

WHITHER CARNATIC MUSIC?

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In what state of health is carnatic music to-day? Not certainly in the pink of it. Sparse audience and the inability of young musicians to rivet the attention of listeners are the common sight in concerts. Only when these two factors react favourably carnatic music can be said to be a cultural force. Before going into the cause of this malady, what had been sustaining carnatic music in the past needs to be scrutinised. What were the contributory factors that made the carnatic music situation a few decades ago a golden era?

First and foremost, a large section of the public was deeply interested in listening good concerts. Unless one is somewhat knowledgeable with the fundamentals of the carnatic music system, there can be no appreciation of its beauty. The question arises how people a few decades ago were fairly knowledgeable which is absent to-day. This is a very interesting study.

Tanjore was the seat of carnatic music. Our temples have not only been centres of spiritual life, but also centres of mass musical education. Throughout the year there were important festivals running to 10 days like Brahmotsavam when on all the days commencing from 8 or 9 in the night upto 3 or 4 am early morning masters of nagaswaram used to play when the deity was taken in procession. In the stillness of night, the strains of nagaswaram music used to fill the atmosphere covering two or three miles around. People within that radius, whether they liked it or not, heard the deep-toned nagaswaram music and over the years, from practical listening, the people in Tanjore and neighbouring villages came to identify ragas, kirtanas and step by step became connoisseurs.

Can we to-day with all our boasting of mass media technology create a mass music education media like the nagaswaram during temple processions? The nagaswaram vidwans were really the greatest gurus of many people in those days. What was prevailing in Tanjore and its neighbourhood applied to other places where temple festivals were the order of the day and reputed nagaswaram vidwans did service to the deities taken in procession. That system has been disappearing. The vocalists and other instrumental accompanists filled up the missing links through their concerts arranged at marriages in villages or in the temple premises themselves. These pervasive musical education was the strong foundation on which carnatic music in the early decades of this century flourished. The knowledge on the part of the listeners coalesced with the vidwans doing their best to please the cognoscente. This union like the *paramatma* and *jeevatma*, resulted in the grand era of carnatic music.

From their Tanjore moorings, many moved to Madras for higher studies, or to carry on their profession. Brought up in the musical culture fostered by the nagaswara vidwans and vocalists, when Tanjoreans settled in Madras their music culture also came with them. To satisfy their craving for good carnatic music the Sabhas gradually came into existence in the place of temple festivals. Gradually musicians also found Madras was the centre for music as Tanjore was originally. One by one they came and made Madras their permanent residence to take advantage of the offers from music sabhas. That is how Madras has become the stronghold of carnatic music to-day. In this process, Kumbakonam, Trichy and other small towns fell by the wayside as

promoters of carnatic music. If to-day many grey-haired are to be seen in the music concerts, they are those who have been fed on the mass musical education prevailing then.

The question then arises what about the next generation. Born and brought up in Madras, they were denied the free musical education their fathers and grandfathers enjoyed. Some of them attended Sabhas and they form to-day the middle level of listeners.

In this context one other significant factor is missing to-day in fostering music at home. In those years young girls were given what was derisively called "Kalyana Paattu" (i. e.) musical equipment to qualify as a bride. Whether the music thus learnt by them was top class or not, every evening at home the tuition master teaching the girls music fell also into the ears of the brothers of Kalyana Pattu girls. This made the young male members of a family quite familiar with several kirthanas. Thus like a smoker doing more harm in public to the non-smokers, the Kalyana Pattu prepared the younger generation to tolerate carnatic music, if not spurn down right as at present. Thus these two potent influences - mass music education and musical atmosphere at home - saw to it that carnatic music was recognised as the Queen of all Fine Arts.

So, we now come to the present situation. Lack of interest on the part of the younger generation of listeners is mainly due to the drying up of the fertile musical atmosphere. Secondly carnatic music has to contend against other entertainment programmes. Unless one is fairly conversant with the fundamentals and nuances of the carnatic musical system, the Fine Art would go above their heads. Other entertainments, which do not require special knowledge gain an easy captive audience among youngsters.

In this situation what can the up and coming musicians do? Their immediate effort is to please the handful of listeners somehow. They have not had the opportunity of listening to great exposition by the nagaswara vidwans or the vocalists and instrumentalists of yester-years. In the absence of such a *kelvignanam*, their only recourse is to their own intelligence, which they have in plenty. It is the peculiarity of carnatic music that in its higher form it speaks to the heart and not to the intellect. Emotion to-day has given place to erudition by way of handling new ragas, new compositions which to them appear easy because the songs of the Trinity have been so well sung before by eminent veterans and heard by many, the youngsters' shallowness would get exposed. Thus the vicious circle has been operative. Even highly knowledgeable listeners willy nilly have to come to terms with what is served as carnatic music to-day or otherwise they would be starved of music. Like the present day musicians denied the opportunity of listening to great music, the old timers have been denied the opportunity to re-hear the veterans because there were no tapes in those days. Some of the tapes of great vidwans marketed to-day are concerts by them late in their lives when they were past their peak and the poor recording adds insult to injury. It is not therefore surprising if some young artists to-day, by hearing such tapes, sarcastically comment what greatness is to be found in their music for the grey-haired to feel so nostalgic about. The youngsters cannot be blamed fully for such poor opinion of the all time greats. It is unfortunate that in a period of a decade and more all stalwarts disappeared from the music scene one after another. Many disciples of such vidwans have become scarce to-day as concert performers for the reason that organisations vie with one another to promote the young aspirants no matter whether they make the grade or not. That is to-day's trend. So the

link between the past through the disciples is also gradually disappearing. It is now a field day for young musicians, financially and opportunity-wise. Economic-wise, Indians settled abroad have opened the flood gates to musicians. Export music market to-day is more lucrative than the domestic market. If at all to-day carnatic music survives to some extent,

the sponsors have to be thanked. Many are optimistic that carnatic music can never be obliterated from the cultural life of the community. Sure, anaemic carnatic music will be there. But of what quality is the question. Are there sufficient indications to dispel the cynicism regarding "Whither Carnatic Music?" and to look beyond into realms of hope?

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