

Virtuosity triumphs

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Was it an astute masterstroke on the part of the Music Academy? An attempt to broadbase the demography of Carnatic music practitioners? Delayed recognition that Carnatic music was essentially temple music before it acquired temporal colours over the last century? A genuine case of honouring an icon? These were some of the varied responses to the awarding of the Sangita Kalanidhi honour to senior tavil vidwan Valayapatti AR. Subramaniam, though no one doubted the merit of the decision.

Whatever the motivations behind the decision – following last year’s award to A.K.C. Natarajan – tavil vidwan Valayapatti Subramaniam was a picture of confidence besides displaying considerable wisdom at every stage of the festival. Proud of his tradition, he has been properly respectful of the many past masters of the great art of Carnatic music, of which his art played but a minor role on the proscenium stage until he and his ilk introduced innovative programmes. The affection with which the Sangita Kalanidhi recalled memories of his association with several peers and seniors indicated the solidarity in the music fraternity regardless of caste or community that must have existed in days past.

A highlight of the Season was the release of a book on the history of the Music Academy authored by Sriram V and Malathi Rangaswami, yet another feather in the cap of the present administration, which has come in for all round praise for its several pathbreaking initiatives. The acoustics and facilities at the hall were clear winners, as were the traffic arrangements handled ever so efficiently by volunteers from *The Hindu*.

SRUTI offers its congratulations to the academy and hopes the process of improvement will continue in the years to come, especially in the area of selection of artists it features in the December season. The introduction of an element of transparency in the way this is done will be a great step forward – perhaps by way of a poll on the artists to be selected out of a longlisted pool for the various slots and giving a certain weightage for the results of the poll. This can help in reducing what critics sometimes – this year was no exception – see as anomalies in the selection process.

At the academy as elsewhere, the veterans including

octogenarian and nonagenarian musicians, some of them Sangita Kalanidhi-s, continued to steal the thunder. They not only performed superbly on stage and did some splendid lecture demonstrations but were keen listeners as well, attending both kutcheri-s and lecdems. The likes of R.K. Srikantan, Nedunuri Krishnamurti, R. Vedavalli, Umayalpuram Sivaraman and M. Chandrasekharan received warm ovations on more than one occasion. Some of the lecdems were outstanding examples of scholarship as well as deep love for the art on the part of the presenter. The healthy attendance at these augurs well for the future of the art.

To describe season audiences in a lighter vein, here’s an edited excerpt from an account that appeared in *The Hindu’s Folio* in 1998:

“What infinite variety our indefatigable music lovers present! An endangered species is of the doughty old warriors whose first season coincided with the debut of Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar, the trailblazer whom critics have charged with inventing the modern kutcheri format. These are the most admirable segment of the audience, for they have braved the rigours of classical music in the severe Chennai winter for over half a century, sweater-and muffler-clad, and remaining stolidly critical of succeeding generations of vidwans. Anno Domini is catching up and alas, this species will soon be extinct, replaced entirely by more thick skinned listeners whom the December cold leaves untouched.

To earn the applause of a Chennai audience is not easy unless you happen to be a Hindustani instrumentalist with long hair, purple kurta and an American accent with which you announce that you will treat them to the exotic delight of raag Hansdhwani. The Carnatic musician may occasionally mesmerise audiences abroad, but his manodharma is scarcely equal to the irresistible lure of the 8.35 p.m. bus home. Every percussionist from Palghat Mani Iyer down to Vikku Vinayakram has lost out to the fatal attraction of the aroma of coffee wafting in from the canteen at tani avartanam time.

Increasingly, devotees from the wicked West descend on staid old Chennai during the December season. Some of them look more Indian than Indians, veshti-jibba, sari-pigtails, jolna bags and all, but what really distinguishes these seekers of nirvana through raga and gamaka is their glazed expression. And they, like their Indian counterparts, keep coming back for more, such is the addictive power of the season for all seasons.”

The revival of the full *Ramayana* series at Kalakshetra has been one of the highlights of the season. Capacity crowds at the Tiruvanmiyur auditorium provided evidence of the enduring appeal of the epic. Other dance festivals were predictably unpredictable, with an ever-widening base of performers, genres and themes. The lecture demonstrations were largely illuminative and thought provoking – when they were not rambling and befuddling.

Irreverence is a welcome quality in the young when they question outmoded or unproven theories and prescriptions. It takes an ugly turn when in a commodified world, rasika-s treat artists with scant respect at interactions meant to tackle controversial issues head-on. We saw a couple of examples of such behaviour during the season.

Samvada, a series of dialogues between very senior artists and their less senior counterparts, is meant to reveal the treasures of the past to present-day audiences. The programme's intent is meritorious but to succeed consistently, it needs veteran artists to participate in it wholeheartedly and share their rich experience with the audience. When it descends to merely idolatrous guru vandana or an opportunity to berate the younger generation, it fails to perform its stated objective.

The usual quota of sore throats handicapped performers, who most of the time triumphed over physical ailments to provide quality music. Still, open-mouthed singing and resonant voice production continued to be casualties of technology and misplaced values and preferences. The

over-seventies were among the exceptions to this post-modern tendency in Carnatic music.

On the last day of the season at the academy, one voice resonated and filled the auditorium to cast a spell on an audience that had apparently come to enjoy depth and purity in the rendering rather than expect fireworks and flourishes. The voice belonged to Kalapini Komkali, inheritor of the Kumar Gandharva legacy. Next morning, the New Year was welcomed by flautist Shashank, beginning with a marvellous display of quiet, meditative music, but seeming to succumb eventually to the lure of showmanship. Here is a brilliant young musician who can achieve greatness through restraint.

Time and again, a musician reaches out for the heights of his art, leaving you misty-eyed for a fleeting moment, only to bring you crashing down to earth, with his vocal gymnastics, abominations even, in the name of virtuosity. Yet one man's poison is a few hundred listeners' ecstasy, it seems, judging from the thunderous applause on such occasions. That would be fair comment on much on show in the great Chennai season over the years. It no longer comes as a surprise that even learned rasika-s come out of kutcheri halls with stars in their eyes after such exhibitions of voice jugglery and worse. The question then arises: isn't great art meant to go beyond entertainment to touch some emotional chord in the human heart? To lose yourself in the piercing cry of a perfect voice in perfect sruti, for instance – isn't that worth living for, dying for? ■