

Shehnai on its way out

BY SAEED MALIK

headed by Shehnai players lead marriage processions to and from the home of brides. In Punjab and Sindh, Shehnai is also played on other joyous occasions such as village fairs, sports competitions and male-folk dances. In the NWFP this instrument is now an important component of the repertoires of Khattak dancers.

In the opinion of musicologists, Shehnai, like several other musical devices, travelled into the Indian Subcontinent with the invading armies from the North, or infiltrated into South Asia as a natural consequence of trans-regional melodic pollination.

A Pakistani orchestra used for the recordings of radio, film and television songs com-

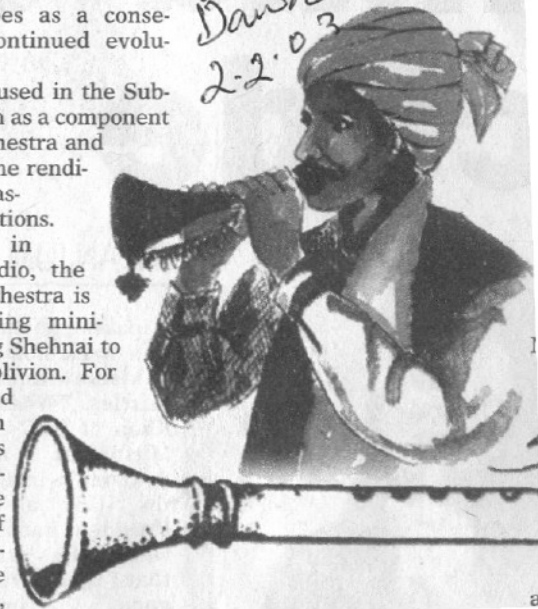
prises four different sections of musical instruments — the strings, the woodwinds, the brass and the percussion while a Western orchestra is heavily loaded with brass instruments. The Pakistani orchestra lays great emphasis on woodwind instruments like flute, clarinet and Shehnai and percussion instruments. Flute and Shehnai are the only instruments from the family of woodwinds that are of Oriental origin.

The musicologists claim that the woodwind instruments are the descendants of the pipe and reed family of the ancient Oriental civilizations. After their introduction in Europe a long time ago, these musical devices experienced a meta-

morphosis and assumed their present shapes as a consequence of continued evolution.

Shehnai is used in the Subcontinent both as a component of a large orchestra and a device for the rendition of solo classical compositions. However, in films and radio, the role of an orchestra is currently being minimized pushing Shehnai to a state of oblivion. For the films and television plays, it is used to accentuate the impact of scenes depicting marriage ceremonies,

*Art
Dawn
2-2-03*



particularly the *Rukhsati* (departure) of the bride from her parental home.

Historians claim that Shehnai was introduced in the subcontinent by the immigrants from Central Asia where it is known as Surnai.

In several parts of Afghanistan and the NWFP, it is still called by the same name. In South India, the instrument goes by the name of Nagasaram. Explaining the peculiar sound of a Shehnai,

A.H. Fox Strangways in his book *The Music of Hindostan* writes: "In the temple of Madurai, I heard the Nagasaram (North Indian Shehnai), a kind of oboe with a very loud tone. It was unbearably close, but sounded majestic and rather awe-inspiring at a little distance in the long

galleries...."

B.C. Deva in his book *Indian Music* has made the following observations about the origin of Shehnai: "The double-reed oboes of India have now earned a worldwide repute through the Shehnai, but it is common in this country as a very ubiquitous instrument, among the tribesmen. It also goes under various names and hellip. We do not know how indigenous this instrument is."

The maestro, who took Shehnai to the height of popularity and introduced it in Western countries, is Ustad Bismillah Khan. Imbued with a life-long passion and enriched with a 60-years practice, he took Shehnai out of weddings to become the centrepiece of classical respectability.

Another one of the few Shehnai expert was Ustad Rangī Khan, who was awarded the Pride of Performance for

HAFIZ AHMED

