



HEART-WARMING: *Sudha Raghunathan at Hamsadhwani.*

Of serenity and sparkle

EXPERIENCE When the whole gathering is swept by a powerful current of common emotion, the music which flows is bound to be spiritually enhanced.

MUSICSCAN

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A fortnightly column on trends, concepts and personalities

Since the solid foundation of Carnatic music is the worshipful contemplation of the Divinity in its various manifestations, attending a performance of Carnatic music is, in a way, like visiting a temple. Of course, regular visits to the local temple aren't always an intensely emotional experience, but are normally just a public expression of one's faith. In the same way, regular attendance in Carnatic music concerts isn't always a soul-stirring experience, and often amounts only to a routine cultural ritual and no more.

But there are certain significant devotional occasions — such as a pilgrimage one makes to a distant and famous place of worship, or a very sacred and festive day when there's a large and animated congregation in the local temple and the holy statues are decorated splendidly and special prayers are recited by the priests — when one does feel transported to a spiritually elevated level.

Equally moving can be a visit to the temple when one is going through an emotionally turbulent experience, either of extreme joy or intense sorrow. In the same way, if you imagine a whole assembly in a Carnatic music concert — including all the performers and the entire audience — being swept by a powerful current of common distress, the music which flows is bound to be spiritually enhanced, providing an intensely emotional experience to the performers and listeners alike.

Brilliance and beauty

That was precisely what had happened in Sudha Raghunathan's concert at Hamsadhwani last year, when the Sabha's immensely popular founder-secretary, R. Ramachandran, was battling for his life in a hospital. As noted in this column, the musicians and the whole audience were acutely conscious of RRC's absence, and the atmosphere was saturated with nostalgia and a worshipful spirit; and whatever Sudha sang that evening was sublime and beautiful, especially the way she had distilled the essence of the raga Bhairavi and dispensed it like perfume to the audience. And since our earnest wish for his recovery and return home was never fulfilled, we could only think of Sudha's concert in retrospect as a memorable requiem for RRC. (Musicscan, June 8, 2007).

It was perhaps inevitable that echoes of that recital reverberated in the collective memory of the large gathering at Hamsadhwani as Sudha sang at the same venue this year; and the music once again acquired a heart-warming quality which lifted it to an extremely high level of excellence.

As highlights went, what was true of Bhairavi then was equally true of Sankarabharanam now. Seasoned rasikas are intimately aware of the many subtle shades and nuances of this basic raga which is heard so often in the concert hall, but this time there were some unusual passages of exceptional brilliance and beauty in the elaboration of the melody and the improvisation of swaras. And ideally for this number, the choice of the composition was Tyagaraja's "Swara Raaga Sudha," which sings of the spiritual virtues of blending music with devotion. (It also seemed to bear the singer's signature, though perhaps that wasn't intended really!).

Only a little earlier in the recital she had sung Reeti-gowla and "Janani Ninuvina" (Subbaraya Sastri) in a weighty manner, with a particularly spirited and colourful sequence anchored on the nishadam in the swaraprastharam. And aptly sandwiched between these reposeful numbers was a brisk and breezy rendering of Dikshitar's "Anandamritha-Akarshini" in the raga Amritavarshini.

Sensitive support

The sensitive support provided by all the accompanists — B. Raghavendhra Rao (violin), Patri Satish Kumar (mridangam) and R. Raman (morsing) — enhanced the meditative quality of the music. And one couldn't fail to notice that the morsing played as the second percussion instrument sounded far more forceful than it normally does in a marginal role.

Serene and sparkling

Sudha Raghunathan is an extremely popular musician who travels widely and performs frequently, and we can be sure her music must always be superb wherever she happens to be singing. But there can be no doubt at all that on these two occasions at Hamsadhwani she had attained an unusually high degree of excellence, judged even by her own superior standard. I do have the impression that the calmness required by the given contexts might have inspired her to moderate her characteristically vivacious style a little, resulting in a marvellous blend of serenity and sparkle. Incidentally, her concert this year took place on International Women's Day; and it was touching to find among the audience RRC's beloved wife, Padma, whose infinite moral and active support was surely one of the vital factors which had made his grand dream called Hamsadhwani come true.