

## BOOK REVIEWS

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*The Sacred Symphony: A Study of Buddhistic and Vaishnava Music of Bengal in Relation to Hindustani Classical Music:* Krishna Bisht; Bhagirathi Sewa Sansthan, Ghaziabad, 1986; vi+177 pages; Rs 160.

THE BOOK is given us under a seductive title; but *The Sacred Symphony* here is slightly off-key if, that is, you wish to get at the exact subject matter of the book. The author's chosen problematic surely does not imply a symphony nor is it confined to the purely sacred. Fortunately for us the book's subtitle has no frills; it immediately pinpoints the subject matter, which is a combination of the Buddhist *caryāgīti* and Vaiṣṇava *kīrtan* in relation to north Indian classical music. For the author however Bengal's *kīrtan* "appears to be no more than the music of divine madness"; yet she finds a "method in that madness". I do not think there is any sacred version of an Alice-in-Wonderland madness here. I take this divine madness of *kīrtan* to mean simply what the Sufis had been doing earlier and what Caitanya made extremely popular in his time—the practice of musical assemblies to enable the participants attain a direct mystical communion with God via a maddening trance and dazed ecstasy.

*The Divine Symphony* is a

shortened but, I'm sure, an updated version of a doctoral dissertation submitted to Delhi University by a member of its music department, Krishna Bisht. If you look at the book's methodological procedure, thematic development and even some conclusions, it would appear that it belongs to the wavelength of a publication brought out at least 16 years earlier, Swami Prajnanananda's *Padavalī Kīrtaner Itihās*, Part One (1970). Surprisingly enough Dr Bisht, who refers to some other publications of the latter, does not even mention this work. The merit of Dr Bisht's book is hence to be sought not so much in new avenues opened as in her work of *substantive* elaboration of the chosen problematic.

*The Sacred Symphony* is apparently concerned, on a general-abstract plane, with the relation between religion and music; but its major object is to trace, in specific empirical-historical terms, the development of two outstanding forms of Bengal's music since the 10th century—the *caryā* and the *kīrtan*.

*tan*. Although Dr Bisht has used several primary materials in exposing these forms and although she has explicated certain issues connected especially with the problematic of the *caryā*, some of which are still widely considered obscure, her first chapter dealing with the relationship between religion and music, which does not appear to have been essential to the book's substantive argument, comes out as a simplistic discourse indeed. And this is so because it is based upon a kind of simple quote-and-run method, and nothing much besides.

Dr Bisht's reconstruction of the historical background of the time in which Bengal witnessed the hegemony of the *caryā* and then the *kīrtan* is based upon some traditional historical literature. It is not just that Dr Bisht has denied herself the delight of enjoying some of the perceptive comments on Bengal's pre-modern culture provided long ago by Niharranjan Ray in his justly celebrated book on the history of the Bengalis. Above all, one needs to come to grips with the question of whether the *caryā* and the *kīrtan* were not, at least at a certain point of time, the handy instruments of a socio-religious propaganda carried out through the medium of music and songs, one representing dissident Buddhism and the other the *bhakti* movement, which grew

from a trickle to a flow to a flood tide.

No book on the Vaiṣṇava *kīrtan* of Bengal can also overlook today the massive work on Vaiṣṇavism given us in 1985 by Ramakanta Chakrabarty, a work which hit the stalls in India at least a year before the publication of the book under review. Chakrabarty's work contains, among other things, not merely a special chapter on *kīrtan* but also an extraordinarily exhaustive bibliography. A pity that neither Niharranjan Ray nor Ramakanta Chakrabarty finds a place in Dr Bisht's short bibliography. Her bibliography seems to have been very hurriedly prepared, for some works referred to in the body of the text (those for example by Rahul Samkriyayana, Suresh Chakrabarti, etc.) do not figure in it. Also, it is a little awkward for a dissertation that it does not go by any of the accepted international footnoting/bibliographical styles; all works are cited in unitalicized letters bound by single inverted commas, which is why you cannot distinguish a book from an article.

It is to the credit of Dr Bisht however that she has been able to clarify certain issues related to the *caryā* and has established, on the basis of her study of certain late medieval works, that the *caryāpadas* were not confined to what were then the bounds of Bengal only and that

they were sung even in certain parts of south India. She has also shown that till the first half of the 17th century the *caryā-padas* had not been relegated to the bowels of history—a point made earlier by Niharkana Mukhopadhyaya, which Dr Bisht fully acknowledges. The latter has also found that the relevant musical treatises do not mention any instrument for accompanying the *caryā* songs other than the *mandidakka*.

The *caryāpadas*, according to the author, "were sung and not recited", as there is a *rāga*-signature appended to each *pada*. This may very well be true, but the *dohās* collected by Rahul Samkrityayana from Tibetan sources, to which Dr Bisht duly refers, do not mention any *rāgas*. The mere mention of a *rāga* or a *rāginī* in connection with a song does not always indicate that it is rendered in a fully classical manner in the specified *rāga*; this may only indicate an ideal. The names of certain *rāgas* and *tālas* are mentioned even in some poems of Bengal's *mangalkāvya*s; but long poems, after all, are not suitable for classical musical rendering. They could have been of course tunefully recited. Finally, a question that calls for some thought is the problem related to the expression of a *caryā* idea *via* what has been called *śamdhā* (motivated) language, that is, if we are to accept V.S. Sastri's views.

There is not much that is new in Dr Bisht's exposition of Bengal's *kīrtan*, on which there already exists a formidable literature, seasoned with not a little soupçon of controversy. Dr Bisht also has not sufficiently traced the later developments in the area, especially during the 19th century when an interaction with Bengali *tappā*, *pāncālī*, etc. made *kīrtan* assume new forms and new nuances. As for Jayadeva's *astapadas*, one or two points readily come to mind. While Dr Bisht speaks of *Gītagovinda*'s wide popularity in many places outside Bengal, she does not examine the very possibility, first postulated by Nihar-ranjan Ray, of *Gītagovinda*'s music having originated in the Kannada region. Secondly, as has been shown by Aychiyar Kauriyvai, certain distinctive styles of the *abhinaya* of *Gītagovinda* had grown up in the course of time in the Deccan and Orissa—a matter which surely calls for some attention. Finally, although Dr Bisht mentions the alterations made in Jayadeva's song styles by Rana Kumbha of Mewar in the latter's *Rasikapriyā* commentary, she does not explore the possibility of these innovations reflecting the Rajasthani variation of Jayadeva's episodic songs.

The resumé of *padāvalī kīrtan* made by Dr Bisht also appears to be largely nescient of the space occupied in the relevant literature by numerous

scholarly discussions. A critical examination of these views as well as a musical evaluation of Vidyapati's *padāvalī* and its impact on musical developments in Nepal and Mithila cannot by any means be overlooked in a book on Bengal's *kīrtan*. With regard to the question of Vaḍu Candīdāsa's *śrīkrṣṇakīrtana* having a classical musical structure, I may say that the mere mention of such technical forms as *dandaka*, *lagini*, *citraka* etc., some of which figure in *Samgī-taratnākara*, does not prove that a strictly classical-musical technique was invariably followed here. But of course *śrīkrṣṇakīrtana* represents a precocious blending, if you will, of a number of *rāgas* and *rāginis* which were to become henceforth an essential mark of *padāvalī kīrtan*. In delineating the latter, Dr Bisht appears to have leaned heavily upon Khagendranath Mitra's views, some of which (for example, the time theory imputed to the practice of *nāmasaṁkīrtana*) are not beyond dispute.

The rôle of Narottama Datta in classicalizing *kīrtan* under the approval of the then Vaiṣṇava leaders is well known, as indeed is his stipulation that *gauracandrikā* songs composed on Caitanya's life and 'sports' must precede the *līlākīrtan*. It is not hence understood how new light has been shed in the book

on the origin of *gauracandrikā*. However, Narottama is widely viewed as the intellectual mentor of the *garāṅhātī* style of *kīrtan*, with its slow and monotonous movement. The point is whether such a form had to be gradually supplemented by the introduction of new *chandas* and faster *layas* to make *kīrtan* more lively. Is this the reason why in the silent depths of the *kīrtan* music other different styles—*manoharsāhī*, *renetī*, *mandārinī* and *jhāḍkhandī*—came into being in later years?

*The Sacred Symphony* ends with the claim that in the course of time *kīrtan* was endowed with a fully developed "classical form"; and yet it is said to have been qualitatively different from north Indian classical music. Apparently for Dr Bisht the *classicalness* of Bengali *kīrtan* radiates from its clearly formulated set of rules, regulations and techniques. Bengali *kīrtan* is a discipline unto itself; it wears a badge of apartness. In fact, its *tāla* system is extremely complex and highly sophisticated, a point made long ago by poet Rabindranath and now superbly explicated by Krishna Bisht. Indeed her exposition of the *tāla* system in *padāvalī kīrtan* and its sustained development is simply brilliant.

JAYASRI BANERJEE

*Sitar Technique in Nibaddha Forms*: Stephen M. Slawek; Motilal Banarsidas, Delhi, 1987; xix + 232 pages; Rs 250.

THE BOOK is indicative of the healthy stream of Western academic interest in Indian music, a stream so often lost sight of in the popular consumption of music. Stephen Slawek has set before himself the commendably limited goal of analyzing *nibaddha* Sitar music (that which is set to *tāla*) in the form of *vilambita* and *druta gats*. He has discreetly omitted *ālāpcari* for analysis as its transcription in notation is well nigh impossible. Slawek begins with an apology to "those practitioners who may consider this study to be exactly what Indian music does not need". He on the contrary feels that "the present study makes a positive contribution to our understanding of Indian music". The author's mentor, Pandit Ravi Shankar, also mentions in the foreword that Westerners used to seeing their music in notation would benefit from studies that provide notation for Indian music. He hopes that such studies will help those "eager to know" about the "improvisational process" that is so unique to our music.

The book can at best be described as an admirable documentation of the physicality of the Sitar, providing its history and a structural analysis of the music produced on it. But whether the book at all succeeds

in giving an insight into the process of improvisation, let alone reveal its secret, is rather dubious. The analysis of *gat* structure given is purely descriptive. It makes no attempt to relate *gat* structure to *raga* structure. Which notes of a *rāga* are to be taken in the *mukhrā*, which in *sam*, which in *mānjh* or *antarā gat* are no concern of this analysis. The analysis thus remains only a detailed account of how much performing time is spent on the total *gat*, how much on the *mukhrā*, how much in *tānas* and so on. This in itself is a useful task and Slawek has done it well. But in the absence of *rāga* principles a description of *gat* structure remains only the outer shell without the inner spirit. It is in the relationship of the structure to the spirit that the process of improvisation lies. The 'technique' thus has remained hidden.

About the history of the instrument and its traditions of playing, Slawek has maintained a judicious objectivity. He is to be congratulated for reiterating that there is no historical connection between the Sitar and Amir Khusrau. Also for pointing out that Abul Fazl's *jantra* description hardly indicates the presence of the Sitar in Akbar's court. He rightly states that the *Sangitasāra*, compiled at the

Jaipur court of Sawāi Pratāp-simha Deo in late 18th century, has the most reliable mention of the *nibaddha tānpurā* or Sitar. Slawek also examines the theory that the Sitar is an improvement upon long-necked West Asian lutes, chiefly the *tanbur*. He has no opinion to offer on the plausibility of any theory. It may be noted here that the *tanbur*—the word is Sanskrit, not Persian—may have actually originated in India. Slawek's conclusion is that whatever its origin the Sitar emerged in the 18th century and rapidly replaced the Been and Surbahar by accommodating the music that was being played on both instruments. The rise of *khayāl gāyaki* facilitated this change. In the beginning Sitar *bāj* concentrated on *gat-torās*, drawing upon Been and Rabab strokes; from the 1930s it assimilated *khayāl gāyaki* with its *vilambita gats* and *layakāri*. This historical account is unbiased, accurate and informative. Incidentally Slawek also brings to light the forgotten fact that the rising fortunes of the Sitar and the decline of the Been were both on account of Been players refusing to teach Been to musicians other than their own family members; non-family disciples were taught Sitar or Sarod. Thus came about the popularity of these instruments and the near-extinction of the Been.

Slawek's chapter on playing technique is extremely good

and accurate; it should be a help to musicologists and prospective students. Then there is the commendable feat of transcribing a Ravi Shankar performance of *rāga Rasia* (a questionable choice of *rāga*—why not standard *rāgas* like Malkauns or Bhoop?) in staff notation. This transcription is a piece of excellent documentation and should be of some use to Western musicologists. But the Indian student, as we know, would continue to depend on his teacher and his notebook where *gat*, *tāna*, *torā* and *tihāi* are put down in Bhatkhande's notation. In his analysis of *Rasiya gat* Slawek has given extensive tables of structural elements in *vistāra* cycle by cycle, variations of *mukhrā*, tempo variation graphs, etc. This transcription is indeed impressive but of doubtful use to the student who has to learn from teachers and not books; besides, staff notation is used throughout, which few in this country follow. Perhaps Slawek may like to add in his next edition this transcription in Indian notation for the benefit of Indian students.

Then there is the wider implication of this kind of structural analysis. What bearing does this approach have on the process of conceptualization in Indian music? Besides being fraught with the dangers of empiricism, one wonders if such an approach will really help in "molding the concepts to con-

temporary music" which, according to Slawek, should be the task of the Indian musicologist today. The basic concepts of Indian music from the time of Bharata Muni have lent themselves to many kinds of contemporary practice. To rush into remoulding these concepts may not be the wisest thing to do. It is not unreasonable to fear that if these creative and inspiring concepts are moulded to contemporary practice, it

may lead only to perpetuation of that practice, besides musical homogeneity; one may even lose sight of the concepts themselves which are capable of constant renewal. I hope the approach adopted in this book is also regarded as an ephemeral possibility born of concepts which are the living truth of a dynamic tradition.

BHARAT GUPT

*Music Makers of the Bhatkhande College of Hindustani Music:* Susheela Misra; Sangeet Research Academy, Calcutta, 1985; 83 pages; Rs 80.

TO RETRIEVE, propagate and reinstal the art of music in society was the life mission of Chaturpandit Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande. Against heavy odds he succeeded in establishing in 1926 the Marris College of Hindustani Music in Lucknow—named initially after the then Governor of Avadh, later renamed after its founder. Bhatkhande managed to gather around him eminent musicians, scholars and patrons whose support he enlisted in the foundation and nurture of his institution. It is the story of the attainments, contributions and sacrifices of these men that Susheela Misra recounts in her book of biographical sketches.

First to emerge in her graphic narrative is Pandit Bhatkhande

himself. He is followed by his chief disciple Dr S.N. Ratanjankar, principal of the college for long years, and Dr G.N. Natu, who succeeded the former as principal in the sixties. The Balis of Dariabad come next, Rai Umanath and Rai Rajeshwar, who together with Raja Nawab Ali Khan of Akbarpur were instrumental in setting up the college and managing its affairs in the early years. This group makes up the nucleus of the institution—its founding fathers, so to speak.

Professional musicians who served on the faculty are allotted the chapters that follow. Names such as Ustad Sakhawat Hussain Khan and Pandit Sakharam—"the two Sakhas"—Ustad Ahmed Hussain Khan,

Chhote Munne Khan, Mirza Mahmud Ali, Mohammad Usman, Bade Aga, Khalifa Abid Hussain, Sitar-nawaz Hamid Hussain Khan, Ustad Yusuf Ali Khan, etc. may not mean much to *rasikas* today, but were highly respected names in an earlier era. Descendants of various *gharānās*, these musicians had joined the college—despite initial inhibitions—solely at the instance of Pandit Bhatkhande. Their commitment as teachers was exemplary, despite low salaries irregularly disbursed; the funds of the institution were woefully inadequate in its fledgling years.

Teachers of the college present-day listeners would recognize include Ustads Ahmedjan Thirakwa, Rahimuddin Khan Dagur, Begum Akhtar, Mohan Rao Kallianpurkar and V. G. Jog who all receive generous treatment in the book. There is mention also of some distinguished alumni—Chinmoy Lahiri, Rabindralal Roy, Dinkar Kaikini, K. G. Ginde, S. C. R. Bhat and others.

Susheela Misra—an alumna herself—fondly remembers Ustads Faiyyaz Khan, Allauddin Khan, Mushtaq Hussain Khan and Bundu Khan who often gave recitals and demonstrations in the college, acting as examiners as well. Rajabhaiyya Poonchhwale, Wadilal Shivram Nayak, the Joshi brothers and other associates of Pandit Bhatkhande are also recalled with

warmth and respect.

*Music Makers* is not just a string of biographical accounts of individuals. These vibrant accounts speak of the very soul of the institution—a product of the spirit of awakening and enlightenment evident in India in the early decades of this century. What emerges from a reading are the living forces which fashioned the institution and propelled it to a preëminent position as a centre for musical education, training and research. A deeply nostalgic note runs through the book, which can but affect the present reviewer—an alumna herself.

The book is amply illustrated with photographs of many eminent musicians; some of these are rare group photographs of teachers, students, examiners and early associates of the college.

An irritating slip may be pointed out. 'Marris' is spelt 'Morris' throughout the book, whether the reference is to Sir William Marris or Marris Music College. The only exception occurs in the handwritten foreword by Thakur Jaideva Singh.

The Diamond Jubilee of the college was recently celebrated in grand style. The college is now a government institution, has an impressive new building and a much larger number of sections and staff. All this speaks of growth but should not conduce to complacency. The earlier spirit of devotion and



responsibility must not be allowed to flag—the author concludes.

*Music Makers* is a highly informative and revealing book, without being voluminous. It is

a significant addition to our biographical literature on music in English and is worthy of wide circulation.

SUMATI MUTATKAR