

Of tangled wires and black boxes

ADDRESS Excerpts from the speech of Gopalkrishna Gandhi, West Bengal Governor.

“I had the privilege of first hearing Sri Lalugudi Jayaraman some forty years ago in the musically-charged town of Thanjavur, in a large hall adjoining what used to be called Rajah’s Choultry. The audience was seated on the floor. The acoustics were poor, but the appreciation rich.

“The air was hot but the atmosphere pleasant; children wailed but no cell phones interrupted the concert with potted melodies. Lalgudi looked much the same as he does today except that, he had a head of jet black hair. He enjoyed himself even as the audience savoured every moment of the concert. The whole thing would not have cost the organisers more than five thousand rupees. Lalgudi moved from pallavi to thillana effortlessly and without any fuss.

“Today concerts are held in far greater comfort for artiste and listener, but there is fuss in the air; fuss about the sound systems about the lighting ‘effects.’ Artistes and their accompanists spend an inordinate part of the limited time adjusting and re-adjusting the amplification, often betraying very short tempers. Each member of the ensemble demands individual attention from harassed sound technicians. Today, technology is not to the aid of music as much as music the aid of technology.

“And then the music party itself is something to reckon with. Lalgudi did not come to that Thanjavur concert with a whole battalion of accompanists. I think they were three in all. Today a mini audience can be seen on the stage. In the 1960s when the morsing and ganjira were added to MS’s accompanying party (apart from ‘fiddle’ Sundaresa Iyer, ‘ghattam’ Kothandarama Iyer and ‘mridangam’ T.K.Murthy, Rajaji, seeing the enlarged group leaving Kalki Gardens, said to Sri Sadasivam, ‘En Sadasivam, audience-aiyum kooda azhachindu porela?’ (Are you taking the audience along) Today, seeing the instrumentation that goes with concerts, Rajaji would probably say ‘oru industrial exhibition amaikka porel polirukka!’ (Looks as if you are going to set up an industrial exhibition). Before hearing ‘Vatapi Ganapatim,’ we have to see a whole architecture of machines through tangles of wires and innumerable black boxes.

“Classical music presupposed a certain leanness of externals, contrasting with the amplitude of its ‘within.’ It is



Gopalkrishna Gandhi.

PHOTO: V. GANESAN

therefore with profound respect that I read Lalgudi telling *The Hindu* in an interview last week that he wants to delve deeper into ‘the ocean of music.’ That was spoken by a true descendant of Tyagaraja.

“We all know of that wonderful new gadget, the GPS. An old practice that anticipated the GPS: place-specifications prefixed names in this part of the country. Great Carnatic musicians were known by their hometowns. Very modest places, villages, in fact, were made famous by the musicians that bore and bear those names. ‘Ariyakkudi’ ‘Chembai’ ‘Maharajapuram’ ‘Tirukkodikaval’ as in Krishna Iyer, ‘Musiri,’ ‘Semmangudi’ ‘Palani’ as in Subramania Pillai, ‘Tirumakudalu’ as in Chowdiah, ‘Kumbakonam’ as in Rajamanikkam Pillai, ‘Lalgudi’ Jayaraman. And even if ‘Thanjavur’ Balasaraswati and ‘Madurai’ S. Subbulakshmi brought to mind well-endowed towns, we know that those great artistes grew up in the most modest of circumstances.

Heritage conservationists

“Musicians need to be helped by the equivalent of heritage conservationists. Sabhas like the Music Academy are heritage conservationists. I would appeal to younger artistes in the classical tradition to bear this in mind the fact that they carry a heritage to be conserved rather than a skill to be turned into a commodity. “Classical music ought not to be the preserve of Academies; but ought it to become so productified as to become a ‘cash and carry’ affair? I do not have an answer to that question, just an anxiety. There is something to be said for the effort that was needed to set up the old gramophone record machine on which the 78 rpm would be placed, with the snake-gourd pin taking its

own time to get going. Now, when the CD can be slipped into cars while driving, on computers while working, walkmans while jogging, should that CD be giving us Tyagaraja, Dikshitar and Syama Sastri? Again I do not have an answer to the question. “To all devotees of classical music, in which category I include myself as an unworthy digit for I lack the *jnana*, I would say this: let us not confound classical music with crusty conservatism. But let us acknowledge that there is something called musical intelligence, musical intention and musical integrity – which, all three, go to make classical music classical. It is only then that a classical musician can conserve and enrich, continue and contribute, protect and renew.

“I should also add that what is intrinsically valuable is, by definition, un-proud. Senior classical artistes have made their contribution. Younger classical artistes must make theirs, not by some prudish touch-the-notches, but by an innately modest recognition of their trusteeship. To be authentic and real but not be puffed-up about it is not easy. But it is important, I think, for younger artistes to attempt that balance.

“Rasa is not and cannot be monochromatic. One can want to start the day with the Suprabhatam, listen to baul music at noon and end hearing Begum Akhtar at night, without being infidel... I therefore laud Sri Jayaraman’s composing highly successful music for the film ‘Sringara.’

“In bestowing on Lalgudi the Lifetime Achievement Award, I do not know if we are celebrating a Lifetime of Achievement or the Achievement of a Lifetime. Be that as it may, for our generation which is co-extensive with your span on this earth, Lalgudi has been an inspiration.

“There is in Tamil, an untranslatable word – *aravamudam*, the nectar that does not satiate. Gliding in confidence, pausing in meditation, resuming with zeal, plangent one moment, joyful the next, you, sir, have done the violin ‘proud.’ Holding it in a way the West would call ‘upside down,’ you have taken the violin to the zenith of musical integrity, intelligence and intention. Your music cannot, will not, satiate for it has been raised from its seven-stringed *sadhana* by the bow of devotion, which informed your ancestor Tyagaraja who worshipped One who also held another kind of bow”.