

14. Music in Travancore

The Royal House of Travancore have always been patrons of music and other fine arts. Some of its members had made names not only for the encouragement they gave

to fine arts and their votaries who gathered in their courts. but they had been great artists themselves, and among these stands out prominently the late Sree Swathi Tirunal Maharaja. Even earlier than this Royal genius there were members of the Royal House who were great musicians, as for example, Aswati Tirunal (1756-1788) whose songs are sung in temples even to-day, Rani Rukmini Bai (1800-1837) whose kriti in Mukhari ("*Sreekantesa*") is well-known. Earlier still, about a thousand years ago a Ruler of Travancore composed music. Later on there were composers of the *Attakathas* in which music was used plentifully. But the hey-day of music was in the time of Sri Swathi Tirunal.

The end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century have been the golden age for Carnatic music. It was in this period that the great saint Thyagaraja, Syama Sastri and Muthuswami Dikshitar (the "musical trinity" as they are called) flourished and flooded South India with their masterly and exquisite music. It was also at this time that Swathi Tirunal lived in Travancore (1813-1847) and made his unique contribution to the music lore of South India. Western Ghats have been to some extent responsible for the land of Kerala not being so well-known as it ought to, especially about a century ago, when communication between the two coasts of the Madras Presidency was few and far between. But this made it possible for some of the distinctive features of the Kerala Culture being kept *intact*. That was also the main reason why the compositions of Swathi Tirunal did not spread in the eastern districts as those of the musical trinity. In Travancore the *Sopana* style was in vogue for a very long time. Jayadeva's hymns (*Ashtapatis*) which became very popular in South India came to Travancore also and were adapted to the local style and sung in temples. The *Sopana* style is so called because its movements are slow, steady and gradual. To one whose ears are accustomed to quick movements and

sharp thrills this style may appear to be dragging and monotonous, but it has its own charm and there is an atmosphere about it which gives it its distinctiveness.

Swathi Tirunal Maharaja was truly a great man, great in many ways. He was a poet, a great devotee, a statesman, a musician and a scholar of repute. His reign though short was crowded with remarkable achievements; many of the institutions which are now our pride were started or inspired by this master mind. Though he lived but for 34 years and reigned for 18, it has been a full and rich life. He was master of 13 languages and composed songs in five of them. His personality and fame attracted very eminent musicians to the State. Among the musicians who adorned his court were Vidwan Koil Thampuran of Kilimanoor, Iravi Varman Tampi, Kshirabdi Sastrigal, the famous Vadivelu and his brothers, Parameswara Bhagavatar (of Palghat), Cunniyah (a disciple of Thyagaraja) and Meruswami. Of these Vadivelu, Meruswami and Parameswara Bhagavatar greatly influenced his compositions. The Royal composer has himself said that for his compositions he took as model those of Margadarsi Sessa Aiyengar of Srirangam who lived in the 17th century and composed mostly in Sanskrit, (he used the word *Kosala* for his *Mudra*). The range of his compositions is vast and as referred to above, he composed in Sanskrit, Malayalam, Canarese, Hindi and Telugu. His compositions comprise Tana Varnas, Chowka Varnas, Padas, Kritis, Tillanas, Upakhyanas and so on. The following list gives the approximate numbers:—

Tana Varnas	...	...	...	2
Chowka Varnas (one in Telugu, one in Mani-pravalam and seventeen in Sanskrit)	...	...	...	19
Padas (The famous "Pannagendra Sayana" is one of the padas)	...	...	...	65
Navaratri Kirtanas	...	...	...	9
Nava Raga Malikas	...	...	...	9

Ghana Raga kritis	...	...	...	8
Ramayana kritis	...	...	...	2
Bhagavata kriti	...	...	...	1
Dasavatara kriti	...	...	...	1
Kirtanas (including Canarese Compositions)	...	...	...	200
Mangalas	...	...	...	3
Tillanas	...	...	...	6
Hindi pieces	...	...	...	37

Apart from these musical compositions His Highness has written a book on the theory of music. It is in his own hand-writing and is preserved in the department of Oriental Manuscripts. The script looks more like *Grantha* than Malayalam.

The ease with which he composed was remarkable. He had a style of his own. He has covered a vast gamut, from very simple pieces to highly technical compositions which will baffle even a first rate musician. At the same time the diction of some of his compositions is simplicity itself.

It appears likely that some of the compositions of Thyagaraja had come to be known in Travancore also through the musicians who came to his court seeking his patronage. In some compositions there seems to be a very judicious blending of the styles of Thyagaraja and Muthuswami Dikshitar, but mostly his compositions stand out by themselves as a class. As an example of the Thyagaraja style we may mention the well-known kirtana in Bhairavi, "Bhavatiya". In compositions like "Rasa Vilasa" mastery of a very high order is in evidence, the fitting in of the swaras and the *solkattu* into the general theme is masterly. There are also compositions in which the rhythm, the idea and the sahitya are so aptly blended that one seems to echo the other two aspects. The kriti "Nrityati Nrityati" in Sankarabharanam is an example. We find also plenty of instances of Swarakshara i.e., letters of the Sahityam being

those of the notes corresponding to those letters. Though generally the words of the sahityas dominated the melody there are compositions like "Kalyaye Sree" in which the words merely hang on the melody like beads in a string. He has composed special slokas and kirtanas to be sung during the nine days of the Navaratri, particular pieces being ear-marked for particular days. In addition to these lyrical compositions, he composed three *Upakhyanas*. In these he was greatly influenced by Kokila Kantha Meruswami, (so-called on account of the sweetness of his voice). Meruswami settled in Travancore in 1833 and lived upto 1870. He introduced here the *sankeertana* style. As a result of this the Royal Composer has given us three upakhyanas, *Kuchelopakhyanam*, *Utsavaprabandham* and *Ajamilopakhyanam*. They contain, in addition to slokas, 33 kirtanas.

Among the varnas, the one in *Kapi* beginning with "Suma Sayaka" is well known and at the same time technically of a high order. It is understood that Vadivelu influenced to a very large extent the music of it.

Among the ragas used for his compositions occur some rare varieties. His composition "Dhanyoyam" in *Gopika Vasantam* has already attracted considerable notice. *Dwijavanti* is another raga in which there are very few compositions by others. *Lalitapanchamam*, *Desakshi*, *Sudda Bhairavi*, *Ghanta*, *Poorva Kambhoji*, *Mohana Kalyani*, *Navarasam* are some of the rare ragas in which he has composed songs. He has left behind him a legacy of musical treasure of which every Travancorean may be justly proud.

Over and above these compositions which had been published already several new compositions have been brought to light from manuscripts since discovered. There are several still unpublished which it is hoped will be made available soon. When these also come out and gain currency music lovers will realise what a rich and wonderful and

exquisite heritage has been left for us by the Royal Musician. Among the new pieces which are gaining currency several have already made their mark. Pieces like "Mamavasada" in Kanada, "Pahijagajjanani" in Vachaspati, "Rama Rama" in Simhendramadhyamam, "Viharamanasa" in Kapi, "Kripa-yapalaya" in Charukesi, "Sri Ramachandra" in Huseni, have won a unique place for themselves in the world of music.

It is a pity that his compositions did not become current; perhaps there were reasons for it. Most of his compositions being in Sanskrit could not probably catch the ears and imaginations of the people as easily as Tamil or Malayalam or Telugu. It is also possible that it struck a new distinctive electric note in the ears of the people dominated by the *Sopana* style and hence the general public found his compositions rather difficult to grasp. There was another important reason also. It is well-known that compositions of great musicians find currency mostly through their disciples. But, naturally in the case of Swathi Tirunal there could be no *sishyaparampara*, he being a royal composer.

Thanks to the great interest which Their Highnesses the Maharaja and Maharani take in the cause of music, steps have been taken to popularise this musical treasure. A Summer School of Music for teaching these Kirtanas to the music teachers in the State was organised some years ago. This has now become a permanent institution providing for a four years' course in Carnatic Music. It is hoped that this institution will serve to bring out the greatness of Swathi Tirunal's music, attract people to appreciate his greatness and realise what a priceless treasure has been given to us by the Royal Composer.

The famous Govinda Marar was also a contemporary of Sri Swathi Tirunal Maharaja, but he seems to have gone out of Travancore seeking newer and wider fields. There is evidence to indicate that he was seen here in Travancore

by Parameswara Bhagavatar about the year 1831. On account of his capacity to sing musical pieces in six kalas (which means 32 times the original speed) he was called *Shatkala* Govinda. During his peregrinations he met the famous Thyagaraja in Tanjore District. He travelled wide and went to such distant places as Pandharpur and Benares. Subba Rao, who was Dewan to His Highness Swati Tirunal, was also a musician who could play Swarabat and Mridangam. Swati Tirunal is said to have learnt Swarabat from him.

The next period of musical importance was the reign of Ayilliam Tirunal Maharaja (1860-1880). Sri Ayilliam Tirunal was himself an accomplished singer. Musical experts of the day used to stand in great awe of His Highness. Most of the well-known figures in the musical world came to pay their respects to His Highness and get recognition from him. The famous Kalyana Krishna Bhagavatar, the veteran Parameswara Bhagavatar and his disciple, Coimbatore Raghava Aiyer (so called because he lived for a long time in Coimbatore though he was born in Vadasseri near Nagercoil) were the chief among those who adorned Ayilliam Tirunal's Court. There was practically no day on which there was not some kind of a musical concert at the Palace in which most of the musicians took part; very often His Highness himself used to take part in the performances to the wonder of those present. The famous Maha Vaidyanatha Aiyer came to his court twice. It was only on his second visit that he appears to have got recognition from His Highness's hands. Mahadeva Aiyer, a great violinist, also adorned the Royal Court at the time. Kalyana-krishna Bhagavatar and Mahadeva Aiyer lived on to the succeeding reign.

There has been an unbroken line of musicians attached to the Royal Court in Travancore and they had kept, some

times brightly and sometimes not so spectacularly, the torch of musical tradition down to the present time.

Now there is a great musical revival in Travancore as in every part of Southern India. Great impetus has been given to that movement by the remarkable interest which the Royal House at present is taking, among other things in the vivification and spreading of the musical culture of the State.