

New directions in the kutcheri format?

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Being a firm believer in diversity, my reaction to the range of names of performers during the music season in Chennai is the exclamation (a borrowed quotation from a great English poet) “here’s God’s plenty”, a rich diversity to suit every palate. Of course, I am very picky when it comes to taking in concerts, my choice restricted to a rather narrow range being a performer from a fairly orthodox background. A few concerts I had enjoyed this season along with the discussions on the format of the Carnatic music concert at the Madras Music Academy set me thinking.

The currently raging issue of the extent of negotiability of the format laid down in another (distant) age, far removed from contemporary issues and the mindset of the average listener of today (keeping in mind the desirability of the younger generation requiring greater freedom to express its views) requires to be addressed in as plain speaking a manner as possible, without glossing over the hard facts of the contemporary scene. We must recognise that for most of us today, the ‘ideal’ format of the kutcheri paddhati is no longer an issue. A few decades ago a reviewer took a performer to task for daring to do an alapana of Pantuvarali as a major piece in his concert. This is no longer an issue for us today. Nor is it an issue today if a performer were to take up a ‘light’ raga like Bheemplas, Behag, Jaunpuri or Kapi for a raga-tanam-pallavi. Why, even if a performer were to relegate the raga-tanam-pallavi to a ten minute slot after having offered a very satisfying, substantial, major offering, we no longer seriously complain.

Clearly, the order of items in a music event is not the issue either, as most of us recognise that in contemporary Carnatic music concerts, rendering of the varnam (in many tempos) and choice of raga-s/compositions are no longer of paramount importance. A concert may begin with a swarajati or javali if the performer has enough talent and courage to make the concert a success. And the controversy did not erupt a few years ago, when the undoubtedly brilliant performer T.M. Krishna chose the weighty classic Bhairavi Ata tala varnam as the central ‘piece de resistance’ (very successfully in my opinion). In the present context, my view is that not all types of compositions lend themselves successfully to all aspects of a Carnatic music event. While I enjoyed the lengthy alapana, niraval and kalpana swara appended to the great Kambhoji Kshetrappa padam *Bala vinave* (by the same artist this year), I found it a trifle difficult to accept the tani avartanam as I felt that the pace of the composition did not bring out the best in the percussion solo (not due to any fault of the performers who were very supportive and brilliant throughout the concert). I may not be wrong in concluding that we, the Carnatic music fraternity, are truly a liberal lot as we give enough freedom to our performers, a freedom based on our trust in the established performer taking his or her responsibility of showcasing our glorious music seriously.

I suspect that the real issue is the following:

What is a permissible ‘art object’ in a Carnatic music event?

What constitutes an art object in contemporary Carnatic music, an object which can be appreciated and evaluated as an independent piece in a concert? While the lightest of light compositions, lasting less than two minutes, hardly rubs anyone the wrong way, I assume that all aspects of manodharma sangeetam except the kriti are not legitimate ‘objects of art’. Even here, niraval and kalpanaswara get legitimised if and only if they fit the format of a ‘pallavi’, however trivially. What has evidently generated so much heat is the attempt to legitimise alapana as an art object worthy of presentation by T.M. Krishna this year. Of course, few would have found fault with the excellent, weighty and creative rendering of the raga Varali by the vocalist and the violinist (R. Hemalatha). Therefore the provocation lies not in the alapana itself but in the artist choosing not to follow it up with a kriti in Varali. In my opinion, this decision by the main artist changed his perspective and was therefore a major point of departure from the traditional format.

If we examine an ‘average’ concert (average from every point of view), we find that the format is a saving grace and minimises the performer’s effort to think on his or her feet, or be innovative and creative at every step. If we examine a range of concerts of a mix of artists, we would admit that the alapana, tanam, kriti and niraval turn out to be fairly routine, rather cliché ridden, rote learnt material trotted out with more or less sophistication and enthusiasm in many concerts (thank God for the truly creative performers). This explains why the

DEBATE

audience feels that nothing will be missed if time were taken out for a visit to the canteen anytime after the new item has begun (and not between items as is the practice in cultured societies elsewhere). The only thing which pulls the audience's attention is a long drawn out (fully rehearsed) frenetic kalpanaswara ending in a satisfactorily long mathematical ending, not necessarily complicated but conducive to loud hand clapping before a similar attention seeking event comes up in the concert. In this context, the fine alapana of the raga Varali which was presented as the art object in T.M. Krishna's concert for the Madras Music Academy, in my opinion, succeeded in arresting the performers' and audience's

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attention on the alapana itself and not something that was to follow it. The alapana was not a prelude to something else but an end in itself, which called for undivided attention. I found that the mindset of the artists had changed considerably as the focus had shifted from the hereafter to the here and now.

Taken in this spirit, I feel that this move to re-think the kutcheri format is a welcome development

in contemporary Carnatic music which will allow more creativity to the musicians, allowing them to re-think on all major issues including the nature and role of composition in contemporary Carnatic music with or without sahitya. I am sure many instrumentalists and even vocalists with a secular mindset will welcome this move in the long run and even come up with new art forms in addition to the kriti, alapana, tanam, niraval and kalpanaswara. This move, I hope, will stem the tide of contemporary Carnatic music turning into an event of bhajan singing and improve the climate for the appreciation of instrumental music.

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