

Music for the soul

Mining the Internet's Carnatic music resources and databases, I came across a curious recording of one of Mali's speeches at a concert in Bangalore. After announcing his retirement early in the speech, he proceeds to tell the audience that he became a musician by accident. Until then, he had been performing only out of necessity. He then says that when he feels like playing, he will let people know, and that they can come and listen to him. "Free of cost," he adds, and ends his speech with an emphatic, "I've had enough. *Saakaithu!*"

Indian classical music is a personal art. While an artist can (and often does) produce music mechanically, it is only when she looks within herself and withdraws from the world around her that she produces something truly special. In other words, you might sing a really good Bhairavi by using standard phrases and keeping the typical outline in mind and play around with swara-s and patterns. But if the Bhairavi has to be exceptional, you need to lose yourself in its vastness, understand each swara, explore each gamaka, delve into the mysteries of its two dhaivata-s, revel in the magic of that unbound, floating nishada.

The Carnatic concert stage is not viewed as a necessary economic activity to keep artists going, but as the pinnacle of artistic achievement. The concert is not about exhibition of talent, as much as it is about expression and exchange of ideas. The *kutcheri* is a spontaneous melting pot of styles and traditions. Each of the artists comes from his own school, understands and performs music in his own way. In other words, they have each gone through a highly personal journey,



Mali

SAMUDRI ARCHIVES

and get together to exchange notes on what they have seen. While this can lead to contrasting, or sometimes conflicting approaches, the intention is always to create synergy.

If the Carnatic concert is such an enriching experience for the performers, then what was the reason for Mali's outburst? Why did he crib and complain constantly? Why did he avoid and evade engagements?

We are forgetting another factor – the audience. The *kutcheri* is not just a place where four or five musicians jam together. If this were so, they could have got together at one of their houses. (Frankly, the sound systems take away more than they add.) The stage is a place where they play for listeners, and sometimes, these listeners can come in the way of the performers' art. It is when a singer, in the middle of his probing Dhanyasi *alapana*, where he is exchanging deep phrases with his violinist, finds the *mama* in the third row snoring away, two others peering into their cell phones and wristwatches, and large groups at the back exiting lazily, that she asks questions of herself. Whom does an artist perform for? Is her art

an outpouring of what is within her? Or is it something she offers for the audience's pleasure? Is her art then moulded by her audience, tweaked to their tastes, sculpted by their desires? Perhaps she wants to devote three hours to meditate on the myriad forms of the *kaisiki nishada* – its quirky appearance in *Bilahari*, its amorphous mix of the most wondrous sounds in *Bhairavi*, the striking double-use in *Reetigaula*. Maybe she wants to go one step further and sing *Ahiri*, *Dhanyasi*, *Todi* and *Punnagavarali* in succession to put across the finer distinctions between the four *nishada*-s. What holds many artists back in taking upon such an exciting assignment is the fear that to a not-so-discerning listener, the concert might become monotonous.

Planning for a concert then becomes a major exercise. The artist often ensures variety in selection of pieces – a mix of *suddha* and *prati madhyama raga*-s, *janya* and *janaka raga*-s, contrasting *raga*-s, songs in different *tala*-s, varying tempos and emotions. The next level of mixing is ensuring various composers and eras have been represented, all languages have been given their due, all compositional forms have made their appearance. Often, the artist does this mechanically. She feels like singing *Sankarabharanam* as the main *raga*, she will choose a contrasting *Ranjani* as the other important *raga*. She will then sandwich an *Anandabhairavi* between the two and plan her concert around it. Her personal expression is shaped by what the audience wants to hear. She should, maybe, pause and reflect on whether such perfunctory planning is worth the audience she gets for it.

Even so, the concert does not deserve

REAR WINDOW

to be belittled in this manner. It is, and it will remain, the most sacred space in a Carnatic musician's life. It is a challenging and rewarding activity. It involves great concentration on your music and an acute understanding of the listener's response to it. Unlike an exam, you cannot scratch out a wrong answer and write it again. In other words, Carnatic music does not live and breed in homes or through recording studios – it comes alive on stage.

It is when faced with this dilemma that many artists lose their sense of balance. Some choose to dilute their music to attract audiences – some such experiments succeed, most fail. Some others make no compromises

– they perform for themselves and themselves alone. Mali's was, perhaps, an extreme case – even as a child, he played many concerts to support a large family. As he grew older, he often performed only when he desperately needed the money. Still, he was a fiercely independent performer, playing whatever he felt like, whenever he felt like it. He would go through some of the most intellectual laya gymnastics (alienating most of his audience in the process) and then play a Bach piece with a nervous violinist following him! Even with all this, he was wildly popular.

Without an audience accommodating his eccentricities, he might never have been this famous – his imagination,

his aesthetic and his techniques that have vastly enriched our music might never have been known outside limited circles. Maybe, audiences today need to be this understanding. They should, once in a while, forgive an artist for embarking on journeys that might not be to their taste. In an old M.D. Ramanathan recording of *Nee madi challaga* in Anandabhairavi, he sings the chittaswara about six times – each time offering a new spin on the same swara-s. Even if these spins seem as dubious and mysterious as Anil Kumble's, the audience must be willing to be bowled over. This will, surely, make the kutcheri a far freer, more intelligent space.

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