

A legacy:

Ustad Rahim Fahimuddin Dagar, doyen of the Dagarbani (style of *dhrupad* singing), passed away last July 27 in New Delhi, at the age of 84 after prolonged illness. He was shortly preceded by *beenkar* Asad Ali Khan (1937 – 14 June 2011), a close friend of his and leading exponent of a unique instrumental tradition in *dhrupad* music. With their demise, it seems like a major chapter in Hindustani musical history has come to a close. They both belonged to a time when life had a different pace and people were ready, for instance, to spend the entire night in so-called "music conferences", listening to great artists well into the morning hours. Both of them had witnessed enormous changes in society, while their own fathers had been court musicians, they had to adapt to the free-lancing artist life of post-independence India. In spite of such major shifts of values and lifestyle, they made it possible for younger people to experience and learn music belonging to another era. Through their uncompromising dedication to the art, they had preserved a treasure which, in this very same shape, is not available to the world anymore.

I first met R.Fahimuddin Dagar in 1982 in Calcutta, where Jon Barlow, another Western student of Hindustani music, had taken me to his house suggesting I should learn from him. I had been practicing *khyal* singing for a few years and was gradually getting acquainted with the world of *ragas*, but somehow I felt I had reached a dead-end and was looking for a different approach to voice and music altogether. At the time, Dagar Sahab was teaching at the Rabindra Bharati University while giving also private classes to small groups of students at his home. Every day, he would sit with them for at least two hours, exercising *alap* and patterns over and over again, giving priority to the quality of *akar* (vocalizing on the sound of "aa"), to the purity of intonation and to rhythmic accuracy with an intensity new to me. At once, I found his method fascinating and rewarding and I kept on studying with him for about five years. During this time with him, I have been introduced to the basics of *dhrupad* music and its philosophy through direct experience according to the traditional *guru-shishya-parampara* system of transmission. He did not seem to follow a strictly structured method and taught me as if I would be able to spend my next 30 years learning with him (as he himself had done with his own father and guru, A.Rahimuddin Dagar). However, due to various reasons, I could not accomplish this task. I decided instead to integrate other styles and artistic forms in my own course of studies and began to learn singing also from other masters (such as Pt. Dilip Chandra VEDI and Pt. Vidur Mallik) as well as *kathak* dance (from Smt. Manjushri Chatterjee). My training in India lasted for more than 10 years after which, I came back to Europe and started collaborating with other artists in various directions (i.e. early, new music and multimedia) with the aim to develop my *dhrupad* skills in a contemporary and intercultural context.

I believe that my grasp of *Hindustani Sangeet* has been greatly strengthened by the innumerable teaching experiences I have collected in the meantime. These, in turn, enable me now to better understand the contribution of my own teachers. After all these years, I feel that R.Fahimuddin Dagar's teachings and practical demonstrations are still working inside me. Again and again I find myself elaborating on some of the principles he was able to transmit in all their self-generative power, possibly because he did not try

to adapt them to modern times and needs. While his uncompromising and conscientious nature has not helped him to face the overwhelming social changes taking place during his lifetime, his truthfulness to the tradition has preserved that inherent quality of timelessness, the original sparkle, linking *dhrupad* to the highest expressions of Indian classical culture. The insights, musical thoughts and techniques transmitted within the *gharana* have been cultivated by many generations in an uninterrupted lineage of musicians. It was never an easy task to partake of this learning and I am grateful to the gurus who have made it possible for us to profit from this vast and valuable pool of knowledge.

Coming back to *Ustadji*, I realize that the aspects connecting *dhrupad* to the yoga-of-sound (*nadayoga*) keep on getting clearer to me with practice, continuously unfolding their significance and potential. Thanks to Dagar Sahab's deep understanding of these principles and his adamant belief in their relevance to *dhrupad*, I am able to gradually absorb them through the memory of his example, even at this later stage. For instance, in the development of my own teaching method I have been heavily influenced by his usage of symbolic imagery for reaching the right state of being and achieve specific musical ideas. Since most of my students are not living in India and approach *dhrupad* with other motivations and expectations than I did myself, I have been urged to reassess my understanding of the tradition and elaborate on its modalities of transmission. Thus, I have been looking for an interpretation which allows the most essential principles of *dhrupad* music to be absorbed and integrated in this different context and environment. If I am able to gradually near this objective, I have to thank my gurus' sincerity and generosity. In particular, all the knowledge concerning voice production, inner attitude and many other subtle issues in music making have been transmitted to me mostly through Dagar Sahab's *talim*, for which I will always give him the legitimate credit. He was one of the extremely few singers in modern India embodying this knowledge and was able to impart it also because it had become his *raison d'être*.

His strict adherence to the tradition he inherited from his elders did not prevent him to develop an open-minded, curious and receptive attitude towards other music and other musicians. Therefore, he was always keen to hear what his Western students were doing. Even more remarkable has been his consideration for my own peculiar path of learning. He accepted to teach me also while I was learning from other gurus with a selflessness and far-sightedness one rarely encounters among music teachers anywhere.

Through his non-sectarian approach to religious belief, I have been able to experience Islam from a very privileged point of view, that one of a Muslim musician offering his singing to Allah and to Shiva in one single breath and honoring the concept of *nadabrahman* through his own dedication to music as a spiritual path. The awareness of the subtle effects of sound and its metaphysical correspondences made of R.Fahimuddin Dagar's *dhrupad* singing an art in its noblest acceptance, nourishing the soul and elevating the spirit, a path leading to the higher Self. In his teachings, singing becomes a way to tune oneself to the harmony of the cosmos, rather than expressing emotions or demonstrating one's own achievements. Here, the focus is not on the individual and his/her talents and skills but rather on the process of manifestation of *ragas* itself, requiring art and surrender both.

I have experienced Dagar Sahab's most brilliant and effective singing during his classes, while searching for the musical translation of a philosophical or poetic thought. Sometime, in a unique and remarkable way, he would demonstrate the extent of human perception by "conjuring" *svaras* (itches) without actually singing them, just leading the listener's mind to hear them by its sheer power of concentration, as an illusionist with deep understanding of the psyche is able to make his audience see actions which do not actually take place. I attribute this ability of his to the ancient, powerful knowledge of which R.Fahimuddin Dagar considered himself a humble custodian.

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Krems (A), 20 September 2011

