

Sandeep Bhagwati

LOST VOICES

In 1963, the year of my birth, a silent and earnest young man called Deepak Gandharva in Bombay, India, composed the first experimental electroacoustic work ever produced by an Indian. Deepak was not a composer, but a chemical engineer who had just recently returned to his hometown from graduate studies at the renowned Technische Hochschule of Darmstadt, Germany. He was, in fact, a close friend of my father, who had studied chemical engineering in Darmstadt with Deepak-Kaka (as we children would later call him). In Darmstadt, these two nineteen year old babas from Mumbai spent a lot of time together, curious to understand this strange and unfamiliar, still war-scarred Deutschland where one could find no vegetables in winter, a real catastrophe.

For not only were they both strict vegetarians, they were also Gujarati middle-class boys, and tasty fresh food was as central to their life as it would be to a French bourgeois gourmand. And then a whole winter of cold canned peas seasoned only with tomato ketchup....whaa! My father told me that during that first winter in 1957 he often remembered the famous Indian mathematician Ramanujam, who as a celebrated Fellow of Trinity College died of malnutrition in World War I – because he would not break his Brahmin food laws – and the Cambridge College Canteen had either meat, or potatoes, or eggs in every dish they cooked.

Summer apparently was good, though. Many a summer day, I have been repeatedly told, Deepak and my father would take a scenic walk along the Mathildenhöhe, a fragrant hill studded with art deco museums and art deco villas, miraculously still mostly intact in the otherwise devastated town. They would not venture there for the architecture, nor for the flowers, nor the girls (my father had at that time already met my mother, and Deepak's gaze drifted elsewhere), but for all the excitement and rosy future new technologies seemed to promise at the time.

They went to see the rehearsals and tech-setups for the concerts of the Darmstädter Ferienkurse – not to listen to the music, my father later assured me, but to gawk and wonder at the elaborate music hardware: the sound generators and modulators, the high end tape recorders and the echo chambers that coiled like cobras, the vast mixing boards, the galimathias of cables and the loudspeaker arrays: all this shiny new and exciting hardware. My father still shines inwardly when he recalls these days: fantastic sounds would wander around the room, he says. "What was the music like?" I once asked him. "I don't know," said my father, "if I accepted it as music at all then – to me it was just a curious and engrossing collection of technical sounds! "

In some of these tales there also appears a strange young man, as my father recalled him, "with piercing eyes and the general aura of a fervent convertite to a new religion", who, unmasked, lectured these two colonials on the fine points of sound generation and tape composition, spewing off-beat formulae and aimlessly used scientific terms at them – until they, baffled, feigned other obligations - and slunk away. I like to think that this must have been Karlheinz Stockhausen himself, and that Deepak-kakas later work in electroacoustic music was in part due to this chance meeting with the genius of electronic music.

On his return to India in 1963, Deepak-kaka started to make dozens of tape pieces, composed by live overdubbing on two Grundig cassette recorders, in the soon-to-be-defunct cassette standard that eventually would be replaced by the well-known Philips cassettes. His first tape composition apparently was based on layering my babbling baby voice onto itself again and again, slowed down and accelerated to create a richly textured sonic landscape. My father says it was quite something. He said it had always reminded him of Kumar Gandharva, the freak genius of Hindustani music, but also of ocean sounds, of seagulls and sometimes of quite nothing else in this world. When I was young, these old oversized cassettes still could be found in my father's desk, all of Deepak-kakas work that now could not be played back by any existing recorder.

Apparently, one winter day in 1967, Deepak-kaka had been working in our living room, as he often did, and had just left all his stuff on our dining table when he went out for a short midnight tryst in the nearby park - from which he never returned. No body, no cry. No one ever claimed the tapes. I recently asked my father where all of Deepak-kaka's cassettes were now. He said, he had finally thrown them away when my parents moved to their new house on Lac Lemay in the late 1990s. "They had rotted beyond recovery !" my father said angrily, and then added: " I cried. It was like a burial". A burial of two voices – Deepak's and mine.

All characters in this text are fictional, even if some of their namesakes exist and have done some of the things described.