

Review

Enchanting music, exquisite dance

- Raneer Kumar

e-mail: Raneer@journalist.com

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Day one of Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan's annual 'Sangeet Samaroh' saw stalwarts Ananda Shankar Jayant and T.M. Krishna share the stage in an evening of dance and music in Delhi. Saint Thyagaraja's ageless kritis woven together to form a garland that narrated the Ramayana formed the theme of Ananda's Bharatanatyam recital in the Kalakshetra style. Every song she chose was a gem in itself rendered with her inimitable artistic expression that pictured the sequences of the epic in live, as much as Thyagaraja's verbal expression did. This coupled with S. Venumadhav's full-throated vocal rendition enhanced the thematic signature piece of Ananda's solo presentation.

While the Madhyamavathi (*Alakalalladaga gani ya Ramuni...*) evokes the picturesque beauty of the young handsome Rama, Ananda conjures the picture of the Shiva dhanurbhanga with Rama taking the cue from his mentor rishi Vishwamitra and takes it forward to the Sita swayamvara scene where the blushing bride garlands the noble prince to the tunes of the lilting Madhyamavati's sweet swar bhol (musical notes), the stately Sankarabharanam seamlessly culminates in the majestic marriage. Since it is a 'utsava sampradaya keertana', the artiste thoughtfully instilled a few traditional ceremonies, for instance, the south Indian 'oonjal' (swing) where the newlyweds are placed on a decorated swing, through beautiful body kinetics. The theme proceeds to the expulsion of Rama from the kingdom along with his consort to *Sandehamunu teerpumaiyya...* in Ramapriya, a kriti in praise of the divine feet, where she enacts prince Bharata's arrival with Rama padukas (footwear) placed on his head in utter reverence to the charanam (verse) that speaks of this incident. The pure dance footwork (brief jati) to indicate the feet and the sacred footwear was brought out with sensitivity.

The post-Ayodhya happenings like Shoorpanaka's maiming, blessing Shabari, vanquishing Vaali, the bridge-building by vanara (monkeys) leading to the ultimate act of finding Sita and bringing her back after slaying the ten-headed Ravana of Lanka, serially displayed the srngara, bhakti, veera and karunya rasa in the lovely Hari Kambhoji (*Oka maata oka banamu*), Mukhari (*enthani ne varninthu Shabari bhagyamu*), Jayanthasri (*Marugelara O Raghava...*) and Panthuvrali (*Appa Rama bhakti...*). The abhinaya to *Marugelara* needs a special mention for the pathos with which she displayed a shocked and distressed Vaali who falls to the ground with Rama's arrow that hits him unawares. The vocalist's tonal rendition mirrored the distress as much as Ananda's overwhelming grief at the end of one's life! It was a heart-rending scene that she could present in realistic terms! The cost-intensive live accompaniment to dance in a city other than that of the artiste is a rarity these days, but Ananda, true to her Kalakshetra roots, had Renuka Prasad on the nattuvangam, T.P. Balasubramaniam on the mridangam and K. Saikumar on the violin, a troupe that has always been an embellishment to her dance.

The redoubtable T.M. Krishna had us all eating out of his hand with an exclusive evening of exquisite compositions. There was no adherence to the Carnatic concert format which usually irks a conservative aficionado, but when the musician can mesmerize you, formalities are of no consequence. The Thodi swarajati of Shyama Sastri *Raave Himagiri kumari...* in soothing subdued tones was an idyllic opening to the recital that was to be followed by rare gems from the vocalist's repertoire. This swara-sahitya piece was rendered in a tone suffused with pleading devotion which is the trademark of Shyama Sastri's compositions. There was longing in his tone, there was plea, there was pathos edged with spiritual joy and fulfillment. The emotive output of these feelings was conveyed with astonishing clarity that went straight to the heart. The nerval at *Kalyani Kanchi Kamakshi nee paadamey* reflected the composer's mood and never did Krishna betray his own prowess like others of his tribe. It looked as if he held his artistry on leash, never straying away from the dominant mood of the song even as he scaled the upper octaves. The timbre of his voice did not run away with his technique genius but remained true to the spirit of the song.

Akkarai Subbalakshmi on the violin trailed his course loyally but at times during the concert was not able to match his reach and subtlety. On the other hand, the mridangist was on the sarvalaghu beat which melted and merged with the vocalist's gentility. *Venkatasaila Vihara* in Hameer Kalyani followed the Thodi with elegance in vilamba kalai. The unhurried rendition was something of a relief to tune into from the racy run-of-the-mill usually adopted by Carnatic vocalists who are on a skill display parade for most part. The alliterative lyric derived lustre from Krishna's superb clarity as he carried us along the charanam - *gantini girini gopuramula manimaya mantapamulanu* with the stress on the last two words of line which created an illusion of scaling a mountain peak! That a song could create a picture seemed possible only with a musician like Krishna.

He was in his full form for the evening or so it seemed as he began the taanam (close to tarana) in the first cycle of speed slowly escalating it like a breathless wonder. The wizardry was not one lightning paced exhibition of his prowess but an immersing rendezvous with rhythm. The taanam was a phase wise rhythmic exposition or so it seemed and cannot be dismissed in one sentence. At best it could be appreciated by taking recourse to imagery. Phase one was like the deceptively placid waters of a deep lake; phase two resembled the ocean throwing up wave after wave without a gap the following one always outdoing the previous in velocity and finally rippling towards the shore; the third phase was higher in volume, stronger in pitch like climbing a mountain with all the energy and drive one can muster, while the final phase was like trekking through a dense jungle axing obstructive branches as we chart our path arriving at the destination. He landed with the captivating Chaturdasha ragamalika (garland of 14 raga), a Dikshitar enchantress to the pallavi, *Sri Vishwanatham bhajeham*. It was evidently the highlight of the evening with the 14 raga: Sri, Arabhi, Gowri, Nata, Gowla, Mohana, Saama, Lalita, Bhairavi, Saranga, Sankarabharanam, Kambhoji, Devakriya and Bhoopalam followed by viloma swara (rendering of swara in the reverse order of raga) combining and circling back to the first Sri raga. Krishna's mellifluous tonal quality can only enhance a raga and here was a medley that turned into the best ever multi-raga blend that was sweet to savour.

Raneer Kumar, a journalist for the past two decades, has worked with mainstream newspapers from Hyderabad. She later took to freelancing for The Hindu in art and culture as their art critic. Raneer has many articles, reviews in music, dance and drama published to her credit.

