

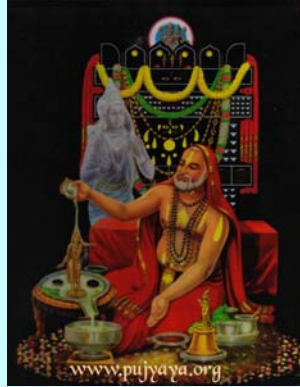
Concert Sudha Raghunathan - An enchanting experience
Feb 9 2008



(Photo: Courtesy Mr.Simon Shanker/Shri Sridhar)

I had missed the first part of the two day series of concerts by Smt. Sudha Raghunathan as part of the Mandalibheshekam Cultural Festival of Sri Sivan Kovil, Singapore. But today I was hell bent on not missing it. And how lucky I was that I made it to the hall. What an enthralling experience!! An ethereal musical performance from the lady with an enchanting smile, as enchanting as her music itself.

Even though I have been writing often on various subjects, this is probably my maiden attempt to summarize a music concert. Not being very knowledgeable about the fundamentals and nuances of classical carnatic music (*பரிக்ரமணியேன் பரிக்ரமணியேன்*), my summary can only be that of a layman's expressions of whatever appealed to his heart, without attempting to understand why. Let me begin this maiden attempt of mine with a prayer to my Guru Shri Raghavendra Theertharu to help me do justice to this enchanting experience.



The hall was jampacked. It was so difficult to get a seat. Thanks to Kirthi–Gowri couple I got a decent seat from where I could not only enjoy the music itself but also could experience the artiste’s expressions as she sang.



In any review of a music concert we usually read about the artiste warming up with certain initial numbers, getting into the rhythm, hitting the peak and winding down towards the close. But here was a concert where the artiste hit the peak with the very first word that she uttered (“Gajananam”) and kept it up till the very end. The audience lapped up every minute of it. At the end the standing ovation that the artiste received from the audience was a standing testimony to it!



(photo: Changi Temple Vinayaka, courtesy Shri Sridhar)

She started off smoothly with the ever popular “Mahaganapatim”. As much as it was a tribute to Lord Ganesha, it also set the mood for the evening. Effortless singing, very rich in “bhava” and carrying the audience with every note.



And then came the electrifying moment. Just as soon as she finished with the first number, even as the applause was still ringing, she started off with “Andhariki Vandanumu”. Half the audience immediately latched on to the famous song that she

was getting into beginning with the second line of it, but the rest took a moment to realize where she was going. After that single moment of stunned realization, the whole hall was applauding cheerfully hailing the divinely composition of the Saint Thiagaraja “*Entharo mahanubhavalu andhariki vandanamu*”. One could see that she was singing this timeless composition from her heart. One could experience the Saint himself offering his “*vandanamu*” to Lord Rama, His consort, His brothers and Anjaneya. One could experience the artiste paying tribute to her Guru and others who had shaped her life. And one could also sense Sudha using this song to thank her audience. In fact if I was not mistaken, at one stage in the song, she was indeed sweeping the audience with a gentle wave of her hand. The richness of the emotion in the song as originally injected by the divine composer Thiagaraja, in chaste telugu, was excellently brought out with a genuine humility by the musician in Sudha.



Next she was singing in praise of Lord Muruga, in Tamil. It was sweetness all over again in this piece. When she was appealing “*Kanda Vaa Kanda Vaa*” it evoked two different experiences the mother calling her child invitingly and the wife appealing to her husband entreatingly both at the same time. And the way she was singing “*Valli Deivanai Manaalane*” musically stressing on the word “*Manaalane*” she brought to our mental eye the happily married Muruga as compared to the bala sanyasi “*Palani Murugan*”. The voice was pure honey and the expression out of the world.



And then she launched into “Alai Payudhe Kanna”. As to be expected there was a lusty cheering from the people in the hall, even as she went into this all time favourite number. The audience was in rapt attention lapping up every twist and turn she brought into this song. Even though this was a song I have heard so many times, I could experience a different treatment to the song from Sudha. Her embellishing the song adding some change of swara from the normal (for example her trade mark stretching the “Pa” in a higher note followed by a quick “yu” in a lower note and then allowing “dhey” to run its course making it into a “Paaaaayudheyyyy”) made it further beautiful. When she was singing “nEramAvAdú aRiyAmalE miga vinOdamaAna muraLidhAra un Ananda mOhana vEnu gAnamadil en manam alai payudhe” she was so much in communication with Lord Krishna that we were experiencing Radha & Krishna amidst us. சுதா ரகுநாதன் அவர்களே, இந்த இடத்தில் எங்கள் மனதை கொள்ளை கொண்டு அலை பாய வைத்து விட்டீர்களே !

Following this and after a serene song on Ambal, came the masterpiece of the evening. Sudha treated the audience to a beautiful elaboration of the raga Sankarabaranam, in all its majesty and nuances.



It was a fascinating journey, even for the uninitiated like me, that she took the entire audience through. It was like a guided tour of a grand palace, rich with its tapestries, precious stones, sprawling ornate courtyards, sculptures, wooden carvings and all the time particularly inviting attention to the grandeur of each. It was that part of the concert where the excitement and enjoyment of the audience gradually transformed into a mood of peaceful and serene contemplation. The entire gathering was mesmerized collectively. The restless mind went into a state of peaceful awakening. It was a fascinating, riveting and soothing experience by turns. When it concluded, the deafening applause brought the roof down!



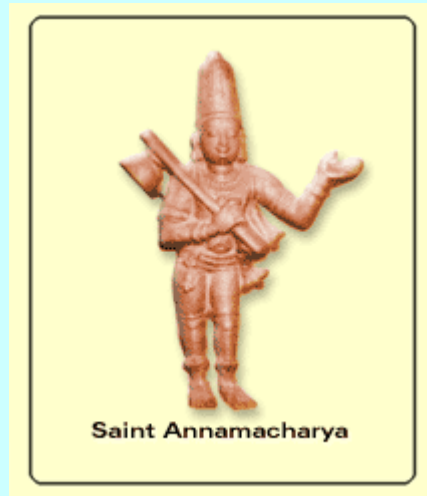
Then she smoothly launched into the well known song “Swara Raga Sudha”, which as Shri Shankar later pointed out to the audience, carries her own name in it. It was an exquisite and fascinating display by a maestro accompanied by two super musicians, Shri Sivaraman on Violin and Shri Sundaresan on Mridangam. The two accompanying musicians added a great lustre to the masterly singing by the maestro herself. If Sudha’s treatment of this raga was all majesty and beauty, Shri Sivaraman added a dose of sweetness to it with his pleasing violin and Shri Sundaresan brought a galloping rhythm to it.

Hereabouts there was a small break in the proceedings with the Organizers honoring the Artistes followed by a brief but incisive analysis of the concert by Shri Shankar, Principal, SIFAS, Singapore. Known for his erudite and in depth knowledge of carnatic music, he pointed out some intricate details about the concert. For example, how during her elaboration of the raga, Sudha brought in traces of another raga (Yaman Kalyan) into it and made it an out of the world experience. He appropriately said she is not just a musician but a musicologist too. Musicology is defined as “a scholarly study of music”. He also paid tribute to the very accomplished accompanying musicians.

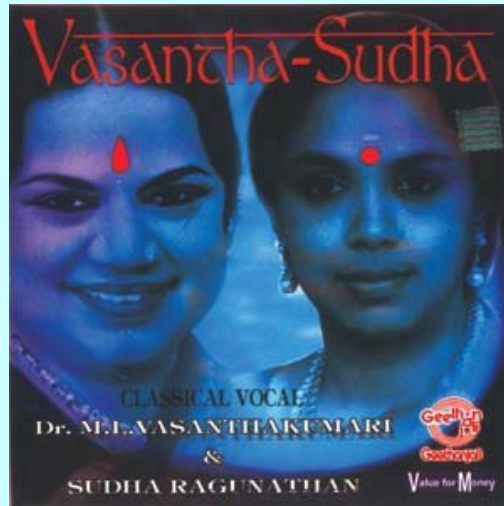
Moving on, the concert entered the concluding phase. In this phase of the concert Sudha was in a very devotional mood. She started off with the deeply moving “பிறந்த மகனை தாய் மறந்தாலும் பெற்ற தாயை மகன் மறந்தாலும் நமசிவாய உன்னை மறவேன்” and went into “எப்படி பாடினரோ அடியார் எப்படி பாடினரோ”.



And then when she was singing the great song written by Shri Rajaji and immortalized by the legend M.S., “*Kurai Ondrum Illai*”. Even as she was getting into the first line of the song the audience showed their enthusiasm for it with a huge buzz around the hall. I could see around me quite a few humming the song along with her.



Following this popular devotional geetham, her full throated and energetic rendering of Shri Annamacharya's "Brahmam Okate" simply sent the audience, which was already in a mood of reverence and devotion by this time, into waves of raptures. By this time, many were silently singing every song along with her and experiencing it.



If I remember right, it was at this juncture that Sudha herself spoke and shared her feelings with the audience. When she said that she placed herself and her music at the feet of the Lord and that at one point in the concert, for her she & the audience did not exist but it was all music and the Lord in the temple she was emotionally overwhelmed and she took a pause. It could be seen that at that point she touched something deep inside each one of us in the audience. There were a lot of moist eyes in the audience. I recall reading somewhere *"where there were tears of ecstasy there God was verily present"*.



Following on, she was offering a musical worship to Arunachaleswara and Sri Ramana Maharishi. With a trembling vibrant voice when she was singing the lines from Shri Ramanar's Aksharamana Malai “அருணாசலம் என அகமே நினைப்பவர் அகத்தை வேற்றுப்பாய் அருணாசல” and entreatingly singing “Guru Ramana”, the audience was moved to tears. The lady sitting in front of me could not control the flowing tears and surely there were many wet hankies in the hall.



And just as were thinking we are at the very end of the concert, Sudha sprang a pleasant surprise on everyone with her “Katrinile varum geetham”.



It is an ever green hit of a song from the movie “Meera” written by Kalki and sung by the one and only M.S. On Jan 10 2006, in a report with a heading “MS and the Tamil Isai Movement” The Hindu said ... “the film `Meera’ not only made her a national icon, Kalki's “Katrinile Varum Geetham” became part of M.S. mystique ever after”.

This song was born in the year 1945. And even after 63 years it was a pleasure to hear this song that too in one of the best musical voices of the new millennium. When she was singing the lines, “கண்கள் பனித்திட பொங்கும் கீதம் கல்லும் கனியும் கீதம் ... காற்றினிலே வரும் கீதம்” in her enchanting voice there was indeed a gentle breeze blowing across the hall which was basically in the open air with an erected ceiling and it was indeed “Katriniley vandha geetham”. It was a phenomenally mellifluous rendering by Sudha with very soft notes.



And then when she ended the evening with the “Mangalam”, the dignitaries stood up, the entire audience stood up in unison and there was a non stop ovation as a tribute to an enchanting concert. Thus ended a fascinating evening.



Written by:
V.Prabhakar Rao
Singapore
Feb 9 2008
