

Music Sabhas - Then and Now

— S. V. K.

At one time the music sabhas in the city were like temples buzzing with devotees and festivals and served as custodians of our culture. To day the deities in temples are starved of even a single kala pooja and the garba grahas in some are steeped in darkness with bats flying hither and Thither.

Our music sabhas too seem to be moving towards that sad status. There was a time when a performance of veteran vidwans - Semmangudi, M. S. Subbulakshmi, Lalgudi Jayaraman, Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar - would make the auditorium burst of the seams. Their superior quality of Carnatic music filled the hall for nearly three-and-a half to four hours and the listeners feasted on their glorious performance. Today sabhas are languishing. Instead of bats flying about, emptiness stares at a few who are distributed here and there. The seats at the back and in the front VIP rows have gathered dust. It is only in December that sabhas come to life like a kumbabhishekam drawing some devotees to a temple.

Normally exposure to the media is supposed to enhance the reputation of artiste to draw a crowd. There is no dearth of publicity today. Several brands of TV show up music artistes in different programmes. That too does not seem to have given any nourishment to the ailing Carnatic music. Can this be said by a film actor projected similarly by way of interviews, film strips or recollections of olden days. They are talked about in every household and when two people meet, the question normally asked is "Did you see such and such a film actor's interview on Sunday? Has anyone cared to speak similarly of a Carnatic music programme? Why this partiality?"

The answer is very difficult to arrive at. Mainly it speaks volumes of viewers' and listeners' priorities in matters of culture.

Anything pertaining to the film world has top grading in people's minds. How can Carnatic music set right this discriminatory attitude?

One particular aspect in this situation is whether viewers show away eagerness to sift the chaff from the grain. Most time TV viewing is passive, gulping whatever is offered in general and film programmes in particular. Unless a discerning standard as to what contributes to cultivation of good taste and what leads to degeneration and debasement is brought to bear on the quality of TV programmes, people's patronage is loaded against Carnatic Music.

Next to TV are the newspapers. At no time in the past newspapers had set apart so much of space for Carnatic Music programmes and review about them. If only newspaper publicity that today's Carnatic music artistes get had been there when the veterans were holding the field what deserving tributes they would have got. Particularly Tamil journalism has done enormous service to project the image of Carnatic musicians. With such widespread publicity through newspapers and magazines if appreciative music listeners are handful, what are we to day about this depressing phenomenon?

Then comes the AIR. Every morning between 8.30 and 9.30 a.m. the music of some top artistes of today is broadcast. How many listen to it. The timing is extremely inconvenient. Morning time is the most hectic time in households. Every member is subjected to much tension. Can it be a proper frame of mind to listen to an exposition of Todi or a Kalyani? If the AIR can shift this timing between 7.30 and 9.00 p.m. as in olden days, at least some interested in Carnatic music can relaxedly hear the music over the dining table. Most Carnatic programmes over the AIR and TV are slotted

at an inconvenient hour. Prime time is allotted for programmes liked by a majority of the people may be an argument. It is worthwhile recalling what a special committee set up by BBC some years ago had to say. It was asked to comment our western classical versus pop music broadcast over BBC at specified timing. Naturally pop was given prime time on the ground many like it. The committee, after a study said, that a big organisation like BBC cannot be the proper judge on what people like. They must stand neutral and provide prime time for both classical music and pop. The people should be given classical music. Otherwise how can the younger generation ever know anything about the classical music. Such was its recommendation. TV too should allot prime time on some days of the week to carnatic music at least for one hour. If films can be telecast for two-and-a half to three hours, why not at least one day in a week one and half hours be allotted for carnatic music?

Of course, anything demanding some fundamental knowledge about a subject can have only a small clientele. In the general

decadence of our Indian cultural base, Carnatic music is no exception. Many virtues that help to shape a good life are disappearing fast in the pursuit of materialism and consumerism. But whatever is intrinsically good and noble cannot be completely wiped out of existence. It will still flourish in some corner or other. But those connected with sustaining and patronising such noble fields have a hard task before them. Musicians while setting their sights on hefty amounts from America, should also respectfully pay homage to their art which has enabled them to cross the shores. Sabhas have to exert to arrange only top class performances, but not just fill the bill of the number of cutcheries they have organised in a year. TV, Radio and other publicity media too should ponder over how their topsided programme arrangements have given step-motherly treatment to the classical carnatic music. The people too should strive to know at least the fundamentals of our music system by setting atleast half an hour a day to cultivation of taste for our wonderful fine arts.

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