



Then and Now

Performers and listeners of today must be sick of talk of four hour Carnatic music concerts. It all seems so long ago and so much out of tune (no pun intended) with the times. But upto the end perhaps of the sixties, certainly of the fifties, four hours and more for the duration of a concert was the norm. Performances in the sabha-s, to take the Rasika Ranjani Sabha, where I developed my passion for classical Carnatic music, as an example would be held on Sundays and would be announced as from 4.25 pm. And punctuality in this regard was guaranteed as no musician worth his salt would risk starting after 4.30 because 4.30 to 6 pm was Rahukalam on Sundays. And the concerts would go on till 9 pm or even slightly later. I remember a concert of GNB where he started the Ragam-Tanam-Pallavi soon after 7 pm. A murmur of disapproval at so early an introduction of the RTP ran through the capacity crowd (GNB was a star). GNB was quick to apologize. He said, in Tamil, that he had a performance next day in the mofussil (is that word still used today?) and so had a train to catch. Would the audience forgive him if he finished by about 8.15? It did – and he did. The long duration allowed for at least three major raga-s, in which the alapana, kriti-s and niraval were well developed, two tani avartanams and a real juicy Ragam Tanam Pallavi of at least 45 minutes – not the anaemic fare you are served today.

But it was too good to last, perhaps. With the season seeing first two then three and then four and so on concerts per day, the duration of each had to be shortened. More sabha-s meant more concerts on week days and so they had to start later, say 5.30 or 6 pm. And the two and a half hour pattern for

the concert – three hours at best – has come to stay. The principal casualty was the Ragam, Tanam, Pallavi which like the Cheshire cat in Alice started shrinking till only the smile remained. The determined efforts of Pattabhi Raman through *Sruti* started a revival but, as far as regular concerts are concerned, and certainly during the season, it lasts for a very short period. To add insult to injury, it is preceded by a fairly elaborate treatment of a kriti in a major raga.

The other significant development has been in the nature of the menu. Upto the 40's, the singers depended mostly on Tyagaraja kriti-s, with occasional obeisance to Dikshitar and Syama Sastri. In fact, with Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer, you could be sure that it would be wholly Tyagaraja kriti-s. Two developments took place in 40 and 41. The Travancore court, ably assisted by Muthiah Bhagavatar and Semmangudi had succeeded in collecting and putting together the kriti-s of Swati Tirunal and launched a P.R. effort worthy of the latest practitioners of that art. A number of vidwans were made Asthana Vidwans of the court and Swati Tirunal's compositions began to find their way into concert and radio programmes. The other development was the Tamil Isai movement started in 1941. Though, in the beginning there was a conflict with the Tamil Isai Sangam insisting on an all-Tamil programme of songs and the orthodox, led by Ariyakudi, refusing to accept the restriction, in due course of time, as generally happens in all such confrontations, both sides came together, the former agreeing to one or two, or even more, non-Tamil songs and the latter agreeing to more

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and more Tamil songs in the menu. One good result was the deserved recognition given to Tamil composers, principally Papanasam Sivan, whose genius certainly entitles him to a place alongside the Trinity of Carnatic music. In fact, if one may digress, it is a surprise that his portrait which of courses is displayed among the Kalanidhis, has not found its rightful place alongside the five that adorn the main hall of the Music Academy, one hopes it will, and soon. All this is not to downplay the efforts made earlier to popularise the songs of other composers like Patnam Subramania Iyer, Ramaswami Sivan, Poochi Iyengar, Vasudevachar, Gopalakrishna Bharathi, Muthu Tandavar, Kotiswara Iyer and Arunachala Kavi. No one can forget the great part played by All India Radio in this regard, consisting principally of special half-hour to one hour programmes of kriti-s of one or the other of these composers.

The shrinking of the duration of the concert and the need to accommodate the kriti-s of composers other than the Trimurties have put special pressure on modern performances. One cannot complain therefore, if most of their programmes consist of one kriti par composer. They have to provide room for a number of present day composers also. Though one cannot help remarking that some of these latter are only lyricists and not vageyakara-s. Examples are Periaswami Thooran and Ambujam Krishna. It is a pity that the efforts of those who have set their compositions to music go unrecognised. But that is a different subject. The pity, to an old-timer like me, is that, in all this pressure, Tyagaraja gets short shrift. Many programmes have only one

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Tyagaraja kriti and, that too, a minor one. I even had to listen once, to a performance by a famous young artist, that had no Tyagaraja kriti-s at all. This will not do. There can be no Carnatic music without Tyagaraja and a minimum of two or three of

his kriti-s, at least one a major one, should be *de rigueur* for a Carnatic music concert. As a matter of fact, there are a number of his compositions which have not found their way to the concert platform at all so far. And it should be

the effort of our young musicians to bring them out. An example would be the Raga Balahamsa, in which he has eight compositions. I have not heard this raga sung in any concert, except by Balamuralikrishna who renders *Dandamu bettenura*. ■

