

Jayamangala Orchestra

Musical Performance (March 17, 2007)

The Jayamangala Group presented a concert on March 17, 2007, billed as a symphony orchestra. The group included a number of vocalists and instrumentalists trained in Carnatic music performing along with instrumentalists and sopranos trained in Western classical and jazz music. Most of the musicians participating in the ensemble live in the United States and range from students and amateurs to performers in the professional circuits. Prof. T. R. Subramanyam, a highly respected musician and musicologist from India, was designated as the conductor of the evening's concert, a role that he performed seated on a chair on one side of the stage. SRUTI took the opportunity to start the program by felicitating and honoring the octogenarian. Kiranavali Vidyasankar introduced Prof. Subramanyam to the Philadelphia audience and in her brief speech, described his achievements in and contributions to the world of Carnatic music.

The fates seemed to be conspiring against everybody on the day of the concert. March 17th was the day of one of the worst winter storms in the region, with snow, ice and sleet covering the roads in ample measure. The originally booked auditorium at Montgomery County Community College was therefore unavailable and the organizers had to shift the program venue at the last minute to the Bharatiya Temple hall in Montgomeryville. The storm also resulted in thin attendance and a delayed start to the program. Not only the members of the audience, but also most performers in the Jayamangala group were driving in on the same day and had to be redirected to the new venue.

While the weather gods could be blamed for problems in logistics and for dampening everyone's spirits, they certainly could not be held accountable for the content of the program itself. Much of the program was patterned on the lines of a traditional Carnatic music concert, with raga alapana, kalpana swaras etc. However, I believe the group was mistaken in its attempt to provide opportunities to each vocalist and instrumentalist

to be heard individually, especially as the performers on stage were inevitably at very different stages of musical training and capability. While no one musician got enough of a chance to exhibit his or her talent sufficiently well, the overall group presentation suffered in the process. For example, in Tyagaraja's composition, Bhavanuta in Mohanam, most of the swarams had to be presented at the end by one vocalist, with the instruments taking turns for accompaniment. As all the vocalists sang the compositions together and again converged in the final stages of the swaram singing, this resulted in substantial dynamic imbalances in sound levels and quality.

The main piece in the group's presentation featured what can only be described as free verse in Sanskrit, describing the various seasons and set to music by the leaders of the Jayamangala group. The convergence of lyrics, rhythm and melodies sounded uncomfortable to this reviewer's ears. Perhaps, on a sunnier day, one could have appreciated it better, but on that particular day, the unfamiliarity of the lyrics only added to the discomfiting feeling of sitting through a highly labored presentation. For the most part, the performers on the Western instruments also ended up either mimicking the roles of the string and percussion instruments in a Carnatic music concert, or providing the kind of background music that has now become an integral part of light versions of Indian music. The two Western sopranos got a few minutes to pitch in once in a while, with some minimal harmonizing, but there was no true blending of authentic elements of Carnatic and Western music. At the end of the day, this resulted in a seeming medley of disparate pieces of music that did not fit into a seamless whole.

Indian music, with its emphasis on creative exposition and improvisation based on melody, shines only under individual performers, with pride of place given to vocal music. All instruments only take on accompanying roles. Conversely, Western symphonies, with an emphasis on composed musical scores based on harmony, thrive when presented by a large group of instrumentalists performing under the baton of a conductor. Very few instruments take on a purely accompanying role in this context. Moreover, vocal music in the Western classical tradition is not usually an element of a symphonic orchestral presentation. Marrying such highly different traditional musical visions and creating new music that has intrinsic value and integrity should not be undertaken lightly. As such, the Jayamangala group can be said to have taken a

small first step in their attempt. This reviewer hopes they continue to search for authentic artistic vision and direction, and give better shape to any future performance. Their task is, of course, additionally difficult as many of the individual musicians live in cities separated by a few hundred miles. However, the greater the challenge, the more rewarding the effort, if they can make it work and produce good music out of it.

The author of the above review wishes to remain anonymous.