

SUDHA IN CONCERT AT HAMSADHWANI

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Requiem for Ramachandran**

Whatever Sudha sang that evening was sublime and beautiful, but her leisurely rendering of Bhairavi and 'Balagopala' deserves special mention.

As we had noted in this column a couple of weeks ago, the most significant reason for the survival and success of Carnatic music in the culturally volatile modern world is the inherent harmony between the orthodox devotional spirit of the traditional music and the basic moral attitude of the majority of Carnatic musicians and rasikas, who never tend to lose their strong spiritual bearings in spite of all the dramatic changes occurring progressively in the whole cultural environment and in their own outlook and lifestyles.

This fundamental truth was demonstrated convincingly in a recent vocal recital given by Sudha Raghunathan at Hamsadhwani in South Chennai.

Ever since this Sabha was set up 17 years ago, there has been a consistently strong rapport between many accomplished Carnatic musicians and the permanent members of the organisation who constitute a very large and intensely receptive audience.

A detailed explanation of the basic factors accounting for such a special bond can be found in the article, 'An adventure called Hamsadhwani' in the Chennai edition of the Friday Review for Dec. 8, 2006 (online archives, thehindu.com).

Sabha and Secretary

Equally impressive has been the extremely close and emotional relationship which had developed gradually between the Sabha and its founder-secretary R. Ramachandran (alias RRC). As the institution flourished and became a predictable venue for superior performances which would become benchmarks of excellence at every level of accomplishment, the general body of members came to feel not only respect and admiration for their dynamic and genial secretary, but also gratitude and great affection.

RRC continued to be as energetic as ever even after turning 80 a few years ago, and was brimming with vitality and enthusiasm during the early months of Hamsadhwani's latest annual festival spread over the winter, spring and summer.

But suppressed health problems suddenly resulted in his spending several weeks recently inside a hospital, and he did not survive the ordeal.

Even in this last distressing stage of his life, RRC felt greatly concerned about the concluding events of the music festival which he was forced to miss, just as he was anxious about his dear wife Padma and their children, without whose unlimited moral and active support he couldn't have ventured so successfully on his daring musical mission.

Meditative music

One of those events was Sudha Raghunathan's vocal recital, which was heard by an overflowing house with a degree of concentration which was unprecedented even by the very high standard set up by the regular Hamsadhwani audience. The musicians and the whole sabha were acutely conscious of RRC's absence, and the atmosphere was saturated with nostalgia and a worshipful spirit. That Sudha is one of the finest Carnatic musicians today is a well-known fact which needs no repetition. But there are some occasions when even the best musicians perform better than they usually do.

That's when the artists and rasikas are all supercharged with emotion and the music acquires an extremely meditative quality.

Whatever Sudha sang that evening was sublime and beautiful, but her leisurely rendering of Bhairavi and Dikshitar's kriti, 'Balagopala' deserves special mention. She distilled the essence of the raga in the alapana, neraval ('Neela Neerada Sareera...') and swaraprasthara alike and dispensed it like perfume to the audience.

The unobtrusive accompaniment provided by violinist M.P.Gopinath and percussionists P.Satish Kumar and K.V.Gopalakrishnan helped to preserve the prayerful mood.

In Western church music, we come across the Latin expression, 'Requiem' , which is a solemn musical service for the repose of departed souls. Perhaps the most famous and frequently performed requiem is an unfinished masterpiece composed by Mozart in 1791 towards the tragic end of his very short life (and completed by his disciple Sussmayr later on).

Though its lyrics are in obscure Latin, the soulful sound of the choruses, solo voices, organ and orchestra transcends all barriers of language and melts the hearts of sensitive listeners anywhere in the world.

Spiritual tenor

An English translation of just two lines figuring in the first and last verses is enough to conjure up the spiritual tenor of the whole recital:

'Grant them eternal rest, O Lord, and may perpetual light shine upon them!'

It is true that as Sudha Raghunathan sang earnestly in the concert under review, RRC was still under intensive care in the hospital and the whole gathering was praying for his speedy recovery and early return home to resume his great unfinished adventure called Hamsadhwani. But since that intense collective wish was not fulfilled by divine dispensation, we can only think of Sudha's moving recital now in retrospect as a memorable requiem for Ramachandran.