

A passion for the Carnatic idiom, too

Chitravina N Ravikiran

I had the privilege of being ‘tested’ by Pandit Ravi Shankar and Ustad Alla Rakha as a two-year-old in 1969 during the December music festival in Chennai. Even though my memories of this incident are non-existent, Panditji later vividly recalled that day in a typically colourful fashion.

“Ustad Alla Rakha and I were astounded when this child could recognise so many ragas. Alla Rakha then playfully tried to confuse him on a couple of talas and jatis but he was almost rudely rebuffed by Ravi. When it was time for Ravi and his father Narasimhan to leave, I personally escorted them to the elevator. As soon as the elevator came up, the child exclaimed – ‘Appa, now the elevator will go in the avarohana (descending) sequence!’ I can never forget that”.

I grew up listening to both Carnatic and Hindustani virtuosos and Ravi Shankar’s style never failed to inspire me, even as a child. However, it was his out-of-the-box thinking which set him apart in my mind. It was evident that his incredible contributions were no accident. They were natural products of his clarity of vision, focus, hard work, suave expression, broad-mindedness and inclusive outlook. He was among the first artistes to make several Carnatic ragas like Keeravani, Vachaspati, Simhendramadhyamam and Charukeshi household names in the North. He never played Carnatic compositions in these but created his own bandish and infused them with a typical Hindustani flavour in his improvisation. His renditions have made them automatic choices for numerous Hindustani artistes and also paved the way for a greater awareness about Carnatic music everywhere.

Insightful

I was also deeply impressed by Panditji’s familiarity with the Carnatic idiom as a whole and his incisive analysis of the various styles that included Ariyakkudi Ramanuja Iyengar, Maharajapuram Vishwanatha Iyer, Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, GNB, Madurai Mani Iyer and others. He unhesitatingly declared, “I was sold on Carnatic thanks to Veena Dhanammal”.

He wanted me to perform exclusively for him (and select invitees) at his beautiful home in San Diego in Spring 2010 and it so happened that I played Varali and Vagadheeshwari in succession. He immediately demanded that I play a javali in a “nice madhura raga” and fondly recalled the exquisite renditions of Brinda and Mukta.

After the concert, he enquired after my own efforts in world music and astounded me when he said, “A few weeks ago, I saw a YouTube clip of your Melharmony.” It was unbelievable that he was so passionately up-to-date about the avenues various Indian artistes were pursuing on the world music front. I meekly mumbled something to the effect that it was really his pioneering collaborations with world artistes and symphonies that served as my inspiration.

The following day, Panditji was the guest of honour at my jugalbandi concert with Dr Balamuralikrishna and it was heart-warming to observe the interaction between these two legends.

Irreparable loss

Sadly this turned out to be my last live interaction with him. His loss is an irreparable one in the world of music because he was one of those rare artistes who did not merely play to live but lived to play.

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