

Swathi Thirunal - the musician prince

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It is a pleasant duty to associate myself with the celebrations of the Swathi Thirunal Day at the Thyagaraja Sangeetha Vidwath Samajam for my devotion to Carnatic music amounts to a haunting passion and my veneration for the great composers amounts to ardent worship.

To be born a prince in a native state in India, to be the object of the adulation of millions of loyal subjects, to be protected in affluence and power by the omnipotent British empire and yet to be remembered by posterity mainly as the composer of devotional music like the saints and savants of our sacred land seems incredible. Swathi Thirunal was the heir to the throne of the verdant state of Travancore even in his mother's womb. As a child he lisped in many languages and became an accredited scholar in his early teens. He created his immortal compositions before he shuffled off his mortal coils at the early age of thirtythree. Those whom the Gods love die young and this chosen prince was snatched away from the mundane world leaving an eternal message in tuneful numbers which will outlive sculptured stone and gilded monuments.

I have often wondered at the enduring vitality of carnatic music. The great songs being sung today are charged with the same spirit and sentiment undimmed in intensity since the time of their conception and creation. Carnatic music can be considered recent and contemporary in the annals of our ancient country for even the earliest composers like Purandaradas and Ramadas lived only a few centuries ago. But their music carries the great surges of thought and passion flowing from Vedic times. The Vedas are traced to divine sources for nothing so perfect, so sonorous, could have been the product of human minds. Carnatic music though of human origin contains the essence of the Vedas and the Upanishads - Gitatyakshila Upanishadsaramu - and will therefore endure as long as there is human life on earth. These composers from Ramadas to Swathi Thirunal have been inspired by a common theme, the immanence of God, the beauty of His creations and the role of man in the universe.

There is a well known saying that music existed even before human speech was discovered. This is not a paradox for 'Nadha' represents sound as it directly makes it impact on the human mind. Language is the vehicle to convey such thought and sentiment. Obviously the most suitable medium is Sanskrit, the language of the Gods, in which greatest compositions of Swathi Thirunal were made. His ragamalikas Pannagendrasayana, Kamalajasya and Bhavayami are masterpieces of literary sculpture

with many splendoured facets. Each raga sounds more attractive in contrast or in consonance with those that precede or succeed it. They are the hues of the rainbow and who would think of adding an extra colour or altering the intensity? It is a little surprising that though Travancore is a neighbouring state the compositions of Swathi Thirunal became popular only in the last few decades in the other southern states. It was Muthiah Bhagavathar and Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer who enriched concert music by the inclusion of Swathi Thirunal's compositions. His famous Varnam Chalamela in Sankarabaranam has been chosen by musicians as a 'flying start' to major concerts.

There is a pardonable weakness in us to compare or balance the divine music from various inspired minds. Yielding of course to this weakness, I feel that Thyagaraja, like Shakespeare, was concerned with human passions and human feelings. He looked upon Rama as child, brother, mother, father, companion, teacher and philosopher. Dikshitar's approach has a Miltonic grandeur. He extolled the Lord as enshrined in the sacred temples. Swathi Thirunal's verse transports us to the prodigality of nature's creation - beautiful gardens of stately cedars and fragrant flowers, lofty mountains and boundless oceans. It is Wordsworth's luminous view of God's creation and the diction of the juvenile prince, his 'Padalalityam', casts a spell which lulls the sleepless into a pleasing trance and wakes us from slumber to sweet sensations. What sublime sounds emanate from Bhogindrasayinam in Kuntalavarali, Gobanandana in Bhushavali, and Sarasaksha in Pantuvarali?

How I wish I could sing them myself but as a passive but passionate listener. I derive comfort from the faith that music, like the quality of mercy, blesses those that receive as much as those that give. The Thyagaraja Sangeetha Vidwath Samajam affords such opportunities for us to enjoy a feast of music provided by maestro and amateur, by veteran and aspirant, in this hallowed temple of the saint of saints.
