

Alarmel Valli's Sprightly Bharatanatyam Concert

A Review (May 13, 2000)

By Chandrakala Menon

On May 13, 2000, the Indian community in the Delaware Valley was treated to an exquisite and scintillating Bharatanatyam performance in the Pandanallur tradition by Alarmel Valli that left the audience craving for more. Valli combined swift foot-work, flexible and graceful body movements, naturalness in abhinaya, master choreography and excellent musicianship from the 20 year-old Randhini Ramanathan to make this Bharatanatyam recital a memorable one for everyone.

Valli is truly a master communicator at several different levels. She eloquently explained to the audience the deeper philosophical interpretation of the different compositions she had lined up for the evening while choosing to squat comfortably on the stage rather than disturb the height adjustment on the microphone that she had to share with her musicians. As a dancer, her movements conveyed an unmistakable joyous spirit that appears to be a hallmark of her performances. Her abhinaya was so natural and free-flowing that she slipped into and out of the characters that she was portraying with ease.

Valli opened the evening's concert with a brisk *Shakti Vandanam* – an invocation to Shakti or the Goddess of Energy embodied by Mahishasuramardini, Durga, Lakshmi and Saraswati. She used Adi Shankaracharya's Sanskrit composition, *Ayi giri nandini* to depict the various attributes of Devi. The swarams in this piece were composed by Prema Ramamurthy and the viruthams were set to music by S. Rajeswari. Valli's choreography of this piece showed immense creativity and attention to detail.

This was followed by the Varnam in ragamalikai that was composed by Prema Ramamurthy and choreographed by Valli. *Kaanna aavadaa di endan naadanai* was fast-paced and depicted the bhakta's longing for Lord Siva as the Nayika's yearning for her lover. In this number, the nayika tells her sakhi that she longs for a glimpse of her beloved Lord and is reminded of Him by everything in nature including the splendor of the rising sun and the darkness of the rain clouds. She describes His beauty as the Lord of Dance and complains to her sakhi that although spring is in the air and the cool perfumed wind is blowing gently, her Lord is indifferent toward her and that she should bring Him to her immediately. Valli's talent and creativity were evident in the choreography and execution of this piece.

The first piece after the intermission was a philosophical one, *Jeevanam Jeevanamrutham*. This piece compared human life to the cycle of water in nature having its origin in the rain clouds, traveling on earth as rivers, merging with the seas and evaporating and becoming rain clouds again. It was a gentle piece that dealt very subtly with the fullness of life treating losses and gains as necessary experiences for a wholesome life. This piece was also set to music by Prema Ramamurthy. Valli's choreography of this number showed a maturity and insight that was capable of depicting abstract themes through Bharatanatyam in a manner that was intelligible to the lay person.

The next piece, a Sangam era composition, by far was enjoyed the most by everyone -- the young and not-so-young alike. It was a piece based on an Indian folklore and captured a moment of transition between childhood and adolescence. The piece, *unnuneer vikkinaan* in Ragamalikai and Talamalikai told the story of a childhood friendship between a boy and a girl that blossomed into physical attraction between the two at adolescence. Valli's depiction of the scene where the childhood friend appears at the doorstep of the now adolescent nayika asking for drinking water and the nayika's efforts to hide his flirtation with her from her mother by distracting her with a tall story about her friend choking on the water she gave him to drink was well received by the audience and was representative of Valli's expertise and finesse.

Valli ended the evening's performance with her favorite Thillana, in Kuntaalavaraali ragam which was composed by Balamuralikrishna. It was very brisk and ended the concert on a high note.

Those in the audience that were traditional-minded missed not having a Mangalam, while those who were enamored by her performance that evening were disappointed that they could not give her a standing ovation because Valli did not return to the stage after the Thillana. Fortunately, the performance's

unusually late start that evening combined with the relatively short repertoire that was presented did not take away from the audience's appreciation of the art or the artist.

Special mention needs to be made of Valli's young accompanying musicians. Randhini Ramanathan was a sheer delight. Her melodious voice and especially her modulation to suit the different moods presented by the dancer were exceptional. The nattuvanar, C. K. Vasudevan, a student of Valli, exhibited great control and dynamics with the cymbals. The mridangist, Shaktivel Muruganatham, the violinist, Kalaiarasan Ramanathan were all worthy in their own right and provided excellent support to Valli.

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