

ABSTRACT

PANNALAL GHOSH AND THE BĀNSURĪ IN THE
TWENTIETH CENTURY

by

Carl J. Clements

Advisor: Professor Peter Manuel

Pannalal Ghosh (1911-1960) is credited with the introduction of the bānsurī (North Indian bamboo flute) into Hindustani classical music in the twentieth century. While the transverse flute played a significant role in the music of India at least since the early centuries CE, it had lost its status as a prominent instrument in Indian art music several hundred years before Ghosh brought it to the forefront of Hindustani classical music. Ghosh's achievement is considered in the context of his time in terms of the social, political, economic, technological, and musical circumstances in India, and particularly Bengal. While twentieth-century developments contributed to his success, it was ultimately through his own efforts that the bānsurī was accepted as a featured Hindustani classical instrument. By redesigning the instrument, working out a technique to emulate the subtleties of the voice, listening to diverse genres and styles of music, engaging in intensive study, and conceptualizing his own eclectic style of playing, he succeeded in convincing twentieth-century audiences that the bānsurī deserved a place as a valued instrument for the performance of Hindustani classical music. His achievement also paved the way for other instruments such as shahnāī, sārangī, and santūr to achieve similar recognition in the classical music of North India.

I have drawn from elements of musical biography; Indian history; organology; music theory, transcription, and analysis; and anthropology to show how Ghosh's career is illustrative of a broader narrative of tradition and innovation in twentieth-century Hindustani classical music. My own studies of Hindustani classical music in the lineage of Pannalal Ghosh began in 1988, and provided a foundation for much of the work in this dissertation. Interviews with former students and associates of Pannalal Ghosh, along with several articles about his life and work, enabled me to piece together his biography. Research into the history and culture of his time provided a clearer picture of the environment that shaped his life and musical development. Transcription and analysis of performances by Ghosh and other vocalists and instrumentalists helped me to situate his music within the context of North Indian classical music in the twentieth century.