

1-2-86

ISHANANI'S TOURS

Oriya song, "Potho Chharia"
Bh... (Do not stand in...)

GOTTUVADYAM

BY MASTER RAVI KIRAN

"A little knowledge is a dangerous thing.
Drink deep or taste not
the Piercean spring"
Sang the great poet
Alexander Pope

RAVI KIRAN has taken it literally and drunk deep of the eternal spring of Carnatic Music!

His mastery over the difficult instrument called Gottuvadynam or Mahanataka Veena is amazing. In appearance the Gottuvadynam resembles a veena but without the frets which is what makes it so much more difficult to play. A piece of wood made of ebony (this is the gottu) is rubbed on the strings to temporarily create a fret and the fine melody. Even though this instrument can be seen in the Amaravathi sculptures of over 2,600 years ago, because of the difficulty in playing it, it had become obsolete. Now thanks to Ravi, it is not only in its rightful place but also in the limelight.

Ravi Kiran is a prodigy who at the age of two and a half could identify 300 ragas! Londoners were fortunate to hear Ravi on his very first trip abroad. It was a Kirtanamala with one Kirtana after another following in quick succession.

His alapana and the mridan-gist's solo were individually excellent and combined, was a marvellous blend. It is worth noting that Ravi played Kambodi at the request of the audience, but not Mohanam which he felt was not suitable. Some of us could appreciate this young artiste who will quench the audience's thirst but only if it conforms to musical etiquette.

As the grandson of the late Mysore Narayana Iyengar, Ravi has a big responsibility on his shoulders. He is discharging it in such an admirable fashion which rightly earned him that evening the title of 'Incarnation of Nataraj' from Shri Alagappan who proposed the vote of thanks.

—Harini Raghuvver

To copy or not to copy

It is a fact of life that if a very strong critical reaction arises in the early part of a Carnatic musician's career regarding any aspect of his music, it tends to last for ever in one form or another and cannot easily be forgotten. Perhaps the memory of Carnatic music lovers is too sharp, in any case, the critics keep fanning the fire all the time

One of the musicians who has been affected by such an early reaction is vocal vidwan T. V. Sankaranarayanan, who has successfully scaled the heights of Carnatic music and now occupies one of the top positions in the hierarchy of performing artistes. I do not think the elder generation of critics and music-lovers can ever forget the fact that once upon a time he was called a 'Carbon copy' of his uncle and master, Madurai Mani Iyer. In fact, so powerful and indelible was our original impression that even when we want to compliment TVS now on his own distinct and colourful style, we are unable to resist saying that he is 'no longer a carbon copy of Madurai Mani' as if the issue still has any relevance!

I suppose there is no use worrying about this obsession of ours, perhaps we should just learn to take things as they are, and we may as well continue to talk the way we do. In a sense it may even be a good thing, for we do not wish to forget Madurai Mani Iyer, nor would we like TVS ever to leave the wonderful orbit which belongs to him.

Progressive phases

In the last 20 years, there have been three phases in his independent career as a singer. The first one was when impartial critics and well-wishers advised him to stop imitating his master's gentle voice and delicate mannerisms and to chalk out his individual approach, incorporating his guru's musical vision in a style appropriate to his own powerful voice and robust bearing. The second phase was when he had succeeded in such an endeavour, and was on the way to the top. The third phase began when TVS emerged as a master in his own right, and had indeed reached the peak. What further advice can a well-meaning music critic

offer him now?

Only this, that perhaps the time has arrived when we would like TVS to give us a little more of Madurai Mani's music! Does that sound like a paradox? Perhaps it is. But in his concert in the AllMS auditorium last Saturday (beginning a three-day music festival organised by the Shanmukhananda Sangheetha Sabha), his swara improvisations did not flow in the exuberant, torrential way in which it has always done, but sounded too measured, studied, and restrained. I wonder whether TVS was conscious of this fact. By all means let him adopt his own technique in whatever else he does, but let him never, never try to contain or curtail that glorious Niagara of swara-kalpana which his great master had gifted to him!

Violin and Gottuvadynam

V. V. Subramaniam, who now seems to have found a place among the top violinists gave excellent accompaniment to TVS, producing a rich tone which had an attractive, husky quality, sounding almost like a male voice in the mandara-shtayi. But in the second event of the festival, which was a violin duel with his young brother V. V. Ravi (with double mridangam support provided by Thanjavur Uppendran and Raja Rao), Subramaniam seemed to lose his sense of proportion.

In the very beginning itself the brothers flogged 'Vatap, ganapatim' with an extremely loud and prolonged swara-prastaram, which clearly gave notice to the fact that it was likely to be a very noisy and boisterous session. I had to leave rather early. And if the scene had changed after that, I was surely the loser!

Disparate combination

The third event in the festival was a gottuvadynam recital by the highly accomplished young artiste Ravikiran, who has just turned 20. He was accompanied by V. V. Ravi (violin), Thanjavur Uppendran (mridangam), and K. M. Vaidyanathan (ghatam).

Ravikiran is well-known for the purity and excellence of his music. He produces a rich and mellow tone which has the texture of the finest

velvet, and his style is meditative and soothing. By contrast, Ravi's violin sounded extremely shrill and strident, introducing a jarring element in the whole concert.

It seemed as if the violin strings were taut to an unnatural extent, creating a metallic effect. It was also often played in a higher octave than the gottu vadyam, repeatedly affecting the contemplative mood which Ravikiran was trying to build up. Given these facts, Ravikiran seemed to be unduly sporting, giving far more openings to the violinist than what the latter's performance justified. The result was that there was a constant disparity in the tonal values of the music, which never acquired an integral quality.

I say all this without prejudice to the fact that young Ravi too is extremely talented, and there are no grammatical faults in his efforts. He has considerable skill and is not lacking in imagination. If he could only soften his touch on the violin, I am sure he will emerge as a fine performer. Perhaps what he needs at this stage of his career is a long apprenticeship as an accompanist to some leading vocalists, and not equal billing with his vastly more experienced brother. —M.V.R.