

Review of “Living Music: Conversations with Pandit Dinkar Kaikini”

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Amarendra Dhaneshwar

amardhan@gmail.com

Translated by Ramesh Gangolli

"Only patience, great patience, can elevate the soul to great things" so said the philosopher Hiderot. One can say the same about a good work of art shaped by the hands of a good artist. The reason is that the artist has poured his whole being into it. That elevates the work to a high level. I have this experience in several concerts of the well-known vocalist, Dinkar Kaikini. Once, on the occasion of Sriram Lagoo's sixtieth birthday celebration, he sang a dadra in Raga Kirwani – his own composition, with the words "More Nainaa Barasana Laage." The plaintive notes of Kirwani, the uniquely robust throw of his voice, and the words of the lyric, simple but compelling – all three elements blended together so well that the memory of that experience has stayed fresh in my mind for years and years.

Dinkar Kaikini was a personality truly sui generis in the world of Music. He was a skilled exponent of both Raagdaari music and Thumri. He was also a creative artist. Not only did he create several ragas such as 'Gaganavihang', 'Bhoop Bilaval', 'Gunaranjani', but he also composed a sizable repertoire in many traditional ragas under his pseudonym "Dinrang". His creativity expressed itself through many vigorous offshoots. Vocal classical music is conventionally regarded as appropriate only for solo performance. Pt. Kaikini experimented with choral ensembles. Ravi Shankar had created a dance-drama based on Jawaharlal Nehru's book, "The Discovery of India", for Akashvani. Pt. Kaikini was Ravi Shankar's assistant for that production. In all this, he was following the tradition of Sangitacharya Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande. True to it, he always held fast to the principle that Music has not only an artistic dimension, but an intellectual one as well. Thus, while attending to his responsibilities as the Principal of the Music and Dance Division of the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, he simultaneously groomed disciples such as Sudhindra Bhowmik, M. Swaroopkumar, and Nishad Bakre. Such a versatile vocalist and artist is rare indeed!

"Living Music: Conversations with Pt. Dinkar Kaikini" is a book written by Priya Purushothaman, a promising young vocalist from Bengaluru, who is a disciple of Pt. Kaikini's daughter Aditi Upadhya. It is an excellent portrayal of Pt. Kaikini's rich musical persona. Priya Purushothaman is a kind of musical grandchild and virtual disciple of Pt. Kaikini, and these conversations reflect the affection that a grandfather would feel for his granddaughter. And, although Priya is very young, her style is a beautiful blend of sensitivity, maturity, and respectful affection for her Grandfather-Guru. Sadashiv Bakre's biography of Pt. Kaikini (in Marathi) is very informative and readable. But here, Priya Purushottaman has created a marvelous potpourri, artfully and seamlessly blending the biographical details of the protagonist, some explication of his musical ideas, and an evaluation of the impact of the musical corpus he has created and left behind. As a result, her book has an entirely different, wonderful aftertaste.

In an art such as Music, so completely dedicated to "doing", competence can only be achieved by means of long personal oral instruction from the Guru. The criticism that schools and colleges cannot prepare performing musicians has been always directed towards music educators, starting from the illustrious Vishnu Digambar Paluskar, who was a pioneer among them. Pt. Kaikini was trained in the tradition of Bhatkhande and Ratanjankar at Lucknow's Marris College. Although that tradition has spawned such powerful artists as Pt. Kaikini and Pt. Chidanand Nagarkar, it has been stamped as scholastic, and therefore somewhat arid and pedantic. The interesting fact is that in his conversations with Priya, Pt. Kaikini himself expresses his own opinion - that schools and colleges hardly ever prepare performing artists, but they do help in preparing attentive and appreciative audiences.

A product of the Bhatkhande tradition, Pt. Kaikini pursued his musical quest holding Faiyaz Khansaheb as a model. What becomes clear from this book is how, in finding and establishing his own musical identity, he had to consciously acknowledge to himself the limitations of his own teacher as a performer, and then put them aside to continue his quest. The knotty relation between Pt. Kaikini, as disciple, and Pt. Ratanjankar, his Guru, is skillfully laid bare here. Here is an anecdote from the book: Pt. Kaikini used to sing in the style of Faiyaz Khansaheb. On one occasion, he had the opportunity of performing when Khansaheb was in the audience. While Pt. Kaikini was presenting his piece in a grand leisurely style, Pt. Ratanjankar (who was also present), kept signaling his disciple to speed up, to get on with his performance, thereby creating a palpable tension. Faiyaz Khansaheb later took his disciple Ratanjankar to task for this, saying "That young man was singing like a tiger, and you turned him into a lamb!" The anecdote goes on to relate how Pt. Ratanjankar later applauded his disciple's performance and showered him with praise, hardly able to control his tears of joy.

A very attractive feature of the book is the inclusion of some very beautiful black-and-white photographs. Roshan, the well-known Music Director, was a fellow student of Pt. Kaikini at Marris College. The book contains a rare photograph of Roshan, Krishna Gundo Ginde (Gindsaheb) and Pt. Kaikini. The book would be an excellent addition to the library of any connoisseur of Hindustani Classical music.