

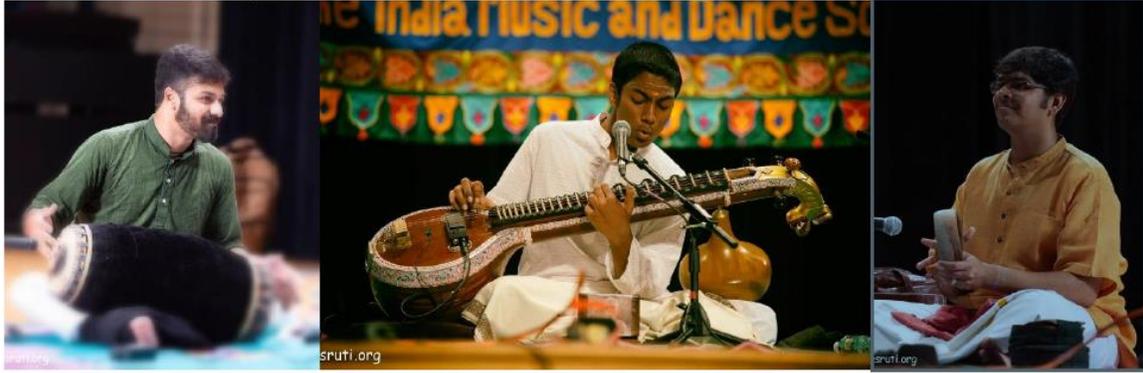
An Emerging Veena Star – Ramana Balachandhran

Carnatic Veena Concert (June 2, 2018)

A Review by Rajee Padmanabhan

Sergei Rachmaninoff, the Russian pianist and composer, famously said, “Music is enough for a lifetime, but a lifetime is not enough for music.” If a rasika is fortunate enough, she gets to witness an artist with such precocious artistry that he seems to have compressed many lifetimes of music into his young musical life. Ramana Balachandran is one such artist. Ramana’s marvelous concert on the Veena, accompanied by Sumesh Narayanan on Mridangam and Anirudh Athreya on Khanjira was a shining example of the incredible dynamism and promise of the new generation of artists coming up in the world of Carnatic Music.

Ramana is a Gayika Vainika. A brisk Taamadam Tagadaiyya in Mohanakalyani started off the concert. Ramana’s resonant voice accompanies and accentuates his Veena, giving the added color of the lyrics in those moments. Right off the bat, it was clear that co-artists on stage shared great chemistry, with Sumesh and Anirudh playing with great anticipation. Devagandhari Ragam’s distinct contours were played by Ramana with great bhavam in the Gopalakrishna Bharathi krithi Enneramum Undan Sannidhiyile.



L-R: Sumesh Narayanan, Ramana Balachandhran, Anirudh Athreya

The effervescent Mandari krithi Ninnujeppa Karanamemi Manasa was taken up with a round of fast swarams. Ramana’s keen grasp of layam aspects lends itself in the intricate and apt patterns in the kalpana swaraprasthara.

Kharaharapriya Ragam was taken up for elaboration. Ramana explored the depths of this melakarta raga, developed it beautifully around the characteristic phrases. Ramana’s approach to alapana is unhurried and the gradual unfurling of the raga in all its possibilities. Thyagaraja’s classic, Pakkala Nilabadi was rendered with both slow and fast swarams at the charanam line “Manasuna dalaci”. The kalpana swarams ended fittingly in the “N S R, R,” pattern of “Manasuna”. Swaraprasthara with multiple nadais included a back and forth with mridangam and kanjira kept the audience enraptured. Sumesh and Anirudh’s Tani Avaratanam in Misra Chappu was full of exciting patterns and enthralling.

A Ragam Tanam Pallavi in Hameerkalyani in Khanda Nadai Tisra Ekam followed.

Ramana Needayarada Arunanatha Karunadatha Ninnarul varaada

There are certain ragas that lend themselves so beautifully to the strums of the Veena strings as if they were specifically created for this instrument alone. Hameer Kalyani is one such in my humble opinion. Ramana played an alapana with such swanubhavam (inadequately translated as “self-enjoyment”). A crisp tanam followed. Here again Ramana singing the trikalam anchored the RTP more for the audience. Excellent round of swarams in Nattai, Madhuvanti, and Shyama added luster to the RTP.

The lilting Chenchurutti of Navaneethachora Devaki Vasudeva Nandana must have indeed be sweet music for Ramana's mother, who was in attendance. Arunachala Siva, a tribute to the lord of Tiruvannamalai concluded this memorable performance.

Ramana's Veena technique can be termed "Gayaki" style, with emphasis on the nuances of vocalized music. Ramana's approach is steeped in gamaka oriented music. Even for the brigas, Ramana seemed to eschew split fingering in favor of producing them on a single fret. Ramana is innovative in the true sense of the word – he pushes the creative boundaries, while staying true to the idioms of the music; his alapanas are refreshingly free flowing; he is clearly charting new waters with his swara prastharas, trying out new patterns and poruttams (fitted patterns); his choices of krithis show his keen aesthetics.

Rajee Padmanabhan has been a long-term supporter of Sruti and is deeply knowledgeable about carnatic music.