

17. The Symphonist among Sitarists :  
Nikhil Banerjee

There has been such inertia of reputation in Indian music that even Nikhil Banerjee has not got the acknowledgment due to him. He is a shy, reserved introvert who is rather indifferent towards popularity. All the same, his recitals have been uniformly great; his style is typically his own, and yet in musical circles he is not mentioned as often as are Ravi Shankar or Vilayat Khan.

Very few Indian artistes plan their recitals the way Banerjee does. In this sense, he is the most symphonic among the Indian sitarists. His every phrase from the initial alap to the fast gat is preplanned so that there are no unnecessary improvisatory sallies. Behind every recital of his, there is that solid homework which gives the impression of spontaneity. Unlike most other Indian artistes, he knows what he wants and gets precisely that effect.

His rendering of Jaunpuri is a typical instance of this methodic approach. All the difficult passages in slow and fast gats are arranged in an ascending order of intricacy, and executed with rare precision. In this way he not only avoids repetition but gives immense variety to his pre-conceived passages. The set way in which he plays his Jaunpuri gives the impression that he is reproducing the notation of a sitar concerto written by a great composer.

Banerjee is one of the few artists who can dispense with the tabla and make the sitar a self-contained instrument. This is so because he believes in the autonomy of alap. Hence he avoids unnecessary overlapping of the same melodic parts which are repeated by others over and over again. It is usual for him to play alap in Darbari for forty-five minutes and then immediately start a gat in Hemant. This is a healthy practice because the implied rhythm of jor and jhala should not be repeated with the obvious rhythm of tabla. One of his outstanding recitals was an elaborate one-hour alap in Komal Reshab Asavari which he played, with his typical melancholic touch and melodic fertility, during a radio sangeet sammelan. It has been recorded since (EASD 1305). His sharp, clear notes have the same serenity and repose as his contemplative, bespectacled face.

Banerjee has never been unduly fond of now-fangled modes, but he has popularised one raga called Man Manjari which is his own creation. In this case, he has added, with a stroke of genius, Komal Nishad to Puriya Kalyaa; his masterpiece does not resemble the original compound raga at all. In this case, Banerjee depends on breathtaking intricate sequences for creating subtle melodic effects. But even these difficult passages have a rare reposeful ease about them. When he played this new raga during the Jaipur Arts Festival, 1968, he complained to me that he was disturbed by the applause of the audience who greeted his fast figures so enthusiastically that some of his brilliant passages were drowned in the noise.

It is to Banerjee's credit that with all his brilliant virtuosity, he never loses his sweetness of tone, nor do his notes lose their individuality. The solemnity and sadness of his finer tones is retained even in these amazingly intricate sequences. One may miss in him the sweet liquid grace of Vilayat Khan but he has the sharpness of tone and the

clarity of outline. If Vilayat Khan has the brilliance of the texture of a Moghul miniature, Banerjee's notes have the grace of those shining pieces arranged in the glass mosaic of Amber Palace.

Graver ragas suit Banerjee's sober temperament. It is on this account that in many concerts he plays Mishra Shivranjani in slow tempo and Kirvani in fast tempo. He is the only sitarist who has brought out the intrinsic, euphonic melancholy of Shivranjani. Particularly, his brilliant passages in the bass octave have rare resonance. The same sad touch can be discerned in his recorded rendering of Jogia Kalingda (this recording is in the possession of AIR, Delhi) which he has played in Jhapala with rare mastery.

In the basic style of playing, Banerjee resembles Ravi Shankar because both are disciples of Ustad Allaudin Khan. Each note has the sharpness and clarity that one associates with the Maihar heritage. But Nikhil scores over Ravi Shankar in his sapat taans that cover the three octaves with amazing accuracy. Besides this, no other sitarist can reproduce the gamak of dhrupad style as well as Banerjee does. He has rare mastery of octaves and few can jump from the bass to a higher octave without any loss of musicality. This is as impressive as his artistic arrival at the sam after three loud intermittent chords that make the whole instrument resound with orchestral elegance.

As a memory of the Maihar heritage, Nikhil plays Maluha Kalyan and Hemant, ragas composed by his celebrated guru. He has unusual mastery of Hemant and this is one of his favourite items. Based on the Bilawal scale (the aroha omits reshab and pancham, the avroha uses all seven notes, and all notes are shudh) with its nyasa on madhyam, the raga is close to Malgunji and Rageshwari. There is a recorded version of this also, but it is not as good as his concerts. Nevertheless, the raga seems to suit

his genius as much as Lalit does. In the latter, he gives a very fine methodical depiction of alap in three movements. The first movement comprises a short exposition in four parts, kharaj, laraj, sthayi, and antara. These correspond roughly to the development of the raga in four octaves. The second movement comprises jor in three parts, kharaj permutations in the bass octave, permutations in all the four octaves and the finale of the second movement which takes the form of short taans. The third movement is jhala which makes a very fine use of short cadential figures preceded by rhythmical strokes on the drone strings. This rendering of alap in Lalit is a fine slow-motion rendering of all the brilliance of the methodic approach of the dhrupad style which was so assiduously cultivated by Ustad Allaudin Khan. Nikhil Banerjee's keen interest in Hemant and Lalit appears in his own compound raga—Hem Lalit. Here, he maintains the grave mood of the two other ragas.

Banerjee's other brilliant recorded rendering is of that difficult raga — Bhatiyar. Among the three available varieties in Marwa, Bilawal and Khamaj, he chooses to play the one in Marwa. In this rather limited raga, the number of melodic routes that Banerjee is able to muster up is an index of the fertility of his imagination. This can also be seen in his brilliant use of alankars in Malkauns. His Malkauns, along with his Sindhu Bhairavi, is pure magic. In the latter, he makes a fine use of Sitar-khani tala (a variation of Teentala which omits the second beat in all the four subdivisions).

But with all this virtuosity, Banerjee's music never loses its contemplative quality. Unlike Abdul Halim Jaffar Khan, he never mistakes technique for value. In his concern for form and *integritas*, Banerjee has created certain aesthetic values which should serve as a model for many Indian musicians.