

IN the last week of February 1983, a significant cultural event took place in the capital, but unfortunately, because no big names or labels were attached to it, and also because of lack of funds, it did not get the attention or the audiences it deserved, and people did not even get to know of it until it was televised four days later.

The event was “Bhairav Se Sohni”, the first ever all-women classical music festival. The festival was organized by Geetika over three sessions on February 26 and 27, in Kamani auditorium, New Delhi. The festival, covering both Hindustani and Karnatic music, was unique in that all the performers, both the main artistes and the accompanists, were women. The moving force behind the festival and behind Geetika is Dr Shanno Khurana, a reputed vocalist, composer, and promoter of the arts.

Imaginatively structured, the festival was the product of a great deal of dedicated hard work, and breathed the spirit of love for music. It took no small courage to open the festival with relatively unknown artistes selected on the strength of their work and brought together from remote parts of the country. From beginning to end the festival was conducted with a grace and dignity which were truly refreshing in the context of today’s music world where gimmicks and personality cults are increasingly coming to take precedence over the simple spontaneous relationship between musician, music and listener.

This dignity was evident from the inauguration ceremony itself. There were no long pompous speeches or projection of personalities. Announcements were made with impressive dignity by Saroj Vashisht from backstage, instead of having a glittering compere on stage, as has come to be the usual practice. Inaugurating the festival, Begum Abida Ahmed expressed her happiness that the stage was now being claimed by women, who have always given the stage over to men. She hoped that the door thus opened

MADHU, RUTH

“Bhairav Se Sohni”

Geetika’s All-Women Classical Music Festival

for the emergence of women performers was a sign of things to come, and that this would be the first of many such festivals.

Thakur Jaideva Singh, reputed musicologist and Shannoji’s guide, pointed out in his introductory speech that in the recent past women singers have received a certain amount of recognition but the majority of women instrumentalists remain in oblivion because platforms are not made available to them. He said the festival was the realization of Shanno’s dream of a forum for women artistes, particularly for those of them who play instruments traditionally played only by men.

The first session then began with ‘Tal Vadya’, an unusual and fascinating performance on five different percussion instruments— with S. Padma on the mridangam, Sukanya Ramagopal on the ghatam, Sasikala on the kanjira, P. Santhakumari on the thavil and Aban Mistry on the tabla’ The confidence radiated by these women and their superb synchronization was a real treat to watch

and hear. Even more interesting was the fact that only two of them were acquainted with each other before the festival, and that the details of the joint performance had been verbally worked by them while travelling together on the train to Delhi.

They must have played for an hour, just going around the circle, passing a rhythmic motif to each other, and doing variations on it. They were able to grip everyone’s attention, even though using five such different drums. They seemed to play to each other avoiding the temptation to put on a personal “show.” As accompanists too, later in the festival, these women impressed with the steadiness, complexity, discipline, and richness of their rhythmic statements which combined well with the voicing of such instruments the harmonium and the sarangi. It was enlightening to see how, for instance, P. Santhakumari was capable of playing complex musical ideas on the thavil, which looked like a drum one could see on the street, a folk instrument, and to realize that there must be many such



Tal vadya: left to right: S. Padma on mridangam, Sasikala on kanjira, P. Santhakumari on thavil, Aban Mistry on tabla Sukanya Ramagopal on ghatam

Photographs accompanying this article are by Avinash Pasrieha.

instruments buried in remote areas all over the country.

These five women from such different backgrounds were able to transcend differences of region, of class, of different music traditions with a rare ease and extraordinary skill. It was one of the most imaginative ways of combining the instrumentalists of Hindustani and Karnanatic music.

They were followed by Aruna Narayan Kalle's solo performance on the sarangi. She is the first and only woman player of the sarangi in India. She started training seven years ago under her father sarangi maestro Pandit Ram Narayan. The sarangi has usually been treated as an accompanying instrument but her father has helped develop its potential as a main instrument. Her able performance was ample evidence of this potential.

The session concluded with Dr Prabha



Aruna Kalle on sarangi

Atre, a well known vocalist in Hindustani music, who is now reader of music at SNTD women's university, Bombay. She was trained in the *gurukul* system by Suresh Babu. Nane and his famous sister Hirabai Barodekar.

The morning session on February 27 opened with Bageshwari Qamar on the shehnai. Disciple of Bismillah Khan and daughter of shehnai player Jagdish Qamar, she is the first woman to have taken to this difficult wind instrument.

She was followed by Dr Aban Mistry's scholarly performance on the tabla,

accompanied on the harmonium by her pupil Savitriben Jhaveri. Dr Mistry, who started taking singing lessons at the age of four from her aunt Mehroo Workingboxwalla, has done historical research into the tabla and pakhawaj traditions, and is currently teaching music in Bombay.

The session concluded with a moving and inspiring performance by Asghari Begum of Tikamgarh (see interview with her on page 8). She is one of the few women singers to have taken up and excelled in *dhrupad*, traditionally a jealously guarded male preserve, never taught to women. This grand old lady of music, disciple of Ustad Zahoor Khan, has maintained her devotion to music through a lifetime of incredible hardships, including 30 years of not being allowed to practice singing. The evening session began with K. Dhanalaksmi and K. Deivakunjaram, two sisters, playing duets, on the nadaswaram, a difficult wind instrument not traditionally played by women.

They were followed by eminent violinist Dr N. Rajam, accompanied by her 17 year old daughter Sangeeta who has been trained since the age of four by her mother. A delightful coordination between mother and daughter drew out the nuances of the instrument with sensitivity. Dr Rajam, who was initiated into music by her father, and trained by Pandit Onkarnath Thakur, is known for her lyrical style and technical skill. She teaches at the Benares Hindu University, Varanasi.

The festival fittingly concluded with Shannoji's melodic and emotive classical singing.

All the accompanists for both vocalists and instrumentalists were women. Outstanding among them was Vasanta Mhapsekar, considered by many to be the most eminent living harmonium player in the country. She has accompanied most of the best known singers and instrumentalists. Her interpretation of the various *ragas* was more than an accompaniment—it acquired the significance of background colour in a painting. Also noteworthy was the impressively sturdy and controlled tabla

playing of Shobha Kudesia, and the enjoyable lively performance on the same instrument by Neelam Gupta.



Bageshwari Qamar playing shehnai accompanied by Neelam Gupta on tabla

After the festival, we talked to some of the musicians. What they had to say shed considerable light on the predicament and the straggle of women artistes today.

24 year old Neelam Gupta works as tabla accompanist at Jwaladevi Mahila College, Kanpur. She said: "I used to learn dance. While dancing, I became attracted to the tabla, and began to learn from Keshavanand Sharmaji. I have now been learning tabla for 10 years. I am the only woman tabla player in Kanpur. I do not come from a family of musicians, but my father is a music lover and has always encouraged me. I feel that this festival was a very good idea. As a tabla player, I constantly face discrimination and prejudice. Many singers and instrumentalists flatly refuse to play with women accompanists. Some of them declare: 'The women who can accompany me has not been born.' Since the tabla is an accompanying instrument, we are dependent on main performers and are adversely affected by their prejudice. This pre-judice is particularly strong against women tabla players. My aim is to further develop my tabla playing."

While Neelam was speaking, Dr. Aban Mistry came up, and passionately agreed

with her that women tabla players constantly encounter prejudice. She said: "Not only men but even some women performers refuse to be accompanied by women tabla players. The accompanists are always considered to hold a secondary status, even though their art requires just as much devotion and hard work. In fact, the main player or singer can pause during the performance but the tabla player cannot stop even for a moment, lest the rhythm be broken. I learnt singing and sitar playing for 27 years but I took up and stuck to tabla playing because I was determined to prove that I could do it."

We also talked to the troupe of artists from South India. Sukanya Ramagopal, 25 years old, is the only woman player of the ghatam in India. She told us about herself: "First I learnt mridangam but then I became interested in this instrument because it was something different. My husband does not discourage me from performing. Just now he is looking after the baby while I am here in Delhi. But for two years after my marriage, I could not play due to certain family problems—my husband's illness and my pregnancy. Now I usually practise in the afternoons. There is a lady violinist living near my house so we often practise together."

Sukanya comes from a family of musicologists. Her great grandfather was an eminent Tamil researcher, and many of her forefathers were composers. She is however the only woman professional in the family. Though she sees herself as a professional, and takes her commitment to music with high seriousness, when we asked if she can and does earn a living by her playing, she said: "It is a side earning for me because my husband is earning. I am not at all bothered about the money. If I get an opportunity to perform I am very happy because I want to improve myself." She also said that since ehatam is considered a secondary accompanying instrument, the players are not paid much. The maximum payment for a performance is Rs 150 to 200 and one can be paid as little as Rs 15 or 20. Also, the musicians are kept busy only during festival seasons. At other times, they may not get even one

performance a month. For women players, the situation is even more difficult. Says Sukanya: "Most male singers refuse to be accompanied by women artistes. Some do agree, but on the whole, it is only women who encourage women. Some women also do not want women accompanists, but mostly we do accompany women singers."

She says that she took up ghatam because "I want to prove that I can play ghatam. At the beginning nobody encouraged me so I took it as a challenge. I want to develop it further and prove that I can do it as well as men can."

Sasikala, 20 years old, was accompanied from Bangalore to Delhi by her guru M.P. Ramachar. Sasikala first



Santhakumari on thavil

learnt bhārata nāṭyam, and then learnt to play the mridangam. Four years ago, she began to learn the kanjira which is played by very few women. Her family encourages her, though she is the only professional musician in the family. She has been learning music since the age of 11. She agreed with Sukanya, saying: "I don't need to earn a living by my music. Among us, ladies don't earn. They stay at home. Men earn." When we asked what she would do if after marriage her husband were to object to her performing in public, her guru urged her to say that she, will marry only a mao who is agreeable to her performing as a professional.

V. Padma, 27 years old, come from a family of musicians, and has been playing

the mridangam since the age of 11. Mridangam is a main accompanying instrument so she gets relatively more opportunities to perform professionally, but she also usually accompanies women artistes since men object to accompanists. Her husband, who is a bank officer, had come with her to Delhi. He remarked: "I love music so I allow her to perform."

K. Deivakunjaram Dhanalakshmi come from a family with a long tradition of nadaswaram playing but they are the first women in the family to have learnt the instrument. Their father taught them to play, but their brothers were not interested in learning. There are now a few women players of nadaswaram, among whom these two sisters are perhaps the best known. They have given about 1,000 performances. They earn a living and support their families by their playing. They have travelled in South India and also Malaysia and Singapore to give public performances. Since the nadaswaram is not considered a main instrument for concerts, they perform mostly in temples and at weddings.

Deivakunjaram is 27 and her sister 29. She said: "Our mother keeps insisting that we should get married soon, but we have not yet agreed because we think that after marriage we may not be allowed to play, and also once we have children, it will be difficult for practise and to perform. I married after I am 30 years old. If I do not marry at all, I may have to face problems and insecurities in old age."

P. Santhakumari, 32 is the only woman player of the thavil in Tamtlnadu. She has an impressive command over the instrument, which she started learning to play when she was 15 years old. Thavil playing is not normally taught to women but she got inspired to learn after hearing some women thavil players from Kerala and Srilanka. Since her guru Rajagopalan is a good friend of her father who is a nadaswaram player, he willingly taught her to play the thavil.

Santhakumari is employed as a regular player in a temple at Dindigul, where she earns Rs 350 a month. Her husband, who plays; the nadaswaram in another temple,

earns Rs 500 a month.

She has two small children who she brought with her to Delhi. When we asked how she gets time for music, with her household responsibilities, she said she has to make the time since it is a question of earning her living. Since she plays daily in the temple, she does not need to spend extra time on practice.

All the women from the South vociferously agreed with Sukanya when she said: "This festival was a very good idea. Women do not get encouragement in the general festivals. Also, it was an introduction for us. I never knew, for example, that if there are such good women tabla artistes. I did not even know the others from South India, except V. Padma." This was the first time that these South Indian women artistes had performed in North India.

Shannoji too felt that one of the most rewarding results of the festival was that "the artistes felt very happy, elevated, satisfied. It was a great experience to witness their dedication — some of them travelling long distances with small babies in their arms. In spite of all the responsibilities they shoulder, women did it ! And I felt that they maintained a high standard, They all said that such a festival should be organized every year."

Explaining why she felt the need for such a festival, Shannoji said : "I feel that music is one way for women to break out of the suffocation in which they have been caught for centuries. When a woman expresses in the form of music the pain, the suffocation, the tenderness, the love which dwell in her mind, she is able to communicate the world the anguish of her heart. It is the woman who introduces music to children, who sings lullabies, who teaches children to smile, to speak. Music is in her very being, she is the embodiment all the *ragas*, the emotions, Therefore I feel the quality of her art will be higher if she is allowed to develop it, because she is closer to life's struggle than is a man..

I want more women on the scene, at every level. In North India, professional women musicians have come to be looked down upon. Women professionals were



K. Deivakunjaram and K. Dhanalakshmi on nadaswaram

courtesans in medieval times, therefore the tendency persists in middle class families to say : 'Oh our daughter-in-law is interested in music but thank god, there is no need for her to go on stage, to play for a living.' Though a few women have made a name for themselves, the majority still encounter a great deal of prejudice. Star performers ask which woman accompanist can possibly be good enough to play with their sarod or their singing. I feel that even if it is true that a particular woman accompanist is not so good, she needs to be encouraged, how else will she improve? We as women should encourage women. There were certain women performers who refused to play at this festival because they were not willing to be accompanied by women. Those who did agree, took a step forward. For example, Asghari Begum was singing *dhrupad* which is always sung with the pakhawaj, not with the tabla. Yet since we did not have a woman pakhawaj player here, she agreed to be accompanied by a tabla player,

I want more opportunities to be available to women accompanists. This festival was an attempt to make the audience receptive, and also to encourage the artistes, to give them recognition as professionals, I did not go out of my way to get women players of instruments which women commonly play, such as sitar and sarod. However, I wanted a woman surbahar player and I would have liked

Annapurna Devi, ex wife of Ravi Shankar, and daughter of Allauddin Khan. She is one of the great musicians of India, but she has for years not performed in public."

A major problem faced by Geetika in organizing the festival was the lack of funds which also led to the sad spectacle of half empty halls. The festival cost about Rs 70,000 since the hall had to be hired, and the musicians were all paid. Though some of them would have willingly performed free of charge, Shannoji says : "Since the idea was to move towards making women artistes professional-ly independent, I wanted them to be paid." The rates differed for different artistes, depending on how well known they are, and therefore how much they are accustomed to charge. However, they were all very helpful and reduced their normal rates considerably. As one of them, expressing her willingness to cooperate fully, replied when Shannoji asked how much she would charge : "What can I say to a sister musician ?"

Shannoji described how the financial dependence Geetika was forced into crippled the organizers and caused innumerable problems : "We approached Sangeet Natate Akademi for funds. We did not receive any answer in writing but were finally told verbally that since the Akademi does not stand for discrimination between men and women, they could not fund an all women festival Early in 1982 I applied

to the Sahitya Kala Parishad, and spent a year running around, completing various bureaucratic procedures. They have lots of money and even if they had granted Rs 10,000, I was determined to go ahead and do it, raising the rest of the money through advertisements in the brochure. Since a year had passed and there was no answer from the Parishad, we were compelled to approach business houses to sponsor the festival. We thought of having three sponsors- one for each session. However, around January 20, 1983, the Modis, makers of Four Square Kings cigarettes, offered to sponsor the whole festival, saying they were not interested in doing it piecemeal. They made a very attractive offer, saying they would spend about Rs 30,000 on publicity, and also organize ticket sales.

We had not planned to sell tickets. Since this was the first festival of its kind, we had wanted to give out free invitations so as to acquaint the Delhi audience with the idea, and also to have full halls for the encouragement of the artistes.

However, since the Modis were so confident of their ability to manage the whole show, we agreed, though it sounded too good to be true. Over the next month, they kept delaying and hanging fire. We had to keep chasing them but they were never available. They also kept changing their differ and contradicting themselves. We were getting frantic since time was passing, it was now too late for us to make alternative arrangements, but we could see no signs of the promised publicity. Finally, they issued three advertisements whereas earlier they had promised more than ten. Also, the tickets were not handed over to the sales counters on time, with the result that many people who did see the announcements and went to buy tickets on the first day had to go away disappointed. It is these Modis who *are* responsible for the half empty halls. We could have easily filled the hall with invitees but after the ticket sales had been so mismanaged, we were helpless. It was really sad that the artistes had to play to half empty halls.

It is these government Akademis with

their so-called rules and regulations who drive us to the cigarette and *bidi wallas*. Businessmen have no value for art. They are more interested in selling cigarettes than in promoting art.

However, I do intend to do it again. I will not be defeated. This time, I will not go in for commercial sponsorship. Geetika has organized many other programmes without commercial sponsorship, and has met with resounding success. We have managed every thing ourselves and have always full halls. This time, we are not even sure whether all the money spent by us will be recovered, since the brochure sale proceeds are still coming in. We members of Geetika have spent out of our own pockets, and paid for everything in advance.”

Shanno Khurana hails from Shahpur near Sargoda. Her father, an engineer, was settled in Jodhpur state. Describing how her involvement with music grew, she said:



Shanno Khurana

“I come from a family of engineers, not a family of musicians. When I was small I used to listen to my older sister taking music lessons. When I was three and a half years old, I one day climbed on a chair to reach the door bolt, and after shutting myself into the room, began to pick out a tune on my sister’s harmonium. After that I began to play whatever tunes heard floating around. My brother had a nice voice and we used to sing together.

My father was a great Arya Samajist. He believed in education for women, but within the house. He was very conservative so there was no question of his allowing his daughters to go to Jodhpur maharaja’s court, to listen to the professional musicians there, or to perform there as profession. When I was about 12, my father allowed my brother to start taking lessons from Raghunath Rao Musalgaonkar, an eminent ustad, but I was told there was no need for me to take lessons with him. I used to hear the lessons but was not allowed to participate. When I was filling the form for the matriculation examination, I, without asking anyone, put down music as one of my subjects, thinking that once I had taken it as a subject, I would have to be allowed to learn seriously. By this time, my father had seen the ustad was a very gentlemanly person, so he allowed me to learn from him. I learnt for about five years, and then, when I was nearly 18, I was married.

My husband’s family had nothing at all to do with music. But my husband saw music in me and he encouraged me to go ahead. It was only his support that made it possible for me to continue practising, and to perform professionally. Otherwise, it would have then. I have seen so many, many very bright and talented young girls giving up music after marriage, and just becoming housewives. So many girls are finished that way.”

After completing her training under Mushtaq Hussain Khan, and doing her Ph.D on *Khayal Gayaki* and Rajasthani folk music, Shannoji founded Geetika in 1968. Earlier she had composed and acted in two highly successful Punjabi operas Heer Ranjha and Sohni Mahiwal. Shannoji says that one of the main aims of Geetika is to bring classical music as close to the people as possible. Geetika has always experimented with new and innovative ideas. In 1970, it staged the first ever opera in Urdu. Entitled Jahanara, it was based on 60 *ragas*. This was followed by Chitralakha, the first ever Hindi opera, based on 80 *ragas*. Sundari, a Punjabi opera, was the first to present the *ragas* of, the *shabads* of Guru Granth Saheb in

opera form. In October 1982, Geetika organized a very successful festival of *thumri*, *dadra* and *tappa*. Representatives of three schools from different parts of the country participated in this festival.

One fact which emerged very clearly from what the women musicians had to say, was that more even than in other professions, a woman in the music profession requires the support of her family in order to survive. The few women who do survive as musicians manage to do so either because they come from families or musicians who are not hostile to the idea of the women members of the family performing, or because their families, particularly fathers and husbands, are supportive and encouraging. On the one hand, many women of promising talent have to give up music altogether, or merely practise for their private pleasure as and when they can make the time, because their families, husbands or in-laws object to their performing in public, and see any attempt to do so as a disgrace to the family. On the other hand, even many male musicians prevent the women of their families from developing their potential or from performing in public.

Sharbari Mukherjee in her essay entitled "Women and traditional Indian music" in the Geetika brochure, gives one example of such exclusion of women: "Traditionally, women have never been permitted to sing or learn *dhrupad* which is said to be the divine music meant for the gods, and was always associated with temple rituals. It was the male bastion strictly taught to the male members of the family or to sons-in-law and the knowledge was sometimes handed down as dowry to those who married into the family of some musicians of high status. But women were never practitioners."

It would appear that with the decline of the older forms of patronage extended by royal and noble families, many of the professional women musicians were pushed out of the field. Today musicians still depend for survival on patronage, though of a different kind.

Patronage today comes either from the state, or from private business houses who

are more likely to support art with the aim of profiteering than from love of art. The atmosphere of competition fostered by this kind of patronage does not appear to be congenial or encouraging for the majority of women artistes, who have nothing but their talent on which to depend. It was evident even from the range of talent displayed at this festival that ability is not necessarily linked to recognition or fame. Some of the most brilliant players were also the least known, the ones buried in small villages, or eking out a meagre pittance by performing in temples or at weddings.

However, one statement in the Geetika brochure was rather disturbing. It claimed that "not many sons of the old masters find the music profession remunerative, and so they have begun to diversify their talents. For instance, the sons of a sarangi maestro or a tabla *ustad* do not take to their fathers' instruments. Since these two instruments are generally accompanying instruments, they take to sarod or sitar and the like, in order to emerge as the main performer on the concert platform. But then, are we going to let the ancient sarangi go into oblivion, for not all instrumentalists can become soloists? It is here that women can come forward." This statement could be interpreted to mean that as men leave low paid and less recognized areas of music, women should fill the gaps, thus coming to occupy the lowest and least remunerative rungs of the ladder, because one major reason for men leaving the job of playing accompanying instruments, is that accompanists are poorly paid as compared to main performers. Fortunately, this statement seemed contrary to the spirit of the festival, which broke new ground in several ways—by giving recognition to women accompanists as musicians in their own right, by demonstrating the potential of instruments usually considered "secondary", and by moving away from the dominant pattern in concerts today, which spotlights the "main" performer, relegating the accompanists to the background. The performers at the festival did not become so excellent and involved in their music because men are now supposedly leaving this "secondary"

group of instruments to them. Rather, they were finally getting long overdue recognition as musicians.

Today, when even habitual concert goers, not to speak of the majority of us, have been attuned to react to "big names" rather than to respond freely to the quality of music as we hear it, to trust the evidence of reviews and awards rather than that of our own experience, this festival was a courageous effort to acknowledge the worth of several relatively unknown artistes, and thereby to assert the primacy of art over cults and coteries.

In her introduction to the first session, the announcer said: "The Rigveda names 27 *vidushis* (learned women) who assisted in its composition... This festival too is a festival of *vidushis*. Today, each of these *vidushis* is standing alone just as courage always stands alone." We hope that this is only a beginning—both for the proliferation of women's scholarship in the field of music, and for their coming together to share their skill and their joy in music. □

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It will be several months before we have a full picture of how much of N.T. Rama Rao's Telugu Desam programme on women's issues will be implemented. However, we are pleasantly surprised at the determination his party has shown in rapidly beginning to redeem their campaign pledges by introducing an Andhra Pradesh Amendment Bill to amend the Hindu Succession Act. The aim is to make a share available to daughters that equals that of sons and to make daughters members of the coparcenary for inheritance of ancestral property. If the Bill is passed and enforced, it should have a strong impact on the status of women in Andhra Pradesh, where women have a long tradition of relatively greater political involvement, dating back to Telugu peaking social reformers of the late nineteenth century. We would be glad to hear from those knowledgeable about women's political activities in Andhra Pradesh.