

Ranjani & Gayathri

Carnatic Vocal Concert (May 21, 2006)

A Review by Yeshwant Prabhu

Ranjani and Gayatri started their concert with Tiruvottiyur Thyagayya's majestic varnam Chalamela in the raga Darbar. The clarity of their pronunciation of the sahitya of the kriti, their diction, and the smoothness of their rendition was extraordinary from the beginning to the end. The violinist, H. N. Bhaskar, played very well; the smoothness of his bowing matched the smoothness of the vocalists. The mridangist, K. Arun Prakash, played with restraint, contributing to an impressive and flawless beginning. Next they sang Muthuswami Dikshitar's Swaminatha Paripalaya in the raga Nattai, with superb swaraprasthara in the end. The cascading notes flowed like the torrential waters of the Niagara Falls. Although I was a bit overwhelmed by the gush and speed of their swaras, it was, nevertheless, very pleasant to hear. Next Ranjani sang a beautiful alapana in raga Chakravaka. It was methodical and well developed. And she brought out the ragaswaroopa of Chakravaka smoothly and effortlessly, expounding the raga and building the alapana with extraordinarily beautiful sangatis. The violinist rendered the alapana very well also. I must say that it is not easy to shine while playing for great singers of Ranjani and Gayatri's caliber. But Bhaskar managed to impress with a smooth, flawless rendition. The sisters sang Tyagaraja's kriti Sugunamule with bhaava in very appropriate madhyama kaala. They sang kalpana swaras here also in their trademark brisk flow. Then Gayatri sang an astonishing but brief alapana in Mukhari, followed by a soulful rendering of Neelakanta Sivan's kriti Endraikku Sivakripai. I have heard them sing this twice before – in Chennai and Bridge Water, New Jersey – but I will never get tired of listening to this kriti. Fortunately the mridangist knew how to support the vocalists for this song: by playing the bridangam to the absolute minimum, so that at times the rasikas barely heard it. His play was as it should be for this kriti.

They chose Thyagaraja's Etaa unnara in Kalyani as the main item of the concert. Gayatri's alapana was brilliant, especially in the higher octave. The violinist too shined with an excellent alapana. The tani aavartana was pleasant and subdued. Next they sang Thyagaraja's kriti Vararaaga laya in Chenchu Kambodhi at a very brisk speed, perhaps as a warm up to the Ragam Tanam Pallavi. But that doesn't quite explain why almost every musician who sings this kriti sings it exceedingly fast. (Thyagaraja's Sarasa saamadhana in Kapinarayani, Telisi ramachandra in Poornachandika, Nenarunchi nannu in Maalavi, and Nagumomu ganaleni in Abheri, too, almost always, are sung at excessive speed; the question is: Why?) Is it appropriate to plead with Rama very fast, as if to tell him "you better hurry!", or should the vocalist plead taking time, without rushing, to conform to the meaning of the song?

They chose Hindolam raga for their Ragam Tanam and Pallavi. Both Ranjani and Gayatri took turns in rendering elaborate and exquisite alapanas. Mere words fail to describe the heavenly beauty of their alapanas. Rare, delicate, extraordinary and scintillating sangatis flowed almost continuously, overwhelming the rasikas. I barely had enough time to comprehend, grasp, and appreciate the beauty of the sangatis. As wonderful as their alapanas were, I believe the effect on the listener would have been even more profound had the sisters given a little bit more time between sangatis to allow the intricate sangatis to properly sink into the minds of the rasikas. For pallavi they chose Dikshitar's Neerajakshi Kamakshi, which I thought was most appropriate, because I can not think of a more beautiful kriti in that raga. There is a saying: For sheer beauty Merusamana in Mayamalawagowla, Neerajakshi in Hindola".

For the last part of the concert they chose Purandara Dasa's Jagododdhaarana, and a Tamil folk song. For me the surprise of the concert was their rendition of Meera's mellifluous bhajan: Paayoji maine Ram Ratan Dhana Paayo. It reminded me of Bhimsen Joshi's recording of the same song forty years ago. Saint Tukaram's Marati Abhang: Tujhe naama maata was soul-stirring. At the request of a rasika, they sang a Tillana in raga Paras at the end.

Their sruti shudda, swarashuddha and sahitya enunciation were impeccable. The concert was laden with bhaava and well-balanced. Also, the sisters matched evenly, which is a rarity in duo singing, and their voices blended and complemented one another. And I dare say that even the most persnickety of the rasikas found nothing to pick on in this concert.

Their Hindolam was still ringing in my head at work in my office the next Monday! It was an extraordinary and most memorable concert that I will remember for a very long time.

A word must be said about the meticulous attention to details that the organizers gave at this concert. The ticket counter was set, the tables were arranged, and the volunteers were waiting graciously for the arrival of the rasikas almost an hour before the concert! This rarely happens at functions like this. And the concert started on time.

About the author: Yeshwant Prabhu is a Chemist and an aspiring vocalist. He learnt Carnatic vocal music from Flutist Sri Gopalakrishna Iyyer and Composer/Vocalist Sri T.N.Bala.