

ACCOMPANISTS - STRUGGLE FOR AUTONOMY

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"Melodically and rhythmically, Indian music long ago achieved a complete sophistication" wrote Yehudi Menuhin. He also added that the "Forms of the Masters are living organisms in which external organisation is delicately adjusted to inner content". This means, for example, in a kriti the raga, the sahitya and the tala constitute a unified force, representing a fine balance between technique and interpretation, not to be disturbed by displays of wilful indulgence by the singer or the accompaniments. After all, effective communion is the basic aim of every art and not least in our music with devotional aspects predominating so much.

The kriti has been the pivot of Carnatic music concerts since a long time. For nearly a century now, a "cutcheri" has come to mean a main performer (vocalist or instrumentalist), a violinist (rarely has the Vina been an accompaniment) and a percussionist, chiefly a mridangist with or without Ghatam, Kanjira etc. Amplification being unknown, audiences had to be reached with least disturbance to appreciate the classical kritis rendered by the great performers. A secondary role to the violin or mridangist was inevitable: the violinist's volume could not be increased to match the vocal, by applying bowing pressure beyond a point. The mridangist, too, was perhaps not on better ground as he could not afford to bang the instrument.

All this was conducive to a culture of music presentation in which audiences depended for their pleasure mainly on the chief performer and he was often a vocalist maestro whose high sruthi of those days enabled his

music to carry well across to large crowds in temples or special shamianas, etc. The inevitable sequel to this arrangement was the dominance of the main performer and the assignment of a deliberately secondary role to the accompanists accepted by both the public and the latter implicitly.

Decade ago, a senior vocalist committed an error in a concert. The violinist, an eccentric senior, had the temerity to point it out. The vocalist retorted that it was none of his business as he was only a "*Pakka Vadhyam*" (sideshow). Swift came the retort from the violinist: "Please remember that 'I am a "*Pucca Vadyam*"— a fullfledged artist and within his rights. This episode shows the fight of the main artist for dominance on the platform.

However, this was not always the case. Exceptions were the cases of artists of extraordinary merit such as violin maestro Thirukodikaval Krishna Iyer, Malaikottai Govindaswami Pillai or percussionists like Manpoondiah Pillai, Dakshinamurthy Pillai and a few others. But even their brilliance never could wholly wish away a role of secondary importance to them in the scheme of things.

From this writers' experience, certain aspects of concerts held before 1930 may be mentioned in this context. First, the violin: while raga alapana by the vocalist was in progress, the violinist did not repeat all the phrases of the vocalist as is now happening but only played the last few notes. The idea apparently was not to disturb the flow of manodharma of the vocalist. When his turn

came, the raga sketch of the violinist followed generally the lines of the vocalist in profile and treatment - projection of entirely different aspects was not condoned. In swaraprastharas too, a similar method was followed, though with some liberties permitted and accepted. In sum, the technique of the violin consisted in not deviating much from the vocalist, but assisting him in achieving concert perfection.

As for the mridangam, a comparatively low profile was the order of the day — cross rhythms were frowned upon ; the kalapramana had to be the same as the singer's (no "melkalam") ; and the object was to help the vocalist in the effective projection of the kriti's framework and beauty. Selfishness was not tolerated, on pain of banishment. The vocalist would say "By all means, show your vidvat in the Thani avarthanam, Pallavi". Even in the former case, famous performers like Azhaganambiam Pillai relied on melodic playing (with extraordinary Gumki and other effects from Thoppi to heighten the finger's impact).

Dakshinamurthy was a law unto himself. He had his moods no doubt, but having him as accompaniment was the dream of many vocalists and performers. One can understand his own attitude by recalling the fact that the thing he most loved was to accompany the Vina of the Karaikudi Brothers, the duo of Subbarama Iyer (a laya giant) and Sambasiva Iyer (an unrelenting perfectionist).

It may be recalled that 'Rhythm' means 'Flow' in Greek. It is the pulse that bestows life, the heart-beat of music. Its simpler patterns when repeated over and over again have a hypnotic effect on listeners—witness the popularity of veteran Vellore Ramabhadran on the mridangam!.

Thus, with the violinist and the percussionists wholeheartedly accepting the

conventional primacy of the chief performer (Vocalist, Flutist, Vina Vidwans etc.) in the general set-up, a certain concordance and harmony was established in the cutcheri format. **It was consensual management at its best.** Old rasikas even today remember nostalgically the aura of serenity and peace that prevailed in concerts those days.

With the advent of the microphone, a sea-change came over the entire scene. Its most important impact was to confer a kind of artistic autonomy to the accompanists and establish them as a necessary complement to the soloists, besides promoting virtuosity in their own right. Among violinists, Messrs T. Chowdiah, Kumbakonam Rajamanickam Pillai, Papa Venkataramiah and later T. N. Krishnan, Lalgudi Jayaraman, M. S. Gopalakrishnan and Chandrasekharan were examples of the unpredictable advent of timing with talent. Slowly, they offered a challenge to the dominance hitherto enjoyed by the main performers, brought about partly by the medium's victory over the music. The last four artists had the mysterious gift of intuition in their role, an imaginative sense of possibilities for inventive attacks, besides an ability to fascinate the common rasika with their tonal charm and bold play, all backed by an egoism that was hardly questionable.

Lately, with the ranks of vocal colossi depleted, these violinists could hardly reconcile themselves to the new situation. Not surprisingly they have switched over to solo playing and in the process achieved artistic excellence. *En passant*, it must be stated that, while achieving phenomenal peaks of performance, they have - perhaps unwittingly - upset the delicate balance that subsisted between vocal and accompaniment that prevailed in the earlier era and even perhaps altered the tastes of rasikas, to some extent.

Their own preciousness has, however, been at a price for the art. The new generation of young and middle-aged violinists have just tended to imitate them only in aspects like length of raga alpana and prolixity in swaraprastharas etc. without their artistic punch, so that today's concerts often have elements of tedium and paucity of aesthetics. Conciseness as a virtue has been thrown overboard, a pity since with duration of concerts drastically curtailed (for various reasons), the quantum of good music available to the listener in a concert is reduced.

Let us turn to the percussion sector. There has undoubtedly been growth in it. However, one may be permitted to doubt whether it has not gone too far in one direction especially as vocalists themselves seem to put a premium on rumbustious percussion. The addition of a mike for percussionists is perhaps the last straw, since the combination of volume and frenetic playing is working havoc. The enhancement in the volumes of sound emanating from the amplified mridangam, ghatam, etc. amounts to a sound battery assailing the rasika, making him uneasy, distracted and angry.

The current day mridangam barrage often does not discriminate between chowka kala and madhyamakala music ; it does violence equally to powerful kritis and sensitive kritis. The rich, poignant flavour of highly sensitive kritis like "Etijannameethi" (Varali) and

"Balagopala" (Bhairavi) is often lost and the technique employed for accompanying is not much different from that employed for a kriti like "Raghuvamsasudha". The mechanically-learned few stock percussive phrases, theermanams and "poruthams" are played without regard to the bhava or context. If one leaves out stalwarts like Murthy, Raghu, Sivaraman, Ramabhadran, Karaikudi Mani and Durai, the rest of the bunch are tarred with the same brush.

A genius like Palghat Mani Iyer conferred autonomy through brilliance in percussion style, but he was a supreme genius in raising a concert to fantastically attractive propositions. Moreover, he could, with equal ease, accompany Mali, M. D. Ramanathan or Musiri (with their distinctively broad Kalapramana) as well as Ariakudi Ramanuja Iyengar with his unique madhyamakala pace of singing. Geniuses have their own unique ways. But no one ever has faulted Mani Iyer or his contemporary Palani Subramanya Pillai for insensitive accompaniment.

We thus enter a new age not without some misgivings. The modern accompanists would do well to acquire the right perspectives in their art. If they themselves learn to sing (privately) (as was the case with many older violinist and percussionists), the sensitivity of their accompaniment will improve, adding an attractive facet to listening experience. The quest for quintessential music must continue.