itself onto the taal. And then the ragas began to stack up: Yaman, Bhupali, Kedara, Kamod, Bageshari, Rageshari, Bihaag, Malhaars and Bahaars, to name a smattering.

As I entered my teens, I started to go for lessons four or five times a week of my own accord. Yet, I was always clear that music would never be a career for me. Academics and school life held precedence over music then, just as my business does today. It was then that I learnt to compartmentalise my life. My 'worldly' life led me from being a



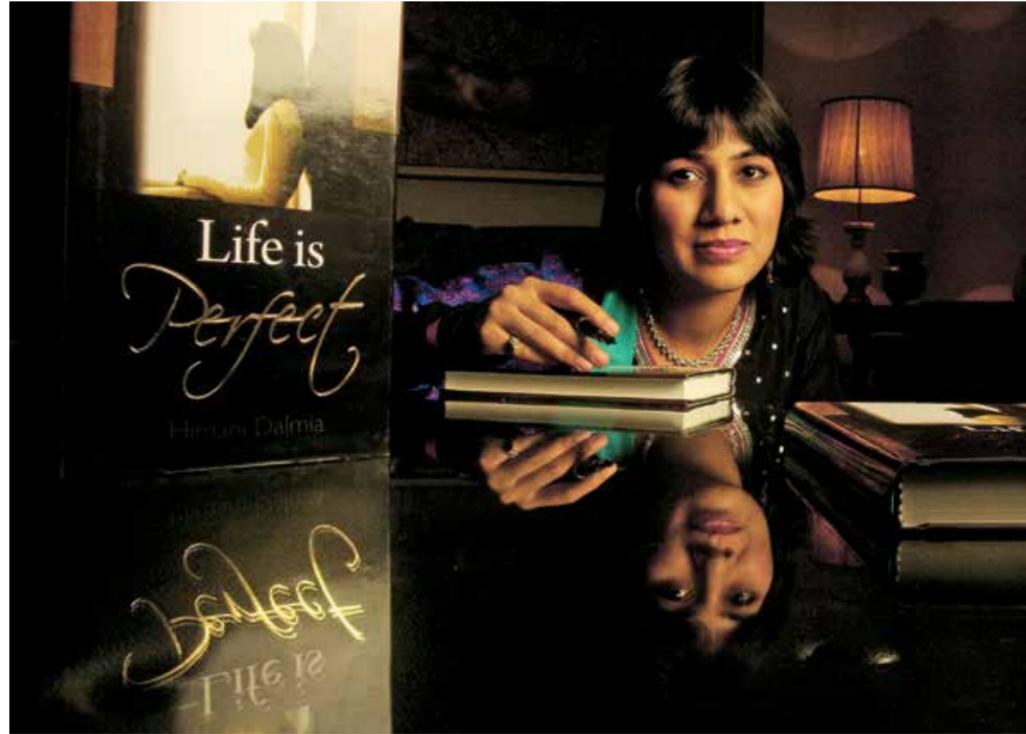
Above:
Outside Oriel
College,
Oxford
University,
during
graduation in
2006

Left: With
brother,
Pranav, who
is a pianist

dedicated student at Sardar Patel Vidyalaya to a literature major at St Stephen's College and Oxford University to writing for *The Times of India* to publishing a novel and, finally, to working in my father V N Dalmia's fast-growing foods company. Literature and music could hone my mind and give me intellectual stimulation, but at the end of the day, I needed to pull my own weight. As far as my parents were concerned, what career I built was up to me, as long as I didn't depend on dole-outs from them or any future inheritance for my subsistence. So, after completing my education, music got entrusted to the weekends. I devoted myself to marketing, sales, distribution and corporate strategy of India's first olive and canola oil brands, Leonardo and Hudson respectively, by

day, moonlighted as a writer by night and continued music as an intellectual and spiritual pursuit in what time remained.

It took me a while to reconcile myself to this compartmentalisation—to accept that business, writing and music could all coexist. In truth, however, my inclinations were far from disorderly when viewed in the light of my family history. My grandfather, Ramkrishna Dalmia, was one of the pioneering industrialists of modern India. However, today, my family consists almost entirely of writers, artistes and academics. While one of my father's sisters was a writer whose partner was India's then leading poet, S H Vatsyayan; another is a professor of philosophy; yet another, a former professor at the Universities



Himani's coming-of-age novel, Life is Perfect, was published in 2009

of Berkeley and Yale, is internationally renowned in the field of South Asian studies; and a fourth is a pre-eminent art historian with many books to her credit. The male heirs, my father and his brother, were never presented with the option of drifting into academia. Businessmen they became, yes, but they also wrote on the side. And whom did they marry? One, an academic, who today is a Commonwealth prize-winning novelist, and the second, my mother, a lawyer and educationist. My own generation is populated by mathematicians, anthropologists, musicians, art historians, writers and philosophers.

These cultural leanings clearly stemmed from my grandmother, Saraswati Dalmia, a Hindi poet and Sanskrit scholar. My grandfather married her when he was already at the pinnacle of business success with a small-town woman as his spouse. Making pots of money had not compensated for his humble upbringing, and he was socially aspirational. Moreover, he had a questioning mind. His last three wives, including my grandmother, brought cultural refinement with them. My grandmother had studied Sanskrit, was highly educated and wrote prolifically. His next wife brought with her the culture

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of Lahore, then known as the Paris of the East. His last wife was a writer who went on to become well known in the Hindi literary circuit and win national awards. It is the women, after all, who bring up children. The offspring of Ramkrishna Dalmia from his later wives were born to double messages: one, to join the family business; and two, to value culture and creative expression. The cultural influence was too strong for his children to escape and was compounded manifold by the arrival of their own spouses.

My mother, born Nilanjana Varma, grew up in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh in a family that is proud of its Kayastha heritage, traditionally associated with education, the arts, law and administration. Both her maternal and paternal families were chock-full of accomplished musicians. Learning classical music and dance was an

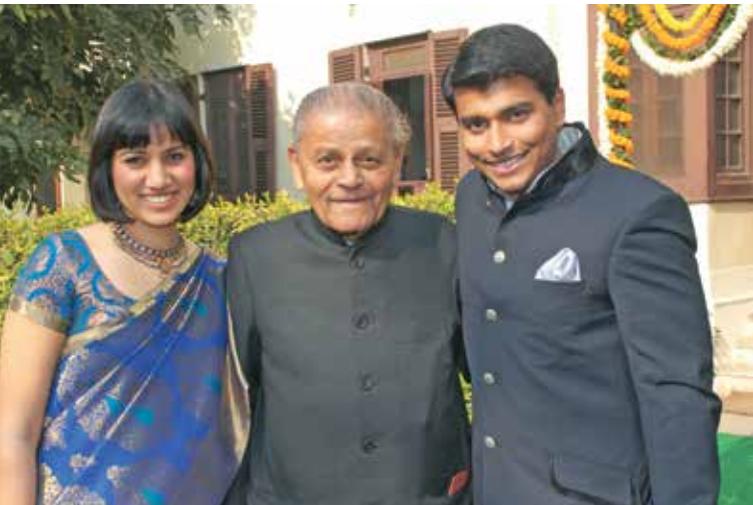
integral part of any Varma or Srivastava child's education. It was never meant to be a professional pursuit but more a way of life, an added dimension to a well-rounded and wholesome personality, a sign of good breeding. My mother implemented these parenting values with her children as well—more strictly with me, her first child, and more leniently with my brother Pranav, who is nevertheless an accomplished pianist today.

Since my husband, Akash Premsen, is a fellow creative spirit who went from liberal arts to theatre to the media and finally to an MBA and a corporate career, my fate seemed sealed. My mother-in-law, Bandana Sen, too is a literary person, an art aficionado and a *rasik* who frequents the concert halls of Delhi, in addition to nurturing a successful career in education.

Maltidi often says to me, “You are so lucky, you don’t need to sing for money. You don’t need to learn quickly and put together performances and sing what sells. You can learn the true art. Our kind of music is a sadhana, a spiritual practice. I too am fortunate that I can teach you the truth behind it.” Maltidi is the founder of the Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan Yaadgar Sabha, a unique trust founded in 1968 in memory of the great maestro. It aims to provide medical aid to musicians, the majority of whom have no medical insurance, job security or regular income. The Sabha organises an annual concert called ‘Sabrang Utsav’, named after Bade Ghulam Ali Khan Sahib’s pen name, in Delhi. Although she is the grand dame of Delhi’s music circles, Maltidi treats these audiences to very few performances. After extensive training by both Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan Sahib and his son, Ustad

Below: Paternal grandmother Saraswati Dalmia with mother-in-law, Bandana Sen

Bottom: With maternal grandfather, Prakash Kumar Varma, and husband, Akash Premsen



Munawar Ali Khan, she gave numerous performances in India and abroad in the ’70s and ’80s. Thereafter, she decided to take a step back, focus on her *riyaz* and passing on her guru’s *gaiiki* to her students. The Sabrang Utsav is now one of the rare occasions when music lovers get to hear her magnificent full-throated investigation of the Patiala Kasur gharana style.

I must have been 14 or 15 years old when Maltidi decided it was time for me to accompany her onstage. Initially, it was terrifying. Singing the *ashayi* and *antara* with her just to give vocal support was not a problem, but Maltidi would often flick her head towards me during the gaps in her singing, expecting me to throw out a few *taans* or *behlavas*. At that moment, all musical knowledge would flee my mind. It would take superhuman strength to tune in to the sound of the tabla, understand where in the cycle of *ek taal* or

teen taal or *jhumra* I was and launch into a *taan*, landing correctly on *sama* with so much relief that I could barely complete the phrase!

Maltidi coaxed me into doing a couple of solo performances. The stress would begin to build a few months before September, when the Sabrang Utsav would take place. Musical fruition that needed hours of *riyaz* everyday could not be conjured up in convenient doses. In the month of September, music would become my number-one priority. I would try to fit in as much *riyaz* as possible, often asking Nawab Ali Khan Sahib to come to my house for some practice with the tabla, un-supported by Maltidi. And then, the big day would arrive.

Entering the auditorium itself represented a shift in the space-time continuum for me. My parallel lives melted away. Now, it was just me, my tanpura, Maltidi and the raga before me. When the performance was over, I would set my tanpura down, fold my hands in thanks to the audience and depart the stage with a jumble of feelings—relief, gratitude, pride and also self-doubt. I had not reached the end of my journey. This was merely a milestone. I would return again next year, for another attempt, another great adventure.

“Don’t let life upset you,” Maltidi says often, adding, “Bade Ghulam Ali Khan Sahib used to say, ‘Why stress or mope about things? In the time it takes to do that, you can do *riyaz* of several *taans*!’” Like any spiritual practice, my musical training is not just about notes and beats and melodies. Life lessons and anecdotes are an integral part of it. My relationship with Maltidi is much more than that of teacher and student. The path she has set me on is greater than just that of mastering a skill. It is a sadhana, a commitment to my intellect and my spirit. It gives me moments to breathe in an otherwise hectic life. It gives me a chance to tap into my multiple family legacies.

Like a khayal, intricately tied to the rules of its raga and the taal it is set in, and yet ultimately unstructured and improvisatory, my life in music and with Maltidi grounds me by making me struggle to achieve every success, and yet finally sets me free. ✨