

Why do Listeners walk away during Thani Avarthanam?

I am reminded of an incident years back where Palghat Mani Iyer behaved odd in one of the music concerts. When his turn came up to play the Thani Avarthanam (Solo Mridangam), listeners began to leave the auditorium. Mani sat quiet. When people were astonished, he announced, "Let those who want to go depart only later I shall play the instrument".

A seasoned rasika recently presented me with a good rerecording of a great artist, in which the Thani Avarthanam of the Mridangam player was deliberately deleted while recording. Asked why it was so done, the reply was, "It is boring". These two incidents give an idea of the attitude of a rasika and his sense of appreciating the rhythmical content in a music concert. Over a period of time, things have not changed; if at all, the situation has become worse.

Sound transformed into rhythmic melody is commonly called thala in carnatic music. It can best be defined as a means to measure or control a musical time scale. Playing solo, the/complicated and innumerable rhythmic patters over a percussion instrument or an ensemble of such instruments is called Thani Avarthanam. This is an integral part of a classical music concert; one cannot exist without the other. As is well known, the combination of sruthi (drone) with rhythm (thala) produces divine ecstasy. Every vaggeyakara (composer) has this detail uppermost in his mind while composing. The thala system of carnatic music is such there is no parallel in any other system of music in the world. The concept of time measure in all other systems will only form a fraction of these innumerable verities of the rhythm used in carnatic music.

If there are just seven notes (saptha swaras) by the permutation and combination of which, several hundreds of ragas (melodies) are derived, there are similarly just seven main thalas, which in turn give birth, as it were, to a total of 175 workable varieties. But among these, just a handful of them are generally utilized, although theoretically a large number is possible. Then why have them at all? This is where the creativity in the usage of these thalas comes in. Where most of the kritis or songs are set to certain limited number of thalas, a majority of them have to be used in improvised lyrics called, ragam, thanam and pallavi. Thus, the thala system in carnatic music is the most arduous to understand and elusive to follow. There is considerable grammer and mathematics to go with it.

Coming back to the rhythm, human reaction to time beat is spontaneous. This is the first instinct in man. It is said that music came before speech and rhythm is an integral part of it. Starting from tribal dances to the modern jazz, the response of the body movements to rhythm is instinctive and voluntary. The feeling is described as being taken over or possessed, a type of ecstasy. When rhythm comes under analysis

with structure, form and symmetry, it can be defined a thala and in the process, it becomes that much complicated. Since this complication leads to disillusionment, the listener wants to get away from it. It taxes his mind. In this course of the Thani Avarthanam, the leap from the simple to the complex is too fast. The science gets too intricate to visualize and understand. There is mental fatigue and the reaction is one of rejection.

Well, what does the percussion expert do in this exercise of Thani Avarthanam? In simple terms, he selects a simple thala, say Adi, which consists of eight pulses (counts) in a single cycle. He first demonstrates by simple and clear strokes the pulses and the established time intervals between each pulse and gets into simple and conventional combinations, all the time, guarding carefully the ratio of the counts. In the process, he produces a variety of exhilarating sounds in close alignment with the sruthi (drone). He then goes on to well worked out and richly imaginative mathematical divisions and subdivisions in each cycle and in different speeds.

The objective is an absolute clarity of texture, a euphonious ensemble, an infallible sense of timing, and above all, prime concern with continuity and flow. It is a concern with forward motion that carries a piece in one long trajectory from its beginning to its end. In the entire process, unwanted noise is a threat. This, in short, in Thani Avarthanam. It must be noted that different artists play the same thala cycle in different ways depending upon their skill and training. Palghat Mani, for instance, had so much ability, talent and interpretative skill more than words can say. Some do have so many affectations, self-aggrandizement and self-dramatization; some often disappoint us, because their narcissism and self-absorption preclude engagement with the mind of the listener. An imaginative mind is essential for the creation of art in any medium, but it is even more essential in the art of percussion playing, precisely because, percussion provides the broadest possible vista for imagination, since it is the freest, the most abstract and the least fettered. Thala in carnatic music has always held fascination for the mind.

But, for the general audience, Thani Avarthanam always remains an enigma. While its interest and function in the art of music is immense, by a slender margin of that extra knowledge, it misses the essence. True, there are pretensions; if one says it was all 'wonderful', it is based on lack of knowledge, and if another comments, 'it is all boring', it is exactly on the same count. It is therefore clear that in this faculty there is no bridge between the artist and the audience. If the listener has to make efforts to achieve the skill of appreciating thani avarthanam, the artist should be aware that by only a slim margin a tasteless exhibition is separated from an experience that can be deeply moving. He should strike at the aesthetic mean between chaotic irregularity and monotonous regularity.

(BRC Iyengar)

Courtesy - Layamani Layam