

M.S. Sheela's Vocal Concert

A Review (May 5, 2001)

By Yeshwantha Prabhu

When a musician sings alapanas and kritis at a slow or moderate speed, with appropriate and lavish gamakas, he or she can bring out the *raga bhava* and *ragachhaya* and the delicate nuances of a raga and the rasikas can relax and enjoy the singing, and feel the *ananda* that Carnatic music can give.

With this thought in mind I sat in the beautiful and luxurious McShain Theater with apprehension and anticipation. M. S. Sheela started her concert with the varna *Ninne Kori* in Kanada at a leisurely and proper speed, and I soon found myself relaxing, putting talam and nodding. In her clear, high-pitched angelic voice, she sang the varnam very well. Next she sang *Vinayaka nata phala dayaka* (Mohanam), not often heard at concerts. I was already beginning to be impressed! Then she sang Thyagaraja's *Sogasu Juda tarama ni* in Kannadagowla. TVS, TNS, Maharajapuram Santanam, DKJ, DKP, and many others have sung this kriti. Next, with a brief alapana in Todi, she sang *Sharadeye karuna varidhiye* exceedingly well. Muthiah Bhagavatar's *Samayamide nannu brochutaku* in the rare raga Budhamanohari was quite pleasant to hear. For a brief period I wondered why Muthiah Bhagavatar was so fond of "inventing" ragas, and composing in very rare ragas. Sheela brought my wandering mind down to earth with a beautiful but brief rendition of Reetigowla alapana. One of the prominent princes of the raga kingdom, Reetigowla deserves an elaborate rendition. Smt. Radika Mani played the alapana wonderfully well and drew a well-deserved applause. I was touched by Sheela's soulful rendition of *Harikatha Shravana mado*. (It was still ringing in my ears, while at work, two days later!). So far six kritis rendered without an elaborate alapana! I was beginning to feel a twinge of disappointment.

Next she sang a melodious, elaborate, methodically developed Pantuvarali, bringing out the ragaswaroopa magnificently. It was the first, fully developed alapana. I felt it should have come much earlier. Radhika Mani, who is an excellent violinist, was more than a match. Her Pantuvarali was superb. I leaned to the rasika sitting next to me and whispered, "She is going to sing Dikshitar's Ramanatham Bhajeham". The way an alapana is rendered often hints at the composition to follow! Musicians such as Sanjay Subramaniam and T.M. Krishna are adept at conveying the kriti they have chosen through their alapana. It was most appropriate that she chose this majestic kriti as the main item. Both the neraval and kalpana swaras were superbly rendered. The thani avartanam was excellent. Anoor Dattatreya Sharma played the mridangam very well. At this stage, even A.V. Kashinath, the kanjira player, who seemed sleepy and distracted throughout the concert, played with vigor, as if rejuvenated. R.Satya-kumar, the ghatam player was excellent. I thought of the incomparable Sukanya Ramagopal, the ghatam player who accompanied Sheela during her 1996 concert. The audience was thrilled at the layavadya lahari, although in the beginning I felt that three layavadyas were two too many. I have attended many memorable concerts where the mridangam was the only laya vadya.

Next Sheela sang a shloka in ragamalika. I liked the Hindola and Amritavarshini. She then sang *Govinda gopal a gopika vallabha*, also in ragamalika. The rasika sitting next to me told me that female vocalists are usually reluctant to sing compositions made popular by the great M.S. because of the unavoidable and usually unfavorable comparison. Just then, coincidentally, Sheela began to sing Swati Tirunal's beautiful ragamalika kriti, *Bhavayami Raghuramam* with Saveri as the main raga. Having heard the wonderful renditions by M.S. and also Maharajapuram Santanam numerous times, I felt Sheela sang it in a somewhat hurried way, without taking care to bring out the beauty of the sangatis in Mohanam and Natakuranji. Had I not heard M. S's recording, would I have felt the same way? I wondered.

Then she sang seven brief kritis in succession, without alapanas. *Tungateer a virajam* in Salagabhairavi, and four Purandaradasa's kritis: *Narayana yemiro* in Saranga, *Tarakka Bindige*, *Ramanama payasakke*, and *Yelliruvano Ranga* in Sindhubhairavi. Although almost all these songs were in response to requests from the audience, it was apparent that she has a special affinity to Purandaradasa's kritis. She sang with great bhava and her pronunciation was impeccable. These were followed by Thyagaraja's *Gandhamu puyyaruga* in Punnagavarali and P. T. Narasimhachar's *Aalisu Krishnana kolalina kare*.

A great musicologist and one of the most knowledgeable persons I knew, the late Sri Vishveshwaraiyya, had told me, "Musicians have a duty to show respect to the Trimurtis and the Pitamaha, so they must sing a couple of kritis of Tyagaraja, Dikshitar and Purandaradasa and one kriti of Shyama Shastri also, and then they can choose a few other composers they like. A musician should sing at least three or four alapanas elaborately and two short alapanas, and it would be nice to include a RTP also." When I think of the most memorable concerts I have been to, I am not surprised that most of them correspond to this formula. Sheela sang one elaborate alapana only, and she sang one ghana kriti only, which might explain why I felt the way I did when the concert was over. Although it was a good concert, it was not a satisfying one. I have observed that at concerts arranged by Sruti, CMANA and the Telugu Association, the audience consists of a significant number of very knowledgeable people, many of whom are concert grade musicians themselves. These rasikas flock to a concert with the hope of listening to not just a few well-rendered kritis, but quite a few well-rendered alapanas also. It would be nice if a musician keeps this in mind and tries to quench the rasikas' thirst for alapanas.

Sheela could have sung fewer kritis, and included at least one ghana-kriti of Tyagaraja and one more of Dikshitar's. This concert had an abundance of "tukdas" and a shortage of ghana kritis, and an enigmatic scarcity of alapanas. And because I have attended several of her excellent concerts over the years, I was quite astonished.

A word must be said about the innumerable requests and notes sent to the musicians by the rasikas through their children, while Sheela was singing. The rasikas have an obligation to remember that the musicians need to concentrate and that sending a note while they are singing or playing the violin can be very distracting. Perhaps the organizers should have reminded the audience before the concert to refrain from doing so.

[Yeshwanth Prabhu is a chemist and an aspiring vocalist. He learnt Carnatic vocal from flutist Sri Gopalakrishna Iyer, and composer/vocalist Sri T.N.Bala.]

Violin Duo Concert by Mysore Nagaraj and Manjunath

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By Kamakshi Mallikarjun

Sruti teamed with Triveni Arts Group to give us a unique double treat on Saturday, May 5th 2001 that started with this lovely concert of lilting melodies. Having enjoyed listening to each of these accompanists, it was another treat to hear them play together in perfect unison!

The concert started with a sparkling rendition of the Durbar, Adi Tala Varnam *Chalamela*. A short sketch of the raga Nattai was followed by *Shri Maha Ganapathim*. Then, Manjunath delineated the raga Garudadhvani triggering memories of the English Note that Madurai Mani Iyer made famous (Garudadhvani, the converse of Bilahari, has the notes of Sankarabaranam in arohana and Mohanam in avarohana). They played Thyagaraja's *Thatva Meruga Tharama* with charming kalpana swarams..

After a bhava-laden alapana of Abhogi by Nagaraj, came *Sabapathiki*. This was followed by a rare Dikshithar kriti in raga Gurjari. The main item was *Bhajare Re Manasa*, preceded by a beautiful alapana in Raga Abheri. The *tani* by Srimushnam Raja Rao was lovely, especially his varying modulation of the sound.

The artistes were deluged with requests and they graciously played a lot of them. After the tani, the songs were *Tunga Theera Virajam* (Salaga-bhairavi), *Baro Krishnayya* (Ragamalika), Akhilandeshwari (Dvijavanti), a bhajan in Vasanthi, *Krishna Nee Begane* (Yaman Kalyan), *Naan Oru Vilayattu Bommaiya* (Navarasa Kanada) Jagadodharana (Kaapi), and finally Lalgudi's Thillana in Raga Thilang. Mysore Nagaraj and Manjunath embellished these melodies with deft touches: one playing the high note and the other the low note in *Krishna Nee Begane*. They have such a beautiful Gayaki style ... their violins seem to be singing the words.

A most enjoyable concert!

(Kamakshi Mallikarjun is a software engineer and a music and dance enthusiast.)