
“Swayambhu Gandhar” – Gaan Saraswati
Smt. Kishori Amonkar

“Music may thrive on and be enriched by the depth and expanse of *Karuna Rasa* or *Shringar Rasa*, but when it leads to *Shanta Rasa*, that is, ultimate bliss.”

-Kishori Amonkar

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ABSTRACT

An extraordinary genius, Kishori Amonkar was a leading exponent of Jaipur Atrauli *gayaki*, and daughter of an illustrious mother, *Padma Bhushan*, *Gaan Tapaswini*, Mogubai Kurdikar, the widely respected and renowned disciple of *Ustad Alladiya Khan*.

What made her music divine were the incredible shades in between two swaras, giving wings and spurs to the raags she sang, skilfully veiling the Avirbhav and Tirobhav, thus contributing a highly distinctive element to the raagas she sang.

She would emphasize ‘that’ *raag* specific *shruti* in a phrase with such remarkable dexterity, gliding through it with astonishing finesse, that the innate *bhava* of the *raag* would be hypnotic.

She was unconventional, abstract and yet deeply systematic. A seeker, in quest of the divine swara, seeking the absolute formless truth that pulsated behind *Naad Swar Shruti* and *Laya*, and believing in music as a channel for a dialogue with the Supreme, through dedicated *sadhana*

A reflective scholar, who diligently studied the ancient *granthas*, As a staunch classicist, she maintained the purity and discipline of the format, and as a romanticist she surged with the *bhava* of the *raag*.

Her music is a rare amalgamation of technique, spirituality, and aesthetics with highest form of content. Kishori Amonkar did not constrain herself to any *gharana*, Her resolute belief in the *swara* as an embodiment of the Supreme further gave multiple dimensions to



her music that, bringing in universal charm. She was like the “*Swyambhu Gandhar*,” which emanated between the two *Shadajs*.

KEY WORDS

Concept, Tradition, Technique, Aesthetics, Spirituality

A legend like Kishori Amonkar was born to create paradise. Her celestial music transcended the obvious, transformed traditions and manifested truth in every emotion.

I shared a profound bond with her during my long association as a disciple. Over the years, I have experienced incredible moments when I caught glimpses of the mysteries of her music and various aspects of her complex personality. She was an artiste with many layers; layers that were seamlessly woven into the magical world of *surs* and *taals*. She was unconventional, abstract and yet deeply systematic. She found rhythm in the chaos and aesthetics between the many tones of thought and approach. Her ability to decipher and fathom the abstruse philosophy of music was uncanny and yet so relatable. Her renderings of *raagas* were therapeutic and her musical vision, a perfect blend of antiquity and modernity.

What made her music divine were the incredible shades in between two swaras, giving wings and spurs to the raags she sang. She also transformed many existing *bandishes* with unsurpassed innovative and spell binding nuances, and renewed expressions.

She skilfully veiled the Avirbhav and Tirobhav which gave a highly distinctive element to the raagas she sang. Consequently, the evolution and delineation of her *raagas* always sounded interestingly different. She would emphasize ‘that’ *raag* specific *shruti* in a phrase with such remarkable dexterity, gliding through it with such astonishing finesse, that the innate *bhava* of the *raag* would be hypnotic.

I have often closely heard her render a particular raaga for several days without repeating a phrase. Each time the raga took on a new altitude, each time a new slant and a whole new heaven! ‘When I sing, I imagine and feel the notes with their colours, their rasas and their bhavas; then I urge the raga to appear with in me and pray to my lord to sing it for me’¹

She was a seeker, in quest of the divine swara, seeking the absolute formless truth that pulsed behind *Naad Swar Shruti* and *Laya*. A reflective scholar who not only diligently studied the ancient *granthas* but also brought into her music the teachings of the great sages of this art “I have merely gone back to the roots; I follow the old seers like Bharata, Narada and Sharangdeva. They were all realized souls. What they wrote in the Shastra’s was what they had experienced”.²

Therefore her introspection –*chintan* and learning through the works of the prehistoric sagacious added an insightful depth to her expression;

As a staunch classicist, she maintained the purity and discipline of the format and as a romanticist she flowed with the *bhava* of the *raag*. She was convinced that in order to illuminate the innate essence of the *raag*, one would have to delve into the past to attain that knowledge which was eternal and absolute.

“When, *Gandhar-Nishad* was symbolic of *karuna rasa*, according to Bharata, and then the effect or the power of these notes alone would give that effect of *karuna rasa*? In *Raag Yaman* for instance, when its two *swaras* ‘*Ga*’ and ‘*Ni*’ as the *vadi* and *samvadi* were symbolic of the *karuna rasa*, then the entire *bhava* of the *raag* would be that of surrender. Music deals with the heart; the intellect should feature only to reason how best to manifest that desired feeling in a *raag*, and with which appropriate embellishment or *alankar*.”³

She intensely believed that a note was a manifestation of a feeling and various notes were manifestations of various feelings; and a feeling was continuous like a flow and that flow could be achieved only when the notes were sung in continuity along with their nuances and resonance. She always reiterated that a note should never be applied raw; as it was a point which had a resonating area, and that every note and every *shruti* had a mind and a body. She held that the *swaras* were living entities because they all had their own individual personalities and one had got to treat them such. “She often wondered how must be the home of these notes. How would they behave with each other? She wished she could see them and talk to them”⁴

“I think I was born to think. When I used to learn from my mother I used to keep on thinking, why a *raag* was like this? Why was a phrase being repeated? I couldn’t get any answers then. Of course, I was blessed with the strength to delve into this realm of music, to think deep, and when I researched I realized that music was not merely entertainment; it was a mode to attain the ultimate peace. That was the reason why music existed!

During my musical journey, I learnt that every *raag* could not have the same format. Because as expressions change, so do the formats; I also felt that I had the right to see and believe whatever was true and beautiful in music, so I did!”⁵

Perhaps that is what makes Kishori Amonkar a concept and an institution in herself, and that is why she is a legend who has left a legacy where several aspiring and established artistes have been either inspired or influenced by her style.

Her contribution cannot just be evaluated only by the many *ragas* she has created or the many *bandishes* she composed as a *vaygakaar* or the many disciples she mentored, it is the musical perception which she gave to the world and posterity that will be remembered

in centuries ahead.

Her music is a rare amalgamation of technique, spirituality, aesthetics and emotions married to the highest form of content. She believed that music was a channel for a dialogue with the Supreme, and attainment of sublime heights was possible only through dedicated *sadhana*.

A *guru* and an extraordinary genius, she was a leading exponent of Jaipur Atrauli *gayaki*. and the daughter of an illustrious mother, *Padma Bhushan* and *Gaan Tapaswini*, Mogubai Kurdikar, the widely respected and renowned disciple of *Ustad Alladiya Khan*.

Born on April 10, 1931 Kishori Amonkar hailed from Kurdi, a small village in Goa, she was married to Ravindra Amonkar on May 11, 1955, in a marriage arranged by her mother. Ravindra Amonkar was a teacher and came from a middle class family. He had an excellent command of the English language and Kishori Amonkar credited her fluency in this language to her husband and also to her closest friend Vibha Purandre who was a scholar in English.

During her numerous conversations, Kishori ji said that her mother Mogu Bai, not only gave her children education, she also gave them *sanskaars* (values). Mogu Bai made her children realize what it was to be a woman and what poise was all about, in deeds, in thoughts, and in treating people. The greatest lesson she taught was how to maintain the dignity and divinity of music. They had to compulsorily read *Dhyaneshwari* since all the books in their house were of the same nature. Later in the evenings, they would have to sit in the *mandir* in the house and chant *shlokas*. These values went a long way in her life as later Sant Dnyaneshwar, Tukaram, Surdas and Meera became her companions while singing and thinking, along with Bharat Muni, Sarangdev, Narad and Anandvardhan- the great ancient literary sages⁶.

In Mogu Bai, Kishori Amonkar had a combination of a mother and a strict guru, who was uncompromising in both in *sur* and *taal*. She wanted every facet of the performance to be perfect - the *bandish*, *alaap*, *bolalaap*, *boltaan* - and made her daughter practice to brutal perfection the most exquisite *gamak* of Alladiya Khan Saheb, which came only with systematic and rigorous practice.

Kishori ji recollected Alladiya Khan as a towering personality but learnt his music from her mother as she was too young to learn directly from him. She would often say with pride that all those lessons were permanently imbedded in her memory, but she remembered him as a towering personality.

Kishori ji often said that “Learning from Mai was a terrifying experience as she he would not repeat a phrase more than three times. I either got it or she would get up and leave

the room. Mai never stopped me from learning anything. She wanted me to learn from all schools of music, as she wanted my voice to get as fluid as water. She had already equipped me well with the aesthetic values of a performance. I only took these lessons further and explored the world of pure notes minutely.”⁷ Mogubai ji would ask her the difference between the *Rishabh* of Raag Shuddh Kalyan and the *Rishabh* of Raag Bhoop for which Kishori ji said she had to dwell deep to decipher. Developing such an attitude towards reasoning, along with study of music literature and ancient granthas gave her an edge over her contemporary artistes.

“Alladiya Khan made my mother practice to perfection the most exquisite *gamak* of Khansaheb which could be learnt only with systematic and rigorous practice. Whatever I learnt from my mother had been registered permanently in my conscious and subconscious state of being. I can replicate it with exactness”⁸

Quoted from the many discussions during classes and other occasions over several years

Kishori Amonkar also learnt from Pt. Mohanrao Palyekar, the famous Pt. Husanlal from the Bombay film industry from whom she got the finer aspects of playback singing, including *ghazals* and *bhajans* and *thumris*. She credited her excellent enunciation in Urdu to Pt. Husanlal. She also had a teacher who taught her Marathi *bhavgeet*. She had a one song stint in the Hindi film industry where her title song for the film ‘*Geet Gaya Pathharon Ne*’ gained her tremendous stardom. She later composed and sang the score for Govind Nihalani’s *Drishhti*.

Since her passion for music was intense and she felt powerfully drawn towards the pure classical form, she decided to train under the renowned Khan Saheb Anwar Hussain Khan of the Agra *gharana*, who taught her a single *cheez Mahadeva*, in *Bahaduri Todi* for several months. Another of her *gurus* was the illustrious Anjanibai Malpekar with whom she shared a very special bond. Though Kishori Amonkar had developed a captivating tonal dexterity, she acclaims her enchanting *meend* and enduring *alaapchari* to Anjanibai.

Sometime around early 1960’s and 1970’s an unforeseen catastrophe struck Kishoriji. Just as her performances were gaining ground she faced voice impairment and suffered a total voice loss. This silence lasted nine long years. No medication worked until Saint Sardeshmukh Maharaj from Pune miraculously restored it through Ayurveda. Although it took two years to do so. This interruption and solitude turned a blessing in disguise as this gave Kishori Amonkar an opportunity to deliberate and dwell deeper into the realm of swaras emerging with a style which had a tremendous universal appeal.

Kishori Amonkar did not constrain herself to any *gharana* because, in her opinion, music was universal. Confining herself to a restricted range would never let her see the

entire horizon she felt. Consequently, while she belonged to the Jaipur Atrauli *gharana*, she had no uncertainties in adapting the nuances of other traditions. But, after studying all the other styles, she concluded that the basic structure of the Jaipur Atrauli *gharana* was the most suited to her as the stylistic equilibrium between a note and a beat would not permit the singer to fade away or get off balance. Therefore, while the Jaipur Gharana's technique and methods formed the foundations of her style, several variations on it, including an adoption of *alapachaari* added a refreshing zest to it. Her resolute belief in the *swara* as an embodiment of the Supreme further added multiple dimensions to her music that, while retaining the essentials of the *gharana*, it brought in a universal charm.

Kishori ji would often say that she was her own worst critic and never excused herself when she did not meet up to her own high standards. Often the criticism from the music critics would leave her anguished but she remained true to her belief and her inner call and made a place for herself in the edifice of Hindustani classical music. She reiterated that whenever her music surpassed sublime heights and whenever the abstract acquired a form then it did not matter what the critics had to say!

Her opinion on today's music generation was that they wished to be overnight stars and lacked the genuine desire to seek perfection. "You know that vocal music is the finest of all fine arts and that unless one goes into the realm of subtleties and accuracy of the nuances of each note, the consequence can only be mundane. In the earlier days, there were great masters who sang and brought about changes in nature. Their music was sublime because they were true to the musical notes"⁹

In the context of changing times, she remained a supporter of the *guru-shishya parampara*, and did not believe in learning from notebooks, notations or recordings and ardently felt that students these days learnt dead music. Learning from a *guru* was live learning. It was learning with a soul. It was a give and take of the souls. Kishori ji would say that our music was the fifth Veda. The Vedas taught *Brahma Vidhya*, which could not be learnt from a machine. If a seeker contemplated and meditated upon this divine art, then surely one would reach the ultimate destination.

She fervently advocated that music was more than just cryptographs or compositions or styles, it was *athaaha sagar*, and was also of the view that education in music should empower students to move beyond repetitive techniques by mastering the tools that allow them to improvise on their own

She believed that playing the *tanpura* well was of utmost importance. Just as important as tuning it, playing it was an art. "Of course it inspires me to sing, but at times I am afraid to mingle my own vocal notes into that divine sound, that divine sound of the "***Swyambhu Gandhar***," which emanates from between the two *Shadajs*. However, one thing I must state

that the scientific rendering of a *tanpura* is different from its aesthetical rendering, in the case of the latter, the emphasis is significant”¹⁰

Kishori ji, published a book in Marathi, in 2010 titled *Swarartha Ramani*, in which she elaborated her views on *Rasa*, *Bhava*, musical theory and practice. She was a well-known speaker at national and international seminars. Several of her students are now classical musicians in their own right.

As a person, she was extremely intuitive, loving and caring, erratic, demanding and temperamental, benevolent, deeply religious and an ardent devotee of Swami Raghavendra; Early mornings were spent passionately twining colourful floral garlands for her morning prayer offerings and always slept well past 3am; after writing in red ink her Deity’s name a 108 times.

Known to speak her mind, she accepted concerts on her own terms and came down heavily upon organisers who did not conform to her conditions. She was known for her legendary temper and had deep rooted resentment over how the women artistes were treated, as she had seen her mother’s struggle. She had also seen the inferior treatment meted out to established artiste like her mother and this had hurt her deeply. “This was the Brahmanical tactics of usurping the valuable contributions made by lower caste groups to keep the dominance of Brahmanism intact”¹¹ Therefore she wowed to change this perception in the male dominated arena and decided never to allow this to happen to her once she made a niche for herself in the field. She always demanded a suite in five star hotels with appropriate local hospitality during her stay along with opportune payments.

Kishori Amonkar received several of India’s national awards and civilian honours. She was awarded the *Padma Vibhushan* in 2002; *Padma /Bhushan* in 1987; The *Sangeet Natak Akademi Award* in 1985; The *Sangeet Natak Akademi Fellowship* for 2009; *M.S. Subbulakshmi Award* in 2016; *Bharat Gaan Ratna-2001* by Sri Raghavendra Swami Mutt; *Gaan Saraswati*, *Kala Shiromani*, *Gaan Samradhini*, and *Ashtang Vidushi*. Some of the other prestigious awards that came her way are the Goa Today Person of the Year in 1993, Sangeet Samradhini Award in 1997, Sanatan Sangeet Samman in 1997, Giants International and the Godavari Gaurav Awards in 1998. She has also been the recipient of several citations like that of the Indian Medical Foundation, First Annual TV Award, Gomantak Maratha Samaj, Gomantak Vidya Niketan, FICCI Millennium Award, and Hafiz Ali Award.

Needless to say, she had received tremendous acclaim, respect and adulation in general from both the public, and the government. “However, the biggest award for me is the appreciation which I get from the spectators. Seeing the presence of a huge audience for a concert of mine is my biggest reward and my award. What can be greater than that?”¹² When she sang, her swaras were divine and her music sacred, the concert hall a temple and

the listeners her deity *Guru Raghavendra Swami!* Therefore, after a concert, she would humbly bow down her head to the listeners, which was indeed an extremely endearing gesture winning the hearts of many connoisseurs.

Kishori Amonkar took Samadhi at her Prabhadevi residence in Bombay on 3rd April 2017, a week shy of her 85th birthday. A large gathering that revered her was present at the Ravindra Natya Mandir to bid her adieu with full state honours.

For the audience, she was a high point of musical pilgrimage, to those who know her only distantly, she was temperamental, to her critics she was inconsistent, but, to her students, she was a *guru* to venerate.

Indubitably, her passing away created an immense void in the world of Hindustani classical music. But her soul-stirring music lives on, transcending precincts of age and time. The magic and the mystique of which will continue to enthral; her music's content will be studied and researched; its beauty appreciated, loved and meditated upon for all times to come.

Note: - This article has been written mainly from the understanding I gathered over several years from my personal interaction and experiences with my Guru, Gaan Saraswati Smt. Kishori Amonkar ji, during my stay with her at her residence in Bombay as her disciple. Her best friend Vibha Purandare, (an English Literature scholar) used to visit her almost every day in the evenings after the evening music session. The only subject that was ever discussed between them was about the mysticism of swaras, their rasa-bhava their colour, their effect on nature and about realization of ultimate bliss through the divine medium of Swaras.

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(Endnotes)

¹ Quoted from the many discussions during classes and other occasions.

² Purandre Vibha- *Kishori Amonkar, A perfectionist and a Dreamer, 1988*

³ Quoted from the many discussions during classes and other occasions over several years

⁴ Purrandre Vibha- *Kishori Amonkar, A perfectionist and a Dreamer, 1988*

⁵ Quoted from the many discussions during classes and other occasions over several years

⁶ Purrandre Vibha - *Kishori Amonkar, A perfectionist and a Dreamer, 1988*

⁷ Quoted from the many discussions during classes and other occasions over several years

⁸ Quoted from the many discussions during classes and other occasions over several years

⁹ Quoted from the many discussions during classes and other occasions over several years

¹⁰ Purrandre Vibha- *Kishori Amonkar, A perfectionist and a Dreamer, 1988*

¹¹ Arthur Rohan, 12 April 2017, Kishori Amonkar: Assertion, Erasure, Reclamation, Article Round Table India.co.in

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