

10. Modern Trends in the Classical Music of South India

Till about a few decades ago, music and musicians were patronised chiefly by Maharajas and Zamindars and the rich. Those were spacious days and the musician lived without a care and devoted all his attention to music alone. But that patronage has now shifted from the few to the many; from the palace to the man in the street. The average musician of today cannot depend any more on the patronage of the aristocracy. He has to look for his support to the people at large and he has to keep them in good humour. The result is obvious. The professional musician is led to a series of compromises to make a good living.

In those olden days there was practically no Sabha or Association which supported the professional musicians, but now practically all the professionals have to depend upon the goodwill of these Sabhas and their officers. The Sabhas themselves have to cater to the demand and taste of their numerous members. It is true that music is now spread far and wide; but what has been gained in width has been unfortunately lost in depth. Inertia, physical as well as mental, is an inborn instinct in all creation. To take things easily, to do things superficially and get amusement without any effort is the order of the day. To understand and appreciate good music, the ears have to be trained at least to some extent. But the average man now is satisfied with what is superficial, with what just tickles the tympanum of his ears, and therefore he expects from the professional musician only just what he wants. Not only this, he becomes even impatient when some rasikas, who are connoisseurs of the art, want to listen to good and high class music from these musicians. As naturally the number of those people is large as compared with the number of rasikas their words prevail and only those musicians

who satisfy their whims are much in demand. If a Sabha has to run and make both ends meet, it has to satisfy the members on the one hand and make sure of a decent gate collection for the performance on the other. In short, the Sabhas are forced to become money-making concerns, though the money is intended to go to encourage and patronise good artists! The position of the professional musicians in such circumstances is not enviable indeed.

It is true that we are living in an age of democracy; the average man feels entitled to the amenities of life which were enjoyed till recently by just a few. The Society has a duty to provide this for him. It does not follow from this that the man in the street is to dictate to a professional musician as to what music he should give or what not. There are certain matters which cannot be decided on votes. Whether the solution of an intricate problem in electrical engineering is correct cannot be decided by votes. The opinion of a million who know nothing about the subject will certainly count as nothing against the opinion of one who knows. The average man may demand for a chance to hear music, but he cannot obviously dictate how a particular raga is to be sung. The question whether a particular Swarasanchara is admissible in a Raga cannot be decided by the average man or voted upon by a mixed assembly. In such matters expert opinion alone counts. Here I am reminded of the wise words of Sir Henry Wood who said, "Music is no place for a democracy. Let us have a few dictators." Unfortunately the modern tendency is to level *down* instead of levelling *up*. The musicians as well as the Music Sabhas have a duty to provide good music to the listeners and not merely to give the music they want. It is their duty to raise gradually the level of appreciation and create right taste for music. As matters stand at present, it will be a difficult task, but all good work is apparently difficult to start with. Everywhere there is a cry for

improving our musical standards as they have fallen low in recent years. It is time we do something to lift the general tone of our performances and also improve the taste of the average listener.

One of the outstanding characteristics of the modern age is hurry, rush, craze for excitement. Those days when people lived quietly and did things leisurely are gone. Everywhere people want speed at any cost. This is noticeable even in the field of music. I have heard performances in my younger days which used to last for five to six hours. I know of a great musician who would do only two or three kritis in two hours and spend two to two and a half hours in ragalapana and pallavi. They were musicians who sang their best and they were not dictated to by the listeners. A musician then was free to sing what he liked and according to his mood. Nowadays it has become a rare thing to hear any of the majestic classical pieces in slow tempo like:

“Najeevadhara” in Bilahari,

“Koniyaadinapai” in Kamboji,

“SriRajagopala” in Saveri,

“Cheraravademi” in Ritigowla,

“Marimarininnemoralida” in Kamboji.

People want to hear quick-moving songs. The tragedy is that even those songs which require to be sung in slow tempo for aesthetic effect are hurried through in our modern concerts.

Ragalapana has almost become a formality. The Raga-Tana-Pallavi item in the A.I.R. is, to my mind, almost a farce. I have found that in some of the modern classical concerts the time devoted to Raga-Tana-Pallavi is less than half an hour! I wonder why there should be that item at all. Is it a ritual or a formality which has to be gone through? If it is done at all let it be done properly. Why

should they not have two types of concerts, one intended for the average listener who is not much interested in Pallavi and elaborate Raga Alapana and consisting of only quick-moving pieces, and the other where elaborate Ragalapana and systematic Pallavi singing are prominent? This is a point which requires serious consideration.

Of late there is a tendency to lay greater stress on the manipulation side of music than on the aesthetic side. The primary appeal of music as of any art is to the emotion. To make music mechanical is tantamount to killing it. That is why we lay great emphasis on *Bhava* in music. Music without *Bhava* is no music at all. It is generally found that young students of music attempting to sing a Raga produce more a jumble of swaras, than the Ragas as such. A Raga though based upon swaras and grouping of swaras is something very much more than these; the swaras are the form but the life of the Raga is its *Bhava*. To bring out the *bhava* of a Raga requires skill and an inner sensitiveness. Master singers can do this successfully with all the Ragas they handle. Certain ragas stand out for their particular beauty and that beauty depends upon not the swaras but something behind and beyond the swaras. The young student unequal to this task resorts to singing ragas with very poor aesthetic appeal such as Charukesi, Sarasangi, Jotiswarupini, Dharmavati, and indulge in mere swara jugglery. Though we have a large number of ragas, it is not all of them that lend themselves to elaboration. We hear of 2400 ragas, 5184 ragas and even 34776 ragas, but most of these are "Ghost" ragas, to use the phrase of late Mr. K. V. Ramachandran. Such ragas are only jumbles of swaras and have no aesthetic reality about them.

Let me quote Mr. K. V. Ramachandran. "Like ghosts, we may seem to see them or fancy they exist; but they have no real entity. Of late, there has been a mass emigration of ghost ragas into Carnatic music. Ever since the intrusion

of pseudo-ragas without musical life or light our musicians have lost the faculty of singing or playing the real ragas..... with the lapse of the art of grand alapa they have lost the musical architecture." In many of our present-day concerts we rarely hear the alapana of Nattakurinji, Yedukula-kambodi, Useni, Devagandhari, but even beginners dabble in ragas like Charukesi, Sarasangi, Vagadeswari, Jotiswaroopini and so on. Further comment is unnecessary. By long usage or otherwise, the first set of ragas mentioned above have acquired a unique grandeur, a characteristic charm and an individuality, all their own. They do not depend upon mere schemes or swaras. It is the graceful deviations from the actual swara points that make the charm and grandeur and sweetness and delicacy of those ragas. The second set of ragas on the other hand are only swara jargon; and so it is easier to handle them and produce some noise. No one with any musical sense will dare to do this with the other bhavaragas.

Let me not be mistaken as being against the advent of any new ragas, simple or involved. Art impulse is never static; it ever seeks newer and newer avenues of expression. Among the 72 melas formulated as a possibility by Venkatamakhi, there are of course some which do not lend themselves to be elaborated as ragas. But there may be some which may reveal some unique beauty not recognised so far. I am very much in favour of research in this direction to explore the possibility of giving life and form to some scales which now remain only as scales and have not been evolved into *ragas*. For example, Subhapantuvarali was only a scale so far. Even Sri Thyagaraja, who perhaps handled more melaragas than any other celebrity, is believed to have composed only one or two kritis in this raga. (Even this is doubted by several.) Still this mela is capable of being developed as a raga with its own characteristic bhava. This is sung as a major raga (under the name

Todi) in North India, and it is a musical feast to hear it expounded by a good North Indian *ustad*. One can never exhaust possibilities of musical expression; as long as life is dynamic there will be room for newer modes of such expressions and new melody moulds will be found to express new impulses of life. We should welcome all such expressions as enriching our cultural heritage. But no mechanical scheme or intellectual formula can be expected to do this, because all art expression is ultra-rational, super-intellectual and above mechanical formulation.

Another thing noticeable nowadays is the undue importance given to *swara* singing. Singing *swaras* was always an integral part of *Pallavi* in which the *Sahitya* was generally a small phrase and played only an insignificant part. But of late, *neraval* and *swara* singing have come to be an indispensable appendage for almost every *kriti*. The propriety of such an intrusion may well be challenged. There is a definite place set apart for those special features which will bring out the mastery of the artist; why then indulge in it in and out of season? And especially with beginners it seems to have become almost an obsession. The veriest tyros who cannot handle properly even some of the well-known ragas start indulging in *swara* singing, jumbling up *swaras* into premeditated *tala* groupings. The *swara* singing seems to have become a trick to justify wasting time. If one cannot keep an audience interested by giving soulful and appealing music he takes refuge under *swara* jumbling. Let me again quote Mr. K. V. Ramachandran: "Look at the other mediocrity of that facile verbiage *swara* singing, the process of bundling *swaras* according to set formulae! What is the aesthetic or spiritual value of a mechanical mix-up of rhythm and design? It was Wilde who said that the incompetent could always be correct..... Is the rich sonorous material meant to deliver some pompous trifle? And have we nothing better to express through music's

celestial medium than the banalities of an outworn technique?"

When art, which ought to be a vital impulse vibrant with life and scintillating with upwelling emotion, descends to formalism and conformity with rigid intellectual patterns and formulae, its death knell is sounded. One of the deplorable trends noticeable nowadays is the tendency to make music rigid and formal by laying too much emphasis on the so called "theory" and thereby stifling the life side of the art.

We should not forget the vital basis of our musical art. Art in India has always been considered a sacred function; music and devotion went always hand in hand. Good, soulful and ennobling music was generally inspired by devotion. I need not labour this point especially in India. Music is something Divine and the Masters of old showed great reverence towards Art. It was believed that Divinity was present where there was good music brimming with bhava and devotion. We may recall the old verse which says that God dwells not in Vaikunta, nor in the hearts of yogis nor in the sun, but where there is music sung by devotees. This aspect unfortunately has receded to the background, if not altogether disappeared, in recent times. I would make a forcible appeal for restoring the proper atmosphere which was generally associated with the music of the ancient scholars and composers.

What makes our music unique is the delicacy and subtlety which form the very soul of our music. Its charm and appeal depend on those delicate nuances, which form the back-bone of the art. There is a tendency nowadays to neglect this subtlety and go in for broad effects. Take for example group singing, in which may be included the so-called "orchestra"—orchestra in India can only mean Vadya Vrinda, that is group instrumental music. Simple pieces set

in tunes which do not involve delicacies or subtleties may be sung in group and may not lose much thereby. Our bhajans are examples of such group singing. In such concerts simple devotional pieces are sung by a number of people at the same time. But to sing highly classical and technical pieces in group is to stifle the very subtlety and fineness which go to make our classical music. It is at times felt that even accompaniments like violin and mridanga are a drag and take away much from the beauty of the music. Just imagine how the following compositions would fare if sung in chorus:—

“Yehi Annapoorne” in Punnavarali.

“Neekedayaraga” in Nilambari.

“Ramabana” in Saveri.

“Yendudaki” in Todi.

“Adaya Sri” in Ahiri.

Then a word about the mike. It seems to have come to stay, but can the mike ever fit into the atmosphere of our music which is essentially “chamber music”? The very idea of amplifying those evanescent and pleasing soft sounds which adorn our music seems obnoxious. Generally the mike distorts the voice and instruments. In some places it converts music into shrieks and howls. The tragedy is that ears accustomed to such shrieks and howls become incapable of responding to anything soft and subtle. I know people would say that in these days performances are attended by thousands and we have to go in for loud-speakers. I can only say that in the olden days musicians had sung in the open courtyards of temples and they were heard by thousands. When the musician wants to be heard and the listener wants to hear, they will always come to a proper adjustment. Now the listener wants to hear only the artificial sound coming out of the mike and his ear has got accustomed to a certain degree of loudness below which

his ear cannot respond and the musician wants to make the listener hear him somehow. Especially if with little effort his voice could be heard very loudly by the listeners the musician is tempted to take the easier path. On account of this mike it is very rare to find silence in our concert halls. These halls have become social clubs where people meet and make conversation; and the listener has got accustomed to listen to music above all this sound. The whole thing is working in a vicious circle. If I am really anxious to hear, I shall certainly carefully attend and if every one is attentive, there would be perfect silence, and people can hear music even without a mike; also the musician will not take advantage of the mike and sing in very low pitch or any false voice. Doing away with this mike will in my opinion make a great improvement in the general tone of our classical musical concerts, in the amount of earnestness which a musician puts in and the degree of attention on the part of the audience.

Another insidious mischief done by the mike is the tendency on the part of the singer to lower his tonic note, *Adhara Shruti*. I can understand this in the case of musicians who are handicapped by their voice. Why should one whose voice can reach higher pitches lower his tonic and sing in ranges which are lower than what his voice would naturally warrant? Because a certain great musician who developed throat trouble lowered his tonic to enable him to give performances, it became the fashion for several others to do the same thing, though there was no reason at all for this lowering in their case. Also singing in a lower pitch means less effort and in any case there is the mike to amplify everything. Why then unnecessary exertion? Why not take the easier way? This is the line of argument which prevails. As we know, each voice has its own natural tonic. This should be so chosen that the voice could normally cover the regions from Panchama in the Manda-

rasthayi to Panchama in the Tarasthayi (this makes a total interval of two octaves). When singers lower their normal tonic the result sometimes is that their voice does not function properly in the lower levels and there is marked lack of Shrutilayam (blending with Shruti) in those levels.

In my own young days there was practically no singer whose Adharashruti was below what is now generally called the 4th Kattai (the fourth key of an ordinary harmonium—this will correspond to note 'C'). Nowadays a musician who can sing to a shruti of even the second key is a rare phenomenon. Some of our top-ranking singers have lowered their tonic to even one full major tone below the first key, i.e., nearly 'E' in the lower octave.

The effect of this on the accompanying instruments is deplorable. How can a violin or a mridangam tuned to such a low pitch give its best? Their total value is lost and their contribution to the richness of the concert is meagre. Of course the accompanists try to make up for this loss by intellectual display involving intricate manipulation. But this is not art.

As with our culture, our music also is individualistic in its basic structure, it is based upon the human voice. Even instrumental music when played solo follows the pattern of vocal music. That is why our compositions are confined to the range of the human voice and rarely go beyond two octaves. It is possible to do $3\frac{1}{2}$ octaves on the Veena, but no piece goes beyond about 2 octaves. All this because the human voice is the primary basis for our music. In a musical concert the main artist dominates the whole show and the other participants are only *accompanists*. They merely follow the main artist. Even when they are given occasions to play solo they have to be within the limits determined by what the *principal* artist sings or plays. Generally in a South Indian musical concert (Vocal music) the accompani-

ments consist only of a violin and a mridangam. Occasionally (and of late more frequently) other tala instruments like Kinjira, Ghatam, Dolak, Moorsing, etc., are introduced. (I do not see why so many tala accompaniments should be introduced in a classical vocal concert. They may be good in their own way and perhaps they will fit in with a tala vadya programme.) In an ordinary vocal musical concert it is best to keep to only one tala instrument, mridanga and a violin. When the tala instrument alone is given a chance, all these other tala instruments may join, but at other times it is best they remain quiet.

Before closing I should like to mention a tendency which I have noticed of late on the part of some to tamper with the tunes of some of the old songs of settled pattern. I can understand in the case of good sahityas of old which have come to light recently for which the tune is not known, a competent person setting them to appropriate ragas and talas. But this has to be attempted only by a really competent person and not by all and sundry. This has happened in the case of many of the sahityas of Swathi Thirunal Maharaja for which tunes were not available; the late Gayaka Sikhamani Muthia Bagavathar set appropriate tunes for them. He was a vaggeyakara, competent to undertake this work. To meddle with an old song of recognised tune and set it to a new tune is not proper. Even if the new tune appears to be better, one has no right to set the old sahitya of another to what he considers to be a better tune. If that new tune is good, he can get a new sahitya fitted into it; nowadays we have any number of sahitya kartas who will gladly do it. Especially if the new tune is not an improvement upon the old one, this change-over is an inexcusable act of vandalism. I am putting it rather strongly because this has happened in recent years. I will just give one typical example. There is an old Tamil song "*Tandai tayirunda!*" in Mukhari raga, Chapu tala, which had been

current for over sixty years. I have heard it sung in my childhood and I learnt it myself. It was also published in some books in the above raga and tala. This song is a kind of *Nindasthuti* (praising God in the garb of censure) and the tune fits in with the sentiment exceedingly well. Recently this song has been changed by some one to another raga and another tala; the most unfortunate thing is that it has been reproduced on the gramophone in this new form! Anyone who has any sense of propriety or aesthetic sensibility will be able to say that the new tune does not fit the song at all. It looks almost a parody. I have been wondering why people should indulge in such misguided undertakings. There are other cases also, perhaps not so bad. The song "*Sivalokanathanai*" which occurs in Gopala-krishna Bharati's "*Nandanar Charitram*" had been set by him in Senchurutti raga and I have heard it sung also in that raga. In recent years the raga has been changed to Nadanamakriya and this new raga has found a place even in a syllabus published by a University. There seems to be no justification for this transformation. Again the song "*Ramanai Tharuvai*" in Arunachala Kavi's "*Ramanataka*" had been set by him in Mohana raga, but recently it has become a fashion with some to sing it in Sindhu Bhairavi raga. Another example of rather striking interest, the song "*Aaro ivar yaro*" in the same opera *Ramanataka*, which expresses Sri Rama's surprise at seeing Sita in king Janaka's palace and his inquisitiveness to know who she was, had been set by the composer in Saveri raga. It used to be sung in that raga and the raga and tune suit the occasion very well. Well, that tune has been recently altered and the piece is now sung in Bhairavi raga. I do not see what need arose for this change! I admit that the Bhairavi tune is excellent in itself. Why should the sahitya of Arunachala Kavi be smuggled into this tune? Could not a suitable new sahitya be found for this nice tune in Bhairavi? I hold

that the Saveri tune fits in with the sentimental and the situation better than the Bhairavi tune, excellent as this is in itself. To my mind this change is unwarranted. I can give many more examples. The point is however obvious. The song of the composer is his own art creation in a particular form. To change tunes, especially when such pieces have been current, is not justifiable, particularly when the new set up is not in any case an improvement. A better aesthetic sense on the part of rasikas as well as the musicians will, I feel sure, put a stop to such undesirable acts of intrusion and usurpation.