

The golden era and the ‘moulded’ era

The first decade of the 21st century which is drawing to a close has seen revolutionary changes in the presentation of art forms especially music. Music has become more of a ‘commodity’ and naturally acute competition has set in. Thus we have ‘music producers’ (artists/musicians), products, distributors, agents, consumers, etc. as in any other business. More and more people are entering the trade as it is no longer a dreaded proposition.

Most leading Carnatic musicians today are not the betel chewing, vibhooti-chandan-kumkum laden senior vidwans, but the trendy, tech-savvy, young aspirants who believe that a lot of acumen is needed to be in the business and in the limelight. They attach lot of importance to presentation skills and not ‘mere singing’. They venture

into new frontiers and themes, thanks to more cosmopolitan audiences and the vanishing tribe of doomsayers among critics.

Today’s vidwans arrive at concert halls in their own cars in style and walk to the ‘sabha office’ speaking on their handsets, nodding to a few – unlike the vidwans of yesteryear who reached the venue in a taxi, ‘packed’ with the entire team of sidemen and a tambura to top it! While the old timers exchanged pleasantries with all – narrating their concert experience of the previous day, the Gen-Next discuss festivals abroad, visas and latest gadgets! They do not fail to greet NRIs among rasika-s and acknowledge the wonderful taste of the ‘vatthakuzhambu’ they relished abroad.

While a torchbearer of tradition like

Semmagudi “refused to cross the oceans” on principle, destinations abroad have become favourite holiday spots for many of the present day artists. They are familiar with continental dishes.

While the bhagavata-s of yesteryear specialised only in music, today’s young musicians have the world at their fingertips. It is not uncommon to see them carrying laptops to the concert platform. With educated and sophisticated audiences, the music scene today offers an altogether different scenario compared to what is known as “anda kaalam” (old times) – the period which is yet to be scientifically dated!

The golden era

Most lament that the ‘golden era’ of classical music is over. But the ‘Gen-Next’ is not prepared to buy

this argument and believe that Carnatic music has many more dimensions than the bhakti element, heritage environs and marathon slots. They are quite familiar with the music of past masters like Ariyakudi, Maharajapuram, GNB, Alathur Brothers, Semmangudi, Madurai Mani Iyer, M.D. Ramanathan, Flute Mali, Palghat Mani Iyer, Brinda-Muktha and M.S. Subbulakshmi (list only illustrative), but explain how it is important to have a holistic view of the art. While appreciating the sentiment behind the golden era, they also tell us why it is important to have plenty of real gold in the kitty, to get adequately insured, etc. in these days of globalisation and financial crises! Many of them are Cyber guru-s and the tribe is on the rise. Emergence of a moulded era?

In fact, it may be necessary to reckon the 'golden era' of Carnatic music in two different perspectives – the period of the Trinity when the foundation was laid, and the first half of the twentieth century when the stalwarts established the superstructure popularly known as the 'kutcheri paddhati'. During the course of learning the art, the in-house student of music had to struggle a lot, not to say of the long wait for exclusive concert chances. But they could absorb and imbibe the distinct styles of their teachers which equipped them to carry on the tradition. The 'depth' in the art was possibly an outcome of this endurance.

Vriddaa sishyaa, Gurur yuvaa!

Chitram Vatatarormooley vridhbaa sishyaa: Gururyuvaa

Gurostu mounam vyaakhyaanam sishyastu chchinna samsayaa:

Loosely translated, this great Sanskrit stotra on Lord Dakshinamoorti means:

"Lo! Sits beneath the big tree (Vataavriksha) the Teacher who is a youth with disciples much aged; the master's silent disposition is enough to quell their doubts."

In a lighter vein, I tend to relate the first half of the sloka to the youthful singers of today who have several students as well as listeners much senior to them in age! The second half of the verse perhaps matched the old timers, many of them who sang much less while teaching but explained sangati-s with mere looks and actions and the disciples got them perfect!

Popular taste

Nama sankeertanam, kutcheri, devotional, light classical, light, fusion, folksy, filmy and what not – music today has lots to offer to the consumers. Carnatic music has most generously accommodated all the genres and types of the art. We had at least one truly honest vidwan in Kunnakudi Vaidyanathan who compared himself to a 'departmental store' where 'everyone has something' to buy!

'Serious' or 'core' music seems to be reserved for 'The Season' and thematic programmes. Elsewhere, a typical concert is guided by 'popular tastes'. Audience eagerly wait for the tukkada session (nothing wrong in it!) to listen to their favourite numbers. Many a times, the artist's performance in the pre-tukkada session where the 'vyavahaara' aspect comes to the fore, goes unnoticed in the process. I think both parties are, to a certain extent, losers in the game.

Yes, we had GNB, MS, Madurai

Mani Iyer, and others acceding to listeners' choices, but we must bear in mind that those were the times when media and gadgets were scarce. Music lovers had to depend on live concerts.

At a concert held recently as part of the Semmangudi centenary celebrations, when a singing duo asked the listeners, during the tukkada session, to choose between an abhang and tillana, it was reported that the audience unanimously voted for the abhang. Padam-s and javali-s face the threat of extinction.

Music in the air

Classical music and musicians seem to be exploited for commercial advantage by the numerous private channels. The Chennai based Podhigai of Doordarshan has been heavily cutting down Carnatic music in their early morning slots. The 4-6 am comfort of kutcheri-s is a thing of the past!

Despite its immeasurable contribution to the development of the art, All India Radio – the silent saviour of classical music – is not patronised by many nowadays. Veena music and kathakaalakshepam survive mainly because of AIR. Though FM Gold of AIR-Chennai has a good number of slots for Carnatic music, none of the mushrooming private FM channels has an ear for Carnatic music. Satellite radios with their 'tailor made' programmes appear to have a gained a footing.

I am perhaps the first to buy the recently launched model of a mobile phone which has the AM radio facility that enables me to carry 'Chennai A' with me to access prime Carnatic slots. The manufactures owe me a compliment!

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