

An evolving tradition

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"It is time now to turn to the burning question whether the Ariyakudi paddhati as followed today is a boon or a bane to Carnatic music. The widespread feeling among the knowledgeable is that it has put the system into a strait-jacket and spelt disaster to the musician's creativity." This comment appeared in an article sometime ago.

Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar, the colossus who strode the Carnatic music scene for the best part of the 20th century, was in no need of defence of his bhani in his own lifetime nor does he need it today. In the days of his gurukulavasam with Poochi Srinivasa Iyengar of Ramanathapuram, Ariyakudi imbibed the pattern generally delineated by his master - opening the concert with a varnam, followed by kritis of Tyagaraja in profusion, an elaborate alapana of the major raga chosen for day's concert, an extensive essay in Ragam Tanam Pallavi, some miscellaneous pieces and ending up with the mangalam. Veterans of the earlier half of the century have been heard to say that before the Poochi Ariyakudi school re-fashioned the cutcheri pattern, it was usual for the great musicians to embark on extensive raga alapanas with the main emphasis on Ragam Tanam Pallavi, with no set cutcheri pattern.

Ariyakudi gave the cutcheri tradition a neat format, a new direction and the much needed sense of proportion. His own concert began with a varnam, followed by a brisk and moving rendering of one of the Pancharatna kritis of Tyagaraja, a brief alapana of Pantuvarali or Purvikalyani; a number of other compositions of Tyagaraja,

Dikshitar and Syama Sastri, Gopalakrishna Bharati, Papanasam Sivan, Narayana Tirtha were thrown in, making remarkable use of rakti ragas such as Mohanam, Karaharapriya, Shanmukhapriya, Kambhodi, Todi, Ananda Bhairavi, Varali, Sankarabharanam, Dhanyāsi, Saveri, Kedaragaula, Yadukula-kambodhi. The raga alapana, the neraval and swaras were limited to only a few of the kritis rendered in the first half of the cutcheri slot. It was plain and exquisite rendering of the kritis in the first segment that made the recital very pleasing and many more kritis could be accommodated in the concert than otherwise. A recital of Ariyakudi in Bombay in 1955 when he packed in six pieces in the first 30 minutes of the concert readily comes to mind. He would not pause for even a second when he switched over from one song or raga to the next. He would take up the Ghana ragas like Kambhodi, Bhairavi, Sankarabharanam - for elaborate treatment in the latter half of the concert and after a short, crisp piece, the ragam tanam, pallavi would follow. In the post-pallavi segment, after the tani, Ariyakudi would sing padams and javalis. Arunachala Kavi's Rama nataka pieces. Tiruppavai, a slokam or a vruttam in Ragamalika, a Tillana, the concert being rounded off with the mangalam. His five hour concerts of 1940's and 1950's are still a vivid memory - with two tanis by Palghat Mani Iyer. The jacket was wide enough and flexible enough to provide the fullest scope for the musician's creativity and the aesthetic impact on the rasika, who came away from the concert with a tremendous sense of fulfilment and an obvious transport of "Ananda".

The manner in which Ariyakudi systematised the pattern of rendering had won wide acceptance in his own lifetime and the fact that even today the pattern is being cherished and followed is proof that time and practice have sanctified its soundness and acceptability. When he started his singing career, Tyagaraja kritis were his main fare. At the first Tamil Isai Conference in Annamalainagar, way back in 1940's, Ariyakudi is said to have told Rajah Sir Annamalai Chettiar that in deference to his guru's example, he would open his recital with a varnam, followed by a Tyagaraja piece and the rest would be Tamil songs. He kept his word.

Ariyakudi sang a few of Dikshitar's compositions and Syama Sastri's also right from 1930's and he proved that in a five hour concert, full justice could be done to the entire gamut of our great composers and their creations, embellishing it besides with a pallavi. In a two hour concert - a constraint imposed on us by modern conditions of living and the large number of aspiring musicians - the pattern set by Ariyakudi is still being happily followed: only the number of kritis rendered has to be correspondingly reduced: the neraval and the swaras should not be overdone: or, as some musicians do, the ragam tanam pallavi is given the go-by or rendered in a capsule at the tail end of the concert within the last 20 minutes. The necessary sense of proportion has to be and can be maintained if the ragam tanam pallavi is taken up half way through the concert there is every hope all the aspects - the kritis of the great composers, the pallavi rendering, the tani avartanam - will receive balanced treatment. Many of our musicians of today have proved that this is possible.

At Tiruchi, 30 years ago, M. D. Ramanathan sang only four pieces in a two hour scheduled concert under the auspices of a Sabha: the next morning at an abhishekam for Akhilandeswari at Tiruvanaikaval organised by Alathur Srinivasa Iyer, MDR rendered 12 songs on Devi in an unscheduled slot of two hours. Driving him back home, I asked MDR why he could not manage more than four items in the Sabha concert the previous evening, when he did so much in the presence of Akhilandeswari. His answer was "mood". I vividly recall a concert at Palghat nearly 25 years ago during an Aiyappan festival when a senior vidwan spent the first 45 minutes in a two hour programme on an elaborate rendering with neraval and swaras - of a kriti of Tyagaraja, leaving very little scope for the rest of the items.

The repertoire of the veterans of the first half of this century consisted mostly of Tyagaraja's compositions; a few selected pieces of Dikshitar and Syama Sastri were added on in later years. By the 1950's the Dikshitar kritis, Sivan's kritis became increasingly popular. In recent years, the canvas has been considerably widened by exploring the less known composers - of the pre-trinity period, post-trinity period and also organising music festivals for composers like Narayana Tirtha, Annamacharya, Swati Tirunal, Mysore Vasudevacharya, Mysore Sadasiva Rao and Tamil composers such as Arunachala Kavi, Gopalakrishna Bharati, Muthu Tandavar and a host of other great composers like Patnam Subramania Iyer. It is obviously not possible for the musicians to do justice to all these masters in a two to three hour recital or to memorise the creations of all these composers. And when musicians sing out of sheets held in front of them (not

depending on their memory alone) it is to be regarded as an understandable situation much as our history has laid stress on the power of memory and the oral tradition. But quantity does not mean that we can afford to compromise on quality.

Ariyakudi's jacket continues to be sound and flexible. It has never sought to curb the musician's creativity and it will endure as long as we maintain a sense of proportion and respect for tradition. Successive generations of musicians up to the present day have demonstrated its validity unmistakably.

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