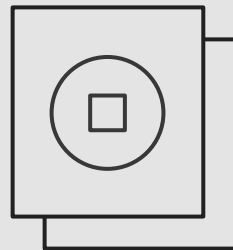


The Sound Of Music

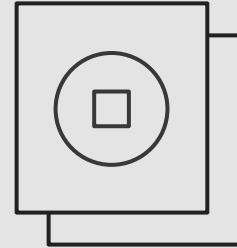


PART II

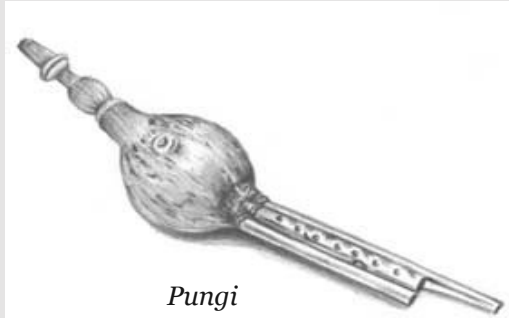
The Shehnai Of Bismillah Khan



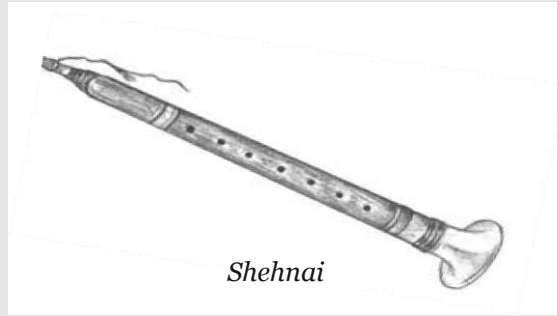
1. EMPEROR Aurangzeb banned the playing of a musical instrument called pungli in the royal residence for it had a shrill unpleasant sound. Pungli became the generic name for reeded noisemakers. Few had thought that it would one day be revived. A barber of a family of professional musicians, who had access to the royal palace, decided to improve the tonal quality of the pungli. He chose a pipe with a natural hollow stem that was longer and broader than the pungli, and made seven holes on the body of the pipe. When he played on it,



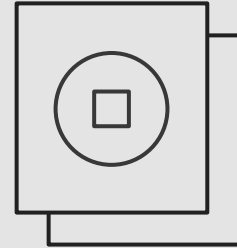
closing and opening some of these holes, soft and melodious sounds were produced. He played the instrument before royalty and everyone was impressed. The instrument so different from the pungi had to be given a new name. As the story goes, since it was first played in the Shah's chambers and was played by a nai (barber), the instrument was named the 'shehnai'.



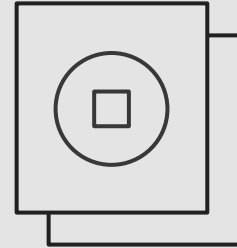
Pungi



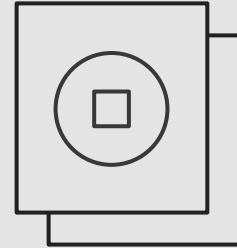
Shehnai



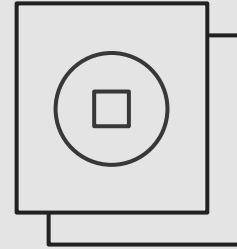
2. The sound of the shehnai began to be considered auspicious. And for this reason it is still played in temples and is an indispensable component of any North Indian wedding. In the past, the shehnai was part of the naubat or traditional ensemble of nine instruments found at royal courts. Till recently it was used only in temples and weddings. The credit for bringing this instrument onto the classical stage goes to Ustad Bismillah Khan.



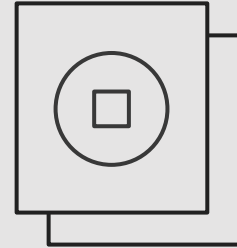
3. As a five-year old, Bismillah Khan played gillidanda near a pond in the ancient estate of Dumraon in Bihar. He would regularly go to the nearby Bihariji temple to sing the Bhojpuri 'Chaita', at the end of which he would earn a big laddu weighing 1.25 kg, a prize given by the local Maharaja. This happened 80 years ago, and the little boy has travelled far to earn the highest civilian award in India — the Bharat Ratna.



4. Born on 21 March 1916, Bismillah belongs to a well-known family of musicians from Bihar. His grandfather, Rasool Bux Khan, was the shehnainawaz of the Bhojpur king's court. His father, Paigambar Bux, and other paternal ancestors were also great shehnai players.

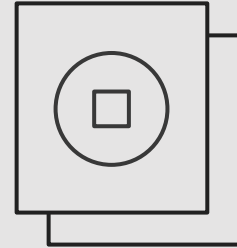


5. The young boy took to music early in life. At the age of three when his mother took him to his maternal uncle's house in Benaras (now Varanasi), Bismillah was fascinated watching his uncles practise the shehnai. Soon Bismillah started accompanying his uncle, Ali Bux, to the Vishnu temple of Benaras where Bux was employed to play the shehnai. Ali Bux would play the shehnai and Bismillah would sit captivated for hours on end. Slowly, he started getting lessons in playing the instrument and would sit practising throughout the day. For years to come the temple of Balaji and Mangala Maiya and the banks of the Ganga became the young apprentice's favourite haunts where he could practise in solitude. The flowing waters of the Ganga inspired him to improvise and invent raagas that were earlier considered to be beyond the range of the shehnai.

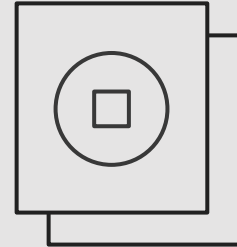


6. At the age of 14, Bismillah accompanied his uncle to the Allahabad Music Conference. At the end of his recital, Ustad Faiyaz Khan patted the young boy's back and said, "Work hard and you shall make it." With the opening of the All India Radio in Lucknow in 1938 came Bismillah's big break. He soon became an often-heard shehnai player on radio.

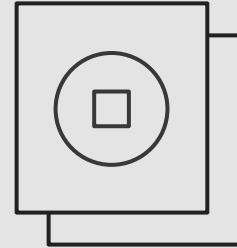
7. When India gained independence on 15 August 1947, Bismillah Khan became the first Indian to greet the nation with his shehnai. He poured his heart out into Raag Kafi from the Red Fort to an audience which included Mahatma Gandhi and Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, who later gave his famous 'Tryst with Destiny' speech.



8. Bismillah Khan has given many memorable performances both in India and abroad. His first trip abroad was to Afghanistan where King Zahir Shah was so taken in by the maestro that he gifted him priceless Persian carpets and other souvenirs. The King of Afghanistan was not the only one to be fascinated with Bismillah's music. Film director Vijay Bhatt was so impressed after hearing Bismillah play at a festival that he named a film on end: for a very long time without stopping after the instrument called Gunj Uthi Shehnai.

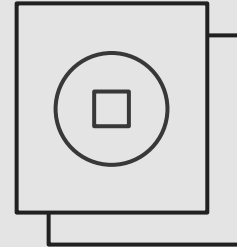


The film was a hit, and one of Bismillah Khan's compositions, "Dil ka khilona hai toot gaya ...," turned out to be a nationwide chartbuster! Despite this huge success in the celluloid world, Bismillah Khan's ventures in film music were limited to two: Vijay Bhatt's Gunj Uthi Shehnai and Vikram Srinivas's Kannada venture, Sanadhi Apanna. "I just can't come to terms with the artificiality and glamour of the film world," he says with emphasis.

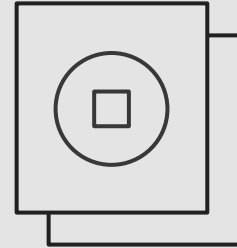


9. Awards and recognition came thick and fast. Bismillah Khan became the first Indian to be invited to perform at the prestigious Lincoln Centre Hall in the United States of America. He also took part in the World Exposition in Montreal, in the Cannes Art Festival and in the Osaka Trade Fair. So well known did he become internationally that an auditorium in Teheran was named after him — Tahar Mosiquee Ustaad Bismillah Khan.

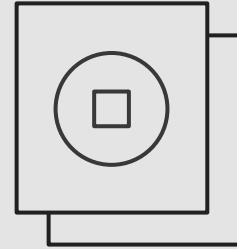
10. National awards like the Padmashri, the Padma Bhushan and the Padma Vibhushan were conferred on him.



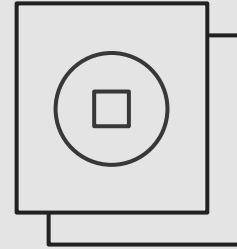
11. In 2001, Ustad Bismillah Khan was awarded India's highest civilian award, the Bharat Ratna. With the coveted award resting on his chest and his eyes glinting with rare happiness he said, "All I would like to say is: Teach your children music, this is Hindustan's richest tradition; even the West is now coming to learn our music."



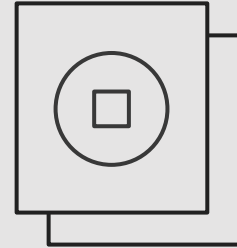
12. In spite of having travelled all over the world — Khansaab as he is fondly called — is exceedingly fond of Benaras and Dumraon and they remain for him the most wonderful towns of the world. A student of his once wanted him to head a shehnai school in the U.S.A., and the student promised to recreate the atmosphere of Benaras by replicating the temples there. But Khansaab asked him if he would be able to transport River Ganga as well



Later he is remembered to have said, “That is why whenever I am in a foreign country, I keep yearning to see Hindustan. While in Mumbai, I think of only Benaras and the holy Ganga. And while in Benaras, I miss the unique mattha of Dumraon.”



13. Ustad Bismillah Khan's life is a perfect example of the rich, cultural heritage of India, one that effortlessly accepts that a devout Muslim like him can very naturally play the shehnai every morning at the Kashi Vishwanath temple.





**THANK
YOU**