

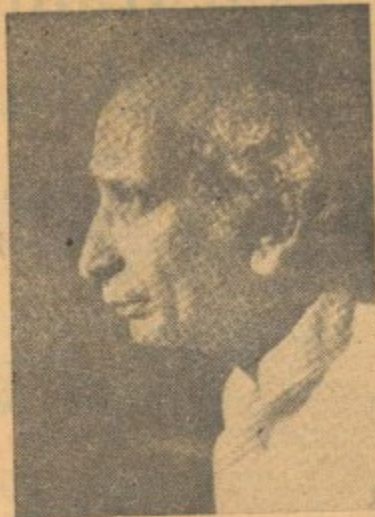
On the harmonium

By Mohan Nadkarni

The harmonium is one instrument which is as popular as it is controversial.

It has as many detractors as votaries. And that is why it compels attention. It will be of interest to recount the genesis of the controversy — in fact, it has gone on for decades. 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 thirties. The influential body of knowledgeable crusaders against the instrument held the view that a keyed instrument like the harmonium was, by the very nature of its construction and tone production, totally unsuitable for playing Indian classical music, both Hindustani and Carnatic. They adduced enough evidence to show that although instruments of the key-board type once formed part of the vast and varied repertory of our vadyas, they gradually disappeared from the musical scene as they did not suit the musical genius of India.

The opponents even dub the



Pt. Manohar Chimote

harmonium a sort of hybrid import from the West. Trying to raise this medium to the status as a solo and accompanying instrument, they argue, was plainly to seek compromises in intonation in relation to the basically melodic character of our classical tradition.

Eminent personalities like Rabindranath Tagore, himself a poet, singer and composer of high merit, and Jawaharlal Nehru were among

the powerful opponents of the harmonium. Tagore once called it the "bone of Indian music", with its key-board outfit and tempered scale, while Nehru was said to have condemned it as a "bastard instrument". So great, apparently, were the pressures from the anti-harmonium lobby that it resulted in the exile of the instrument from the radio organisation for several decades.

There were vociferous protests from several top-ranking classical musicians as well as listeners against the ban from all over the country. They averred that just as the violin had become a naturalised South Indian instrument acceptable to AIR, the harmonium was also a naturalised Indian medium deserving of continuance in India's broadcasting studios.

Finally, the pro-harmonium lobby had its way, and succeeded in bringing the radio authorities round to its view. But it was only in 1976 that the instrument was allowed to stage a comeback into the broadcasting net-work.

Controversy or no controversy, one question I have always liked to ask many musicians and musicologists is whether the harmonium is so indispensable to classical singing. For long have I entertained doubts about its suitability as a solo concert instrument as well. I have seen that all-time greats in Hindustani music like Faiyaz Khan, Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, Begum Akter and a host of others have presented their khayals, thumris and other light classical

varieties to the accompaniment of the harmonium. To them, the instrument was inseparable from their performance. Which is why, despite the ban on its use for broadcasting purposes, the harmonium continued 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. I have always sensed a kind of innocuous compromise at work in the process — that is at the cost of reducing the values and the character of the sensitive and delicate shrutis which constitute the very foundation of our melodic system. Indeed, it is through the use of an amazing chamber of fine middle-tones and semi-tones which lie between the swaras of the saptaka that the unfolding of the melody emerges in a grand design. This unfolding is conceived and presented in an unbroken manner, in which the swaras serve only as landmarks. The type of harmonium that has been in vogue has, in my mind, falls tragically short of the basic needs of melody-making, especially in the classical field.

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 ran-swaras and other embellishments as effectively as in string instruments like the violin or the sarangi. In saying this, I certainly do not deny the great work visionaries like Bhayya Ganapatrao (who pioneered thumris in the early years of this century and also excelled as a harmonium without a peer), Govindrao Tembe, Vishatrao Korgankar and several others towards aligning the harmonium to the needs of classical solo expression. But such examples have been extremely few — they rather came as exceptions to prove the rule. By and large, the technical limitations of the instrument have seemed so formidable that no amount of virtuosity, nor originality, nor even both put together, have helped to make it as profoundly appealing as our other string instruments.

Now comes Pandit Manohar Chimote, who has devoted almost his life-time to research and innovation in his relentless effort to overcome the usual deficiencies of the harmonium. In the process, he has ingeniously fabricated what he calls "sawvadin", which represents a clever variation of the original instrument. But more about this, next week.

(To be concluded)