

In the midst of a bustling apartment on Old Prabhadevi Road, in Mumbai, she lives, reads, teaches, talks, keeps house, makes jokes, makes her point, and sings. FIRST CITY brings back and relives Mumbai memories of Kishori Amonkar, even better than the real thing

ONE

Green. A perfectly temperature-controlled 6 pm. Divine intervention, must be. An *alaap* that resounds in your ears, amidst the trees, and you can't remember how long it's been haunting you. Lasting seemingly forever. Since when the trees were planted, perhaps. Déjà vu that speaks, "I like to sing in nature. I just don't like auditoria and halls." A voice that makes, demands, its own special space, making a permanent home in your mindspace. Urging you to close your eyes. And breathe.

Raag Malhar plays over and over, between my ears, on the iPod, as I make my way to her house. The lady with that voice, *that* voice, appears from behind curtained-off doors, with a sharp, "Hello there", and settles down on the ornate *jhoola* that enjoys pride of place in Kishori Amonkar's drawing room. ("It's my favourite place", she tells the photographer later, who's wishing away the blurs, "And I have to keep rocking. So sorry.") Her voice has been described ad infinitum (ad nauseum) as 'sublime', 'beautiful', 'sensual', while the elaborate sorts even go so far as 'Ma Saraswati *svayam unke kanth mein baithi hain*'. *Et cetera. Et cetera.* Kishori smirks, disinterested. And promptly turns the table on our interview.

Asking *me* questions instead.

Questions that are "essential"; essential to her, you figure.

"Why have you come here?"

"Why did you want to meet me?"

"Why do you think this interview will be of any importance?"

An interrogation that turns out to be rhetorical, as we proceed through two evenings ("First day, let's just talk. You take your photographs the next day") of stimulating conversation. Her eyes boring through to the core of all my questions and counter-questions. Leaving them somewhat unanswered, but only for a while. Kishori has this roundabout way of answering every single thing you've asked her (and some that have only just managed to form themselves in your head somewhere), in precise words. In impeccable language. With great charm. There's something wonderfully intangible about the way she does that, which you begin to enjoy, almost addictively. Wishing, wishfully thinking, that

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all your interviews were like that.

"Joy and peace. Each time I sang, or learnt music from my mother, especially when I learnt something new, I found myself very, very (what shall I say?) happy and peaceful. Yes, happy and peaceful. I remember this feeling very well." Memories not entirely unprovoked, surface and resurface, even as she's emphatic about nostalgia, "I remember episodes and incidents, not dates..." She looks away, visualising her mother, Mogubai Kurdikar, her *guru*, her father too, since he passed away when Kishori was six. She describes her, poetically almost, caressing her words as they find shape, "She stands before my eyes as I saw her last. I remember her in a nine-yard *sari*. Very dignified, very beautiful, very fair. That's how I remember her. I also remember her diamond earrings, her diamond *mangalsutra*..." How she "likes to remember her", also finds expression, in a daughter's voice who'd always been a good student, "I *like* to remember her when she was old, because she carried that aura of knowledge, which I couldn't understand when I was younger. I could only understand it at a mature age, much later in life, what she was." It was a curious equation that Kishori shared with her, "*Jab bhi maine dekha unki taraf, shishya ki nazron se hi dekha*... It was very difficult for me...I learnt my music from her womb. That's where it started. If she was just my mother, things would have been different. *Gale pad jaati main*. She wouldn't have been able to teach me music in the spatial and conceptual way she wanted to. I thought in my mind that if this is what my mother wants from me, and this is what gives me so much joy and peace, then I'm supposed to search for new vistas in music. And for that, I had to



practise. And I also knew that just practice wouldn't take you anywhere. There was more. I had to do more..." Kishori asks Vanita, one of her students, to get in some *chai*, milky and sweet ("gas *bandha karah*"), and suddenly goes all tch tch, "The weather is terrible for dust in the house. *Din mein do baar* dusting *na ho toh...*" She catches me smile, and smiles back, "I am basically a mother and a housewife. My house should be clean, nice, however small it is. You can check every corner of my house, except for my room, which is messy, because there are too many books scattered around!" She reiterates her point, "My life is music and a mother. My two children and my students. Nothing beyond that. Not all of my students last, mind you!"

Right outside the door, in a blue-and-white apartment complex, a stone's throw from Siddhi Vinayak *mandir*, 20-something (if not 20) Asavari takes off her shoes (like all of us did), outside Kishori's house. One of her students, today she's here to be a part of the discussion. "Tai had called me for the *mulakaat*", she tells me, and listens in, almost protective of her *guru* and the ideas she's sharing. "In a 45-minute concert, artists sing *tanas* for almost 20 minutes, and then they call it classical music! It's *not*, it's like doing *kasrat*." Kishori's vehemently vocal about what she perceives to be the problems of Indian classical music. Her take involves all the possible aspects, embracing the sublime with the ridiculous, issues about *sur* and the air-conditioning inside auditoria, "To play to the gallery or to excite people, is very easy. But Indian classical music is meant

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for peace, *not* for excitement." She is keen on the argument, not pausing for a moment, as she continues, "What is the meaning of classical? That nothing can be beyond it? Isn't that the meaning of classical? *Kya hota hai is angrezi shabd ka arth?*" The quizzing is back, as Kishori decides to illustrate the reasoning, "Tell me something, why are we speaking in English? Singing in Marathi? Is there a purpose to why language has come into existence? Or is it all pointless?" A quiet gleam spreads across her face (belies her years completely - 75!), when I respond with, "To communicate. And express." She nods very slightly, and makes the point, "See, you *know* the purpose for language taking birth. You know the purpose of speaking to me... In the same way, is there no purpose for the notes to come into existence? There is deep purpose in Indian classical music. The notes *are* the music, and that is all there is to it. That is the purpose, which Indian classical musicians should understand. The language of

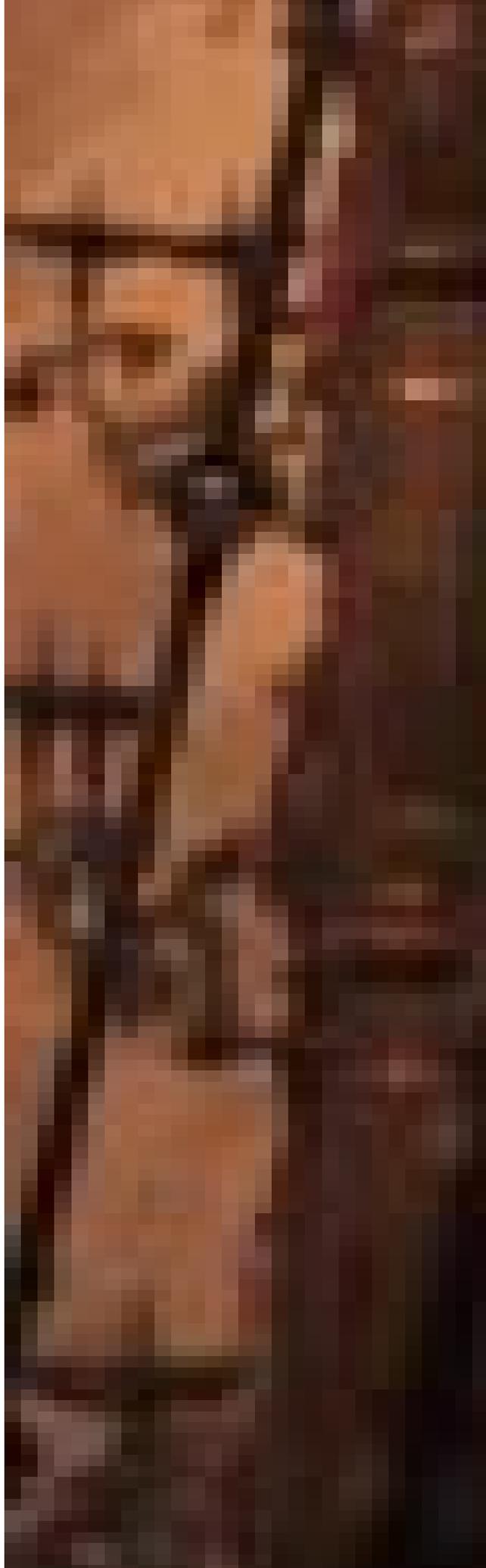
You have to get involved with the feeling of the raag. When I give you Radha-Krishna samvaad or leela, I get involved in it, and my voice is bound to be sensual. It better be. That is true Indian classical music

notes has its own innate rhythm, and to know *that* is to know Indian classical music. What my *guru*, my mother, taught me, was so precious. She taught me *sur* and only *sur*... Music that is unadulterated. Pure.”

Telephone rings are part of Kishori's soundscapes (“*Kon aahe? Baga na*”). There are calls that she ignores with a wrist-flick (“Tell them I’m not here”), and those that she takes with palpable glee, like when her granddaughter phones, “Tejashree. Must be about 19. She’s interested in fashion designing, but has a beautiful voice. I want her to take it up, because it is inborn. She calls me up suddenly, ‘*Main abhi aati hoon*’, and I bow down before her, I don’t have a choice!” Kishori’s curious about the interview layout in the magazine, “Interviews with classical artists are always on the last page. *What a shame!* How will children ever realise that this is important? Why are we like news items, at the best of times? ‘Kishori performed here and here on this and this date’. Plain reporting, and no reviewing. I want to tell all of them to please not write about me at all, if this is all they have to say. It’s like a news item then. ‘Kishori is dead’, they’ll say, one day. A news item. It’s the same thing.”

At times, she offers self-analysis, never ceasing to startle us with her sudden bouts of self-awareness, “Most artists today, most people actually, are very positive about the present generation. They like to give good, positive feedback, but I *cannot* lie, and I am not going to be positive for no reason. I prefer to say it like it is.

Why the farce? See, that’s why I’ve never been popular. Famous, yes. But popular...”, she almost (but not quite) laughs, turning the joke on its head. And elaborates, “It’s not instant coffee. You have to sacrifice a lot... To know the power of a note. To know what it is. To know that every note is a live entity... You have to sacrifice a lot. A great lot.” She looks back in time, glancing at the dictaphone, almost questioning its place on the *jhoola*, and at times, forgetting it, “It happens in the beginning, it happened to me, that you sing a *raag* because you *love* it. But eventually, you’ll want to sing the *raag* for its own beauty, for its own *bhaav*, which is already present in it, alive. I try and express *my* feelings of the *raag*, but what about the feeling of the *raag*, which is already in it? You have to get involved in the feeling of the *raag*, not in your interpretation and love for it... But it takes time. You have to keep at it to reach that stage. And where do we have the patience to get there? And who allows you to consider it?” Surely not the education system, which insists “theory *alag*, practical *alag*... *yeh kahaan ka logic hai?*” And not the government “which should stop bestowing artists with awards”. You sense the emotion in her voice when she talks about one of her favourite artists (Pandit Bhimsen Joshi is another), the late Ustad Bismillah Khan, “The government showed a great lot of interest in taking him to the hospital when they knew he was dying. What is the use of giving him a Bharat Ratna, I say? He’d even said that himself, ‘*Hamaare pet ka bhi khayaal rakho*. Do







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something for me. Don't give me more awards'. But *nothing* happened. He died, and many important people attended his funeral. That's it. It made the news that evening. *And that's it*. This should disturb us. But it doesn't... We are losing that which is sublime, which is India's strength... It's almost like we don't even know we are dead. *Hum kab mar gaye, hamein pata bhi nahi chala*. First, we need to realise that Indian classical music is dead, only then will we act on it. Only then can we act on it. And we'll *have* to act on it. Our souls have died, and we want instant coffee, instant music!" The imperatives are urgent in Kishori's mind, and on her mind today, in the forefront, "I haven't spoken so vehemently ever before. But maybe it's time for me to speak up before I go. I'd stopped saying anything, because what's the point? *Ab main kehti hoon mere paas jo bacha kucha gaana hai, woh suniye aur jaaiye*." Young minds stimulate her, for sure, "I'd rather have young people come to my concerts than those who know too much... I try to speak to the hearts of the young minds, which is why there are more young people in my concerts than old ones." On day two, we meet Irfan, a studious chap, preparing all gung-ho for his PhD on "the comparatives

of the various ways of imparting music education". A subject that his *guru*, in the course of the evening, demolishes, slowly but surely. Almost brutally. Her earlier observations echo in my mind, as I watch Irfan listening to Kishori tell him why the idea doesn't work, and what he should do instead, "Do something on the pure notes versus the adulteration of music." In a courageous moment, Irfan tells her it's too difficult, and Kishori is disbelieving, "*Pare le jaane ke liye hi toh kathinaai hoti hain*. (The difficulties are only there so that you can move beyond them). *Koshish toh karo, bachche*."

She metamorphoses from admonishing, didactic teacher to well-wisher, with sharply defined maternal instincts, in the span of a few seconds. Perhaps answering, unconsciously, what she'd mentioned earlier, "*Itna jheekti hoon main inko*, I don't know why these children don't leave me!"

"Very rarely have I found that moment of blissful peace in my concerts when I sing", says Kishori. She, who is known to do just that for her audience many times over, has no "superhuman" pretensions. "Lot of people mention god and godliness during concerts *aise hi*, I don't know how. I don't think I've ever found that ultimate realisation so far," Kishori tells us and continues, "Things affect me like everybody else. Why wouldn't they? Too many lights on the face would never allow you to go into trance. Sometimes, the air conditioning is so high, how can I be expected to go into trance? Then it becomes a compromise with me. It's like, '*Chalo beta, aap sunne aaye hain, hum gaate hain*'. You can't realise the beauty of music unless it's quiet, comfortable, and when you



don't expect the artists to be superhuman." She struggles somewhat with her words, uncharacteristically, while attempting to describe the rare moment(s), "When I present a *raag*, sometimes I'm so lost in it... It's not easy, my dear, it's very, very difficult. To express the emotion of the *raag* into *alaapi* is the most difficult job in Indian classical music, and that is why we are trying to escape it, compensating it by rhythm and words... Sometimes I get involved in it so much, I feel as if I'm not there. But because I am alive, I can feel myself there too, I am aware of myself... And that gives me happiness, peace, strength, confidence. That's the moment when I'm in timelessness. But it's very rare..."

It's perhaps this timelessness that keeps her young at 75 (almost everyone I asked gauged her at 50-55 max), and inclined towards the young, "I'm in my *sadhna* all day long, day in and day out. I am, many a time, in timelessness. I can feel it... I really think time stops for us. Somehow." A typical day for Kishori comprises "morning *puja*", "my own *sadhna*", and worrying about the intricate mechanics of housekeeping. She watches the daily soaps, she tells me, "even though they are spoiling my ears, because of the heavenly music", and finds herself intrigued by the women in it, astutely summing them all up in one phrase, "*auraton ke kapde aur unke kasht*". She doesn't sleep too well even on good days, she says, without any hint of resentment, but what really does away with any inklings even of shuteye time, is when "a *bandish* begins to haunt me... I start thinking about how to get that feeling into a *raag*. And then I cannot sleep. Not until I finally get it."

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Conversation starter in the form of an exquisite black and white photograph of her mother, with Kishori forming a surreal background, is up on one of the walls of Kishori's house, which are otherwise quite bare. Mogubai Kurdikar, in the middle of a performance, an *alaap* perhaps, her fingers in poised *mudra*, thumb to ring finger, eyes closed. Sound familiar? Kishori's deeply, spiritually humbling moments come to the fore when she talks about her mother, her *guru*. She never actually looks directly at the photograph, I notice, even as her presence fills up our chat room, and inspires Kishori's thoughts. Says the *shishya*, "My music is actually, very simply, just a personification of my mother's thoughts. Nothing greater than that. I have made them my own, that's all. I learnt so much from her. Not just music, but life." Kishori story-tells her way through the subtle lessons that her *guru* taught her, "I remember, many years ago, once I got eight programmes in one month, and I was quite excited. I called her up and told her this, very thrilled, 'Mama, *pata hai, mujhe na aath* programmes *mile hain*'. She said to me, '*Bachcha, aath* programmes? That's great... But tell me something, eight programmes mean 32 days, right?'" (See,



I'd rather have young people come to my concerts than those who know too much... I try to speak to the hearts of the young minds

because those were the days when we used to travel by trains everywhere). Doesn't that mean you won't be able to practise for 32 days? *Dekh lena zara, beta' ...* That was the first and the last time that my mother had to tell me how many programmes to take up and how many to reject. That's why I don't do too many concerts today... This is just an example of how my *guru* was, and how a *guru* should be." Comfort too, was sought, and found, "I would get very pained, when I was immature, by what people and critics had to say about me. *Log kehnte hain main bahut der se aati hoon, main roti thi.* They would accuse me, 'Is she trying to change horses mid-stream?', and I would cry. Or they would say, 'Kishori has left Jaipur *gharana ka gaana*', *main roti thi...* Once my mother told me, '*Beta, log kya kahenge - isse tumhe kya matlab hai? Tum apni sadhna mein raho, log apne aap aayenge tumhaare paas*' (Why does it bother you, what people say? You stay with your music, and people will come to you automatically). And that's exactly what happened. She didn't want me to dance in public. Please the audience... She didn't want me to sing for *altu faltu*, she wanted me to sing for Him. That's why she taught me pure music." Which is why, Kishori's music is about, "What my thoughts are deep inside me, *mere andar ke bhaav*, they can be manifested and expressed externally, outside of me, via the language of notes, *suron ke zariye*. Without the usage of rhythm and words... When you

express different feelings of a *raag*, you try and embody them, with your voice. Some *raags* have *shringar* in them, some have *bhakti*, some have *veerta*, some have *karuna*. You have to get involved with the feeling of the *raag*. When I give you Radha-Krishna *samvaad* or *leela*, I get involved in it, and my voice is bound to be sensual. It (had) better be. That is true Indian classical music. A language of notes that expresses different feelings in its true way... You have to start with your personal, individual feelings about it, and expand it in such a way that it turns universal. It becomes true for all experience... All art is emotive, so music is too; the *shastras* tell you that... But notes are abandoned now."

She looks ahead though, "I do hope that people listen to *sangeet* much better than mine, even when I'm not around". Something she's surprisingly optimistic about, "Let me tell you that Indian classical music is not going to die, simply because it is the eternal truth of nature. All the emphasis on yoga and *ayurveda*, where do you think it's coming from? In the same way, people are going to realise the potential of Indian classical music. *Suron ke peechhe bhi vaise hi lagenge log, aap dekhna...* That time is yet to come, though."

Times yet to come might produce a book, we're told. But mention autobiography, and Kishori waves it away, ordering the word itself to be dispelled and dismissed from the room, a phone call she'd rather not take, "I don't give so much importance to my life. My life is my personal business, why should people care? Writing on music is a different matter altogether. That, I might do." For now, the song has its drive, its surreal benefits, "When I sing sometimes, I feel as if my life is coming to an end, and how will I ever reach Him? I have experienced what they say - of being a drop in the ocean - I'm not saying this because it is a great proverb. I have experienced it. I experience it. Each time I sing." ■