

## MUSIC IN DRAMA

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When my friend Sri Yagnaraman, General Secretary, Sri Krishna Gana Sabha, desired that I should write my impressions about the place of music in drama, I readily agreed because this is a subject to which I have given considerable thought and my own experience with the two devotional musical plays "Saint Thyagaraja" and "Purandaradasa", has confirmed my views on this matter.

After the successful staging of our musical drama "Thyagaraja" at Madras, in which I had sung as many as thirty Kritis, I was astonished at first when people asked me how I was able to sing and act at the same time without undue strain. That such a question should be asked in Madras, of all places, which had been the cradle of music and where the greatest of actors of yore who had dominated the stage had been mainly singers was astounding. But on second thought I realised that, considering the sorry state of affairs presently prevailing in the field of musical dramas on the Tamil Stage such a question was not at all surprising. There are very few musical dramas being currently staged and most of them have "play-back" music, with the result that most of the younger generation of play-goers have hardly experienced the thrill of "live" music on the stage.

For an understanding of the present state of affairs, we must view the matter in its historical perspective. Till about the middle fifties, the Tamil stage as well as the Telugu and Kannada stage was dominated by musician-actors and thus music was the main attraction to the play-goers. The names of those actors were house - hold words, further

popularised by their gramophone records. Many of us still recall the memory of the greatest ever S. G. Kittappa who was the main attraction in the famous plays of Kanniah Co. Among a host of famous actor-singers who have left their impress are S V. Subbiah Bhagavathar, Devudu Iyer, Kader Baksha, K. B. Sundarambal, Ratnabai, P. S. Velu Nair, Ananthanarayanan, Chellappa, Bhaskara Das of the Tamil stage, Sthanam Narasimha Rao, Kapilavai Ramanatha Sastry of the Telugu stage, Subbiah Naidu & Nageswar Rao of Gubbi Veeranna troupe of the Kannada stage. Even among the non-professionals, to mention a few, the late Rao Bahadur C. Ramanujachariar, Dr. Natesan, Krishnaswamy Ayya, Dr. Srinivasaraghavan, Sunderarajan, S. J. Acharya, P.S. Krishnaswamy Iyengar, Dr. Ramamurthi and M. D. Parthasarathy had attained greatness on the Tamil stage by their music first and foremost. The above list is not exhaustive but I have given some of the names which are fresh even now in the minds of many of our Tamilian friends.

With the advent of "Talkies" in which music (whether relevant or not) played a significant role, the stage suffered a set-back. But even in films, in the earlier days, musicians were called upon to play leading roles. That is how we saw Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer as VEDIYAR in Nandanar, Musiri Subramania Iyer as Tukaram, G. N. Balasubramaniam as Dushyanthan, M. S. Subbulaxmi as Sakunthala and Meerabai, and N. C. Vasanthakokilam, M. K. Thyagaraja Bhagavathar, Chinnappa, Honnappa Bhagavathar, Kothamangalam Seenu and others playing various roles. With the introduction of

“play-back” music in films, the demand for actor singers ceased. This is no occasion to dilate on the merits or demerits of play-back music in films, but I am deeply concerned with its baneful effects on the Tamil stage.

After independence the Tamil stage, as well as the stage in all parts of the country, had a grand revival. But unfortunately, especially on the Tamil stage, they could not get good actors who were also musicians to act in the plays, although musical dramas had their own special appeal. As a result play-back singing which has invaded the films was utilised on the stage as well. In order to justify their stand the drama producers have advanced the specious argument that “live” music deprives the actor of proper expression while singing and acting at the same time and sometimes it results in contortions of the face which leaves a bad impression on the audience. This is far from the truth as those of us who had occasion to see Kittappa and others still retain a vivid picture in our mind of the composure with which they used to sing and act. They had no mike to amplify the voice and they had to sing in 4 to 4-1/2 sruthi in theatres like the great Waltax Theatre. The actors sang in such a vibrant tone that even the noise of the trains frequently passing by did not distract the audience. Such thrills have only to be experienced to be fully appreciated. Even till recently we had Avvai Shanmugam presenting live music on the stage with great eclat. Compared with this none can deny that the play-back music introduced on the Tamil stage sounds drab and artificial.

Let us face the facts. We are not able to present live music on the stage, because there is a dearth of good actor-singers. If we have to stage musical dramas, we cannot dispense with live music and must find the actor-musician who can take part in them. Otherwise let us confine ourselves to staging only “social” dramas without music or with only background music. The experience of the Marathi stage is quite relevant in this matter.

After suffering a temporary setback owing to the advent of films, during the last fifteen years or so, they have produced a galaxy of brilliant stage musicians, both men and women, comparable with the best of the maestros of a bygone era. They have even written special music dramas to suit the genius of the actors and actresses. We can certainly profit from their experience.

In Bombay itself when the Matunga Dramatic Society was started in 1941 the very first play was a mythological “Subadra Arjuna” where as Arjuna I had to sing nearly 30 songs without the aid of a mike. For nearly ten years thereafter most of our dramas were musicals such as Kabirdas, Tulasidas, Bhookailas, Paduka and Vasanthasena which the people welcomed with enthusiasm. For the next few years we engaged ourselves in presenting social dramas with no music except orchestral background music. Even our friends had forgotten that we staged musical dramas in the past.

When we took up the play “Thyagaraja” on the occasion of our Silver Jubilee in 1965, many people had come to the auditorium with the thought uppermost in their minds as to how the kritis were going to be sung. When I sang the first kriti “Lavanyarama” from the depth of the stage, some persons thought it was tape recorded. It was only when I came forward just in front of the footlights and sang the second kriti “Thulane jesina” that the people realised that it was “live” music, and the favourable audience reaction was immediately perceptible.

I have been always holding the view that an actor singing his songs will create a far deeper impression and impact on the audience, which would remain permanently in their hearts than any amount of taperecorded or playback music. This has been amply proved by the dramas “Thyagaraja” and “Purandaradasa” staged by us recently. After our staging of “Thyagaraja” in Bombay as well as in most of the Tamil Nadu districts, I received a large

number of letters from various people commending our effort stating that our dramas had done a great service to the younger generation in Tamil Nadu (who were crazy after film music). The same has been our experience after staging "Purandaradasa".

Drama is the only medium through which all the three performing arts, namely music,

dance and acting can be produced live on the stage. I firmly believe that musical dramas have a great future. Let us hope that the day is not far off when more and more eminent musicians will come forward to take part in dramas and help to restore the musicals to their honoured and rightful place as of yore.

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