

The Malladi Brothers are indeed a breath of fresh air when they ascend the concert stage. With their foreheads streaked with bright splashes of vibhuti, they look bright and sparkling in their usually pearly white jibbas and veshtis, their eyes taking in the audience in an intelligent sweep that seems at once to gauge its level of appreciation, its stylistic preferences. They invariably radiate energy and grandeur even as they deliver the opening salvo in a brisk, bright manner that would have done credit to the Alathur Brothers, arguably the most spectacular duo in Carnatic music.

With their impeccable pedigree, Sreeramaprasad and Ravikumar are no doubt destiny's children. With both father and guru devout students of a great musician/ musicologist/ teacher, could they have chosen a career path other than Carnatic music? Eclectic is a much abused cliché, but in their case, that seems the only word to describe the several influences that have shaped the siblings' musical loyalties as much as their readiness to embrace art from different directions, with good aesthetics the only limiting factor.

There is an unmistakable Telugu touch to their music, paradoxically undistinguishable though it may be from the best Tanjavur bani that their guru and guru's guru practised and assiduously advocated. The first aspect of this orientation is of course their voices with the deep resonance we have come to associate with Andhra Pradesh's vocalists, stage and film actors, and politicians, the byproduct no doubt of a lifetime of imbibing the waters of the Krishna and the Godavari, not to mention the red chilli of Guntur and Vijayawada! To draw cinematic parallels with my inadequate knowledge of Telugu movies, the elder brother's voice is reminiscent of N.T. Rama Rao's and Rao Gopal Rao's, to name two examples of bell like voices, while the younger brother sounds more like Akkineni Nageswara Rao or S.V. Ranga Rao. And I mean this as a compliment to all concerned. And of course their impeccable enunciation of Telugu and Sanskrit lyrics is a great value addition as well.



Perhaps I am being wildly imaginative, but I wonder if Sreeram is influenced by guru Nedunuri's (or Pinakapani's) greater akaram orientation and Ravikumar by the relative nasality of their father and other guru Suri Babu. If Sreeramkumar is the epitome of Nedunuri's much vaunted Tanjavur bani, does Ravikumar reveal the Hindustani-like raga interpretations of Voleti Venkateswarlu, Suri Babu's guru?

These differences I am sure are my fevered creative licence at work, for when the brothers perform on stage, the resultant blend is holistic and complete. I do know, however, that they, like their father, appreciate other streams of music, the ghazals of Pakistani maestro Mehdi Hassan, for instance. My own attempts to interview them were stymied by impromptu singing sessions once we discovered our common love of the *ustad's* music. I was delighted to field questions like, "Did you know that *Aye kuchh abr, kuch sharab aye* has strains of Sankarabharanam in it, or "Have you heard Khan sahib's version of Lata Mangeshkar's *Hum pyaar mein jalnevaalon ko?*" All this is not to suggest that the brothers' concert music is anything but wholesomely Carnatic.

It is hard to believe the brothers' assertion that they perform their concerts without premeditation as to the different roles they assign each other. They seem to enjoy a fortuitous complementarity of voices and musical ideas that give their partnership a deeply

satisfying fullness of purpose. There appears no rigid hierarchy as to who sings the main raga, who has the lion's share of swara kalpana, who's the niraval specialist. The only distinct difference I can make out is the Hindustani touch the younger brother employs in raga alapana while the other presents the more conventional approach to the exploration. Ravikumar tends to be more adventurous, too, with the elder brother looking on nonchalantly even at the inevitable risks along the way.

Do the brothers play the audience, "press buttons", as T.M. Krishna has said in his recent book, to wring out of their listeners the emotion they have pre-planned? With their near transparent sincerity, it is difficult to imagine that the duo employ any such stratagem to win over audiences or string them along a predetermined path, emotional or technical. More often than not, they seem guided by instinct and intuition on the concert trajectory of the day.

The brothers can create magic together. Their raga alapana is seldom pedestrian; it is almost always

invested with deep resonance and bhava. They are both spiritually inclined in the tradition of their south Indian brahmin upbringing. Performing their daily sandhyavandanam ritual is sacrosanct to them, as the *Sruti* team found out during an interview in their hotel room. They internalise the meaning of the bhakti-rich lyrics of the Trinity and other vageyakaras of Carnatic music, and it is with the full import of these emotional verses that they render them on stage. Their guru bhakti is unshakeable. It is in this spirit of reverence that they approach their music.

The brothers question the speed and pyrotechnics of the concert paddhati that shows scant regard for the meaning of the songs, quite often rendering a plaintive composition at express velocity. Their manodharma passages are not without fireworks, but they are invariably tempered with concern for appropriateness or *auchityam*. Their next phase of musical growth will perhaps be marked by even greater depth, and malleability of voice. With their vibrant voices, thirst for learning and intelligent work ethic, the brothers seem all set to peak as consummate artists. ■



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