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Opinion Column

Carnatic And Hindustani Music

In the *Sruti Box* section in *Sruti 253*, Trichur K. Sundaram (C & H Music) has offered some interesting insights into the appreciation of Carnatic music beyond its natural habitat, as it were. Being committed to the appreciation and dissemination of Carnatic music abroad, and also because I have been cited in two items-- the above one and in "Tambura - 1" by 'Garland' N. Rajagopalan in the same edition, I would like to share my own views for further debate:

Complexity does not make one music system superior to another. Complexity is also the hallmark of 20th and 21st century music that is variously categorised as "contemporary", "new", "avant-garde", etc. (This music, irrespective of its other merits, is hardly listened to by self-professed music lovers even in the West and typically broadcast in the middle of the night for the benefit of a few aficionados.) Does this mean that "classical music" of various shades is lacking complexity? By no means, but composers of the past pursued different goals than their modern counterparts.

The complications that may arise in the appreciation of Carnatic music can be viewed as an intellectual challenge and even flaunted as its hallmark; or (more commonly), deplored as constituting its chief burden, and it is indeed a cause for some deep-rooted misunderstandings and prejudices outside India.

I have to confess that I never miss a Hindustani concert when offered a chance and enjoy every part of it. The prevailing focus on a few time-honoured procedures in Hindustani music (for example, beginning slowly and ending in fast passages or the absence of an extensive drum solo) seems to be no weakness either, far from it. Conversely, I have listened to much Carnatic music that is mindboggling in terms of various "complications" (for example, virtuosity, vocal range, teamwork, calculations, spontaneity) but failed to touch me beyond the thrill of the moment.

Incomprehensible strains of unconventional sound combinations are surely not the answer to lack of interest. What matters is serious artistic work that takes the whole gamut of human emotions into account, whether or not this is likely to attract large audiences in the immediate future. Fortunately, there are musicians and teachers of that calibre, and many of them have a broad outlook. It is the most honourable task on the part of rasika-s, patrons, teachers, educational institutions and organisers to find talented musicians and enjoy their presentations after enabling them to develop their talents as long as it takes. (It took Alauddin Khan nearly half a century, and generations of musicians and listeners have benefitted from his quest for self-perfection.)

As with cooking, connoisseurs of the arts tend to have little interest in the procedures that precede or accompany the acquisition and preparation of various ingredients.

Furthermore, the aesthetic delight derived from good music is as immediate as it is lasting beyond the tangible experience which, I understand, raises a true rasika's delight above that of a gourmet (though the latter may also be a great rasika and vice versa).

For the same reason, I believe that the debate around the "vanishing" tambura is so important for the future of Carnatic music in and outside India: A good, beautiful tambura is more than just a nostalgic feature for senior listeners; a well-tuned and played tambura, provided it is carefully positioned and audible during a live concert, lends another aesthetic dimension to music. All this cannot be explained just in terms of auditory experience, overtones or musical colours. Its contribution is more than the sum of all these and other properties, some of which have been admirably incorporated in the electronic devices available now. Yet, first and foremost, the presence of a tambura makes a powerful statement about the way musicians and organisers pay attention to detail beyond that which is duly expected of them.

An experienced tambura player is an artist in his or her own right and deserves proper acknowledgement and remuneration for the valuable services rendered. Yet a tambura player's name can rarely be ascertained, be it in recording and programme notes or photo credits.

Proper training in the art of playing and maintaining a tambura has not even been considered by most modern institutions as part of their curriculum. It definitely should be considered, and I hope it soon will. Why? Firstly, because there is an intrinsic quality of raga music informed by the perfect (admittedly complex) sounds of a tambura; and secondly, because Carnatic music will never qualify for prime treatment in the eyes and ears of discerning music lovers beyond South India (or South Indian communities abroad) until attention is paid to details such as those outlined above. Whether this will change in the foreseeable future is entirely in the hands of those who train, promote and present Carnatic music in India and beyond.

The cooperation of the main artists is indispensable and a matter of self-interest as and when they wake up to the fact that it is attention to every minute detail in a concert that determines their future prospects beyond the current touring and festival frenzy. With the advent of another generation, the current level of interest in Carnatic music may just fade out as fast as it has grown into a profitable industry since the 1990s. After all, each generation is bound to develop its own musical orientation whereas artistic integrity and beauty are bound to prevail.

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