

Focus on pallavi singing at Nadasangamam

Nadasangamam, an annual event conducted by the music wing of Narada Gana Sabha, is a platform for transfer of knowledge from senior musicians to students of Carnatic music. Inspired by Natyarangam's Natya Sangraham, the much sought after annual dance camp, this music event was launched and is being co-ordinated by Sumathi Krishnan with R.S. Jayalakshmi as the convenor. Thennangur, situated about 117 km from Chennai, is the venue chosen for this camp which has been conducted successfully for four years now. This was the first time I was witnessing the sessions.

The theme for this year was 'Pallavi'. The sessions were conducted from 6 to 8 February by R. Vedavalli, Chitravina Ravikiran, R.S. Jayalakshmi, A.S. Murali, Shruti Jauhari and Renjith Babu. Vocalists Mala Mohan and Sumitra Vasudev assisted in co-ordinating the event as part of the team.

The serene atmosphere of the place, coupled with the prevailing divinity of the temple was an apt setting to internalise some of the best aspects of Carnatic music. The first evening

opened with a session of bhajans by Keerthana Bharadwaj and the second was a musical evening by all the participants.

Yoga teacher and Bharatanatyam dancer Renjith Babu (disciple of Prof. C.V. Chandrasekhar), set the tone in the morning by discussing the art of breathing, the importance of posture and the right food intake to produce good music. His agility and composure were enviable. Sumathi Krishnan began the sessions with a couple of slokas and introductions, following which the resource persons for the day took over.

Chennai-based Shruti Jauhari, Hindustani vocalist from the Maihar gharana, holds a doctorate in music. An exponent of khyaal and thumri, she works at A.R. Rehman's school of music. She is endowed with a voice that travels effortlessly across octaves and her ideas on how to produce the right voice for classical singing were very interesting. 'Nabhi-hrut-kantha-rasana' said Tyagaraja. She demonstrated the way to produce rasa from the navel to the throat. She said a robust voice could be built without shouting or exerting unwanted pressure on the

vocal chords. Though Carnatic music may require a slightly different treatment of the voice for the production of some specific gamakas, the underpinning lesson was that full throated music need not necessarily translate into screaming in the higher octaves.

Be it teaching, singing, or playing the chitraveena, N. Ravikiran articulates complicated subjects so clearly that even an elementary student finds it easy to understand him. He explained in a lucid manner with sound examples and explanations how to construct a pallavi and how it is important to balance the tala, sahitya, bhava and intellectuality of treatment. He explained that in a pallavi construct, the sync between music, lyrics and metre are of paramount importance. Ravikiran's ability to connect with the young was amazing. With references from the computer lexicon, he told them that the memory size of the hard disk that the brain is had to be constantly expanded, with many file partitions on the disk, but it would not suffice if the random access memory was not fast enough to quickly retrieve and connect the dots! He beautifully explained that music presentation on stage should follow the CID principle (content, intent and delivery). Unless the three fall in place at the same time, the presentation cannot be a success.

Veteran vainika and teacher R.S. Jayalakshmi could also easily connect with the youngsters, despite her age and seniority. Her demonstration of pallavis, especially the rettai arudi ragamalika pallavis, was very interesting. She explained various aspects like how and when anulomam and trikalam are done, as well as the various points to sing

A bhajana session led by J.B. Keerthana



tisram for a pallavi. She elaborated on raga nuances and pallavi patterns with several examples and gave the students small pallavi exercises. She was quite a favourite with the participants.

A.S. Murali of Kalakshetra, a disciple of P.S. Narayanaswamy, is a vocalist and a percussionist. He explained the systematic approach to kalpanaswara singing in Carnatic music. Starting from small one-fourth avartana swaras he moved on to complicated poruttams and korvais and explained the method behind the arithmetic of swaras. He showed that sarvalaghu swara patterns are not rambling swaras strung together; it is essential to practise them well as these swaras demand both imagination and arithmetic, balanced in proportion. He made a complicated subject seem easy with his interesting approach and comments.

R. Vedavalli, the doyenne among Carnatic musicians, has been a great resource, guide and mentor for Nadasangamam over the last four years. This year too she participated with great enthusiasm and provided essential inputs on many aspects of Carnatic music. She gave a brilliant lecture on the art of niraval



N. Ravikiran's session

singing and its importance to pallavi exposition. According to her, a pallavi is complete only if it allows for elaborate and expansive niraval singing. It has to have minimal words and measured spacing between words (karvais) which then lend the musician enough scope to explore the kalpana aspects of niraval singing. She also elaborated on the comparisons and contrasts of the two schools of thought on niraval for pallavi singing and demonstrated some old pallavis. A master teacher, she made a group of students who were relatively new to this concept, actually sing a pallavi by giving them small assignments in different talas.

The highlights of the two-day sessions were the little quiz on a video about T. Brinda that was screened, the extempore little viva held for each participant, and the open discussions and clarifications in the night after the close of the day's sessions.

The finale was a small examination. The students were given a set of words and they had to gather in groups of five and compose a pallavi in any raga and tala, but set only in chatusra nadai. The group had to sing the pallavi and demonstrate trikaalam for the basic construct. Prizes were awarded to the top two renditions and the sessions came to a close with the valedictory function.

Nadasangamam participants, resource persons and the organising team



Two days of unhindered immersion in music, the gourmet food, the darsan of the Lord, the singing sessions in the evening in front of the sanctum sanctorum, the vivacity of the young participants, the approachability of senior artists, and the fun and games centered around Carnatic music in which all of us took part during the return bus journey – all these made for a true nadasangamam.

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