

A CASE FOR THE INTRODUCTION OF NEWER SUBJECT THEMES IN COMPOSITIONS OF CARNATIC MUSIC

Carnatic music is not devotional music. It is art music. The fact that the subject matter of classical compositions is overwhelmingly devotional is incidental. This being the case, it is but natural to wonder whether this issue of the declining popularity of classical music can be viewed through another perspective-that of the subject matter of the compositions. Would our music be any less 'Carnatic' if we sang about a flower, love, life or nature? Is it sacrilege to look beyond the boundaries defined by the Trinity as to what is a 'proper' theme for a Carnatic composition? I, for one, believe it is not.

All our composers have been great devotees of God. In particular, the Trinity have become legendary as much for their devotion as for their great contribution to Carnatic music. While, for Saint Thyagaraja, his whole world was Lord Rama, Shyama Shastry looked upon the Devi as his own Mother. And Muthuswami Dikshitar was equally passionate about the Devi, Lord Guruguha, and the concept of the Godhead in all its forms. As these great artiste-composers' lives centred on Bhakti, it was not surprising that the outpourings of their creativity blossomed in the form of Carnatic music in a devotional garb. Yet, we all agree that the compositions in our music are fundamentally *Dhaatu-pradhaana*. It is the inherent musicality in a *kriti* rather than the *sahitya* that is of primary importance. The lyrics, while significant, serve mostly as a vehicle for the *raga bhava*. If one considers some of the gems from Dikshitar's repertoire (*Ranganayakam*, *Amba Nilayatakshi* are some examples), the sparseness of the lyrics seem to indicate that the words are but placeholders for the world of *raga* that he has created. Would any other words in their place make a large difference to the sheer melodic beauty of these compositions?

Moving ahead from the Trinity, later day composers continued to tread the path that those great men had set, both musically and lyrically. Mysore Vasudevacharya, Mutthaiah Bhagavathar, Patnam Subrahmanya Iyer etc. all continued to weave their compositions around Rama, Krishna and Devi. Up until this day, we have numerous prolific composers-Balamurali Krishna, Lalgudi Jayaraman being noteworthy examples. An interesting point is that there have been many innovations in the musical content created by these modern day composers- they have introduced new *ragas*, innovative *tala* formats, made beautiful use of concepts such as *poruttham*, *murchhana* etc. Yet, one hardly sees compositions that have moved much beyond the

traditional in terms of subject matter. We still seem to have only one predominant theme in our music- Bhakti. *Krithis, Varnams and Thillanas* continue to describe the many forms and qualities of God, with some mythological stories and excerpts here and there.

All this was very fine at a time when religion formed an inseparable part of the social fabric. One cannot deny that our music was born and nurtured in the temples, and we are indeed indebted to the role that religion has played in developing Carnatic music into an evolved and refined art form. Temples were not only places of worship, but pillars of society, in that they served as community centres and places of social congregation. Given the divine atmosphere in which concerts were held, the religious theme fit seamlessly into the surroundings, creating holistic aesthetic enjoyment. Listening to an *O Jagadamba* in a Devi temple, bedecked with oil lamps, would certainly be a moving experience, to say the least. To this day, no puja is complete without *sangeetha seva*, and the biggest festivals of music are still associated with religious festivals.

It is an undeniable truth that religion is fast losing its traditional significance in modern society. Whether less people are religious now than in the past is a debatable question, but one can at least say with certainty that the temples are no longer the centre of social activity. Similarly, Carnatic music performances have moved from the devotional towards the entertainment sphere. A majority of concerts are held in auditoriums such as Gayana Samaja, Chowdaiah Memorial Hall etc. which have no religious attachment. Concerts are commonplace at wedding receptions, where, in the midst of talk embroidered saris and diamond jewellery, the question of religion does not even arise! Why then do we steadfastly choose to stick to singing only of one theme?

Secondly, we are all concerned about classical music losing its significance when it comes to the youth. And without attracting young people, we will all be soon singing to empty chairs. When I speak to people of my generation, they have two common complaints about Carnatic music-“we don't understand what's going on, yaar” and secondly “it's too old-fashioned”. My argument is aimed more at the second reason. Young people need themes they can relate to. Art must mirror life if it is to retain its relevance over time. None of us spends our day to day life asking for *moksha*. We go through pain, sorrow, joy and conflict of different kinds. One probably would think that mundane themes are not 'befitting' enough for the greatness of classical music. Let us compare Carnatic classical music with those two other great classical systems- Western and Hindustani. Is not (the great Western classical composer) Vivaldi's greatest composition

about *The Four Seasons*? Does not a large part of the lyrical content of Hindustani music describe very human love (*Paayaliya Jhankaar, Albelā Sajan Aayo Ri* etc.), or the rainy season (any composition in the *Malhars*), or festivals (the *Horis, Kajris* etc.)? Why are only Carnatic musicians and *rasikas* above these day-to-day timeless themes? Even our limited *Sringara* compositions are apologetically justified as being *Madhura Bhakti*. Are we so prudish that we cannot imagine singing of 'normal' themes?

I believe that our ears have got so used to hearing the oft-repeated words that we are apprehensive of moving beyond. Even the few attempts to bring the compositions of Kannada poets, with more diverse themes, to the classical stage have met with limited success, because we have become attuned to the usual fare. For those who say that our music is too 'weighty' to be sustained by this light *sahitya*, I do agree that the solution does not lie in adapting poems and other songs to a classical format. My solution would lie more in spawning a new generation of *Vaggeyakaras* who are not constrained by traditional thought into composing on the same themes. The Balamuralis and Lalgudis of tomorrow should be able to explore newer subjects without fear of social disapproval.

I am not suggesting that we do away with the great compositions that we have with us today. In fact, no concert would be complete without them. I am suggesting that we need not be confined to them *alone*. Let us appreciate the music in them, let us even appreciate their lyrical content, but let us not confuse the theme of the music with the music itself.

After all, does not a rose by any other name smell as sweet?

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