

Review of 1994 SRUTI Concerts

Some observations on the
Veena concert by Chittibabu
Oct. 8, 1994.

S. Sankaran

Chittibabu's concert got off to a slow start with the krithi 'Vathapy ...' in the raga Hamsadhvani, which did not sound as brisk as it normally does. The next krithi (in the raga Nalinakanthi) 'Manavyalakimchave..' was better. However right at the beginning, the repetition of the short phrase 'Manavyalakim' three times before playing the complete line once was disturbing to an attentive listener, accustomed to tradition.

The artist then announced the next song 'Sukhi evvaro' in Kaanada. Some people applauded. Chittibabu, instead of acknowledging and continuing, started a campaign for a loud applause. This looked inappropriate for an artist of his caliber. However, with this krithi, the concert really took off. It made a distinct impression both in terms of technique and feeling. His playing on multiple strings during the alapana for emphasis really struck a chord, so to say. This technique was even more evident in the kalpana swaras at the end of the song. The combination of this and volume expansion exhibited his creative imagination and ended in a climax.

Chittibabu then announced the next song 'Raghuvamsa sudha' in the raga Kathanakuthalam. But this song was not rendered in the traditional style in which it was played by other eminent artists (e.g. Dwaram Venkataswamy Naidu). For example at the start, the word 'Sudha' was repeated 5 times before proceeding further. This sounded like a broken record. The artist's modulation of loudness in the Pallavi had a striking effect. The 'Anupallavi' was played in its usual vigorous tempo. But his idiosyncrasy made it sound more like a film tune than it was. His habit of damping the notes sometimes had a harsh chopping effect, especially when playing in the fast tempo. When the 'Anupallavi' ended with a bang, there was an applause, partly because some thought that the song had ended. The second part (the 'Charanam') was not as good as the first. On the whole it would have been just fine if he had played the song with the variations and embellishments already put in it by its composer Patnam Subramania Iyer.

He then announced the song 'Saamaja Varagamana..' in Hindholam and played the song in a peaceful style appropriate to the raga without his idiosyncrasies and chopeed up notes.

This prepared the way for the masterwork of that evening, the Ragam, Thanam and Pallavi in Shanmukhapriya. In the systematic development of the raga alapana, he digressed into a mood like 'Punnagavaraali' and returned smoothly to the main raga. But the best part of this best piece of the evening was the Thanam. Here he took advantage of the fact that Thanam comes out very well on the Veena. He played it as a 'Ragamalika' transcending from one raga to another using Neelambari, Reethigowla, Hamsanandhi, Behag and others. Here he allowed the notes to linger on, creating a continuity characteristic of Karnatic music. The serenity of this sustained string of melodies had the audience spellbound. He played an impressive succession of swaras in Shanmukhapriya with a perfect ending. He did not do ragamalika swarams, since he had achieved a similar effect in his 'Thana Ragamalika'. This was followed by an extended 'Avardhanam' on the percussion instruments. The entire RTP with the Avardhanam lasted an hour and 15 minutes. This piece by itself would have constituted a short chamber concert.

He continued the session with a pleasant composition of Purandaradasa in Tilang, which almost sounded like a Hindi Bhajan, and a familiar Tamil composition and then his usual Cuckoo song, which seems to have captured the fancy of the audience. I guess that is what matters in THE END.

Sankaran is a computer specialist with the IRS, Philadelphia. His strong interests in Carnatic, Hindusthani and Western Music started as part of his first job as an engineer at All India Radio, Delhi for nearly 10 years.