

Brinda-Muktha: Certain Aspects of their Music

Ravi & Sridhar

Brinda and Muktha had a thousand songs in their repertoire. The popular and the rare kriti-s of Tyagaraja and Dikshitar, the gems of Syama Sastry and Subbaraya Sastri, Anai-Ayya, Gopalakrishna Bharati, Arunachala Kavi, Subbarama Dikshitar, Ponnayya Pillai, Kshetrayya, Mysore Sadasiva Rao, Subbarama Dikshitar, besides innumerable javali-s were all in their possession.

Karubaru, a grand Tyagaraja song in Mukhari was their favourite. Today this song has become famous. Similarly *Elavataramu* in the same raga was a grand edifice of pure and deep melody. So was *Sangeeta sastra gnanamu*, again in Mukhari. In Todi, they knew many Tyagaraja songs including *Tappi bratiki*, *Kotinadulu*, *Emi jesitenemi*, *Enduku dayaradura*, *Endu daginada*, *Kadatera rada*, *Munnu ravana*, and *Proddu poyenu*. *Manasu swadheenamai* and *Emi neramu* in Sankarabharanam, *Mundu venuka* in Darbar, *Nee bhajana gana* in Nayaki, *Seetavara sangeeta gnanamu* in Devagandhari, *Mummurtulu* and *E papamu* in Athana were some of the other major pieces of Tyagaraja that received excellent treatment by Brinda-Muktha. Most of the above mentioned pieces were sung by them in vilamba kala, the slow tempo. The kriti-s sounded so different, so ravishing, that it gave the lie to the theory that Tyagaraja kriti-s were all in madhyama kala. They had a number of short, delightful Tyagaraja compositions in rare raga-s in their repertoire. *Tolinenu jesina* in Kokiladhwani, *Tanameedane* in Bhooshavali, *Vinave O manasa* and *Manasa manasaamarthyamemi* in Vivardhini and *Varasikhi vahana* in Supradeepam are some of them. Muktha had the habit of singing these short pieces to put her daughter, nephews and nieces to sleep.

Dikshitar pieces were another heirloom received from Sathanur Panchanada Iyer. These pieces were sung as Dikshitar would have envisaged them, with both the deep and subtle gamaka-s, the grand sweeps and glides, all like the gait of a majestic elephant. *Akshayalinga vibho* and *Dakshinamoortey* (both Sankarabharanam), *Sree Subramanyaya namaste* (Kambhoji), *Veenapustaka dharineem*



Brinda and Muktha

(Vegavahini), *Chetasree* (Dwijavanti), *Sree Rajagopala* (Saveri), *Sree Venugopala* (Kurinji), *Sree Matrubhootam* (Kannada), *Mamava Pattabhirama* (Manirangu), *Saraswati manohari* (Saraswati Manohari), *Sankaram Abhirami* (Manohari) and the Navagraha kriti-s, to mention only a few, acquired an altogether different sheen at the hands of Brinda and Muktha. Many of these songs were identified with them.

Impeccable lineage

Brinda and Muktha, like their grandmother, had no use for dialectics and arguments in music. They trusted their ears. Should anyone challenge them on the grammatical correctness of their renditions they could demonstrate and explain how their version had sastraic support. Doubting Thomases were simply informed of the impeccable lineage through which the works of the Trinity and other great composers came to them. Music for them was a matter of singing, not of rhetoric.

What were the essential, important features of the Dhanammal school of music? According to Muktha, the 'anuswara' which made up what is called the gamaka, as also the jaru-s and karvai-s. It was the importance given to the anuswara and the gamaka that was the hallmark of that style. No swara was left to fend for itself. It had to take the company of the neighbouring swara-s appropriately and this was beautifully achieved by that school. Muktha

further said that the anuswara had to be coupled with bhava, not just dryly sung. “Each and every swara should be sung with bhava and feeling. Otherwise what is the use of singing it?” Their singing of sangati-s involving complicated anuswara combinations was effortless yet full of feeling. Theirs was a typical example of bhava sangeetam which touched your soul. As much as the gamaka was an important component of their music, smooth and beautiful karvai-s, and breathtaking jaru-s were important too.

While singing certain kriti-s, they were so taken up by the music that both Brinda and Muktha sang as if possessed, as if they were in competition with each other (in the words of a staunch rasika, “potti pottundu paduva!”). *Chetasree* of Dikshitar in Dwijavanti was one such composition. Their version almost followed Venkatamakhi’s definition of the raga whereas the version of other musicians is now almost akin to the Hindustani Jaijaiivanti. In the madhyama kala passage of the anupallavi, their singing of ‘Pootanadi samharam, Purushottamavataram’... and in the charanam, the line, ‘Nava champaka nasikam’ in the top register was thrilling, as if the gates to heaven had opened. The unique rishabha swara of Dwijavanti would take on a beautiful contour. All through the song, Muktha’s alternating between the middle octave and the top would enhance the quality of the music without deflecting attention from Brinda’s exquisite singing. This was the case with the charanam line beginning with ‘Sadhujanopeta’ in *Akshayalinga vibho*. So was the case with the two compositions of Subbarama Dikshitar, *Sankaracharyam* in Sankarabharanam and *Kantimati* in Kalyani. The latter was a perennial favourite of theirs as well as their rasika-s. Only if one has listened to this song sung by both Brinda-Muktha together, can one understand its true greatness. The effect that they created in the seemingly simple anupallavi line, ‘Santamuna bhavinchedi’ and in the charanam lines, ‘Naradu sahimpumamma’ was incredible and inimitable.

The influence of veena

Brinda-Muktha’s singing of the beginning of almost every line in the samashti charanam of the Dikshitar masterpiece *Tyagaraja yoga vaibhavam* illustrates the Dhanammal effect best. The jaru gamaka-s employed at the beginning of the line, ‘Yuga parivarutyabda’, in this song are out of this world and the sangati-s for the word ‘maasa’ are very difficult to reproduce. The swara-s for this word are the madhyama and the shadja, that is, *ma, sa* (swarakshara) for ‘maasa’. The throat has to slightly shake the madhyama thrice and land on the shadja which Brinda and Muktha did to thrilling effect. So also the rishabha to

shadja jaru in the beginning of the line ‘Sree Guruguha Gurum’ produced the same thrilling effect. It is in pieces like these that we can discern the influence of the veena on their music. Their version of *Sree Subramanyaya namaste* is almost totally different from the usual one, with the charanam sung in true chauka kala. The current popular version is sung in madhyama kala.

The bhava-laden compositions of Syama Sastry and Subbaraya Sastri received special attention as they were the precious property of their family, Dhanammal’s grandmother being Subbaraya Sastri’s disciple. The swara-sahitya passages brimmed with special beauty. Brinda sang the sahitya and Muktha the swara, simultaneously. This was repeated in the charanam with the roles reversed. This is not an easy feat as it requires tremendous concentration and the extraordinary effect that it produced on listeners had to be experienced to be believed. This was especially true of *Marivere gati* (Anandabhairavi), *Janani ninuvina* (Reetigaula), *Sree Kamakshi* (Vasanta) and Annasami Sastri’s *Inkevarunnaru* (Sahana). Syama Sastry’s compositions like *Ninuvanaaga mari* (Poorvikalyani), *Ninne namminanu* (Todi), *O Jagadamba*, *Pahi Sree Giriraja sutey* (both Anandabhairavi), *Palinchi Kamakshi* (Madhyamavati), the Bhairavi swarajati, and the kriti-s of Subbaraya Sastri like *Ninu sevinchina* in Yadukulakambhoji, *Venkatasaila* in Hamirkalyani, *Emani ne* in Mukhari and *Sree Kamalambike* in Todi, were some of the gems subjected to the same grand treatment. Annasami Sastri’s *Inkevarunnaru* in Sahana was a dazzling jewel adorned with all that was beautiful in that raga.

Padam-s and javali-s

Padam-s and javali-s being their forte, none equalled them in their rendition, except members of their own family like aunt Jayammal and cousin Balasaraswati. Brinda-Muktha were so much identified with them that many people believed that they knew only padam-s and javali-s. Their rendition of *Moratopu* in Sahana, *Rama Rama* in Bhairavi, *Ososi* in Mukhari, *Payyada* in Nadanamakriya, *Vaddante* in Pantuvarali and the padam-s in Ghanta, Ahiri, Punnagavarali, Begada, Sankarabharanam, Kalyani and Surati, to speak of only a few, should all be classified as deep meditation in those raga-s. Most of these padam-s were set in Tisra Triputa, which tala was the despair of even accomplished musicians, but Brinda and Muktha handled padam-s in this tala as if it was their slave. The padam rendition was slow and unhurried. They began the padam with the anupallavi which created an immediate electrifying effect on the listeners because the anupallavi would almost always start in the top register.

SPECIAL FEATURE

Their javali-s were sparkling and ravishing and many of the javali-s as well as padam-s brought out the true sringara bhava. Pining for the lover was the theme in certain padam-s and javali-s and there was a certain pathos in their rendition if the sahitya so demanded. *Sakhi prana* was one such javali which in the hands of Muktha reached sublime heights.

Brinda possessed a beautiful voice that had strength as well as a melodiousness that defies description. Both Brinda and Muktha possessed tremendous breath control and used this strength of theirs as well as the depth of their voices shrewdly and to great effect. Their control of the volume of their voices was especially amazing. The honey dewed voice of Brinda perfectly blended with the somewhat rough voice of Muktha. When they sang together in the middle octave it sounded as if only one person was singing. This can be verified in the few recordings available.

Brinda and Muktha had no use for the scale raga-s or latter day favourites like Ranjani, Nalinakanti, Valaji and the like. They presented the highest in art music. They never hesitated to sing Begada, Saveri, Sahana, Varali, Mukhari, Dhanyasi, Yadukulakambhoji or Surati in concerts. Their exhaustive manodharma challenged these highly gamaka-oriented raga-s. A Sahana or a Surati had to rise to the occasion to satisfy the demands of their unbounded imagination and the craving of their souls. Not that they would sing alapana-s for half an hour or more. Not they.

But their knowledge and manodharma ensured that they brought out the complete essence of a raga in just a few minutes. Brinda's and later, when she sang alone, Muktha's raga alapana-s were eagerly looked forward to by rasika-s. Every swara was embellished with anuswara-s and the deep gamaka-s interspersed with beautiful karvai-s were exhilarating. A two-minute alapana of Begada that Muktha sang at her last concert at the Musiri house is a case in point. All that the great raga had to offer was said in those two minutes. Brinda's niraval-s and kalpana swara-s were precise and to the point. Being Naina Pillai's disciples, Brinda and Muktha had perfect laya, but they did not indulge in laya acrobatics.

Once, at a concert in Sastri Hall, Muktha sang a Bhairavi alapana and Tyagaraja's *Raksha bettare* in it. Rasika-s attending that concert were floored when she immediately started an alapana of Mukhari followed by Tyagaraja's *Karubaru* in the raga. There was not the slightest hint of Bhairavi in her Mukhari. The rich gnanam and immense courage of Muktha were there for all to see. Very few people knew the extent of Muktha's gnanam as, all along, she chose to live in her sister's shadow. But those close to her knew that her musical knowledge was profound.

Brinda was also an accomplished vainika. She played the Dhanammal style on the veena. A video recording of the 1970s done in the US has her playing the instrument with Vegavahini. It is not only an aural but a visual feast too,

Brindamma

I did not have much exposure to the Dhanammal bani of music when I joined the Central College of Music for further studies in music in 1949. It was at the instance of my guru at Kalakshetra, Tiger Varadachariar, that I joined the college. There my teachers were Musiri Subramania Iyer, Budalur Krishnamurti Sastri, Tiruppambaram Swaminatha Pillai and T. Brinda among others.

Brindamma maintained her timings and she expected us also to be on time for our classes. She never wasted even a minute and would straightaway start our lessons. T.R. Subramanyam and T.K. Govinda Rao were among the senior students studying along with me. Brindamma would sing a line and we would repeat it. All of us had to get every sangati right, only then would she proceed further. She had a sharp ear and would never miss any deviation on our part. Brindamma was strict and never tolerated any mischief or out of turn behaviour on our part.

She taught us several pieces, most of them compositions of the Trinity. Once, egged on by T.R. Subramanyam and T.K. Govinda Rao, I made bold to request her to teach us a padam. Both of them wanted to learn the Ghanta padam Neyyamuna. I was very nervous when I asked her, "Amma can you please teach us the Ghanta padam?" She gave me a stern look and asked, "Oho, avvalavu dooram vandudutha?" (Oho, have you come to that level?). Of course, she did not teach us any padam immediately. But after she was convinced that we had progressed well, she taught us five padam-s. Brindamma's teaching method was so good that I have never forgotten even one sangati in any of the pieces she taught. I learnt music at the college for two years and passed out in 1951. Since then I have had the opportunity to listen to Brinda and Muktha's music often. In my opinion there is no music outside of Tiger, Musiri and Brindamma. These three great artists represented all that was best in Carnatic music. Of course there is no gainsaying the fact that Mukthamma was equal to Brindamma and that there is absolutely no difference in the music of the two sisters.

S.R. JANAKIRAMAN

SPECIAL FEATURE

so elegant and graceful is her handling of the instrument. In veena playing too, Brinda never let the swara alone and embellished the playing with suitable anuswara-s.

Muktha's music

Muktha's music acquired more maturity in later years, in the 1970s and 80s. Her voice could not be described as melodious, as noted earlier it was quite hoarse, yet she overcame this deficiency and made it her strength. She shunned the niraval and kalpana swara-s and sang only raga alapana-s, besides of course, compositions. Visranti and sublimity were the hallmarks of her music. Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer has said that he was in the habit of using sleeping pills at night. Once he attended a concert of Muktha where she sang an exquisite *Ninu sevinchina*, the Yadukulakambhoji masterpiece of Subbaraya Sastri which captivated him and held him in thrall. That night, he could sleep well without the aid of a pill. This, Semmangudi said, attested to the power of Muktha's music. Muthuswami Dikshitar's *Veenapustaka dharineem* (Vegavahini), *Dakshinamoortey* (*Sankarabharanam*), Subbaraya Sastri's *Ninu sevinchina*, Tyagaraja's *Raksha bettare* (Bhairavi), *Karubaru* (Mukhari), the

padam-s *Ninnu joochi* (Punnagavarali), *Ela padare* (Begada), *Niddirayil* (Pantuvarali), *Padari varugudu* (Kambhoji), *Tiruvottriyur Tyagarajan* (Athana), *Naninna dhyana* (Kanada) and the javali-s *Sakhi prana* and *Marubari korvalene* (both in Chenchuritti), to mention only a few, gained considerable weight and beauty in Muktha's hands. None in the audience failed to be emotionally moved when she rendered these works. The rasika's heart would be suffused with peace and his soul elevated.

This unique style of music can now be heard only in a few recordings done surreptitiously and there are only a couple of official recordings. Those fortunate few who had the opportunity to listen to the doyennes have their memories of the great music of Brinda and Muktha to savour.

There is a new found interest in the music of Brinda and Muktha amongst young rasika-s the world over. Many rasika-s who have listened to other musicians and have accidentally stumbled upon Brinda-Muktha's recordings have said that after listening to their music they are not able to listen to anyone else. What greater tribute does the Dhanammal style need, and need anything more be said about Brinda-Muktha's music? ■