

Thyagaraja Aradhana 2004: An Impression

Meena Pennathur

As I walked in to attend the Thyagaraja Aradhana day of Sruti, Sadimchane in Arabi was pervading the auditorium. I made a quick stop at the front desk manned (I guess I should say womaned) by the treasurer of Sruti, bought the season ticket for 2004 and walked in. Looking around for a comfortable seat, I settled on a seat in the 3rd row where I had a perfect view of the performers who were singing with reverence. The stage was full with vocalists and instrumentalists. An aura of obeisance and veneration filled the saba. I had missed the Utsava Samprdhaya keerthanas by the children and the first two of the Pancharathna krithis. I was told that this event was commenced with Vuncha Vridhi, where the musicians walked on to the stage in a procession singing the Utsava Sampradaya keerthanas. Oh well, 8:30 a.m on a Saturday morning was a tough sell for me and I knew it was going to be a long day. Devotion filled my heart as I received the Prasadam that was distributed after the Pancharantnam.

The individual participation segment was now in progress. The children one after another sang with a lot of enthusiasm – some with twinkle in their eyes, some obviously shy to be on stage, some stealing a glance at their teacher and parents for appreciation and approval, some wanting to impress and some blissfully indifferent to everything around them. The thought did cross my mind - do these children really know what this day was about? Should the participating children be asked to write a sentence or two on Thyagaraja or the meaning of the song, as a prerequisite? This would achieve many things, children would understand the significance of the celebration, the teachers would be forced to teach also the meaning of the song and the greatness of the composer, SRUTI, in the process, may end up with some material for the newsletter written by the children.

On a different note - I failed to see the connection between solo mridangam and tabla rendering at Thyagaraja Aradhana. I believe it undermines the significance of paying homage to a great composer and ends up being talent show. This is my personal opinion - though I heard, a few in the audience share my view. While children should be encouraged to perform and parents given an opportunity to see their children perform, it should be at a different event and not under the banner of aradhana day.

The adult participation followed. I was amazed at how many good musicians we have amongst us not to mention the ocean of songs written by one composer. In an attempt to best use the available time, SRUTI was preparing for the next artist as one was singing - with two sets of microphones on stage. As a result, the center of the stage was not used, this appearing more like an assembly line set up. I have seen this technique adopted by many organizations but leaves something lacking in spirit.

The day came to a conclusion with the concert of Professor Subbulekshmi. She was accompanied by Kalyani Ramani and was supported on the violin by Radhika Mani and on mridangam by Suresh Ramachandran. This day was well spent, I thought to myself, as I was leaving the auditorium. I extend my congratulations to the new SRUTI committee for organizing an enjoyable day.

Concert Review: Prof. Subbalekshmi & Smt. Kalyani Ramani

Rajee Raman

Being a native of Thiruvananthapuram, I was naturally excited at the prospect of listening to Smt. R. Subbalekshmi, along with her daughter Smt. Kalyani Ramani, on the Thyagaraja Aradhana day. Having regularly listened to her Veena recitals on All India Radio, I was eager to attend her vocal concert.

On the Aradhana day, following enthusiastic performances from promising youngsters in vibrant costumes, the stage was set for the concert to begin. A concert on a Thyagaraja Aradhana is unique in a couple of respects; for one, usually all the items rendered are the Saint's compositions; it's a reverential tribute, as the word Aradhana denotes. Smt. Subbalekshmi's concert was just that- a tribute that brought out both the beauty and Bhakthi Bhava inherent in Thyagaraja krithis.

What better way to flag off a concert than with a soothing Mayamalavagoula, the krithi being Meru Samana? A nice Neraval sequence followed by Kalpanaswaras rounded off this piece. A brief sketch of Begada preceded Samiki Sari. Maragathimanivarna in Varali was well rendered after a short alapana by Smt. Kalyani Ramani, who is a well-known music teacher in New Jersey, is proof for the fact that the fruit does not fall far from the tree. Her succinct Arabhi alapana, peppered with sancharas that brought out the essence of the raga, was well received. Radhika Mani's response on the violin was equally good. O Rajeevaksha, a Thyagaraja gem was rendered in all its splendor.

Smt. Subbalekshmi, who was the Principal of Sri Swati Thirunal College of Music, has had the good fortune of learning from both Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer and K.S.Narayanawamy. In my humble opinion, this was apparent in the high quality of the sangathis rendered and the raga bhava in the alapanas. Smt. Subbalekshmi should also be commended for the choice of raga and tala mix.

The Saranaga krithi, Mamava Raghurama, enlivened the concert with its tempo. The main piece for the day, the Thodi masterpiece, Emi Chesite Nemi, in Mishra Chappu was given all the attention it deserved. Thodi is a raga that is almost inexhaustible in its charm. Smt. Subbalekshmi's voice was in some discomfort, but that did not dampen the raga lakshana to shine through. A Thani Avartanam by Sri. Suresh Ramachandran capped the Neraval and Kalpanaswaras. I am no expert in layam, but I thoroughly enjoyed the Thani. The fast paced Kiranavali piece, Etiyojanalu, provided the right setting for the rare krithi in Neelambari, Neeke dayarada. I must mention here about the SrutiRanjini booklet brought out for the occasion. The lyrics and meaning of four or five songs from the concert were provided in there. I found this neat - for once, the audience could relate to the lyrical beauty of the composition.

A Managalam in Surutti, Maakulabrochuta, was the penultimate piece followed by a viruttam praising the singular devotion of Thyagaraja towards Rama, in Madhyamavathi. Thus the curtain came down on a concert, even though plagued by microphone troubles, was marked by the dedication and sincerity of the artists in showcasing one of the greatest composer's legacy. Indeed, a very satisfying concert.

Kritis rendered at the concert are listed below for your reference.

Merusamana – Mayamalavagoula- Adi; Samiki Sari- Begada-Rupakam; Maragathamanivarna- Varali- Adi; O Rajeevaksha-Arabhi – Mishra Chappu; Mamavaraghurama- Saranga – Rupakam; Emi Chesite Nemi- Thodi – Mishra Chappu ; Etiyojanalu – Kiranavali- Adi; Neeke dayarada- Neelambari – Mishra Chappu; Maakula brochuta- Surutti – Mishra Chappu; Thyagaraja- Madhyamavathi.

Rajee is an ardent student and rasika of Carnatic Music. She lives with her family in the Exton area and works as a Software Engineer for Unisys.

A Chat with the Thyagaraja Aradhana Concert Artists

Latha Nataraj

It was a beautiful afternoon. At Sruti, we were celebrating our annual Thyagaraja Aradhana in honor of one of the greatest composers in Karnataka Sangeetha. After participating in the traditional “Utsava” of Sri Thyagaraja and listening to the beautiful renderings of Utsava Sampradaya Krithis by our juniors and Pancharatna Krithis by our own Sruti artists, we were close to the end of individual presentations by almost a hundred, very enthusiastic participants. The artists arrived; they were to be performing in the evening concert, which was the highlight of the day’s events. Professor Subbulekshmi and her daughter Smt. Kalyani Raman along with her two, very energetic sons and their patient father, the violinist, Smt. Radhika Mani and mridangist, Sri Suresh Ramachandran were all in very good spirits and a delight to talk to.

The artists were individually requested to talk a little about themselves, their prime motivation factors for learning music, their formal training, their careers as performers, and their advice to students of music.

Professor Subbulekshmi:

My father’s encouragement was the prime motivating factor for me to learn music. He was very enthusiastic about music. He was a music critic, an astrologer and a Sanskrit scholar. My brother, Veena Venkataraman is a very well known Veena player. He is a part of the Veena-Venu-Violin trio with Sri. Lalgudi G. Jayaraman and Dr. N. Ramani.

I started my formal training when I was ten years old. I learned at the Music Academy in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. I went on to work at the Swati Tirunal College of Music (earlier known as the Music Academy) and retired in 1992 as the Head of the Department of Veena after thirty-two years of service. I have performed on National Television and National Radio. My first concert was at the age of fifteen. I have been performing since 1951 in several places in South India as well as in Bombay. I have performed live on Malaysian Radio in 1997; it was a onehour vocal concert immediately followed by a one-hour Veena concert. I enjoyed that very much.

My advice to youngsters learning music: Learn the concepts of Raga, Bhaava, TaaLa and Gamakas well. Face to face learning from a good Guru is very important to achieve this. Get good training and make sure you keep up regular practice.

Smt. Kalyani Ramani:

My prime motivation factor for learning music was my mother. I always watched and listened when my mother was teaching. I decided on a career in music at a very young age. I started my formal training at the age of seven. I am a gold medalist and have a Master’s degree in Music from Kerala University. I later continued my training with Smt. Neela Ramgopal after 1992. I have performed as a ‘B’ grade artist at All-India-Radio Bangalore and Thiruvananthapuram and also on the Thiruvananthapuram Doordarshan.

My advice to students of music: Start young. Learn to focus. Responsibility, respect and discipline are very important. It is very important to learn about our culture and heritage. Practice is extremely important; it should never be time-bound, just practise till it is perfect. Another thing I would like to emphasize is ‘Listen and learn’; listen to a lot of music, go to concerts.

Smt. Radhika Mani:

My parents were the prime motivating factor for me to learn music. My mother is a well-trained vocalist and extremely enthusiastic about music. I have had the honor of performing at several concerts in India, USA and Australia and at several prestigious institutions. I have also enjoyed performing with many well known musicians.

My advice to students: Listen to lots of music. Keep up regular practice; it is very important.

Sri. Suresh Ramachandran:

I am actually a mathematician. My parents’ enthusiasm for music motivated me to learn the Mridangam. Both my parents are musicians. I grew up with my two sisters who are also vocal artists. I trained under the

tutelege of Sri. T.V.Gurumurthy at the Palani School of Mridangam. I feel honored, having played with several well known artists. I am also a graded artist of All-India-Radio. I have enjoyed performing in AIR, Doordarshan and several sabhas.

My advice to students learning music: Listen to a lot of music. Listen to other students as well as professional artists. It is very motivating.