

On the harmonium—II

As most connoisseurs of classical music know, the harmonium has suffered at the hands of die-hard purists basically because the variety in vogue has a key-board outfit with a tempered scale.

But there are other obvious deficiencies which seriously detract from the continuity of flow of its music. Its swaras come out separately and not in smooth succession as one would find in string instruments. Besides, its wind-flow is not only limited but cannot be regulated at will.

How the great masters of the harmonium mentioned in this column last week, managed to control its wind-flow and conjure up

marvels of melodic portraiture by their magical touch on the keys—which varied from feather-like, soft to light, fleeting or hard—will always remain a mystery. I was privileged to listen to the music of Tendre and Korgankar in my younger days. Their music spoke eloquently of their versatile genius. Indeed, one can even say their music was *sul graneris*. No artists in the later years, it seemed to me, would come up to deserve the mantle of these old masters.

Pandit Chimote can be said to have filled the vacuum, with the difference that he has carried out a variety of innovations on the harmonium in vogue. In the first place, he effected significant changes to secure a longer duration of wind-flow from the bellows of the harmonium.



Pt. Manohar Chimote

He then made equally significant alterations in the arrangement of the key-board and in the tuning system from the tempered scale to the *ganhar* mode of Indian music. He incorporated a number of reworking wires into the structure of the instrument, and fondly named his improvised harmonium "samvadini".

I first heard Chimote in early

By Mohan Nadkarui

1960, when he was featured in a duet with a violinist. The instrument he had then played looked like a stringed harmonium, innovated by himself, and he had then called it "su-manohar". The tones of the instrument sounded rather loud, while its playing as a whole seemed to give a slightly jarring, even unmusical effect, apparently because of clashing of the strings and the reeds. Frankly, I was neither impressed nor

amused by the instrument.

But it was an astonishingly different Chimote when I had the chance to listen to his recital again a few weeks ago. The samvadini he wielded at the recent concert sounded marvelously different from his old su-manohar in many respects. Obviously, he continued to pursue his experimentations assiduously in the intervening years to make it a full-fledged solo concert medium on par with those like the flute, the shehnai, the sitar or the sarod. Indeed, one would have to listen and watch how he has managed to overcome some of the inherent handicaps of the original instrument with so much ingenuity and craftsmanship.

The recital was held as part of the felicitation function organised by Panditji's admirers, friends and disciples in observance of the 25th jubilee day of his teaching institution, the Samvadini Sanghatilaya, located at Goregaon, in the northern suburbs of Bombay. The fare he offered com-

prised an elaborate delineation of *Marva*, followed by a tune based on *Mihira Pilo* in the *thumri* style, with a sensitive *Bhairavi* raga set to *dadra taal* to round off.

All the pieces were intensely melodic and revealed dignity, dexterity, poise and balance. The melodic flow was smooth and unhindered by any disparate elements. The impulses emerging from the instrument were variegated but they blended themselves so naturally in the overall pattern of improvisation that each number stood out as a coherent melodic picture. In brief, the recital was a revelation.

Behind Pandit Chimote's achievement lies a long period of brilliance and struggle—almost a life of despair and frustration. Born at Nagpur in 1929 in a family of traditional exponents of devotional music, Manohar Vasudev Chimote took to bhajan-singing at the age of 6 when he began to accompany his father. Later, he took to playing the harmonium as a serious pursuit.

Chimote acquired the basic techniques of playing the instrument from the late veteran Bhanushimdev Veda, himself a versatile instrumentalist and innovator. He came to Bombay in the late fifties and forced valued contacts with the noted vocalist, Lakshminarayan Jaisurwale, and, still later, with the great Amit Khan. He soon made his mark as an ideal accompanist and was seen to provide harmonium support to other masters like Bade Ghulam Ali Khan.

Chimote's talents attracted the attention of the film industry and music directors from the world of Cinema began enlisting him in their instrumental ensembles. But not for long. For it was typical of the man that Chimote thought that "the honor of accompaniment, no matter how great a salarist, was no substitute for innovation and creativity." And he decided to devote himself completely to teaching and also to the fulfillment of his consuming ambition to raise the status of the harmonium as a full-fledged solo concert instrument.

Pandit Chimote looks rather old for his 55 years. And perhaps naturally. He wears the look of a true seeker always immersed in his unending quest and oblivious of material gains and economic hardships. He has now reached a stage where the world of classical music has to take a serious note of him and give him due recognition for his work in the field.

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