

Compositions Of Pandit Amarnath

It is not common to remember a bygone master of music through his own compositions. But this is precisely what was done at the India International Centre, New Delhi on 9 March. The occasion was the second death anniversary of Pandit Amarnath, one of the better known khayal-singers of the capital; and those who sang his compositions—that is, only the sthayi-antara twosome—were two of his senior pupils, Amarjeet and Mahendra Sharma, the latter a vocalist who deserves much wider notice than he has so far received.

I may add that though he was probably the most devoted pupil of Amir Khan (of Indore gharana), and quite as contemplative in his way of singing as his mentor, Amarnath never allowed such bonds to bedim his own creativity. I say so on the basis of the apt wordings and the structural balance of the compositions presented on the occasion, two or three of which he had kindly sung for me at my residence about 40 years ago.

Turning to the recitals, I must say Amarjeet surprised me with the way she sang. She is about 60 years of age, but her sur was all along steady and tuneful, even in the singing of such sargam-s as are intentionally deepened with a touch of gamaka as commonly understood in the North. She rightly opened with a bandish in raga Marwa—I say, rightly,



Mahendra Sharma

because it was probably her teacher's most favoured raga. Then she presented compositions in Kaushik Ranjani (a melody quite new to me), Pooria Kalyan, Maru Bihag and Sivaranjani. The rhythm of most of these pieces was madhya laya Tritala; and so their structure was manifestly symmetrical. Nowhere could I see that excessive slowness of pace which makes it difficult for the listener to follow the course of rhythm, but which was surely typical of Amir Khan's singing. Patterns of note-names were frequent; and, what is more, they were all along woven in the way of Amarnath. However, Amarjeet's handling of rhythm did not quite match her proficiency in melody.

Mahendra Sharma's contribution to the concert was a revelation to me because I did not expect such excellent music from a vocalist who is not quite well-known. He presented a veritable bouquet of compositions in the following raga-s: Madhukauns, Kedar, Gunkali, Bilaskhani Todi

and Bhairavi. Thanks to their maker, Amarnath, almost every one of these compositions appeared to relate the *sama* to its context admirably. I have a key point in mind as I say so. The vocalist's gaining access to the *sama* is one thing; the sthayi as itself appearing to move towards and climax at the *sama*, is quite another. The former is an easy matter of just indicating the location of the *sama*; the latter is a structural excellence which gives an autonomous, vital form to the first line, and makes the focal beat appear not as the mere limit of the line, but as its destiny. What is created in the latter case is a look of orientation. It is this one excellence which distinguished the compositions in question.

But the singer's own contribution was by no means negligible. I may list his main excellences thus: ability to unfold the canvas of the raga through utterance of the text, all along winsomely—my reference here to the words, *sohee param sujan*, in the opening of Madhukauns (vilambit) composition; steady, tuneful and vibrant singing of the tara shadja at every attempt; delightfully liquid treatment of the two adjacent madhyama-s in the Kedar compositions; and, what captivated me, a remarkable ability to traverse the region between two neighboring notes in such a gradual, seamless

and venturesome way that an utter abdication of euphony appeared to be saved by a mere hair's breadth, so to say. Above all, the ultimate piece, Sharma's own composition in Bhairavi, was the pinnacle, and no mere ending of the programme. It had passion, and power, and a compelling inwardness.

All this, however, was but a part index of Amarnath's total devotion to music. As a performer, he distinguished himself as the first Indian to sing at the prestigious Fogg Art Museum of Harvard University; and in his home country, of course, he had occasion to perform at almost every important cultural centre. Further, his original khayal compositions number 200; and, in this context, we have reason to be grateful to the Indira Gandhi Centre for Performing Arts which has recorded some of these pieces for archival preservation.

My own immediate debt, however, is to the maestro's own daughter, Bindu Chawla, who organised the entire concert. Besides a fuller insight into her father's creative prowess, it has given me my first chance to listen to the admirable singing of his leading pupil, Mahendra Sharma, whom the comper aptly characterised as the mainstay of the Indore gharana today.

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