

T.N. Seshagopalan Concert

A Review (April 29, 2000)

Rasikan

Madurai T.N. Seshagopalan (TNS as he is known) is one of the most popular South Indian musicians of the present day. Endowed with a rich voice and enormous talent he has been regaling enthusiastic audiences for nearly three decades. He is, as it were, the bridge between the old guards of the so-called golden age of Carnatic music, the years 1930-70, to the growing fresh crop of younger musicians. TNS is a master of kalpana (innovative) music. If the present day musicians seem to indulge in a lot of kanakku (mathematical combinations) in their swara prastarams, the reason could be traced to TNS.

SRUTI audience had a taste of the genius of TNS music on 29 April at his concert in Cabrini College. He was accompanied by Jayasankar Balan of Detroit on the violin and R. Vaidyanathan from India on the mridangam.

TNS was in good form. His Todi that day was superb in which he rendered Sri Krishnam bhaja manasa, a masterpiece of Dikshitar. One of the many contributions of Thyagaraja to Carnatic music is the innovation of sangatis in a kriti whereby musical variations of increasing complexity are added to specific lines. Not many other composers have been successful with incorporating elaborate sangatis in their compositions. Indeed, among Dikshitar's kritis only two are well known for sangatis, one of which is Sri Krishnam and the other is Sri Subramanyaya namaste in Kambhodi. [The sangatis in Vatapi (Hamsadwani) were supposed to have been introduced by Maha Vaidyanatha Iyer.]

Earlier, TNS exhibited his virtuosity by elaborating alapana and swaraprastarams in comparatively minor ragas: Jaganmohini (sobillu saptaswara of Thyagaraja) and Kalyana Vasantham (Enda mugam of Ambujam Krishna). In fact in the Kalyana Vasantham alapana he indulged in thara sthaya sancharams hitting the tara sthaya daivatham and even touching the nishadam. For a change, the prati madhyamam ragam was Hamir Kalyani and not of the too frequently heard Pantuvarali/Poorvi kalyani. TNS's alapana in this ragam had tinges of Hindustani music from which the ragam is derived. TNS rendered the lyrical composition Venkata chaila vihara of Subbaraya Sastri without neraval or swara prastaram. Before the lengthy Todi, he sang Ranganayakam, a Dikshitar kriti in Nayaki emphasizing the subtle nishada prayogams of the ragam.

To many people's disappointment TNS did not render an RTP. Indeed Todi was the only major piece. Perhaps the large number of 'chits' that he received curbed his enthusiasm. Or may be the fact that the accompaniments were not upto his standard. Indeed neither Jayasankar nor Vaidyanathan rose to the occasion. I have heard Jayasankar accompany R. Sundar of Detroit. He is an adequate violinist, but that is not enough qualification to accompany a musician of the caliber of TNS. One of TNS's strengths is his mastery over layam and the swaraprastarams full of kanakku. To do full justice to this aspect of his music the mridangam player has to give very good support, which was lacking in Vaidyanathan. In fact even his tani avarthanam after the Todi piece was quite pedestrian.

The short pieces (thukkadas) after the Todi that TNS sang included the ever popular Jagadodharana. TNS suggested that this piece sung in Kapi, was originally used to be sung in Neelambari in which ragam the bhavam of the song would come out better and demonstrated it briefly.

Another interesting piece was a tillana composed by TNS himself in Niroshtha. This ragam, a creation of Harikesanallur Muthiah Bhagavathar, omits the madhyamam and panchamam in both the arohanam and avarohanam (sa, ri, ga, dha, ni; sa, ni, dha, ga, ri). If you voice the saptaswaras, only for ma and pa you have to bring the lips together. Muthiah Bhagavathar has composed a kriti in this ragam (Raja raja raja) in which for no word or syllable do you have to touch the lips together. TNS has also composed the tillana in similar fashion.

The large number of the tukkadas tended to drag the concert towards the end. TNS was obviously trying to please too many of his aficionados.

I have previously voiced my objections to sending chits. For sometime I thought the scourge had diminished if not eliminated. The ugly habit seems to have risen its head again. I do wish those interested in hearing particular pieces from a musician would contact the organizers ahead and have their wishes conveyed to the artists who can then plan the concert to possibly include them.