

Review of L. Shankar and Ginger Concert
by Dinakar Subramanian

My first encounter with L. Shankar occurred when I was a young boy growing up in Chennai, India where I used to attend most Carnatic music concerts that were held close to my house. At that time, (more than 25 years ago), I was attending a violin concert by the 'L-trio'. The 'trio' referred to him and his two brothers, L. Vaidyanathan and L. Subramaniam. They performed that day with Sangeetha Kalanidhi Shri Palghat Mani Iyer. They were a famous 'set' at that time. That concert was memorable for me because they started off with the Sri Raga varnam – Sami Ninne Kori in 3 speeds. I was awe-struck after listening to the varnam. From that point I was always curious about the music that they offered.

Several years later I listened to a few of L. Shankar's albums (not the Shakti albums) that were still Carnatic based. I was quite enchanted with the sound of the double violin as it did provide a very rich and unique sound. The fast pace of his composition and the range offered by the double violin captivated me.

Not having listened to many Shakti albums and knowing that L. Shankar had diversified into many different kinds of music including that for feature films, I entered the hall on March 12, 2005 with a feeling of apprehension, wondering what was going to be offered. The presence of Pandit Swapan Choudhury raised my hopes.

The first piece was called Sunrise. It was set to a very brisk tempo and had the refrain of G M P N S, M P N S, P N S, N S in Ragam Savithri which was similar to Suddha Dhanyasi. This piece was very captivating with Swapan weighing in very nicely through the descending refrain noted above, until the point when Ginger started humming at the microphone. This brought me back to reality that I am attending a world music concert and that I can only expect brief flashes of classical Carnatic music. There were brief tabla solos interspersed in the first piece and Ginger built a crescendo and the duo concluded the first piece.

The second piece was called Voices from Heaven, which started with Shankar humming a bit tentatively. This piece had a nice folksy tune and Swapanji pleasingly kept the beat. There were several ragas used in this piece one of which I identified as Keeravani. The Keeravani part of the piece was built to a crescendo. After the crescendo, both Ginger and Shankar both abruptly left the stage.

At this point, Swapanji (after a lighthearted comment) started an elaborate solo, which showed what a class act and tabla player he is. He produced several unique sounds from the tabla with such speed and dexterity that demonstrated his true virtuosity. Honestly, to me the high point of the whole concert was this tabla solo.

Shankar and Ginger then returned as Swapanji was finishing and Shankar asked him to continue the solo with the Bols (uttering of the actual tabla sounds). This was very enjoyable as well as Swapanji did the Bol and played it on the tabla. Shankar then built another crescendo and finished the piece.

After a brief intermission, the next piece was based on the feature film, The Passion of the Christ, for which both Ginger and Shankar hummed. I thought that their humming was still tentative. This piece also had a mix of ragams one of which was Aberi that Shankar played a refrain reminiscent of one of his older albums called Aberi.

Shankar announced that the next piece was a Ragam, Thanam, Pallavi in Ragam Kamboji set to 9 ¼ beats. This was the closest that any piece came to a pure classical Carnatic piece. It had Shankar singing a bit of an alpana, dueling violins and singing kalpanaswarams. Shankar's violin sounded much richer than Ginger's and it was very obvious in this piece. In Ginger's violin, the lower frequency stem did not show any melody at all – I am not sure if it is a fault of the violin or the sound system that the artists kept adjusting.

The last piece was aptly called 'Let's go home'. It had Swapanji using the Dholak in an upright fashion and providing another tabla solo. Though this piece was nothing spectacular melody wise, it gave the Sruti audience a new thrill – singing along with Shankar. Shankar urged the audience (like a rock

concert) to follow his vocal expressions where he would provide a few notes for the audience to follow. There was quite a bit of audience participation for this part.

Overall, it was an interesting experience and I came away with the reinforced understanding that Shankar is now a World Music performer and his offering that night was exactly that – it was not for the typical Sruti audience but to a ‘world music’ audience.

[Dinakar Subramanian is a former president of Sruti and a frequent contributor to Sruti publications.]

Violin Concert by Shankar & Ginger – A Viewpoint

By S.Sankaran

I learnt that the concert was arranged in a big hall on a strong belief that it will pull in a big crowd. If that was the rationale, then the results were disappointing. What happened actually was those few souls who bothered to come with an open mind had to be pulled to the front to form a small crowd.

Even before the music started, the first thing the artists did, was to turn on a reverberator to the point of producing a booming base sound. This was totally alien to Indian classical music, and unpleasant.

The concert got going with 2 or 3 pieces which had a vague resemblance to what we might call a Thanam-Pallavi. One thing that was evident was Shankar’s *mastery* of the double violin designed by him, over a pitch range greater than 2.5 octaves. They claimed that at the low end, the instrument could produce sounds like a double-bass. However whenever Shankar played at that low pitch, as I far as I could hear, I could not distinguish one note from another. Still, all that expertise was not put to good use. I say this because, some 20 years ago, I attended Shankar’s concert in ‘Painted Bride’ (along with Dr.Subramaniam, Dr.Rangachar & others). Then he did play the krithi ‘Siddhi Vinayakam’ in Shanmugapriya, energetically, with a lot of improvisations, gliding over easily from one section of his violin to the other. (I do not remember if he played the Charanam part of it). I am not sure if Ginger has the same level of competence. She was not even facing the audience.

I do not know why he announced the next piece as a ‘Ragam Thanam Pallavi’ in Kambodhi. There was hardly any Raga Alapana. Whatever he meant by ‘Ragam’ sounded like Kambodhi only part of the time. May be he was not aware of what a ‘Sruti’ audience would expect.

The concert was a disappointment. What I heard was neither Indian Music nor World Music.

What lesson could we learn from this experience? In extraordinary cases like this, I wish we could come to an understanding with the artist about what ‘Sruti’ expects from such an expert, even before sending the formal application for a grant.

[Sankaran, a music enthusiast, is an active volunteer and Life member of Sruti.]