In all my lifetime I have never come across any musician who is so precise, melodious, and involved. Her sur pierces the heart.

Nityandnad Halipur

An Unheard Melody
ANNAPURNA DEVI
An Authorized Biography

Swapan Kumar Bondyopadhyay
2005
The greatest musician of the No. Indian Senia Mailar Gharana is also the least heard, at least w. regard to vehicles for music in our era – the concert hall, the CD, even U tube. You will not hear Annapurna unless you are as fortunate as I was, crossing her path, indeed seeking her out – as a young woman in a moment of humiliation but also of inspiration. She was moved, by way of divine empathy, to open her vast estate – to offer & to extend the limits of the gharana – the ordinary barriers – of religion & culture & those less ordinary of instrumental hierarchy.

Her father an unusual musician, was also an unusual humanitarian, teaching freely to pupils of widely divergent talent & circumstances, regardless of caste, gender & other factors so divisive, in general, in Indian society.
Only a very unusual woman cld. have accomplished this. Hers is a talent, so natural, so profound, so inherently allied to the deepest & most esoteric resonance of both music & mantra that to hear her play as I did, one late afternoon in Mumbai, is a truly indescribable experience.

Was I listening to my mind waves, who was the player, who the listener?

Annapurna,
born Roshanara Khan
in Mailar, No. India, 1927 was the 3rd daughter of the great master Allauddhin Khan, teacher to the most prominent Indian musicians of the 20th century & to an orchestra of orphans. He was the father of Ali Akbar Khan, several years older than Annapurna. She, it is generally agreed, wore the mantle of the gharana (as its most profound exponent). She was also the most profoundly silenced, as far as the expectation of the Indian public was concerned.
At 14 she is the bride of Ravi Shankar, himself a devoted student of her father, but a late comer, his first art was that of the dance. At 15 Annapurna is the mother of Subho (Shubhendra Shankar). At 16 her heart is broken. Shortly thereafter she returns to Mailar, to her father’s refuge, to begin what must have been a period of almost unbearable solitude (& *sadhana*). 

Intense introspection, accomplished through the idiom of music allowed her to nurture a transcendent relation to the music, for her a conduit to self effacement. She was immersed in a divine & divinely musical presence.

*Not for nothing is Annapurnaji described as the very embodiment of Allauddin Khan's pure and deep devotion to his music. She is rightly hailed as the ultimate reference point to the musical ideology of Allauddin Khan. It is only in her that the quintessence of the Maihar parampar is preserved.*

Another of the daughters, Jahanara, the elder sister of both Ali Akbar & Annapurna, is, as a child, trained in music. As a married woman, her talent alienates her in-laws (the mother of the groom burns her tambura) – she returns to Mailar to die in her own mother’s arms. Shocked, Allauddhin resolves to spare his youngest (& only remaining daughter – a 3rd Sharija has died in childhood) fr. the rigor & commitment of the talim (or training). But, returning fr. an engagement, one afternoon, Annapurna is discovered teaching her older brother Ali Akbar Khan, 5 yrs. her senior, the morning’s lesson – she has memorized it fr. behind a curtain. Finding his children engaged in such prodigious study, he accepts Annapurna as his pupil.

Of the 3 pupils, Annapurna is the most intrinsically devoted – within a few years, it is reported, she masters the Surbahar. (She herself says that all 3 were equally talented & that she, Ravi Shankar & Ali Akbar Khan wept openly as they studied, immersed in the sangeet. A friend, describing the very last lesson given by her brother, recently deceased, spoke of the same phenomena – every student in the room weeping at the perfect beauty of the music – Ali Akbar Khan insisted to sit up & teach a final lesson on the final evening of his life.
Annapurna, through a rigorous process of renunciation & transubstantiation, internalizes & then liberates the ‘courtly music’, she moves backward to the source of the music & forward to a realm beyond time. She is undistractedly devoted to her father’s instruction. Instead of hiding behind the curtain to secretly memorize the lesson, she sits w. her brother & then w. her brother & Ravi Shankar for the next decade or more. The singularity of her music cannot be exaggerated – I heard her in 1971 & to this day remember all details of that afternoon & the extraordinary effect her music, *her talim*, had – truly impossible to impart in words.

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If Ravi’s musical powers are to predominate professionally & within the context of his marriage, her mastery must manifest outside the confine of concert hall, radio station & recording studio.

(It is rumored, in India, that Annapurna took a vow of silence – her biographer states, Annapurna, however, told me that something worse had happened than Ravi attempting to make her take this oath. But she added that she would divulge it to none. . .)
If Annapurna’s music is to reclaim the divine heritage of sur, swara & raga – only those who have heard her personally & not in the covertly recorded music of the 50s – fragments of which remain (see the links which follow) can attest to this – such isolation, was part of a greater intention.

The music which follows her isolation in Mailar & the first separation fr. her husband – there were several – seals her youth w. an extraordinary sign, extenuating her loss but also transforming it. The loss is transmuted, an otherworldly gift manifests. It is our loss, for the music is inaccessible, but it is not the loss of a woman whose dignity so touched me that 35 years later, our lessons might have taken place 35 minutes ago.

Even on Surbahar, the bass sitar, her technique was astonishing – one can still hear fragments of this early music in a duet w. her former husband – the only recording that exists of the two of them.

Shankar turns toward the public & what he perceives to be its needs. Annapurna, a classicist, strictly adheres to her father’s talim & applies herself to the spiritual discipline inherent in it.

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The court system, in India, at least, in general, is presented as a protector of the music, sheltering its musicians & giving them sustenance. Annapurna’s position is that the shastra sangeet, at this point, suffered a permutation, fr. which it did not recover – in some sense, her role, as the gifted daughter & abandoned lover of the gharana, puts her in the position to penetrate to the depth of the music, mining its resources, in a way not permitted to its public performers & especially those who were, in yet another permutation, to present this music, not only beyond the boundaries of the palace, but beyond the boundary of Bharata or India itself.

‘Public performance’ she said to me ‘why should I play for those fighters’ referring to the Indian elite in judgment of its most prodigious cultural exponents (i.e., Why should she play competitively?). She hears the rustling of an invisible sari – applying herself to her riyaz – the ringing of bells – night after night. Her audience – Saraswati & entourage. The Hare Krishnas – living above her on Warden Road where we studied ask her to please stop practicing.

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The biographer has done a remarkable research & obviously earned the trust of his subject. But one wonders if, in trying to elucidate the ‘scandal’ of the genius disciples– to set the record straight – he falls into the limitation of precedence & sacrifices his subject to the personalities which surrounded her. The reader wants to understand Annuapurna & her music. We do understand, of course, the subjectivity of biography, the fragility of memory – the complexity fr. which our human karmic vision – our view of ourselves & others arises.

Mr. Bondyopadhyay penetrates a purdah of more than 40 years – but we do not – cannot – hear the music through his reportage, we do not understand what made her music so distinguished.

It was during my years of studentship that my father would repeatedly tell me that my music should not be treated as a product for public display. It was a means of achieving one's own fulfillment, which should lead to one's own development as a human being.... .... This reminds me of what Amir Khan, one of the greatest vocalist of our time) reportedly told one of his close friends. He had said: ``Annapurna is 80 per cent of Ustad Allauddin Khan, Ali Akbar Khan is 70 per cent and Ravi Shankar is about 40 percent.

http://www.kamat.com/database/articles/annapurna_devi.htm
The author can hardly be criticized – for this, as Annapurna does not play for the public. But as an unsuspecting, in the time, initiate, I feel obliged to at least embellish, if I cannot succinctly review, An Unheard Music. I thank all those who have encouraged me to do this, I myself silent, on this subject, until now.

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Annapurna, on the dissolution of her marriage, takes ‘purdah’, the Muslim refusal to leave the house. Remarried she continues to live in this manner, never setting her foot in public domain. *If you were to put me in front of this apartment, she said, I wld. not be able to find my way back to it …*

Immense dignity a strange combination of frailty & resolve, crystallized in the young woman & created a dialogue, a musical dialogue, rooted in the origins of the music & its capacity to liberate the mind fr. thought & thought fr. time.

Annapurna is an exponent of NADA yoga that yoga of sound which leads to transcendent perceptual faculty & liberation fr. that faculty. *If one listens to the available recordings* ..........................................................
Smt Annapurna Devi- Surbahar-Raga-Kaushiki
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TARyHE-iIw8

Srimati Annapurna Devi, surbahar, Raag Manjh Kham
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jetdF9v4LPI

her fluency is astounding, even in the 50s, when a saddened musician returns to her father. There are NO recordings of her mature music & few have ever heard it

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In the wake of brother’s passing, a great, an epic pillar in the majestic temple of the Indian canon, I salute the sister, whose voice was removed fr. the public sphere decades ago but whose Surbahar & kindness as a teacher has continued to resonate & to instruct, as is detailed in the biography, musicians such as Hari Prasad Chaurasya & the late Nikhil Banerjee & several Western pupils, Daniel Bradley, being the one upon whom Bondyopadhyay generously concentrates. For these pupils Annapurna Devi is the very embodiment of the Sangeet Guru in the Indian Sastra.

Unheard is not a masterful biography – for readers accustomed to contemporary English usage, the diction will distract but the material it covers, has been hidden from view, perhaps consciously & it is singularly important that this material come to light, especially, as the time frame it covers, is rapidly receding fr. us.

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The biographer reports that Annupurna wished to clarify certain features of her history. Such matters can defy elucidation – inherently complex, subjective detail mutates in relation to our perception of it.

For the modern connoisseur, it is important to understand Annupurna within the context of her father’s *talim* – ultimately it is hers. For her, it may be impossible to dissociate fr. the power of the 3 men who so influenced her formation & fr. the bond to her only son – teaching Shobu, she told me, almost all she could in a mere 6 years – before such instruction was so rudely interrupted. Here the biographer defers fr. what was told to me directly re the prematurity of the separation (& the subsequent death, in America of her only offspring

* An Unheard Melody is the first to expose this story. The reader traces the dynamics of the gifted pupils, the seemingly inevitable circumstances that evolved & the profound impact the music was to have, particularly through her brother & former husband, on the musical cultures of planet Earth fr. 1960 to the present. The genius of Ustad Allauddin Khan is beyond ordinary comprehension – he lived to be 110.
Ravi Shankar & Ustad Ali Akbar Khan are household words in the music community – Annapurna’s name is hidden. Even in the obituaries which followed the death of her brother Ali Akbar Khan only one of those I perused on the Internet even mentioned Annapurna. But Khansahib himself kept her picture directly before him, w. the photos of his parents, as he steadfastly taught his students in San Raphael, California, the school to which he devoted the later half of his life (w. a warmth, understanding & musical siddha only his pupils knew). The music he taught in his later years, especially in the vocal classes, close to the music Annapurna played – but a teacher’s presence must remain – to guide –

When Annupurna played it was as if nothing remained, nothing.

It is also on record that even Ali Akbar Khan, her elder brother, reportedly hesitates to play his sarod in her presence. Besides, it speaks volumes for the maestro's open-mindedness and magnanimity that he sent his sons Ashish Khan and Dhyanesh Khan (who died prematurely at 49 in 1990) to benefit from guidance from his sister in their sarod-playing. The father initiated his daughter into the mysteries of Hindustani music while she was still a child, and thoroughly groomed her in vocal music, the sitar and the surbahar for over 15 years. To the master's touch, she added an amazing degree of practice with singular dedication and determination under the vigilant but affectionate guidance of her father.

http://www.kamat.com/database/articles/annapurna_devi.htm
The book traces the life of Shrimati Annapurna. To its credit it is unbiased – one understands the young Ravi Shankar, Annapurna said to me Panditji was a genius – She honors the most well known of her father’s disciples but she had been immersed in the talim – since birth – when he arrived on the scene, so to speak, to study w. Allauddhin Khan – the latter accompanying choreographer & dancer Uday Shankar, Ravi’s elder brother, on their ground breaking tour to the West – (Rene Daumal, Uday’s secretary, on these tours, was later a major exponent of Indian Aesthetics – see RASA, Essays on Indian Aesthetics & Selected Sanskrit Studies, Rene Daumal).

I can only say, in closing, that practicing xitro – (Buddhist practice for the dead) for Ali Akbar Khan, as I did, following the announcement of his death, I saw a palace, a huge musical palace. I saw a tiny window, the least significant perhaps, that window shed its light on me, it was reserved for me. For unknown reasons the author of this review was the recipient of a fraction of the musical light that filled the palace. It is impossible for my reader to hear the music I heard the monumental day when Annapurna Devi played for me. Ali Akbar Khan, in his master classes, sometimes approached this sound, w. his voice, only w. his voice, that she displayed instrumentally &; toward the end, he wld. teach, in the vocal classes as she did, a very few notes or a phrase at a time.
In an era of absolute chaos, we mourn the loss of Ali Akbar Khan & we remember Annapurna DEVI, the remaining sibling. May her music, even if we can not hear it directly, purify our minds. Such perfection will penetrate us if we are aware of it. She, who directly inherits the Haridas – Mian Tansen lineage is a royal musician – one who has lived & will live in solitude.

To be honest I have never thought that there is anything special about me to write on; I see myself only as a humble student of music who learned fr. Baba Allauddhin Khan, my father & a great Guru to many besides myself...I will be most happy, she says to her biographer if your book marks the sharing of his divine musical gift w. the disciples.

For those seeking sophisticated musical analysis Eastern or Western, look elsewhere to find this kind of approach. Unheard is a straight forward biography, – but for those seeking to unravel the mystery of the daughter of Allauddhin Khan, so hermetic, she has not left her house for decades, the book is a treasure & the author is to be respected for the reserve he shows. The book does not cater to parasites – but a perspicacious report on the music of the great master & why she is considered to be the true holder of the gharana, for this reader, is missing.
Having heard her play I am obliged to write – not as literary review but as revelation – of a musician whose specific mastery I only encountered once, in her. I still hear her, patiently training me on the 3rd. note in the Indian scale, the Ga, sound of the sheep, for an entire afternoon, & never once did the note bore me, the note was as infinite as her patience.

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Biographic interpretation of certain features in her life, especially concerning her son (who died in LA in 1991) contradicts, to a certain extent, w. what she herself told me as the crucial separation was taking place. One might wish the author had spent less time on her (then) husband, but ironically, her life is so inextricably tied to the most illustrious musicians of her gharana & of India, indeed the world, that to separate herself & her developmental years fr. them, is nearly impossible for a biographer, even the most ardent.
Pregnant at 15 – when I meet her, Sobhu has only recently departed fr. her tutelage – for new life in the West. Subject to its expansive life styles, especially in the 1960s, he is unable to fulfill or to develop his training. Not to open wounds, but to honor biographic heritage, one wonders if Bodopadhyay sought to protect those responsible, or if, with the passage of time, the story itself transmuted.

In India, the *garana* (*ghar* = house) were kept in the family. Early Western students will attest to the difficulties encountered – Annapurna told me that in the 6 years of her training, her son had absorbed almost all that he cld. have fr. her illustrious heritage. She needed a few more years to complete his training. Shobhu dies, in America, unknown & as the biographer reports often unmiked at the concerts he played w. his father.

Perhaps, through divine agency, before she too leaves for pure land, somehow, even a fraction of her mature music, will be preserved & Budopadhyaya, by bringing her secret life to the public eye, will have accomplished his true mission – the revelation of a music that surpasses time & resolves the agony of our bound condition.
Dhrupad ang talaim imparted to her by her father does not differentiate w. regard to the manner in which music was taught to male & female pupils. Annapurna, decades after the traumas says to her biographer

I have great respect for women who stand up for what they believe in and fight for the cause of women against all odds. I do not agree that for women career and marriage do not go together. If there is mutual respect and understanding between the husband and wife, if there is an absence of jealousy, both can build their careers & still be happily married.

Ravi Shankar, agonized by these traumas & other factors, eventually bonds to an Indian Spiritual master – Annapurna, says the biographer had bhakti bhavana but she had no faith in ‘idolatrous guru worship’ i.e., her music was her object, her path & her liberation.

Allauddhin Khan taught his students according to their personality or aptitude.
Babab was truly a saint and did not discriminate on the basis of caste, creed or class. When Baba built his house in Maihar it was a modern house by any standard. Many from the adjoining areas came to see it. I was a child then. One day I noticed that one of the old sweeper women fr. the village who used to lift human excreta was peeping through a window admiring the new house. I wondered why she had come there. Baba noticed my expression. He then went outside & respectfully said to the sweet woman ‘Ma, why are you standing outside? Please come in.’ He held her hand and brought her insider with great respect. He made her sit on the cot and ordered me to touch her feet saying Mahai charan sparsh karō bita. She is like you others. Touch her feet. I had to touch her feet. That was the greatest lesson I learned in my childhood.

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For Western readers of this material, the organization of the interviews & quotes, the diction, as stated, the obscure Indian terms, present obstacles. It is difficult, at times, to read & one wonders if the author’s obsessive need to detail the relation between A & RS when the book is really a biography off the former is necessary (or even, in certain instances, accurate).

Yet, one cannot impose a post modern understanding on an author who is deconstructing relationships that adhere to tradition (the arranged marriage) & even more complicitously the respect afforded, in the same tradition, to those who share the talim of a particular gharana & the terrible consequences – rumored to be inflicted upon he or she who breaks the guru bhenji/guru bhai vow (samaya) or promise shared by disciples, even non-family members of the same gharana.
The need to protect the *gharana* & its famous exponents is self evident & in conflict w. the story that is being told.

The same fire that burns in the spiritual domain, burns for glory in this world – the later not always & not necessarily in contradiction to the later.

Understanding the powers of the dedicated artists, AA RS & A, at the feet of their master, is almost beyond the power of a book to convey & it is also understandable that the biographer, an initiate will not want trespass on forbidden realms.

* & yet, the silencing of a woman artist, as brilliant as Shrimati Annapurna Devi is a source of great personal pain to this writer. Perhaps it is enough that the gods are witness to such resonance, perhaps fr. her room in her father’s house – & onward – waves of grace were generated – inspiring future composition in the West & the harmonic inquiry that developed in the 50s, later expanding into almost all fields of music, both popular & classical, from that time to ours, in the new millennium.
As Annapurna practiced
internalizing the gharana & returning it to root
La Monte Young, Terry Riley & in Italy Giancinto Scelsi,
in the same time frame, were
re-evaluating the musical system of the West
& literally forging new ties,
especially to systems such as the Indian one in which the harmonic series has been intact for millennia. Later musicians, jazz artists John & Alice Coltrane, Thelonious Monk, Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, pop musicians, Brian Eno, groups Sonic Youth, Shakti & others, Frances Marie Uitti, Charles Curtis, Hilary Jeffery continue this inquiry.

Harry Smith denizen of the Anthology of American Folk Music, wisely put a Pythagorean symbol on the 3 volume set, also in the 50s understanding & not stating that the same harmonic series was preserved in the 78 RPM records he painstakingly collected.

_I wanted to make a revolution w. music_
he said when he won his Grammy in 1997.
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It is many decades
since a young Annapurna returned to her father,
heartbroken,
it is a few decades since the son of the two masters died,
in a hospital in LA.
Bondyopadhyay’s
casual reportage of the afterlife of RS, the American chapters.
also conflict w. what had been personally confided.
Does feminist theory reveals the conspiracy --?

There is no doubt
that APD, hermetic, reclusive, understood her path
& carved it, at a certain point, consciously. The heart of the
music is hers, she knows & she offers this. She instructs fr.
this center
to students fortunate to have
been accepted by her.

Even in the West,
flautist, Dorio Dwyer, teacher of my teacher Yaada Weber,
was the first female to play flute in a Western symphony
orchestra. Was the female presence such a disturbance to
the occidental orchestral genre?

Times have changed
but it will be decades, centuries, even millennia
before a musician of the caliber of Annapurna Devi appears.
It is not too late to beg for a recording, even a taped interview, as Thurston Moore suggested, Sonic Youth, a supporter, among others: Mr. & Mrs. Bhattacharya, Mookerji or Dutt, i.e., the Indian patrons- of the Ali Akbar Khan Digital Archives. The Indian girl who memorized lessons fr. behind a curtain, then tutored her brother, 5 years her senior, grew into a beautiful young woman. Now she is an elder, in the same apartment to which she took refuge, w. her son, when her marriage irreversibly – w. Ravi Shankar’s permanent residence in the USA, 1957 & onward – dissolved.

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While in retreat, recently I dream of her brother, in multi-dimensional dream spectre, we are in the back seat of a car, something so familiar, so serious about that car. The master put his left arm, in a comforting manner, around my shoulder.

I woke w. the dictum ‘see my sister’. See her? To offer comfort, for her loss of him – as a child she knew only 3 or 4 people, her brother, Ravi & Sucharita, the neighbor’s child – cld. I comfort her? Or did he, fr. a car that felt like a hearse & perhaps was one, his own, tell me to go to her & to beg for a recording, however fractional, of a music of which most people can only dream, a music that truly is the fulfillment of the Nada Brahma or lst. Sound for indeed, the player Annapurna disappeared in an oceanic sensibility, articulated, on the Surbahar by her playing, alone.
Even though she has remained aloof from the world of concert music, Annapurna Devi's greatness as an erudite guru has been mercifully recognized and appreciated at the official level. She has been a recipient of Padma Bhushan (1977), Sharngadev Fellowship of Sur singar Samsad (1988) & the Sangeet Natak Akademi award (1991). She has served as professor of music at the NCPA since its inception, till 1983 and presently is the guiding spirit behind the activities of Acharya Allauddin Music Circle in Mumbai. Indeed, such distinctions do not have any significance and meaning to Annapurnaji. So immense has been her contribution to our musical heritage that one is tempted to say that by bestowing these honors on her, the bestowers have honored themselves. [http://www.kamat.com/database/articles/annapurna_devi.htm](http://www.kamat.com/database/articles/annapurna_devi.htm)