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Subject: Great Masters Part VIII: Kumar Gandharva - The One and Only!
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Namaskaar! Kumar Gandharva - master theoretician of Indian music and performer par excellence will sing no more. He passed away on January 12, 1992. Noted for his maverick vocal style, Kumar endeared himself to many with his bold innovations; he also alienated himself from the conventional music establishment. His detractors, however, never doubted his musical genius. We play humble tribute to this musical institution by reproducing the following feature from G.N. Joshi's book "Down Melody Lane".

Rajan Parrikar

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DR KUMAR GANDHARVA

On 8th April 1924 a shining star of Indian classical music was born. On the same date in 1974, Kumar Gandharva completed his 50th year. He is now proudly marching on to 60. One should be grateful to God for helping this gifted singer to fight against formidable odds and to emerge victorious and dedicate himself solely to the study and advancement of music.

About 30 years ago, Kumar had to undergo very complicated lung surgery, and consequently had to suspend his extremely promising career as a singer for a few years. This lapse into obscurity actually proved to be a blessing in disguise because, even though he had to discontinue his singing riyaz, Kumar spent his temporary forced retirement in introspective, contemplative and meditative concentration on the study of music. This helped him to emerge from the ordeal a much matured and seasoned artist with newly sharpened creative faculties. Today he has evolved a particular style of singing, entirely his own, which does not unduly tax his health and voice. He has rebuilt his audience all over the country with his ever new and fascinating art.

I have known Kumar since he was a lad in shorts, sometimes going about barefoot. When he was only 12 years old he held a large select audience of Pandits and musicologists spellbound with his spectacular performance at an All India Music Conference. Correctly judging the talents of the young boy, Professor B. R. Deodhar took him under his wing. He carefully groomed him and steered his talents into the

proper channels.

Professor Deodhar taught Kumar to be steadfast in his aim and inspired him to make an exhaustive study of music. As a result, Kumar has acquired a very wide and progressive outlook which enables him to appreciate all that is best in different styles of music and to absorb them into his own peculiar style.

In doing so he has courageously brushed aside long standing conventions and thrown a challenge to those singers of reputed gharanas who have been blindly following old traditions and illogical conventions.

Kumar studied very closely the folk music of Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Malwa, etc. This led him into composing Geet hemant, Geet varsha, Geet shishir, and Triveni- bhajans of 3 great saints: Kabir, Surdas and Meera- which proved a sensational hit. These experiments clearly portrayed his revolutionary spirit and his bid to be a trend setter. There are some who viewed these experiments with derision a few years ago, but the same critics have now come to appreciate him greatly.

Kumar who was a thin and lean teenager is now a chubby middle-aged person. In a concert hall, chewing paan and clad in a snow white zabba and pyjama or white dhoti with a black border, Kumar, with his arresting smile, immediately succeeds in spreading a lively atmosphere all around.

To watch Kumar tuning his tanpuras perfectly and tunefully is an enjoyable and memorable experience. Only those who are able to distinguish the finest subtleties of different notes are able to tune the four strings of the instrument so that they will blend perfectly. The two middle strings are required to be tuned to the tonic or shadja note, the last string also to the shadja note an octave lower - kharja, and the first string is tuned to pancham the 5th note, madhyama the 4th note, or nishad the 7th note, whichever may be in consonance with the compositions of the ragas the artist intends to present. The process of tuning the tanpuras is sometimes a lengthy one and may be a little boring to most listeners. Sometimes this instrument is as whimsical as the artist and refuses to stay steady. The strings resist attempts to blend them into a homogeneous unity, but a formidable musician like Kumar or Bhimsen can force them into submission. When the strings, perfectly blended in unison, resound and reverberate in the concert hall, the tense atmosphere suddenly becomes relaxed, and when Kumar blends his own voice so identically with the swara of the tanpura, the audience experiences a sensation divine and beyond description. After a lot of hard work and practice Kumar has mastered the technique of tuning this wonder instrument.

Apart from the two tanpuras, one on either side. the only accompaniment Kumar uses is that of a soft harmonium and a tabla played in a tranquil, straightforward manner and in a tempo - laya - with perfect precision. Kumar's concert is therefore absolutely free from unnecessary gimmickry and acrobatics. It has a soothing effect

on the audience whose whole attention is riveted on Kumar's singing that very soon envelops them in its magic.

When Kumar starts his methodical exposition of a raga picture, he puts before the audience the many mysterious and beautiful facets of the raga. The audience enjoys all these with ever increasing curiosity and delight. At one moment one is floating down a quiet and serene river of melody; at another one is rushing down a tumbling waterfall from the Taar saptak to the Mandra saptak. At times the swaras are swift and piercing like an attacking falcon; a little later they will sound caressingly soft and sweet and hauntingly imploring. Kumar's musical presentation is an experience of these contradictory impressions that are created with ease and grace.

Kumar has achieved recognition from the Indian Government. Recently he was awarded the title Padmabhushan.

Before the advent of microgroove recordings I recorded Kumar's voice on a number of 78 R.P.M. discs. It took some time and hard work to persuade Kumar to cut a long-playing record, but once he agreed he wholeheartedly cooperated, and apart from the recordings of my choice, he insisted on making some of his own choice that proved to be very successful commercially. His LP recording, Mala Umajlele Bal Gandharva, is an instance in point. Since one long-playing record containing the most popular songs of Bal Gandharva in his own voice had already been released it was a commercial risk to make, so soon after, a record of the same songs sung by Kumar. However, I appreciated Kumar's intense desire to pay a glowing musical tribute to Bal Gandharva, and allowed him to make the record. I must confess that contrary to my expectation this LP proved to be a very good seller. Kumar has made a distinctly valuable contribution to Indian music. His deep and extensive study of our ragas has enabled him to bring to light many forgotten ragas. Apart from this, the contribution of ragas of his own creation is very substantial. Among the new ragas which have already received public approbation are Sanjari, Malavati, Bihad Bhairava, Saheli Todi, Gandhi Malhar and Sohoni Bhatiyar. Kumar, who was born in Karnataka and spent his childhood there, came to Maharashtra, where he spent some years of his youth with Professor Deodhar. Later he migrated for reasons of health to Madhya Pradesh and settled down in Dewas. He speaks, therefore, an admixture of three languages - Kannada, Marathi and Hindi. His Marathi pronunciation, though faulty, has a peculiar twang which listeners have found irresistible. As a result, his renderings of Marathi bhavgeets have become very popular. For instance, in his record of the late poet Anil's poem Ajuni rusun ahe, he has pronounced the word dhusfusalo in a rather jarring manner but his fans consider it as the beauty spot of the record. Only those who are really close to Kumar are aware of his perseverance, his absorption, his deep study and his boundless enthusiasm. His creation of new ragas, peculiar songs attributed to different seasons, devotional compositions, and compositions of thumri, tappa and tarana are ample proof of this. Whatever he

undertakes to do is carried out with perfection and precision. When he came to our studios for recording I always found him prepared to the last detail with what was to be recorded. Therefore recording him was never a long drawn, tedious affair.

Singing in a concert he never caters to cheap tastes, never allows the audience to influence him, to lower his high artistic standard of singing. Instead he succeeds, with great confidence. in charming the audience into wholehearted acceptance of his own highbrow style. That is why younger audiences, even though they may not be very knowledgeable, are enthralled by the magic of his artistry.

Though Kumar studied the rudiments of music in the Gandharva Mahavidyalaya, he did not allow his art to be dominated by any particular style. One observes sometimes a very strong resemblance to the late Omkarnath's style, while at other times one has tantalizing glimpses of the Gwalior and Agra Gharanas. It is a matter of considerable speculation among those who are interested in our classical music whether Kumar, who had rebelliously cast away the cumbersome load of gharanas and traditions, will eventually establish an independent gharana of his own. Though Kumar has successfully explored and created fresh wonders in music, I do not feel that a 'Kumar Gandharva' gharana will become a reality, because there is and will always be one and only one Kumar.
