

BOMBAY JAYASHRI

A strange and wonderful journey

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Not perhaps since the days of Veena S. Balachandar has a leading Carnatic musician traversed a path as unusual. Bombay Jayashri was all of 28 when she began a truly full-fledged performing career in Carnatic music. Though introduced in early childhood to Carnatic music, thanks to both her parents being music teachers, she grew up in cosmopolitan Bombay, revelling in the singing of bhajan-s and film music at functions small and large all over Maharashtra and Gujarat, learning Hindustani classical music, 'geet', film songs, and a variety of 'light music' genres. Through childhood and college, she almost kept her training in Carnatic music a secret. She had a ball singing jingles in several languages extolling the wonderful attributes of Bournvita, Mealmaker and Rexona, solo or in duets. Throughout this period, she was also learning Carnatic music from the rigorous school of T.R. Balamani, a renowned teacher of Bombay, who also taught the likes of Shankar Mahadevan. She loved the film songs of Rafi, Lata and Asha, and continues unabashedly to do so, despite stardom in Carnatic music. Mehdi Hasan and Farida Khanum are equally her favourites. She attributes her pitch perfect voice to her training in Hindustani music and her soulful articulation to her eclectic musical background. Her assimilation of such a varied range of musical ideas has ensured the success of her theme-based albums like *Vaatsalyam* featuring lullabies, or

Young Jayashri



Agni showcasing Subramania Bharati's fiery lyrics. She sees no conflict between her concert career and the film songs she has sung over the years.

She rarely performs in Chennai these days. Her December season concerts here are now limited to seven – to be reduced by one more next year, according to an insider. Sruti suddham and a contemplative quality mark her singing. A noticeable feature of her concerts is the superior aesthetics of her singing. In the past – especially after she resurfaced on the kutcheri platform after a four-year hiatus spent in drinking deep of the Lalgudi bani of music under violin maestro Jayaraman's tutelage – she was accused of sweet, rather than deep music, crooning, and even singing "like the violin" in a soft voice. Today her stillness and sonorous voice draw comparisons with M.S. Subbulakshmi, though the majestic voice sometimes seems to lose its vitality as the concert

COVER STORY

progresses. Her stage presence is dignity personified. No flailing about of arms, no facial mannerisms mar her style, though by her own admission, it needed a young teacher back in her teens to make her look into the mirror for her to achieve such poise. She often seems completely lost in the sheer beauty of the raga music she presents. She is firmly convinced that the musician can transmit her own deep-felt emotions to the rasika in the audience, no matter what expectation brought him there in the first place.

Jayashri is undoubtedly one of the leading lights of Carnatic music today, with a considerable fan following. She has also taken upon herself the task of propagating the music among young Indians in India and abroad. In partnership with T.M. Krishna she is involved in initiatives towards creating future rasika-s as well as future musicians with a keen sense of history and tradition. The organisation they founded, Matrka, brought out a coffee table book, *Voices Within*, a tribute to seven past masters of Carnatic music, and runs an annual event entitled *Svanubhava*, introducing to young students the great music of the past through veteran musicians reliving for them the art of their guru-s and forgotten traditions.

Jayashri appears to have arrived at an important juncture of her career, on the verge of a change of gears, a phase in which her voice should gain greater vibrancy and her music profundity, and her inward journey explore further the depths of the great legacy she has inherited from the giants of Carnatic music. The atmosphere is electric when she ascends the concert stage, and she straightaway casts a spell with her perfectly sruti-aligned voice. It is not always easy to live up to the high expectations of her audiences, and it must take a superhuman effort to satisfy them, though she is known to sing for herself, not to the gallery. Many feel she has the potential to become the top woman singer in Carnatic music, a potential she can fulfil if she reaches deeper into her own reservoir of talent – fearlessly, tirelessly.

There are still some critics who are not satisfied. A “long time rasika” says, “Serenity is the essence of Bombay Jayashri’s music. We can go home after her concert with a sense of peace and quiet. She has one of the sweetest voices in Carnatic music today – silken, malleable and even haunting. Her pleasant and dignified stage presence adds to the ambience of the concert. But the expectant rasika also wonders: Why does the music not travel beyond the voice and the serenity? Why is the best



Jayashri and T.M. Krishna with Dr. Abdul Kalam at the launch of the book *Voices Within*

voice in the field least exploited by the artist? Why has her growth as an individual artist not matched her lateral growth in the field of performing arts and media? Why is it that after over 20 years we do not have something we can call the inimitable Bombay Jayashri style? When will her spurts of open-mouthed, inspired singing turn into her consistent best?”

Jayashri is a picture of confidence as a musician. She has a healthy self-esteem that enables her to take criticism in her stride. “Once you become a performing musician, you should be prepared to face and accept criticism,” she recently told a group of young journalism students. (She bowled them over comprehensively with her candour and willingness to share). For someone of immense pride in her art, she is also a humble student, willing to surrender to the teacher. Her attitude to criticism is best exemplified by an incident some ten years ago, when she sought help from a reviewer – who had strongly criticized one of her concerts – to make some corrections, because she believed it was a case of constructive criticism.

People who know Jayashri personally describe her as a good human being, a kind and helpful one. She can be a thoughtful friend, relative or neighbour, with no celebrity airs about her, and she can be generous with her time as the journalism students recently found out, but she is completely professional when it comes to work. She can be reclusive, unavailable to friends and rasika-s, “an enigma” as a friend put it, especially while preparing for a concert. Don’t expect her to attend a feast the day before a concert, no matter how close you may be to her. That is the time she needs to practise, meditate, rest. She needs time to herself, to reach towards her ultimate musical goals. “The best of Jayashri is yet to come,” her mother told us. A happy prospect. ■