

SRUTI BOX

My guru Rajeswari

I had the opportunity to learn veena from guru Rajeswari Padmanabhan. Her method of teaching was unique. Since veena playing is an exalting discipline both physically and spiritually, she took one week to teach us how to hold the instrument, the plucking method and to play the veena. Then she concentrated more on fundamentals like sarali and janta varisai-s, and alankaram in various raga-s. Finally varnam and kriti-s were taught to us. Since veena playing is close to the vocal style she gave importance to singing the kriti along with playing the instrument.

Before starting each kriti she insisted on playing the arohana and avarohana until the outcome was the entire rasa-bhava of the raga. She wanted us to practice the abhyasa varisai-s in different raga-s and asked us to concentrate more on the sookshma gamaka-s while playing a kriti. The Karaikudi bani is well known for its tanam rendering, and she taught us how to do the sa, ri, ga method of tala between three swara-s and how to play 4, 5, 6, and 7 swara-s. She gave importance to stopping technique, use of individual side strings, use of a special technique in effecting rava sangati-s, sharpness in the rendition of gamaka phrases and techniques in rendering tanam. All these features helped listeners to identify our playing as the Karaikudi bani. I feel it is the blessings of my Guru to me.

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Transition from junior to senior

Every year I attend the junior and sub-senior concerts more than the frontline musicians. This year was no exception. It is a fact that most of the juniors ascend the stage before they are ready. But there is no denying the truth that the sub-senior's performances were more classical in content and delivery and was quite enjoyable. With the exception of a few, most of the 'star performers' were either shouting or singing too light. Lesser we talk about it, the better it is.

I have heard the current 'star performers' 15 years back and they were absolutely brilliant. Full credit to them for reviving and increasing the interest in Carnatic music. They proved wrong the myth that stage performance is only after the age of 35! Therefore the expectation that they would take Carnatic music back to the 'Golden fifties' was not misplaced. Or was it? Musicians are perhaps at the peak of their prowess between 35 and 50 years of their age. What we have in our possession by way of recording of the past maestros – Madurai Mani Iyer and GNB for example – were their performances when they were well past 45 years of age. For those who were not fortunate to listen to them live, these recordings are benchmark and we look forward to such listening experience. This is not a comparison between the 'current' and 'past'. It is accepted that musical abilities mature with the age and therefore should be able to improve their concert quality. Here I am assuming that the quality of music of MMI and GNB were better as they became older. So, the question is what went wrong with the present frontline musicians. Is it

due to commercialisation? Is it due to too many performances – sometimes singing for 5 days a week? Is it due to too much money? I do not think we should worry about the money factor because they deserve every penny (paisa!) of it. But they should never compromise on the quality of their music.

Which way will the current crop of sub-seniors go? Anybody's guess! For the sake of posterity, I hope their musical skills would improve and their performances would be more polished. Importantly, I hope, they would not forget that the 'sukhabhavam' should not be sacrificed which is the sole aim of a music concert. Otherwise, in 30 years from now, when MMI and GNB fade away from our memory, the standards would have fallen to very low levels.

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MS and Chembai

In the feature on the Nellayappar Temple in Tirunelveli, Sriram V has made a passing reference to Semmangudi's remark that he had learnt the song *Sree Kantimatim* from MS. We don't know MS's reaction to that remark – probably she must have just smiled!

An incident of a similar kind took place some time in the late 1960's. It was the Ekadasi Music Festival at Guruvayur. In those days it lasted only for three days. Concerts used to take place under the personal supervision of Chembai, and in his immediate presence. It so happened that MS came to the temple on the second (Ekadasi) day for darsan, quite unaware of the

festival, or the Bhagavata's presence there. Someone brought the news of MS's arrival to Chembai. He told the person to convey his request to her that after darsan she may come to the venue. When MS came, he told her that the Lord would have wanted to listen to her music and therefore had brought her to the temple on that day. MS too took it as a divine command, and sang a moving concert soaked in devotion. The precinct of the Lord added to its sublimity.

When Chovvallur Krishnankutty, an ardent admirer of Chembai and a correspondent of *Malayala Manorama*, met the Bhagavata next morning at Poomalli Matom where the latter was staying, he asked the correspondent to file a detailed report about MS's visit and her soulful music. Then he added: "MS is like a gurunatha to me as I have learnt a couple of songs from her. You should write this also."

The story did not end there. Next year, MS was on a visit to Kozhikode for a concert. Krishnankutty had obtained a prior appointment for an interview with MS. Among other things, the correspondent mentioned to her about Chembai's remark that he was like a disciple of MS. She was visibly shocked and shaken on hearing those words. She earnestly pleaded with the pressman not to utter or write any such thing. "He is a venerable maha vidwan. To say the truth, I am his disciple, as he has taught me three or four keertana-s in detail," replied the queen of melody and model of humility.

This is a vivid example of the high esteem in which great musicians like MS and Chembai held each other. (This incident was narrated by Krishnankutty, the correspondent, in his contribution to *Paavanaguru*,

a collection of reminiscences of Chembai by some of his disciples and admirers. The slim volume is edited by T.K. Govinda Rao, and published by Chembai Smruthi Gana Sabha, Dombivli, 2003. The publication is in Malayalam.)

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Rajeswari Teacher

My association with Rajeswari Teacher began in 1984, thanks to the efforts of K.S. Kalidas and Dr. Alamelu Govindarajan.

Teacher's style of teaching was unique; she started my first lesson with Mahaganapatim in Nata raga. She did not insist on beginning with sarali or the basic fingering. While teaching the kriti she would break the phrase into smaller units for me to understand. She would be at it until I got it perfectly right. She would personally write the notation for all her students. She always paid attention to detail, the right kind of plucks, which she would make. She would keep experimenting with the veena, for example, she tried using acrylic instead of beeswax as an alternative material. She was also responsible for making the detachable veena to facilitate easy transportation.

Teacher trained illustrious disciples not to perform but to teach. Many of her students are sought after teachers in institutions. To name a few, Dr. Saraswathi Vasudev is an Associate Professor in the Dept. of Music and Fine Arts, Sri Padmavati Mahila Viswavidyalayam. Dr. E.B. Saraswathi was awarded a Ph.D. by the Department of Indian Music, University of Madras for her Research on 'Thaya-s and Chittatana-s'. S.V. Mythili is a Senior Lecturer in SRC College, Tiruchirapalli. S. Srinivasan

is an 'A' Grade artist and also a staff artist at the All India Radio. Dr. Margaret Bastin, Principal, Kalai Kaviri College of Fine Arts, Tiruchirapalli, learnt from Teacher for a period of four years and she was very much influenced by her style.

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Sounds of music

It was wonderful to go through the main feature – Season 2008-09 in Sruti 292. Hats off to the cartoonist Sandhya Prabhat for her pranky presentation of a typical December kutcheri scene, which was available in plenty! The click of the camera emitting a yellow flash at the left top corner of the caricature speaks volumes of her runaway imagination indeed!

In this year's season, I was told that there were several other "sounds of music" in addition to what had been described by K. Krishnaprasad. Kaka sabdam, mandooka sabam, hasthi-mukha sabdam, mooshika sabdam, sarpa sabdam were some of them! Of course sabdam-s (sounds) alone could go in making a full fledged dance-drama, as in the case of the "sabda nritya" of western Orissa. Bhagaban Sahu is a great artist of this kind and he runs a school to train young boys. Before joining this school, they have to grow their hair to such an extent that it touches their ankles! This is the prime requirement for admission in the Sabda Nritya school at Sambalpur. And Bhagaban Sahu received the President's Award about twenty five years ago.

In this age of liberalisation and globalisation, manufacturing companies have to push their products

all over the globe, come what may. Probably taking the cue from them, our Carnatic music performers have also started giving a “heaveful push” to the great art, which they have lapped up. And therefore they do not mind or find it harmful, if they provide add-ons (nowadays products are introduced to the customers at their doorsteps with jingles, as in radio ads!) in the form of extra-territorial sounds in the music which they are offering to the gullible audience, who sit to listen after devouring crispy vadais and bondas offered by the Meenambikas and Gnanambikas!

Music can allow by itself, to burden, hamper, load, clog, retard and handicap its own growth and development and thus, it is proved that it is “organic” in its contents and properties. Organic substances can dissolve, coagulate, assume hybrid outgrowths and also to a great extent combine with unexpected cousins! Hence one should ponder over these realities, before finding or pointing out such extra-constitutional outreaches, made in the name of “Global push”!

Stalwarts of the past too pushed their products, through peculiar oscillations, swings, beats, shakes, trills and tremolos! Therefore, would it not be prudent on the part of passionate rasika-s to adhere to the attitude of “Let G” and happily shed the heaviness that accrues in our intellect as a result of the monstrous debris of rights and wrongs?! Modern day mind-doctors emphatically prescribe the therapy of viewing the world not through one’s intellect, but through unalloyed intuition. They say this would heal and energise our existence and relationship hassles on this planet. I would not be wrong if I categorically proclaim that music can envelop our lives only through

intuitive reception and never through intellectual brooding and assessment.

“Unheard melodies are sweeter than heard melodies!” should be the screaming banner boldly displayed in all the sabha-s during the season 2009-10! Perhaps a squeaky jingle to the banner, which if allowed to continue even during the concert, would be a great value addition!

Audience applause

The feature on Sarada Hoffman in *Sruti* 293 reveals her total commitment to the pursuit of the art form, namely Bharatanatyam and there are many lessons to learn from the story by today’s young performers.

Manna Srinivasan, has made a fleeting reference to the irksome practice of loud clapping by the audience at any time of the Carnatic music performance (pp. 26 and 36). Probably it is due to the release of the accumulated energy bottled up in the minds of the listeners (which is termed as ‘Pain body’ by the psychiatrists!). It certainly serves as a priceless nectar to the performing group on the stage, as long as they don’t decipher the value of the contents! Thank the Almighty, that it is only a loud clapping and not prolonged whistles, as happens when a mega star of the silver screen makes his entry. Who knows? Probably such days are not very far away.

Hindustani music seems free from this congenital menace as they do not indulge in syllable-laden acrobatics and take the audience to a contrived crescendo! Moreover, there is no thigh-thumping tala-keeping by the main artist. Probably, more the vigour in thigh-thumping, more the volume in hand clapping as in the case of

Carnatic music. This may be a kind of ‘Domino’ effect, subliminally released by the audience in Carnatic music performances only!

Hindustani music appreciation is done through the shaking of heads and vocal expressions of “Waah waah!” and “Sabash”. Sabash is not a word of Indian origin. Perhaps it was brought to India by the nawabs who were great patrons of music and dance in their palace courts. There are also stories of how the nawabs issued ruthless edicts to the audience not to sway their heads during the performance, lest they may be left only with their torso at the end!

In most of the Western countries, the audience rise together at the end of a concert and clap slowly and sweetly, in a most dignified, decorative and definitive manner, to express their joy and happiness of having listened to a stellar performance. The length of this kind of clapping depends upon the depths to which the listening audience travelled along with the performer. The clapping nicely fades out and the artist is allowed to withdraw most gracefully into the ante-chamber of the auditorium.

Our music can draw one or two inspirational lessons from what prevails in other parts of the globe. Let us not make our music and ourselves too boisterous and uproarious (which are perhaps the privileges of the elected representatives in assemblies and parliament !) Our music is silk-soft and it deserves only feather/flower-touch appreciation. Surely we can overlook the thorns, if any, that lurk here and there.

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