

GANESH AND KUMARESH

A quest for 'pure' music

Srilatha Krishna

When Ganesh (born 1964) and Kumaresh (born 1967) ascended the Carnatic concert stage in 1972, the image of the violin as an accompanying instrument in Carnatic vocal concerts had been well-etched in the minds of audiences and musicians alike. By then, Lalgudi G. Jayaraman, M.S. Gopalakrishnan and T.N. Krishnan had achieved remarkable success as solo violinists, each with their distinct style. It could not have been easy for the young boys to start out as a violin-duo at such a time. But the youngsters were fortunate to have their own father, T.S. Rajagopalan, as their teacher and mentor, who seems to have had an intuitive understanding of how to channelise his children's prodigious talent.

It was not long before the boys were hailed as child prodigies. Their grasp of the Carnatic idiom, combined with robust technique and charming on-stage demeanour, soon helped them capture the imagination of the Carnatic audiences. They became the youngest violinists to receive the Kalaimamani award in 1997. Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, M.G. Ramachandran, a lover of music himself, named them the "State artists of Tamil Nadu" in 1984.

Such early adulation only increased the duo's enthusiasm for pushing the boundaries of their music and violin-play. Today, with more than forty years of concert experience behind them,



Kumaresh and Ganesh

T.S. Rajagopalan



M.G. Ramachandran honouring the duo



they employ the raga-tanam-pallavi as the perfect vehicle to convey their musical ideas. Their raga alapanas seem to look at the notes of a raga, their movements, and interconnections afresh. The brothers seamlessly complement each other's ideas on stage. If Ganesh chooses traditional raga essays, Kumaresh ventures into new territory and vice versa. Masters of technique, their extempore sections abound in complex rhythms

presented with clarity. To keep audiences engaged, they explain musical features, or ask them to suggest notes of a raga for their pallavis. They have earned many rasikas who seek out their concerts to relish the novelty of their approach.

As composers, Ganesh and Kumaresh have numerous kritis, varnams and tillanas to their credit. Many of these have been presented on stage by musicians such as Abhishek Raghuram. Some of the ragas created by the duo are Aditya, Amruta Kalyan, Hemanta, Mohanasri, Pamararanjani, and Sheilasri, and tala called Chitram.

The brothers have also conceptualised a new musical form, called the ‘Ragapravaham’. It is a lyrics-free form, bound only by raga and tala, and meant specifically to showcase melodic instruments. Though the jatiswaram, nagma or the tillana forms serve a similar purpose, the ragapravaham compositions have more freedom of structure than the former. The brothers’ ragapravaham compositions, over 25 in number, are a reflection of their approach to instrumental music. While a Sahana or



Little Ganesh-Kumaresh (violin) and Kuttalam Viswanatha Iyer (mridangam)



a Begada gets a traditional treatment at their hands, other ragas such as Kharaharapriya and Janaranjani get a “Western” twist, with an abundance of consonant phrases and plain, unadorned notes. True to the spirit of the ragapravaham form, their compositions juxtapose traditional phrases of ragas with features tailor-made for the violin, such as staccato notes, high-speed phrases and passages that scale four octaves.

The siblings have collaborated with legendary percussionists such as Zakir Hussain, Vikku Vinayakram, Valangaiman Shanmugasundaram, Umayalpuram Sivaraman, Palghat Raghu, T.K. Murthy, Yella Venkateswara Rao and Haridwaramangalam Palanivel. Their discography is quite impressive and diverse. Of their many Carnatic albums, *Shadjam* is noteworthy

for its exposition of graha bhedam of raga Kalyani. *Colours of India, Carnatic Chills, Seasons and Spark* are world music albums that show their understanding of the universality of music. They have collaborated with Hindustani and jazz musicians and have played for Indian films with A.R. Rahman and Illayaraja. They have set music for dance-dramas like *Maya Ravan, Savitri, Gajamukha*, and *Srishti*. Their music for the movies *Dance like a Man* and *Lessons in Forgetting* have won them critical acclaim. They have also scored music for telefilms, jingles and advertisements. Older readers may remember that they created quite a stir thirty years ago, by acting in K. Balachander’s Tamil film *Oru Veedu Iru Vaasal* and appearing as Rama and Lakshmana in N.T. Ramarao’s Telugu production *Brahmarshi Viswamitra*.

