



❖ ' Paus' ( The rain )

A Marathi poem by Grace and calligraphy by B.G. Limaye

## ❖ Excerpts from the book titled 'The Musical Journey of Kumar Gandharva' by Raghava Menon

*Kumar Gandharva (1924-92) was one of the greatest exponents of Indian Classical Music. During an entire lifetime immersed in the study and practice of Classical Music, he created many newer dimensions and raised some fundamentally important questions about the nature of this great art form. In this book, the author Raghava Menon has tried to capture the mind and the journey of this great artist.*

...This book has taken a lifetime to get written. Not because any of us who knew Kumar and felt the epochal implications of his art that his life presented thought that it needed necessarily to be documented in a book; but that it needed to be understood for its own sake. It was, we felt, in this understanding that we would understand ourselves. Even to get a grasp of what and why he was the kind of man we believed he was needed time, a whole lifetime of time.

...In one of his letters he mentions how it is important to be lonely in life and not seek redress in company. *That unless a man is absolutely and resolutely alone he cannot achieve much within him.*

...This was another strange and compelling finding about Kumar's essential spirituality. ***The whole thing called life, he believed, was one piece, not made up of random parts or seemingly disjointed by the absurdities of the social culture we inherit, or the peculiarities of the habits which are the substance of our lives. Fear would be among the first to disappear from our lives if this bit of truth were discovered. This was something that simply had to be known, and after knowing it there was nothing left to be done but fulfil one's appointed tasks.***

... One of these is the nature of the art itself. Indian music is largely a process rather than a finding. It does not conclude at any stage....This is among the reasons why the life histories of Hindustani classical musicians have a certain fey quality about them, a nimbus of unreality that hovers over their lives, and after the passing of the musician takes on the muted glow of fable. To some extent this is because of the nature of Raga, of the way the Ragas of the Indian musical inheritance are ordered and the way they play their part in Hindustani classical music, — *the belief, for instance, that Ragas have a certain kind of life in them. So that the inheritance of the Ragas is not a science nor an art for they are organic, transcending both art and science.* It is because of the fact that Hindustani classical musicians live their lives almost submerged in the world of Ragas that when their lives are examined exclusively along their lengths, in the realm of sequence alone, the meaning of their lives is vastly diminished. It is in the breadth of time that these lives are best measured for it is there that meaning is deepened and subtly layered across each life....Such measures of a linear passage are meaningless in the life of a musician who lives with certain timelessness as part of the calendar of his existence....It is in this sense that the historical part of a Hindustani classical musician's life is trivial and inconsequential **in the context of that inner journey which is the true content of the man.**

...Kumar had always been a musician who caused comment, dismay, admiration, wonder, befuddlement, and also a certain kind of despair because Kumar embodied more than any one else in our times in the field of music that impenetrable mystery which *is* there within every human being.

...There was little doubt for those who watched him closely even in those far-off days that Kumar was destined to look for music's source. The problem, as always, was where was this source located..... It was like a meteor that he passed across the Indian sky and cut in his wake the body of Hindustani classical music into two neat halves; one half before Kumar Gandharva and one half after him, a kind of a B.C. and an A.D. in Indian music. ....*There is very little doubt that a great part of Kumar's life was spent in devising means by which he might return to the source of his own being.* That he

found what he had searched all his life is borne out by the many hundreds of Bandishes he left behind him, a legacy which was one of the most formidable musical inheritances of Hindustani classical music in the twentieth century.

...The Swara, which is the unit of the Indian musical scale, is as esoteric a concept as the Holy Grail of the Christian Church. ***Broken down to its Sanskrit roots, the root Swa refers to the inner self of the student, the resident deity that inhabits all created things, and the root Ra which refers to a shining out of this inner self. In combination the word Swara would mean the radiance of the inner self and this is the essence of the Swara. It is because of the fact that very few people are aware of anything inside of them to which they can attribute their sense of self except as a bunch of appetites to which they give their exalted names that the musical discipline is directed firstly towards creating a passage within the student towards his inner into Sadhana rather than merely work at the practice of their art.***

...The practice of Sadhana in any work liberates the practitioner in numerous unaccountable ways but Sadhana achieved in music is so assertive that a person who has worked in this area becomes somewhat remote and distant from the principal concerns of the social order to which he belongs. The problem is not that such a person becomes a reactionary or a rebel. The problem is that he does not. If he were to become a rebel it is easy to administer such a man but a person who is largely indifferent to the preoccupations of the social order to which he belongs is a predicament, which is much worse than being a rebel. You cannot reorder this man, or give him another set of priorities He is beyond the reach of society, which was among the reasons why a subtle feeling of hostility exists between lovers of music and the practicing musician.

...This characteristic of Kumar's mind set even as a child, a complete indifference to any kind of mechanical response or a child-like delight in mere information, provides a vital clue to the path he took in his future years, the reason among other things for that internal restlessness and dissatisfaction with which he looked around and within him for answers to the fundamental question of why he was born. In actual fact he had resolved these issues in his mind well before he was bedded down by a near-fatal attack of tuberculosis for nearly six years. The suffering involved in his sickness was not what made him into a musician as many of us at a certain time wished to believe. He had become a true and complete musician long before he fell ill. It was the level of his art that changed after his illness. The sickness gave him; in addition, new and living material with which to sing, a refreshingly new repertoire to build on, and another language which branded his identity over the many decades of singing that followed his illness.

...Even if you did not have the slightest interest in the mysteries of Hindustani classical music you would still look at him and wonder at his presence which had something sure and secure in its knowledge. The fact that he had become a famous singer was the least of the reasons for this wonderment. It was Kumar as a person. He had this quality all his life.

...Kumar had two sides to him, only one of which he revealed to his friends. Within him, Kumar was a deadly serious and focussed man, a grim seriousness that would halt any one in his tracks by its sheer unreachable inwardness. An easy way to bring this element of Kumar's nature into the open in those days even while he was still a groping young man was to ask him for a Raga or a Bandish which you would like to hear him sing. If that Raga or Bandish was not in his mind among the Ragas or Bandishes that he had planned to sing for that evening, he would neither say yes nor no to your request, but would not sing your request. This was not because he wanted to slight your feelings or in any other way wanted to cause you hurt or embarrassment. The reason for this was that Kumar's Raga world was a peculiar psycho-spiritual realm, hardly of the nature of an art that he had learnt and acquired. It was a mystical universe with which his internal bonds were beyond the power of his words to describe or explain. ....He could never fathom their mystery, the power they had over him in his inner world, even in his sleep and in his waking moments. So he said nothing, and left people to think whatever they liked to think about him. Some thought he was arrogant and superior; others that he was after all a musician and was therefore bound to be eccentric. But the true reasons no one could ever know.

*...The ordinary body language of feigned humility, the desire to please for the sake of public adulation and all those social bits and pieces of casuistry all of which are part of our inheritance were beyond his ability to mimic. He left those things where they belonged in the world around him. He did not care whether there was one, two, ten, or a thousand listeners assembled to hear him. He was equipoised, the same everywhere and wherever. He came to sing on the dot of the time given to him and a few minutes before his allotted time was up you could hear him collect all those loose ends of his performance into a single unbranched statements like an aeroplane coming into land, the aileron dipping, the wings tilting to turn and align, and almost on the dot of the appointed time, he would land on the runway of your mind three hours after he had begun to sing. His engines would then be switched off and you would hear his Tanpuras slowly die down into silence. He sang for himself to his own standards and for the music he embodied. For the rest, he cared nothing.*

*.. He was fully aware that Ragas were never static that they grew and were reborn every time any one sang them, and that this power of regeneration that lay hidden in the scales of the Ragas was the mysterious fire of their inner life. He also knew that the Raga rewarded its meanest devotee by giving him a means whereby he may achieve that feeling of creative intensity and magnified life that was the quick of Raga Vidya.*

...Sadhana is a word that has always lain hidden in the veiled world of the Yoga of Nada. The triggering word for this concept was Brahman about which people had all kinds of notions but no personal experience. In music, from the beginning of time the best bet had always been found to be Raga Vidya and there was always so much to be done in that realm that very few people ever critically examined the ground on which the whole edifice was built, which is the Swara. Almost instantly in a major internal decision, Kumar decided to lay siege to this kingdom of the Swara...

Nambiar looked after and managed the Kumar household in all those years that Kumar lay in bed debarred from singing, ( due to his serious illness )..... When I asked Nambiar whether Kumar sang at all during his illness, Nambiar replied that he did not think so, but there was this one thing. He seemed constantly to be humming something to himself, so softly that you did not hear anything unless you went close to him. These were not songs, he was keen to point out, but a kind of sound which he did not understand.

*...To a group of American language teachers who had assembled in Delhi in the 1960s Kumar had made a startling remark that someone who did not know the nature of silence can neither speak nor sing. Both these abilities, Kumar had declared, were built on the substance of silence and demanded the knowledge that at the very centre of every Swara there is hidden a vast space of impenetrable silence. In a certain sense, it cannot be denied that Kumar's singing embodied this knowledge.*

...What Kumar did to the Tanpura was to point out to his listeners the pivotal role this instrument plays in the very pith and grain of the art. ....*Often he would compare his singing as an attempt he was making to paint on a background canvas of Tanpura, Tabla and Harmonium a particular portrait of the universe of a Raga through Alap and Bandish as felt at the moment of singing. Just as the unpainted portions of the canvas reveal the empty places on it, what is often designated as negative space, the Tanpura and the other accompaniments appear at those moments of silence that intersperse the performance.*

...Many of his listeners believed that the short, heavily-charged spurts of singing and pause that Kumar favoured was the consequence of not having enough breath with which to sing on account of his illness. This was not true. Kumar's breath was sufficient for himself and his musical needs. *The seeming pauses in his style of singing was a waiting, in order to make sure that the lyrical and musical idea he was wishing to convey had duly registered in the minds of his listeners;*

***the sudden silence showed the point he was making*** ...The Gayaki that he evolved had no place for the remotest hint of vocal vainglory.

..He believed that the lyrics of the Vilambit Khyal had their own place and life as poetic utterance and were as vital to the thrust of the Khyal as the words of well-known Thumris. ***This is one of the reasons why he used the words of the Khyal he was planning to sing in his introductory Alap of the Raga, making them function like a kind of musical sextant to find his coordinates across the ocean of the Raga. Metaphorically he could be considered as setting a course true north from a reading from the sun's angle on the Raga's horizon. At that instant the mood and the feeling of the performance was established.***

...When Kumar would constantly advise students of music not to practice scale exercises mechanically for hours but spend time in thought, very few understood what he meant by "thought". Many understood him to mean that he was merely referring to the mechanical nature of the basics of music practice.

"There is too much of Kumar Gandharva in Kumar Gandharva," Deodhar used laughingly to say at Kumar's strong predilections that often seemed almost like physical reflexes towards the art's basic assumptions. And it was not possible to come into Kumar's ambience and not be smitten by the sheer force of his being...He had an elaborate simplicity within which he lived. Sitting on a mat and leaning a tiny mirror against some furniture and quietly shaving while he laughed and made innocent remarks about life and art, he used the easiest phrase to sidetrack a too close examination of any issue that might have been uppermost in our minds by replying to it with a characteristically domestic answer, simple, unaffected either by scholarship or academic implications. Then there was his Supari slicer with which he would become absorbed. He was a handyman in every sense of the term, could lay pipes or wire a house for electricity. It was a way with him, a fine grasp of the physical shapes and the tangled nature of objects in the world.

...Kumar obviously knew Bhakti differently from the safe social approach to Bhajan singing, which is commonly seen in Bhajan Sandhyas and Satsangs where people gather to remember God. The Sanskrit root *bha* represents error that is part of all natural state of creatures, and the concluding *kti* means remove, separate, put behind, or put a distance between. ***So for Bhakti you have to know what is what, in what we perceive as life before you can remove the congenital error with which we are born; loving God or telling people that you do is not enough. You have to know the nature of what you are extolling in your verses through observing life and living it for greater knowledge of its essence. It is then that your Bhajans will become Bhakti Sangeet. It is merely a manner of paying rent for being given life and is the original obligation of the awakened man. Kumar merely paid his rent scrupulously like any self-respecting tenant on earth.***

...Kumar had an implicit conviction that things in life are directed inexorably towards their appointed end, and that no one can change a hair's breadth of them. But he also knew that this was the outer circumstance for their working out. Personal effort, yes; but, personal effort where? ***It was no use making any personal effort in the mechanical world outside without first preparing an elaborate ground within. This is the only work that makes any difference to any one within or without. In fact, it was only within that a person had any choices whatever. The choices outside were already made and concluded. We only arrive at them. But the person within had infinite freedom and as long as this person exercised his full freedom within, it made no difference what happened outside. Every action that you took to endorse and augment your inner work can be undertaken without fear or embarrassment. It was this same thing in his life that took him through his sickness..***

...Kumar, too, in a certain sense worked on the breadth of Hindustani classical music and not along its length. ***The principal value to mankind of such intrusions into its customary state of stupor is that their entry helps to expand the***



*database of life. They add new approaches, new understandings, and sometimes these results in a brand new awakening. They also help us to understand that almost anything that we think as known today can pass from us and a new angle and a new finding can be discovered which will change a great deal of the world as we now know it, into brand new, magical shapes and configurations.*

*...It is a novel approach and demands power, presence, a quality of inner silence and certain special qualities of character in the student who will search for this new path. It cannot be done easily, or mechanically, or from books, however capable and gifted a student may be. It lies in the sadness of a breaking away from roots that actually belong to us but not having been truly claimed never become our right to possess, and it is the undertaking of a journey like those Pilgrim Fathers did, when they fitted out two ships and went into the empty blue of the Atlantic and found a verdant land beyond the horizon. The journey once begun never truly ends. It is to the end of every life that this journey is directed. What it needs are courage and a rapt belief.*

### ❖ Traveler : A concert by Anoushka Shankar

*Exploring connections between Indian Classical Music and Spanish Flamenco*

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7a1zU0yxk6c>



#### About 'Treasures'

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