

The Education of the Rasika

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Certain heartening features in the music world of late are : Firstly, the expanded musical consciousness of the average listener. Unlike his forebears, he is keen to know the name of the raga, the composer in respect of a Kriti which the singer or instrumentalist is performing. He probably has been an attentive listener for some years and either by his own urges or promptings by others has come to have a knowledge of the chief ragas in which great Kritis have been engrossed like Thodi, Sankarabaranam, Bhairavi, Nattai, etc., and others on the fringe like Dhanyasi or Pushpalathika is sketched, this rasika keenly absorbs their murchanas, the way the composer like Tyagaraja or Muthiah Bhagavathar has used this raga in this kriti or that.

Secondly, it is undeniable that many singers, especially the later entrants into the field, have been at pains to learn the kritis of Neykrapatti Subbier, Thiruvarur Ramaswami Pillai, Periasami Thooran, Sivan's compositions, Mayuram Viswanatha Sastri's kritis and Thirukkural — often to the exclusion of the mighty creations of Subbaraya Sastri, Subbarama Dikshitar, Patnam Subramanya Iyer, etc. My point here is that there is a broadening of the musical landscape resulting from these efforts. I would not, for example, fault them for not knowing Muthuswami Dikshitar's Kritis on Goddess Kamakshi, Abhirami, the Navavarna Kritis though that would have helped their minds to have a better focus on the sturdy elements of Karnatak music.

As E. M. Foster put it: "A classical audience is surely the plainest collection of people anywhere assembled for a common purpose". Our younger musicians - there are so many of them on the musical scene now - believe like Faust that "only he who looks forward looks with gladness". As the Victorians believed, "Music is grander in proportion to the number of people performing it".

The crunch for them comes when music cast in traditional forms and ragas is suspect in their eyes even if it is of first rate craftsmanship. Partly this is due to the lack of study and judgement of the contribution of the galaxy of composers, especially the Trinity, at firsthand. Partly it is also to be traced to the fact that "they are suspicious of classical intelligence which they accuse of having tricked them, by establishing conventions" — e.g. the relegation of vivadimela ragas to the background. The case of Ghanta raga comes to one's mind. Two hundred years ago, Sri Thyagaraja composed many kritis in it. That the taint of some "dosha" attached to its singing has no basis, is proved by the fact the Dikshitar has composed an "auspicious" kriti on it. Such irrational prejudices are not common to music alone. As Menuhin put it "Today, novelty is at a premium, requiring every can of baked beans to assert itself, every idiom to be personal, every person to be original, and every composition to be original, and every composition to startle by departure from tradition. The bemused listener must first choose which of the countless innovators he will run after."

Of course this uncontrolled expansion in the field of performing has regressive consequences both to the art and its performers since palpably, the latter cannot take the audience with them all the time. As someone put it, "familiar music is not bad music". The other day at the Vidvat Samajam, T. V. Sankaranarayanan after a brilliant sketch of Kalyani, selected "Ethavunara" of Thyagaraja which in the fifties was the staple piece for both Ariyakudi and Semmangudi. To witness the brightness in the face of listeners was an education in itself. Hence, performers, unless they do not mind the alienation of middle-aged and senior citizens - who still form a major portion of the audiences - have to be selective in their approach to kritis, old and new. There

is the further point that, if a concert is not to become a curate's egg, the blending of traditional and *Avant garde* music is essential requisite for enduring satisfaction to the listener. There is no rule about the "correct mix". Musicians have to arrive at it through experience of different audiences and in varying ambience.

Bodies like the Saraswathi Vaggeyakara Trust have in the last few years done signal service by projecting compositions of all centuries, like Pre-Trinity, Trinity, Post-Trinity music. The last category has a huge output and only a part of it has been cleared for concert programmes. It is thus that many compositions of Oothukadu Venkatasubramania Iyer (a great Krishna bhakthar) Dasakootas, Annamacharya, Badrachalam Ramadasar, have come to be learned and put before the listening public. The music kaleidoscope now shows a great variety of compositions and the musical horizon of the average listener has certainly widened.

It is a moot question whether, apart from mere "shravyam", the listener's musical education in its best sense has progressed much. "Kelvignanam" as elders used to call it, is essential to a proper focus of appreciation but the real education of the listener stems only from his own application to the study of the art. Publication of a large cross-section of compositions with notation etc., is the first step. Of late, the practice of announcing the raga, kriti and composer directly or by hand-outs has been helping listeners to know what to look forward to. But this is only a drop in the ocean of understanding the complex process of creativity. There has to be a progressive rise in

the equipment of the rasika and this can be brought about only by the Sabha, or concerned organisations helping rasikas with notes, information, etc., of the contents of a concert. For instance, the Pallavi. This great branch of our music is now little understood by rasikas. There may be no harm or breach of etiquette in my opinion, if the singer elaborates the features of the Pallavi, such as the "eduppu" structure of the tala and briefly outline whether he proposes to perform "gati" variations, "anulomam and pratilomam" etc. Incidentally, it would also facilitate adequate support from the thalavadya vidwans and help to make the whole thing a thundering success. Similarly the musician, before taking up a Kriti, could refer to the special aspects of the raga such as "alpapravyoga", "sruthibeda" (if he was going to show it). The argument may be raised that this leavening of the concert might detract from the spontaneity of the singing. On closer inspection, it would be seen that this argument holds no water. In any case, for some time sabhas and trusts can undertake these experiments.

To quote Menuhin again, "In all teaching, there must be a fusion of authority and humility - authority providing a stable framework for the learner (or listener) and humility as another human being ready to educate an equal who may well turn out to be a superior".

There has to be a considerable infusion of correct knowledge, and training if Karnatak music is to reach out to the vast limitless spaces of its universe - a veritable cosmos. First and last, it is a problem of communication in its modern sense. □