

THE BRIDGE OF SOUND AND LIGHT⁺

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There is a three-fold pleasure in welcoming all of you to Ekambra Nivas, the home of my great father, sanctified by his presence and his ideals for over three decades and preserved by us as a sacred shrine of a thousand memories, all delightful, many inspiring and some almost sacrosanct.

First, we have with us some distinguished citizens who were associated with my father, in whom the name 'Alladi' evokes a measure of esteem and affection characteristic only of long and true friendship. Next, there is the group of bright-eyed young men of ambition and initiative working in that centre of advanced learning called MATSCIENCE the creation of which can be directly traced to their periodic meetings in this very hall where scientists of world renown had lectured at my personal invitation. Thirdly we have today with us some of the most gifted and reputed musicians of South India graciously offering you an evening of delicious delight and exalting experience. Among them we have the living embodiment of Carnatic music in its most traditional form, Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavathar endowed by divine dispensation with a sonorous voice which has been heard in ten thousand concerts for over half a century. Then there is Lalgudi Jayaraman whose charmed fingers have enmeshed the hearts of admiring audiences throughout our country, Tiruchi Sankaran and Vellore Ramabhadran those wizards of beat and rythm who have rocked the heads of millions to delightful distraction and Maharajapuram Santhanam, a true chip of the old block both in style and substance!

There is a peculiar appropriateness in their participation in the festivity today since Lalgudi Jayaraman is leaving shortly for the United States at the invitation of my old student V.K.Viswanathan, now a flourishing New Yorker, who was one of the first members of the theoretical physics group which met in this hall twelve years ago. I used to remark to Viswanathan and other students that a great revival of our ancient culture will come, paradoxical as it may seem, through a nascent enthusiasm in the new world for such learning since the great American nation has the extraordinary faculty for drawing intellectual and moral strength both from internal and external sources. I suggested that some constructive and effective method must be devised for inviting Indian musicians to

⁺ A talk by the author welcoming the guests on the evening of music arranged at his residence on 21.8.1971.

America and I am so happy that Viswanathan took my suggestion so seriously that with the cooperative effort of his friends he formed the East West Exchange centre which has now initiated this great endeavour by inviting Laludi Jayaraman and Flute Ramani to the United States.

To a western world steeped in the tradition of Bach and Beethoven and charged with the scientific triumphs of Newton and Einstein, what has Carnatic music special or particular to offer? I hope to reply convincingly in just one sentence. Carnatic music is the best medium for transmitting to the new world the intellectual, moral and spiritual values of this ancient land whose historical sources can be traced to the dawn of human civilisation. Though Carnatic music in the concert form is only a few centuries old, its spirit, content and substance are derived from the eternal fountains of Hindu thought - the Vedas, the Upanishads and the immortal epics.

The vital source behind our music is Bhakthi or devotion to the Almighty through the outpourings of the human spirit. The transcendence and immanence of God are symbolised in the trinity, Brahma, Vishnu and Siva representing the source, the sustenance and span not only of human life but of all creation. The spirit of Hinduism lies in establishing the consistency of two apparently contradictory ways of thought, the inviolable dignity of the individual with his power to evolve his own destiny on the one hand and his total surrender to the all pervasive power of God. In every sense this attempt at reconciliation is also characteristic of modern physical thought in understanding the microscopic and the macroscopic structure of the universe of space, time and matter.

The characteristic feature of our music is that it is enshrined in the form of keerthanas which are sonnet-like compositions mostly by a trinity of musicians in the eighteenth century, Thevagaraja, Dikshitar and Shyamasastri. Hyperbolic as it may seem, the musical strains of these sonnets carry the surges of Hindu thought from Vedic times to the modern era, fused by legend and lore, facts and fancies, sentiment and reason. These keerthanas are classified into patterns of melody or ragas. One great critic of Carnatic music, the Late Justice Venkatarama Iyer, has compared the raga classification of keerthanas to the classification of human faces! Is there not something more discernible in a human face when it meets our eye than from a knowledge of the precise dimensions of its components? The raga conveys the mood and the emotion in its characteristic manner - the august dignity of the Sankarabharana (the Jewel of Gods) or the honeyed strain of Mohana (the enchanter) or the mellifluous grace of Kalyani (the blessed). However, the structure of the raga is so well defined and understood that

the slightest deviation from the normal would jar the ear or raise the eyebrows of the feeblest of critics!

I take this opportunity to suggest to my good friends Lalgudi and Ramani that in their concert series they may include what I consider as five famous keerthanas 'pregnant with celestial fire'. The most treasured place in my heart and mind is taken by Ksheerasagara Savana in the raga Deva-candari. In just four couplets, it summarises the message of the trinity of epics, the Bhagavatham, Ramayanam and Mahabharatham fusing into it a fragment of modern history - the redemption of Bhakta Ramadas.

Another keerthana I suggest is Vathapi Ganapathim Bhaje invoking the blessings of Lord Vigneshwara. A task well begun is half done and any task begins well if we appeal to the Lord who prevents the incidence of obstacles emanating from unkind circumstance or voluntary interference from foes or doubtful friends. Even the ageless Siva with his limitless power Akshavalingavibhu is supposed to commence his task through such invocations. Muthuswamy Dikshithar has set the song in the vibrant lilting tune of the raga Hamsadwani to set the mood and pace of the concert to follow. This has been the practice for Chembai during a whole life-career of music and Lalgudi must have been fortunate to accompany him on many occasions in an unimpeded march to success.

The Piece de resistance of any concert is the major keerthana sung in leisured detail and a suitable choice would be Theyagaraja's Enthuku Peddala in the raga Sankarabharana. It is a yearning for the wisdom of the sages and an appeal to banish ignorance and prejudice that stifle human endeavour and imagination.

When seeking the effulgence of God, man has to be cautious of the shortcomings in human life, of ugliness and deceit which distract him from his main pursuit for Niravathi Sukha or true happiness. He should not waste his powers in idle effort to please mortal human beings. In the deliciously plaintive strains of Poori Kalyani, Shyama Sastri expressed human regret at precious hours wasted in attempting to obtain the favours of incorrigible misers.

What sweeter song could conclude the concert of Ramani and Lalgudi than Krishna Hae Vere in the raga Yamuna Kalyani. This has been chosen as the song of Ekambra Nivas for it is charged with the sweetness and grandeur of Krishna's beauty too rich for prose or poetry and transmissible only through music.

This song will be rendered today by Kamala Kailas who, while preserving her elegant originality, is attempting to follow the illustrious example of India's Queen of melody M.S. Subbulakshmi. She will be joined by my wife who wishes to express her gratitude to all of you, not through the dull prosaic medium of speech as I have done but through the song beckoning Lord Krishna, a name borne both by me and my son after that of my father in the true tradition of a Hindu family.

Carnatic music or the music of South India is not only an eternal source of sweet sensations and enthralling experiences: it is a bridge of sound and light from the hallowed rivers of our ancient land of singing saints to the golden gates of the new world of moon-bound astronauts.