

Old is gold, so what's new?

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“Bigger... and better?” we asked in our last issue on the Chennai music and dance season. Bigger it certainly has been but whether better is arguable. We shall at any rate wait till our next issue, when all our correspondents will have filed their stories, before we pass judgement. Yes, it's early days yet but on evidence gathered so far, some eminent representatives of an earlier era of music gave greater demonstrations of the grandeur and depth of Carnatic music than today's stars. Devotion rather than showmanship prevailed in these concerts, leaving even newcomers to kutcheri listening thirsting for more.

Nedunuri Krishnamurti at the Music Academy, for instance, belied his 79 summers, with his stirring effort to bring out the soul of the sangeetam of which he has been a worshipful devotee. True there was the occasional slip owing largely to a voice rendered recalcitrant no doubt by age and the December throat, but the striving for perfection and the dedication to bhava were unmistakable. In the best guru-sishya tradition, the Malladi Brothers gave the septuagenarian devout support. The accompanists Sriram Parasuram, Tiruchi Sankaran and T.V. Vasan combined in a seamless partnership to give a delightful start to the season at the Academy. Fittingly, the foursome received a standing ovation.

An equally moving experience was listening to Tanjavur Sankara Iyer at a Naada Inbam concert at Raga Sudha hall. For the handful of listeners present at the kutcheri, it was an unforgettable Sunday morning, as Sankara Iyer fought a sore throat and frail health to reach out towards some deeply personal musical goal. He found time to chat with the audience as well as his two disciples on



Nedunuri Krishnamurti



Tanjavur Sankara Iyer

the stage, coaxing them to sing full-throatedly, but in vain, as the sishya-s in their reverence for their guru, refused to raise their voices. Umayalpuram Mali's resonant percussion support too was appropriately subdued in keeping with the general air of bhakti towards the veteran. Violinist Varadarajan was restraint personified until under constant prodding by the vocalist he surpassed himself with some exquisite bowing, producing music that can only be described as profound. It was a clear demonstration of what complete absorption in the music submerging the self in a spirit of devotion by a seasoned artist can do. It is to Varadarajan's credit

that his performance that morning was compared for its ripe classicism with a magnificent offering by T.N. Krishnan in November at the same venue during the R.K. Venkatarama Sastry centenary week.

This concert, with its quietude and occasional endearing verbal exchanges, was perhaps more truly representative of our classical music than grander concerts before large audiences. The family of the late S.V. Krishnan must be complimented for quietly carrying on the good work at Raga Sudha.

The decline in audience support for instrumental music continues. It is a sad development that excellent performances by the likes of Mala Chandrasekhar or Jayanthi Kumaresan or even maestros Ravi Kiran, U. Shrinivas and N. Ramani do not draw crowds comparable to those at vocal concerts. A serious attempt seems to be called for to promote the greater appreciation of instrumental music.

Old problems do not seem to go

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away. Poor acoustics continues to be an irritant, sometimes made worse by the musicians' own systems coming into play, replacing the facilities of the sabha-s, freeing them in the process from any blame for the damage done to the eardrums of the audience. In this respect, the Music Academy offered improved sound that made listening there a pleasure most of the time. Here, too, there were complaints at a few concerts from some listeners who felt installing good systems is only half the job done. Expert sound management must follow. Of course, as in the past, there were a few vidwans including Rashid Khan who tried to impose their own demands for volume control on the audio specialists on duty.

The usual shortchanging of southern audiences by visiting Hindustani musicians was in evidence once again, as Rashid Khan's concert lasted less than two hours. The Rajan-Sajan Mishra brothers had raised our expectations during the Hindu Friday Review festival, with their deeply evocative three-hour plus concert at the same venue.

The showing of the youth brigade was heartwarming in the music season, with a number of new names turning out excellent progress cards. Sandeep Narayan, Abhishek Raghuram, Amritha Murali and Amrutha Venkatesh were among the vocalists who impressed and so did young flautist Sruti Sagar, violinists Charumati Raghuram and Akkarai Swarnalatha, Anirudh Atreya

(khanjira) and a number of other percussionists. This is a far from complete list and only reflects top of the mind recall.

The seniors among the current performers gave consistently good performances but the December fatigue syndrome seemed to catch up with a number of them, as the season progressed, perhaps inevitable given their frenetic schedules. Less acceptable was the tendency among some of the great names to go off key in their explorations of raga and bhava. While layam's paternity was maintained effortlessly at all times, the mother, sruti, sometimes came off second best. What made it worse was the thunderous applause that greeted such efforts.

The audience was often guilty of worse lapses. Walking in and out of concerts was bad enough, and perhaps forgivable, given the rival attractions of top concerts elsewhere, but the continuing exodus during the tani avartanam is an insult to the percussionist, and so long as we continue this practice, we cannot call ourselves rasika-s of music. The reading of newspapers, rustling of plastic bags and constant chatter during concerts do us no credit either. Toilet and canteen breaks were invariably taken at the expense of listeners staying behind in the auditorium. It's time we established a code of conduct for ourselves and followed it strictly.

More on the season will follow in the February issue of *Sruti*. ■