

Hindustani raga-based music belongs to the category of "classical" art. The ability to appreciate it is not innate; it must be cultivated. A listener's aesthetic sensibility develops gradually through years of attentive listening. It is precisely for this reason that such music can withstand the tests of both time and timelessness.

Senior journalist and author Sumana Ramanan is a dedicated student of this musical tradition. For many years, she has pursued the study of vocal music with seriousness and discipline. She is, by disposition, an intellectually rigorous thinker. This becomes evident while reading her substantial volume, *The Secret Master: Arun Kashalkar and a Journey to the Edge of Music*.

By way of illustration, Ramanan cites an observation by the renowned American novelist Philip Roth. According to Roth, within the next twenty-five years, only a small number of people would continue reading novels, owing to growing addiction to computers, films, and television screens. Reading a novel demands concentration and a deep commitment to the act of reading. Ramanan suggests that the audience capable of appreciating khayal music belongs to a similar category. The comparison is highly apt.

Since 2016, Ramanan has been a disciple of the veteran vocalist Arun Kashalkar. Her profound devotion to her guru constitutes a central foundation of the book. She repeatedly grapples with a question: despite possessing a repertoire that is captivating and deeply engaging for listeners, why has Kashalkar remained somewhat detached from the mainstream performance circuit? The book appears to have been conceived as an attempt to answer this question.

Ramanan undertakes a detailed examination of multiple factors: the whims and prejudices of concert organizers, their exclusivity and arbitrariness, the politics of competition within and between gharanas (musical lineages), and the dominance exercised by major organizers and sponsors. She brings to this inquiry the sharp tools of investigative journalism and employs them with admirable fearlessness.

Kashalkar himself, however, appears largely unconcerned with his perceived position in the musical hierarchy. He remains absorbed in his own practice and in the transmission of knowledge. Even when his wife urges him to perform on larger and more prestigious stages, he reportedly responds that he would never beg organizers for opportunities. Although he may not be widely known to the broader public, this musician—who has mastered the idiom of khayal singing and, in many ways, defined an idiom of his own—is undoubtedly a "secret master."

The book contains biographical chapters on several of his disciples as well as accounts of numerous performances by Kashalkar. There is little disagreement regarding the quality of the guru's artistry; nevertheless, one must remain mindful of the possibility that excessive admiration can verge on placing him upon a pedestal.

One of the more controversial assertions attributed to the central figure of the book is that the purpose of khayal singing is to explore the raga, not to interpret the semantic meaning of the lyrics. Since the singer's vocal apparatus is the very source of musical expression, problems related to the voice inevitably assume great importance. Many distinguished vocalists have suffered from vocal difficulties, and Kashalkar was no exception. The book discusses at length how he sought to investigate the roots of these problems through a scientific approach.

Ramanan ultimately concludes that even students trained under celebrated musicians and gurus often receive little scientifically grounded guidance regarding vocal health and voice fitness. Her intellectual curiosity is particularly evident when she contacts scholars in Chicago

and California in order to ascertain the meaning of Persian lines appearing in a tarana, thereby resisting simplistic or politically motivated interpretations rooted in religious polarization. Such diligence is genuinely commendable.

The author's political and social perspectives also find expression in the book. She believes that the art of music emerged from traditions of tolerance and flourished through its engagement with broader social realities. In her view, practitioners and devotees of music should refrain from nurturing political divisiveness. She does not hesitate to articulate these convictions candidly in her writing.

Ramanan once drew Kashalkar's attention to a historical anecdote: when Haddu Khan, one of the pioneers of khayal singing, died in the final decade of the nineteenth century, Maharaja Jiyajirao Scindia of Gwalior is said to have observed a seven-day fast in mourning. Kashalkar reportedly ended the discussion by remarking, "I have no interest in politics."

This book deserves to be welcomed for the way it uses Arun Kashalkar's life and career as an occasion to engage with a wide range of issues connected to the world of khayal music.