

THE harmonium is one instrument which is as popular as it is controversial, especially when one thinks about its role in traditional music. Over the decades, it has attracted as many detractors as ardent votaries. And that, possibly, is why it continues to attract attention.

It will be interesting to recount briefly the genesis of the controversy. It all began with a complete ban on its use both as a solo, and as an accompanying instrument in the broadcasting media in the late '30s. The influential body of knowledgeable listeners held the view that the harmonium, a keyboard instrument was, by the very nature of its construction and tone production, totally unsuitable for playing raga music, both Hindustani and Carnatic. With a crusading zeal, they marshalled massive evidence to show that although instruments of the keyboard type once formed part of the vast and varied repertory of our *vadyas* they gradually disappeared from the musical scene as they simply did not suit India's musical genius.

The opponents have dubbed the harmonium a sort of hybrid instrument from the west. Trying to raise this medium as a solo and accompanying instrument, they argue, was plainly to seek compromise in intonation in

Carnatic instrument acceptable to AIR, the harmonium was also a naturalised Indian medium deserving continuance in the broadcasting studios.

Finally, the pro-harmonium lobby had its way. It succeeded in bringing the radio authorities around to accept its view. But it was not till 1976 that the instrument was allowed to stage a comeback into the broadcasting network.

Controversy or no controversy, one question I have always liked

HARMONIUM

Sangeet Vadya

Popular and controversial

to ask many musicians and musicologists is whether the harmonium is so indispensable to raga singing. For long have I entertained doubts about its suitability even as a solo concert instrument.

True, I have seen that all-time greats in Hindustani music, like Faiyaz Khan, Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, Begum Akhtar, to name a few, have presented their *khayals* and also *thumris* and other light classical varieties to the accom-

panied.

This holds good even when I have chanced to hear the harmonium being played as a solo instrument. It simply cannot bring out the *gamakas*, the fineries like *kan-swaras* and other embellishments as effectively as in the case of the violin or the sarangi or the flute.

In saying this, I certainly do not deny the great work visionaries like Bhayya Ganpatrao (who pioneered *thumri* and also excelled as a harmonist without a peer of his time), Govindrao Tembe, Vithalrao Korgaonkar, P. Madhukar and the present-day Manohar Chimot have done towards aligning the harmonium to the needs of solo expression of raga music.

At the same time, getting used to the tempered notes of a harmonium — even a 22-notes-to-a-scale instrument — would make our ears less sensitive to the *shruti* intervals used in a number of ragas. For instance, if we hear a raga like Darbari Kanada or a Shree on the harmonium while accompanying a vocalist, and still do not feel the uncomfortable difference, we had it. We will have made a real compromise. The question is whether we can afford such a compromise. Even I question the advisability of using the harmonium for teaching raga music to children, who will take up the subject for specialisation as a concert art-form.

Meanwhile, the ascendancy of the harmonium as an accompanying instrument has come to pose a serious challenge to the survival of many other *sangat vadyas* from the stringed category — specially that of the sarangi, whose tone comes nearest to the human voice. Only time will tell whether this is to be regarded as an example of "peaceful co-existence" between the two rivals and if so, how long it is going to last.

Mohan Nadkarni



relation to the basically melodic character of our music. Eminent personalities like Rabindranath Tagore, himself a poet-singer and composer of exceptional merit, and Jawaharlal Nehru, were among the powerful opponents of the harmonium. Tagore once called it the "bane of Indian music" with its key-board outfit and tempered scale. Nehru was credited to have condemned it as a "bastard instrument."

So great, apparently, were the pressures from the opponent's lobby that it resulted in the banishment of the instrument from the radio organisation! Predictably, there were vociferous protests from several top-ranking exponents of Hindustani music, as well as listeners, against the ban from all over the country. They averred that just as the violin had become a naturalised

paniment of the harmonium. To most of them, the instrument was inseparable from their performance. Which is possibly why, despite the ban on its use for broadcasting purposes, the harmonium continues to enjoy pride of place as an accompanying instrument on the concert stage without any impediment.

Frankly, I have never felt quite at ease on such occasions. Indeed, I have sensed a kind of insouciant compromise insidiously at work in the process — that is, at the cost of reducing the values and the character of the subtle and delicate *shrutis*, which embody the very essence of our melodic system. In fact, it is through the use of an amazing number of fine middle-tones and semi-tones, which lie between the *swaras* of the *saptaka*, that the unfolding of the melody finally