17.2.63 A+3

MUSIC

Ersatz Classicism

CONSERVATION of tradition is a legitimate principle in art. But when tradition is equated with a diehard formalism, there would seem to be very little worth conserving in it. Most people have the vaguest notions about tradition, and look upon it as an inviolable dictate of the past to the present. To them tradition is an one-way flow of authority. Classicism, in this line of thought, is indistinguishable from conformism, an uncritical conformism at that. In music, this kind of conformism demands a rigid adherence to cliches, to a hackneyed treatment of ragas, to prescribed modes of delineation, and most absurdly to time-tested (but also time-worn) ragas.

But this is a pharisaical notion of tradition. And the sooner the quietus is given to it, the better for music. Far from being merely a channel to convey authority from the past to the present, tradition acts as a means of communication between the past and the present. It is a continuous and organic development wherein the past is redefined and revivified by the present and the present sustained by the past. Authority here is derived not from the oppressive dictates of conformist opinion but from a self-attesting insight that is born of faith. Classicism here is not formalistic imitation but artistic sincerity and balance.

Reading a recent notice of Balamurali Krishna's music, one is appalled by the attachment to ersatz classicism displayed by soi-disant purveyors of critical opinion. Balamurali Krishna is accused of handling unfamiliar ('apoorva') ragas in a large measure, of scaling up and down the gamut, thus rendering the raga formless, and lastly of introducing a falsetto in the natural register of his vocal range.

It will be interesting to know by what niceties of calculation 'apoorva ragas' and familiar ragas are to be apportioned in a performance. Also, whether such nice calculations derive from anything more respectable than one's prejudices and predilections. It may be admitted that some of the pleasure of listening to a concert consists in one's own ability to identify the ragas, and anticipate the singer's possible flights of fancy. In the case of many of the elderly musicians, the raga eleboration can be expected to describe a graph on unswerving coordinates. One prepares oneself for the obvious turn or glide, for the preordained flourish or pause. The music is utterly ground-controlled. The critic along with the others has the vicarious satisfaction of having operated the controls. The music he has heard is a personal achievement for him, for he can encompass it in his own imagination. And by certifying the music, he certifies himself. If on the other hand, he cannot identify a raga or anticipate a musical phrase, there is a sense of deflation. He feels guilty, impotent and angry. The critic has a right to feel all this perhaps, but if he rationalises his own inadequacies into critical canons, his criticism will be an appraisal of himself and not of the music. There is a simple way in which the organizers of a concert of Balamurali Krishna can help the critics 'alone and palely loitering.' They can give printed programmes mentioning the titles of the songs and their ragas, which the singer would be handling in the course of his concert.

Balamurali Krishna has done more to bring into vogue many ragas that one sees mentioned only in text-books, than any other musician, old or young. Apart from his own Mela-raga malika composition, which by any standard is a stupendous achievement in one so young, he has also rescued from the limbo of desuetude many kritis of Tyagaraja, which have remained obscure for the only reason that they were composed in 'apoorva' ragas. He and the enthusiastic band of young musicians around him have proved that rare ragas can be rendered with an amplitude and thoroughness which until now one associated only with the familiar ragas like Todi, Kalyani and Kambodi. Balamurali Krishna's Naganandini, Jankaradhwani and Suryakantam as well as Voleti Venkateswarulu's Raghupriya and Natakapriya bear eloquent testimony to this fact. And, above all, the ease with which they sing these ragas is something new to those who have only listened to the laboured exposition of Todi and Kalyani of an earlier generation of musicians. Ease, to our learned critics, is suspect, because they have not seen it in the grunting, growling music of the elders. Hence, they would willingly mistake it for formlessness.

This brings up the second charge against Balamurali. Scaling up and down the gamut is about all that anyone can do in music. One does it in conveniently carved out ranges, or in the full range that one's voice would felicitously accommodate. One does it in slow tempo or fast. But ultimately one does little more than scale up and down the gamut. But the gravamen of the charge is, perhaps, that Balamurali traverses the gamut in quick tempo, and that he does not bring out the 'moorchana' in short phrases, spread out in leisurely grace, as, for example, Ramnad Krishnan does. But this would only amount to accusing Balamurali Krishna of not being Ramnad Krishnan. And why on earth should he be?

Since a charge of formlessness has been levelled against Balamurali, it is as well to examine what form in music is. We have all along equated form with gradual progression, linear flourishes, nodal pauses, heavily stressed accents and a liberal sprinkling of cliches. Form to us hitherto has been a bald statement of the theme, not an artful suggestion. Like Ravi Varma's pictures, we expect that music should be in a monotint, spread over an even texture, bringing out an orotund fullness, which we call form. But this is not the ultimate in music. There is another way of looking at it which stands more to reason and experience. This is the idea of plastic form instead of the [illegible] ly graphic one. At a time when even painting has incorporated plastic values in its conception of form, the votaries of classicism would like to confine form in music to contour-r[illegible] Balamurali does not believe in the music of the contour-re[illegible] He scales up and down the gamut, most certainly, but he also unfolds before us a terrain which has eminences and depressions, an undulating terrain that is at once real and colourful. He races up the slope and plunges

into the valley, leaps across crevasses, and somersaults in the air with the abandon of a young athlete. This to the critics is formlessness. They perhaps expect him to lumber along obesely with the heavy tread of a decrepit man.

Form should underlie, not overwhelm, any product of art. It should be inherent, not circumscriptive. Even the severest critic of Balamurali Krishna cannot deny such a form to his music. His elisions and syncopations communicate to his music a virility which is refreshing in contrast to the tired drag of ersatz classicism.

The third charge of introducing a falsetto in the natural register of his voice is more justifiable than the other two charges. Balamurali Krishna is unfortunately dependent on the mike to bring out the timbre of his voice in the higher reaches. In the bass region, his voice has a weight and richness which only M. D. Ramnathan among the younger musicians commands. But in the alto and soprano reaches, he muffles it in a controlled effort to keep it in reins. Secondly, his association with the light music wing of AIR's Vijayawada Station must have forced on him the realization that the muffling of the voice in the higher reaches gives to light music a softness which an unrestrained use of vocal chords would deny it. What perhaps was a necessity has become a habit However, it would be nice to hear his voice traverse the tetrachord above the 'tara shadja' with the same weight and resonance that it has in bass.

Above all, it must be remembered that it is Balamurali Krishna who has put Andhra Pradesh back in the musical tradition of South India. Fifteen or twenty years ago, the music of Andhra could offer nothing better than the padyas of the Andhra stage or the folk tunes of the 'burra-katha.' Except for a few like Parupali Ramakrishnayya Pantulu, there was no one to give Karnatak music that dignity and prestige in Andhra which it has enjoyed in Madras. Balamurali has changed all that. By his genius both as a 'gayaka' and as a vaggeyakara,' he has thrown up a challenge to the rest of South India which it would be difficult to ignore. There is hardly anyone else among his generation who could compare with him in the manifold talents which his music comprises. I have yet to come across another musician in Madras or elsewhere who can so imaginatively and so exhaustively render a 'swaranthara raga as he did 'Sumukham' in the AIR national programme more than a year ago. There is no other singer who can render classical and light music with the ease and felicity which he possesses. The Bhakti Ranjani programme under his guidance was the best example of light classical music that any South Indian station of the AIR could produce. His compositions have a maturity and sense of form which mere acquaintance with music cannot confer on one. Add to this the fact that he plays on the viola with an expertise which would place him only next to M. S. Gopalakrishnan. These must be sufficient to give him a status which the carping criticism of ersatz classicists can never belittle.

* *

Hirabai Barodekar, who was featured in the national programme last week, is a veteran whose art never fails to weave a magic spell on the listeners. Though grown in years, she brings to her music a youthfulness that is a lasting testimony to her loving devotion to her art. The 'khyal' in Emen Kalyan was replete with beautiful turns of phrasing, at once soothing and provocative. A bewitching pliancy in the notes, especially when returning to the 'bol' after the extemporisations, invested her music with emotional tenderness. The strain of age was evident only towards the end when her imagination outsped her execution, and the notes failed to connect with the shruti in the upper reaches.

The 'thumri' in Tilak Kamod (one should imagine it to be nearly allied to Kuntalavarali) was more roundly treated but with the utmost economy of expression. Hirabai rarely makes a dramatic statement. Her mood, as in the thumri, is lyrical and philosophic rather than dramatic. The Marathi pad in Kamaj began brightly but petered out somehow.

AEOLUS