

# Then and Now

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A question with which I am frequently confronted is "What are the major changes in the music world between then and now?" By "then" is presumably meant the period before the questioner was born or at least the period before the questioner began to take interest in music. From my point of view I define the period as the time when I myself was in school and college i.e. about two generations ago. This would be between 1915 and 1930. But it cannot be said that conditions which obtain today succeeded those which obtained then. There was another period of change during thirties and forties which in fact brought about the significant changes in singing and listening.

No account of the rise of modern Carnatic music will be complete without reference to the half century between 1870 and 1920 which was the most glorious epoch in its history.

It witnessed the rise of great "exponents" as distinguished from the great "composers" of the earlier part of that century: Maha Vaidyanatha Aiyar, Patnam Subramania Aiyar, Tirukodikaval Krishna Aiyar, Koneri Rajapuram Vaidyanatha Aiyar, Ramnathapuram Srinivasa Aiyangar, Trichinopoly Govindasamy Pillay, Veena Dhanammal, Tiger Varadachariar, Tirumarugal Natesa Pillay, Sembanarkoil Ramaswamy Pillay, Pudukottai Dakshinamurthy Pillay, Madurai Pushpavanam Aiyar, Saraba Sastry, Harkatha Panchapagesa Sastriar.

Many of these names, however, had become legendary by the time I came to take interest in music. Fortunately a few of them survived during the early years of my listening. I have a distinct recollection

of Koneri Rajapuram Vaidyanatha Iyer, for example. Several of the others I have heard with pleasure and profit. In those days Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavathar, Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar and Maharajapuram Viswanatha Aiyer were the younger artistes who were coming up and making a name for themselves. Sabhas were few and one heard them in place like temple festivals, marriages in the house of the rich, at private concerts arranged by special sponsors and like. It must also be admitted that musicians as a class had not attained to the social status which they have at the present time.

During the thirties, the concert pattern established by Sri Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar had a great influence in changing the nature of the concerts. He had a crisp style and he confined his exposition of ragas to short periods and to the essential elements. The earlier vogue for leisurely expansion was given up. This tendency gained strength as a result of the introduction of the radio. The radio concerts had necessarily to be short and sweet, and these restrictions had their effect in the open concerts also. A new concert style developed with a quicker tempo and a tendency to shorten the duration of the concert.

The next great change came about with the introduction of the microphone. This enabled artistes with poor voices who could not command what may be called concert-attention during the earlier days to become prominent platform artistes. The number of persons in the field naturally grew, so that at the present time, there are more artistes than at any time before in the history of Carnatic music.

The question arises whether as a result of this enlargement quality has suffered. In answering this question the first point to note is that when a very large number of people take to the profession, a general lowering of quality is inevitable. On the listening side also, with huge modern audiences, the same quality of critical appreciation cannot be expected. Secondly the fact that there has taken place a change in the mode of exposition has also to be considered. A quick concert, lasting between two and three hours, has to be planned differently from one which does not bother about time and was spread out over the whole evening. The Gokhale Hall concerts of those days used to start before half past four in the afternoon, and they continued till 10 O'Clock in the night. Such a concert naturally invited an expansive style of singing.

It is one thing to explain why a certain change has taken place. It is quite another to justify it or criticise it. The present concert methods have led to less attention being paid to the well known Rakti ragas like Sankarabharanam, Todi, Kalyani, Kambhoji, Bhairavi, Karaharapriya and the like and more attention being paid to obscure ragas and the exhibition of dexterity in their manipulation. Naturally these ragas can be sung only for a short while. But the true tradition of Carnatic music requires that a concert should be enriched by the well known ragas which afford infinite scope for expansion. To the extent that a musician rejects them, he fetters and reduces himself and gives to the audience only half a meal when they are entitled to a banquet. This is rather a sad change that has taken place.

Arising out of this is the tendency to fill up the time by singing swaras for each and every song and of getting by heart certain combinations to suit the Mridangam which create a dramatic effect without having much musical value. So much so, one of

the most important aspects of a concert, namely the singing of Pallavis, has more or less gone out of fashion. One can understand that in a marriage concert the Pallavi may be out of place. But when learned institutions follow the same tendency then one is entitled to express a fear that the great art of singing Pallavis is passing away.

These are the negative aspects of the situation. On the positive side, the first gain is that a very large number of persons are listening to classical music today. This very fact is of importance because once the audience is there, a determined effort can be made to educate them. Another cheerful aspect is the higher educational qualifications of most of the artistes. This makes them socially more acceptable and intelligent personalities and gives them also a broader outlook on life. The danger here, however, is that some of them tend to cultivate the social side to the detriment of their music or even to use their social contact to support their art. It is said of a great lawyer that he did not develop other interests in life because he maintained that the law was a jealous mistress. So indeed is art. One cannot dabble in it. It requires constant practice and an unremitting striving for improvement which cannot be attained except by a devotion which discards all other interests. Yet another welcome feature is the high level of musical attainment of the lady artistes. In those days there were very few competent lady artistes, and it was generally agreed that their highest attainment consisted in the melodious reproduction of set pieces. Today in point of merit there is no distinction between the sexes in music. Indeed some of the ladies exhibit a high degree of competence and strive for true musical effects. This is all to the good and it is to be hoped that very soon the prejudice of some of the male artistes in accompanying them will disappear. ●