

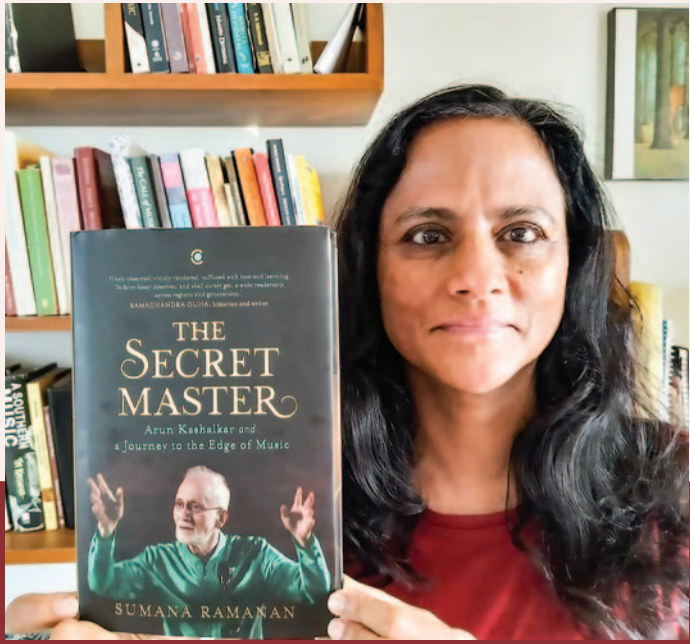


Whispers from the Classical Underground

Recommended Reading

On a winter evening in 2016, Sumana Ramanan casually attends a private Hindustani music performance in South Mumbai. The singer, a man in his early seventies, specializes in khayal, one of the Indian subcontinent's most scintillating music genres, the very name of which means imagination. Astounded by what she hears, Ramanan sets off on a mission to solve the mystery of the missing maestro: for although a student of khayal, a regular concert goer and a writer on music, she has never heard him before.

In this musical detective story, Ramanan unravels the secret of his life, art and milieu of the singer, Arun Kashalkar. He performs on the fringes of the



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The Secret Master: Arun Kashalkar and a Journey to the Edge of Music
Sumana Ramanan
Context, an imprint of Westland Books

Praise for the book

The author pushes the boundaries of literary non-fiction, lovingly combining personal narrative, biography and history in a virtuoso performance that redefines what writing about music can achieve. A stunning accomplishment."

WARREN SENDERS, *khayal singer, educator and world music expert.*

At every stage you sense the quite yet tenacious presence of this writer and committed student of music, her passion and devotion, her painstaking research. An absolute tour de force, this is a must-read for anyone who loves music.

VIDYA RAO,
thumri singer, editor and author of "Heart to Heart: Remembering Nainaji".

The author shines a light on a singular and significant life in music... A revealing, sometimes provocative and deeply insightful work, it is a significant addition to a rather small body of literature on music.

ASHOK VAJPEYI,
Hindi poet-critic and art lover.

mainstream music ecosystem in Mumbai, which has been the epicenter of the art form since the early twentieth century. He is one of the most accomplished and charismatic figures in a wider underground scene that has been preserving this music in its most vibrant colours.

After joining Kashalkar's large student community, Ramanan grapples with his intricate and rhythm-infused style while exploring answers to fundamental questions about the nature of the mainstream and the reasons for the rise of an underground culture. This book is thus also an excavation of khayal's history, and a meditation on its aesthetics and contemporary practice.

Within the true artist lies the eternal seeker... Yet, the musician in him also needs validation, and this is determined by social power dynamics. The author portrays this intense tension in the life of Arun Kashalkar... with great sensitivity. This book courageously calls out the normalized opacity in the business of classical music, asking serious questions about respect and success.

T.M. KRISHNA, *Carnatic vocalist, writer and activist.*

With the passion of a rasika, the curiosity of a prize-winning reporter, and the fluid storytelling abilities of a novelist, the author leads the reader on a sonorous journey through the universe of khayal

NARESH FERNANDEZ,
Editor of Scroll.in and author of "Taj Mahal Foxtrot: The Story of Bombay's Jazz Age"

SUMANA RAMANAN IS AN AWARD-WINNING JOURNALIST WITH THREE-AND-A-HALF DECADES OF EXPERIENCE. SHE HAS WORKED FOR LEADING MEDIA ORGANIZATIONS AS AN INVESTIGATIVE REPORTER, FEATURE WRITER, FOREIGN CORRESPONDENT, SENIOR EDITOR AND COLUMNIST. SHE IS DRAWN TO HIDDEN HISTORIES, NARRATIVE NON-FICTION AND DARK CHOCOLATE. FOR SEVERAL YEARS, SHE HELPED CURATE A PROMINENT LITERATURE FESTIVAL TO KEEP SANE. SHE SINGS, SWIMS AND PRACTICES YOGA. SHE LIVES IN BENGALURU BUT HAS ONE FOOT IN MUMBAI, WHERE SHE GREW UP AND WORKED FOR A MAJOR PART OF HER LIFE.

A Novella of Evocative Experiences

NISHI PULUGURTHA

The novella, a fictional work that is an oft-used genre by writers in several Indian languages, is described as a structured work of fiction, often satirical or realistic in content. Later writers brought in the psychological aspect into its writing as well. Tracing its origins to Italy in the Middle Ages, the genre has seen several serious practitioners from all over the world. The book under review is a novella, the debut novella of author, poet and academic Sreetanwi Chakraborty.

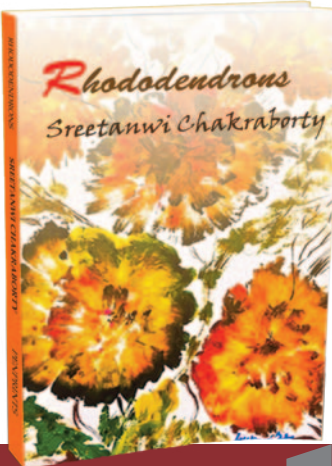
The very title takes one to the hills in early April and May when the red rhododendrons colour the landscape rendering it surreal. The white and the purple ones too make an appearance here and there. Chakraborty's acknowledgement mentions the North Bengal connection in her life and work. To someone located in the plains of Kolkata, like this reviewer, the majestic hills of the northern part of Bengal and the bloom bring up magical memories. The novel refers to them vividly – "Rhododendrons in mauve, white, pink, and white varieties, with striations on the velvety petals; petals that smelt of poetic soirees and jhumur songs sung by the tea plantation workers to camouflage the distressful days." That celebration and inherent sadness is a recurrent theme in the novella.

Divided into chapters with

very evocative titles – "Book-Covers, the Flautist and Parijatham", "College Street, Coffee House, and Istehar," "Saar-Paak, Vermillion and Roller-Coaster Rides," "Teesta, the Sunset Lounge, and the Interlocutor," "Journalists, Mouth Organs, and Once Upon a Time in a Tavern," "Rhododendrons" – the novella tells the tale of Sreenandini. The cityscape, the lanes and buildings

create a vivid picture of the world that is so much a part of her life – "Kolkata was slowly transforming into a reverie, and Nandini could feel a hallowed glow pervading her whole body. Was it intense love that she searched for in the potholed mirage of her vision?"

We become a part of Sreenandini's world as we see her romance with Baisakh while at college. Their courtship, their shared interests, the world of books, of College Street, of their haunts and favourite places creating a cocoon that is their alone as we follow them. The novel moves between the past and the present and the sense of time jutting in, of the breaks, being an important part of the narrative – "With nights infiltrating



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Rhododendrons
Sreetanwi Chakraborty
Penprints India, Kolkata

into the realms of the days surreptitiously, the election wounds also became a history, a cohort of inane issues percolating to nothing." The world of heartbreaks, of reaching out, of love entanglements that become so much a part of her world and complicate it all as she falls in love with Amuthan. Her relationship with her husband is no longer what it was, "Twelve years have passed since Baisakh changed." The very matter of fact statement comes as Sreenandini is aboard a flight, in mid-air. It is a reality that is now part of her existence, a reality that troubles.

In Darjeeling she meets Afroz, and bonds with him. This is how the novel describes Afroz – "He had a chiselled jawline, and the beardstache beard style made

him look exquisitely handsome." Each of these people who become part of her life for a while, bring a sense of purpose for a while. Each of the places that she inhabits make her look back, compare and contemplate the trajectory her life had taken over the years, of her losses and her troubles, of the fleeting moments that seem to have some meaning, even if for a brief point of time. As Ashwani Kumar in his blurb notes of the character of Sreenandini – "No wonder, it is a darling tale of a woman's whimsical, capricious adventures into subterranean realms of love, envy, and betrayal." It is this that makes the character of Sreenandini attractive. She is not presented as larger than life but is a real individual trying to negotiate the complex terrain of life.

While the focus is on the characters, the geographical settings are an important part of the narrative. Kolkata, Chennai, Darjeeling, the river, the streets, the beach, each of them are vividly drawn out. The city, its familiarity and strangeness, the comforting spaces, the locales are all important parts of the novella as we move across the reality of Sreenandini's lived experience, the reality of her life and the fantasies that at times make one look up. Written in an extremely lucid style, there is an evocativeness in the novella, one that makes one become aware of Chakraborty's work as a poet as well. A line like "The morning gust of wind was redolent with the fragrance of Jasmin and Gardenia flowers as Afroz lit his Marlboro", lingers on. This is an interesting debut novella that makes for an easy read.

THE REVIEWER IS AN ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, BRAHMANANDA KESHAB CHANDRA COLLEGE, KOLKATA

Curious to Know - Why is Music a Universal Subject?

SWARNABH

ROLE OF MUSIC (CLASSICAL/FOLK) IN EDUCATION SYSTEM

Music like the primordial oceans has been part of every culture and historic period. I would like to start by emphasizing the importance of music in one's life with a short poem of mine connecting the 7 Swars of an octave to the 7 colours of a rainbow, origin of those sounds from our own nature like birds and animals, respective unique frequencies i.e. living vibrations of the Universe coming from different planetary motions leading to the healing of the 7 Chakras of human body linking them to different emotions and feelings.



*Tiny prisms of rain water droplets,
Dispersing shining Sunlight's seven horses
Into a spectrum of seven beautiful rainbow colours.*

As if, seven Swar of Saptak connecting me - 'Swarnabh'

*To the divine frequencies of the Universe,
Finally Resonating with the primordial sound 'AUM' its natural own verse.*

*With Green Peacock singing peaceful Shadja 'Sa'
Aspiring to reach Mars by riding Nandi Rishabh 'Re'*

GOAT yet compassionate - our own Golden Sun Gandhar 'Ga'

*Traversing 108 times Earth's Diam to meet Anahata healer-serene Moon Madhyam 'Ma'
Around Saturn's young blue icy rings, Cuckoo confidently playing Pancham 'Pa' Riding a yellow chariot drawn by heroic horse Dhaivat 'Dha'*

To adorn octave with mysterious Nishad 'Ni' - a multicoloured Crown Chakra Finally, with Aakar tuan resolving into mother of all Swar - calming harmonic Shadja 'Sa'

I thank my parents for having introduced me to music early on in my life. With the blessings of Maa Saraswati, I have enjoyed playing keyboard, singing rhymes, mantras, and musical pieces since the age of 3.

Currently, I am learning Hindustani Classical Music from Riyaz Academy under the guidance of my Guru – Anjana Ghoshal Ma'am under the tutelage of Guru RC Sharma from Kirana Gharana. I began this journey with the Riyaz manual authored by Ranjani Gehani from Carnatic Music for practicing well-structured Alankars with several combinations of Palas in various thaats.

I like understanding various raag structures; linking the raag's notes especially Vadi (most important swar in a raag) & Samvadi (Second most important swar/note) to their original Thaats (source) and Raag's Jaati i.e. Audav (5 notes), Shadja (6 notes) or Sampoomna (7 notes). I am happy that I am being able to experiment with the raag taught and spontaneously self-curate unique taans while singing the raag and connect to the mood and the time when the raag is actually sung. It has been a splendid experience so far.

So, for me doing Riyaz is like a daily ritual, a very calming peaceful experience and at the same time keeping time and space for my own creativity.

I have by far been able to learn raags like Des, Bhupali, Sarang, Yaman/Kalyan, Bhairavi, Bhairav, Tilak Kamod, Bageshri, Bhimpalasi, Durga, Kafi, Khamaj, Asawari, Khamaj, Bilawal, Hansadhvani and am continuously improvising the same with time. I also love to sing solely on Tanpura along with di'Uerent Laya on Tabla from Vilambit to Dhnut and practicing notes on all three Saptak- Mandra, Madhya and Taar.

I simply love playing and singing intricate rhythmic taans especially in energetic dhnut laya before returning to sam (main beat) just like catching a train on time while keeping raag's personality and emotional Navarasas intact, be it purity and valour (veer rasa) in raag Durga or festive mood like Holi sung in any bandish; singing historic sagas through bhajan or Shlokas like Gayatri Mantra, Shanti Mantra to attain higher dimensions and characteristics; or be it playing melancholic Komal swar Ga, Ni or radiant Tivra Ma. I recently learnt to sing a birthday song in Sanskrit composed by Swami Tejomanyananda from Chinmay Mission on my 8th birthday which guides us to seek blessings for the person to not just live a long life but also lead a noble, purposeful and honourable life through virtuous actions. My friends love it when I sing it for them.

Well, I believe there is no right time or cause for emphasizing the importance of music that is an integral part of one's life since it is universal in nature, however, as we just crossed Kargil Diwas and are approaching India's 80th Independence Day celebration, mentioning the fact that music like Raag Desh not just invokes the feeling of patriotism signifying the importance of unity while remembering heavy cost of sacrifices but also glorifies the true spirit of Bharat with Bandish like 'Mehare Bana-Bana Daar, Papiha bole, Mehabo Jharan Barse' meaning majestic monsoons drenching every tree in the Jungle, symbolizing every Indian's love for nature and sustainable environment. Also, on the occasion of Guru Purnima, I take this opportunity to thank the Universe 'Parambrahma', parents and my teachers for their guidance and blessings.

With that note, I feel highlighting the role of classical music from early foundation years for envisaged 'Viksit Bharat' is must, considering the numerous benefits it has drawn upon me till date like

understanding rhythmic patterns and complex harmonies of various compositions not only enhanced my reading, writing and logical reasoning skills but also increased my memory and attention span by active listening and at the same time soothing riyaz at night always helped me with a sound sleep. It also aided me build better sitting postures, controlled breath while singing and physical coordination while playing keyboard steadily. Apart from that, I worked on how to connect with the Soul of the audience from my mother by keeping an amicable stage presence with improvised and civilized linguistic capability.

It is proven in Neuroscience that music is a whole-brain phenomenon and an integrated experience with right brain identifying the raag's contour while left brain processing the fast-changing frequencies of respective swaras, remembering sequences and helping keep rhythms, and return to 'sam' (main taal) on time. Thus, consistent and quality musical training enhances interhemispheric neural connectivity aiding in overall brain development.

Hence, quoting my mother here, she says, "Like predictive modelling, daily riyaz trains my brain well and helps me in regularly updating my taans logbook through continuous predictive processing of my brain."

In future, I wish to create my own compositions and do research on various raags to be able to touch the divinity in my journey of music.

Hereby sharing a few words of encouragement from my Guru who is always ready to give extra classes on my humble request for new learnings and doubt clearing sessions. Apart from overall grooming required in a raag, the best part is that she leads my musical journey understanding my interest areas like encouraging my love for creating, playing and singing my own Taans and introducing me at times to out of syllabus Raags I am curious about which takes my interest in music to another level.



"Teaching Swarnabh music is nothing short of a dream. There was something fantastic about teaching this 7-year-old from day one. He was attentive, receptive, was curious about learning and wanted to master each Swara with expertise and skill.

The form of Hindustani classical music is not easy, especially for a child. It demands patience, discipline, and countless repetitions. While children often become restless after a few minutes, Swarnabh would surprise me with his willingness to try again and again.

A guru does not merely teach music. A guru shapes character. Through every lesson, Swarnabh is learning concentration, humility, respect, and perseverance.

He is discovering the power of Riyaz and the fact that excellence is never accidental; it is built through daily riyaz.

There are moments when his innocent questions make me smile. There are times his intelligent questions blow my mind. He has questions about the structure of ragas, about creating variations in notes of Bandish and Taans, about Thaats and Jaati of di'Uerent ragas. These questions remind me that true learning begins with curiosity. Rather than giving quick answers, I encourage him to listen deeply, because music reveals its secrets only to those who are patient.

The only intention and vision for teaching Swarnabh is that he can build a steadier voice, a sharper ear, a more confident expression. Progress in classical music is often slow and almost invisible, but to a devoted teacher, every subtle improvement shines brightly.

I think true art shapes the personality. Of course I want Swarnabh to be a skilled singer, one of our country's top most Hindustani classical vocalists but I also hope Swarnabh grows into a kind, sensitive, and thoughtful human being. For music is not only about perfect pitch or flawless rhythm. It is about learning to listen to oneself, to others, and to the silence between the notes. It is about cultivating compassion, patience, and grace."

Would request all to shower their blessings upon me for not just growing in my musical journey and taking forward the flag of art and culture but also rising in life to become a responsible, honourable human being.