

Thumri sits in the hearts of Lavani

A musician friend who has spent a considerable part of his life in Bombay was once heard to remark, "the Maharashtrians not only hear but eat music too. It is their staple food." To them music is like air and water, an article of daily use. An idea of this can be had from the size of audience music recitals attract in Maharashtra, from the number of music circles, concerts and recitals there. The largest ever audience at a classical music concert witnessed by me — between 10,000 and 15,000 crazy listeners — was at the annual Sawai Gandharva anniversary concerts at Pune.

There is something in the very air, in the very instinct of the people there which inexorably puts a song on their lips. The volume and extent of the untrained and amateur talent is astonishing. Mere nonentities achieving a very high standard of artistic excellence as they render a Marathi pada, a Bhavageet, an Abhang or a popular stage song, is a common enough experience.

The number of approved artists on the rolls of AIR stations in Maharashtra is so large that even high-grade artists have to undergo a long wait for a broadcasting engagement. The State and tenor of the popular light music is such (seasoned generously with the classical as it is) that without his knowing, an early student of the classical art finds himself already half way through it. The same thing can be stated in another way. In few other regions can one come across so invisible, wide-spread and such natural interpenetration of the popular and folk varieties of music and classical music.

Can one still dispute the existence of an eternal evolutionary bridge between the two, over which each can walk unseen into the other, give of itself and imbibe of the other? Those who have heard the Marathi Natya Sangeet and other popular musical forms would readily recognise it. In each song, there is a quick change of the melodic climate, ingenious graftings and still more graftings of ragas. And these easily get on the

tongue of the musically inclined listeners even if they have no pretensions to formal training. They sing it unconsciously though craft certainly lay in the mind of the original composer.

An eloquent proof of all that has been said above was furnished by an evening of breath-taking 'Lavani' presented by the National Centre for Performing Arts, Bombay at the Kamani auditorium on May 1. The occasion was the celebration of the Maharashtra Day by the Maharashtra Information Centre, New Delhi. The Deputy Speaker of the Lok Sabha Mr. Shivraj Patil was the chief guest. The programme was attended by Mr. Vasant Sathe, Mr. V. N. Gadgil and a number of MPs from Maharashtra.

Titled 'Baithakichi Lavani' (Lavani of the Chamber) the programme was devised, compered and presented by Dr. Ashok Ranade. The stamp of his personality and scholarship was to be seen on each and every item of the programme as in the selection of a galaxy of vibrant, powerful voices. Dr. Ranade's extempore exposition of the various shades of the Lavani as also those presented on this particular evening, though entirely in Marathi and therefore unintelligible to the non-Marathi among the Northern audience, nonetheless was so lucid, forthright and as they say, hitting the nail on the head that even the latter, this critic included, were tempted to train their ears and make something out of it.

I think, they did not have difficulty in getting to the central point. The singular success of the programme was a testimony to the excellent homework done by Dr. Ranade who must have devoted a great deal of time in winnowing away grain from the chaff to cull out a string of Lavanis that could titillate the refined ear and bear out Dr. Ranade's assertion that a particular type of Lavani was deeply coloured with the thumri style. And what more could one aspire for than that these choice Lavanis were voiced by such acclaimed artists as Ranjana Joglekar, Shruti Sadolikar, Faiyaz, Narayan Bodas, Sharad

Jambhekar and Medha Damale.

Besides, those who provided accompaniment — Anant Kunte on the sarangi, Pandurang Ghotkar on the dholak, Shekhar Khambete on the tabla and Vasudev Chandrachud on the harmonium, were second to none in contributing to the success of the programme. One has a very special word of praise for the brilliant sarangi player.

These gems of Lavanis exuded not only the long breath and expanse of the thumri but also the terse and tricky ornament of the Tappa style. The incorporation of the latter element in some compositions as for example the one Shruti Sadolikar sang — Vrindaban Hari ne — based on the notes of Gara reminded one of certain Bengali kirtans. Quite naturally a number of questions popped up in one's mind as one listened to the presentation. The most vital among these was whether Lavani can be regarded as a form of folk music because of the distinct method and style of its rendering.

Since most events in the programme were adorned with terse and tangled ornamentations, highly tenuous 'avarohi tanas' smartly terminating on the take-off point of the 'Murkhra' and last but not the least the interplay of 'bols' and 'laya' et la the Natya Sangeet, one wanted to know if, like any other folk song, a Lavani was a fixed entity or it could lend itself to wilful extemporisations. The evening's recital veered towards the latter inference. If that be so, it would always be a threat to the permanence of its face and form.

The information I subsequently gathered was that there are two types of Lavanis. The old and original one is called 'tamasha ki Lavani.' It is completely folk in character and is much like the popular Nautanki. It used to be sung for the entertainment of the soldiers. In the later half of the 19th century, it came closer to thumri. The original Lavani, more often than not laid emphasis on the 'teep notes.' Of the latter form of Lavani, Sundrabai Jadhav was the most renowned expo-



Hinda 17/18 Mrs. Faiyaz 1996

nent. I also learnt that the famous vocalist Shobha Gurtu's mother Menaka used to excel herself in doing 'Abhinaya' with this form of Lavani.

All items and their singers in the programme of 'Baithakichi Lavani' were heart-warming and instructive. And yet one found an irresistible charm in the transparent and well-intoned voice and easy and effortless expression of Ranjana Joglekar. Her voice is all honey. Whichever note it settles on, begins to glow, emit light. Her first Lavani describing the elements of dress (Poushak) was couched in a melody blending Gauri and Bhatiyar. Her singing was replete with plastic graces especially so the closing Bhatiyar

phrase Pa Ga Ri Sa. The composition had a classical environment. The singer gave evidence of her mature musicality in every syllable and phrase. She could also sport with the 'laya.' In Ranjana's second Lavani — jaai juichi shej phulanchi — cast in the notes of Pilu Kafi one could see the dominating influence of the Poorab Ang. The music had a quiet and reposeful gait, was free from fussy embellishments and had traces of the Tappa style.

The classical vocalist Shruti Sadolikar sang three Lavanis, each one a masterpiece. What an assured and self-confident artist she is! Her sturdy, burly voice and swara have much to contribute to her self-confidence. Hers is a voice whose nuts and bolts seem to be 'air-tight.' It has an even temper with no change of colour or volume. Such a voice comes to acquire a special kind of impact. Remember the late Kesar Bai. The sun seems to gleam through Shruti's broad voice. The first Lavani she sang seemed to blend strands of various melodies like Khamaj, Desh and Kafi and borrowed generously from Tappa. Variations and 'Harkat murki' in its later part, strongly reminiscent of the Natya Sangeet, tended to stand apart from the musically more cohesive first half of the Lavani. Strangely the name of Sadarang, the celebrated khayal composer was tagged to the tail of the lyric.

The next Lavani based on Shudh Pilu (it actually ascended with Khamaj and descended with Pilu) sung by Shruti Sadolikar came closest to the Banaras style thumri. The piece used to be a favourite of Sundrabai Jadhav. Quite a few sequences carried Kalyan endings. It may be a moot point whether all this mixing and graftings serve an aesthetic purpose. Her last, Vrindaban Hari ne, had the lively strains of popular dadras in Gara. It was decorated with crisp Tappa tanas.

Oustanding

Faiyaz with her marked penchant for 'Abhinaya' appeared to be the senior and outstanding artist in this Bombay troupe. Her opening song attaining the 'som' with the catchy Sa Dha Sa Ri Ga had the flavour of old stage music or raas. Accompanied by 'Abhinaya' in the sitting pos-

ture, the piece had, of necessity, a graceful slow rhythm. It was a blend of Kalyan and Bhupali. Her next 'Vadi var madi' beautifully incorporating strains of Lalit in the dominant Bhairav was a ravishing piece. One sensed the trenchant power of her full-throated accurate Ter Shadja in this Lavani. Her 'Shudh shravan masi' appeared to tread common ground with one or two other Lavanis heard in the programme.

Versatile

Let no one think that a late mention of an accomplished and versatile singer Narayan Rac Bodas is in any way a reflection on his quality which certainly is behind none. His competence was to be seen in the expert change of rhythm from six to eight beats in the same Lavani which descended with Sarang as also in his first song in a kind of Mishra Pilu which was ornamented with superbly 'Danedar' avarohi short tanas. And none could beat the first male singer Sharad Jambhekar in the breadth and buoyancy of his melodious voice in which he rendered a Bapurao composition 'ya naachat rangani' whose main melody of Bihag chose to peep into Khamaj so frequently.

The Marathi composer, it seems, is particularly fond of blends which provide some intellectual exercise to his brain. Simplicity and digging into pure and unmixed emotion with humility in the use of technique does not appear to be his cup of tea. About 30 years ago I asked the famous composer Sudhir Phadke as to why did they pack so many melodic variations in a single song. His reply was, "since our throat and artistic acumen can negotiate them so affably, why shouldn't we." Probably he precluded the possibility of the aesthetics of the song in question falling sick due to indigestion.

'Baithakichi Lavani' achieved a traditional and also the most fitting finale with a composition in Bhairavi of the late Bal Gandharva in which Faiyaz, Shruti Sadolikar and Ranjana Joglekar made an exquisite team. There was a veritable dialogue between the short, ornate tanas of each of the three singers. The only singer who did not cut ice with me because of her raw and unsure melody was Medha Damla. — P.W.

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**‘Lavani’
as chamber music**

LAVANI is the most popular form of Marathi folk music. It is the staple of *tamasha*, the folk theatre of Maharashtra. It is sung to the accompaniment of dance.

Lavani is more popular for its erotic tenor. But it is a flexible form. However, it has changed with the times over the past three centuries. It professes detachment from the worldly life as well as passionate enjoyment of mundane life. Metaphysical *lavani*, known as "Bhedik Lavani", is a class by itself.

What has not changed is its musical character. *Lavani* music is a discipline by itself. It has its own style. It is the presentation rather than any literary content that is the distinguishing feature of *lavani*. Other poetic forms also become *lavani* when adapted to this style.

Its accompanying instruments are also typical. A type of *dholki* for percussion, the one-stringed *tuntune* to sound the drone and a *manjira* or a type of cymbals for rhythm beats are the essential instruments. The harmonium has been added in the past one hundred years.

Lavani was patronised by the Peshwa court. This patronage brought about the evolution of a sophisticated variety of *lavani*, to cater to the refined taste of the ruling gentry. It was blended with classical music form. The *dholki* and *tuntune* were replaced by the *tabla* and *tanpura* and the tunes were adapted to *ragas*.

In the *tamasha*, *lavani* was sung and danced in a standing position. In the court, it was sung in a seated position. It became a form of chamber music and came to be known as "Baithakichi Lavani." Yet it retained its original style of singing and rustic spirit. The dance was restricted to interpretative gestures and expressions from a seating position of the performer.

The "Baithakichi Lavani" has fallen on bad days in the absence of patronage since the fall of the Peshwa rulers. There are a few professional artistes who performed this *lavani*; but they have preserved it as their family heritage. And they are not professionals.

The National Centre for Performing Arts (NCPA), Bombay has taken the troubles to acquaint today's audiences with this dying art. It has organised a group of young musicians to give shows of *lavani*. Performances have been given in Bombay and Delhi during the past two years. A performance was given to a packed house of music-lovers in this city last week.

Mr Ashok Ranade, head of the music department at NCPA, is an eminent researcher in music. He has selected a score of such *lavanis* which are sung individually by eight artistes including himself.

Mr Ranade explains that the "Baithakichi Lavani" is the Marathi version of the *thumri* of Hin-



dustani music. It is tuned to the *ragas*; but it does not bear the grammatical burden of the system. It takes only the shades of *ragas* and sometimes fuses more than one shade into a delightful melody. Even the grave *raga* like Bhairav becomes soft and light in it. There are *lavanis* which imbibe the spiralling flights of *tappa*

The rhythms are light and prancing, but generally played in a slow gait. Sometimes, a *lavani* begins with the 8-beat rhythm of Kerawa and, as it proceeds, shifts imperceptibly to the 6-beat rhythm of Dadra, and returns to its original rhythm. This play on rhythm enhances its delectability.

The rendering of the *lavanis* was illustrative. But it lacked the grace and flavour of the traditional

REVIEW

By M. K. PARDHY

lavani-singing. The tunes, the style and the accompaniment adhered to the tradition. Yet the singers could not bring out the vivacity and vitality of the genuine *lavani*-singing. None of the singers were groomed in the *lavani* tradition.

Shruti Sadolikar and Sharad Jambekar sang in the classical style. Narayan Bodas sang in the manner of stage songs. Ashok Ranade rendered a colourless copy of the tunes. Medha Gogte and Ranjana Joglekar were lyrical singers.

Faiyaz enacted a *lavani*, but her gestures were too meagre to express the meaning of the romantic song. Only Kirti Shiledar afforded a little glimpse of the real *lavani* spirit.

Secondly, a *dholki* and sambal solos were played by Pandurang Ghotkar and two Gana songs were recited in the beginning of the two parts of the programme. But all these were out of place since the "Baithakichi Lavani" does not use

either of them, though they are there in *tamasha*.

INTER-RELATION OF ARTS

THE Fine Arts Centre of the University of Poona conducted a two-day seminar on the "Inter-relation of fine arts" last week. Artists and critics of the performing and plastic arts participated in the discussion.

Inaugurating the seminar, Dr S. C. Gupte, vice-chancellor of the university, announced that a course for M.A. degree in fine arts would be introduced by the Centre from June next. The Centre has been conducting a course for B.A. degree for the past three years.

Sucheta Bhide-Chapekar, a noted Bharat Natyam dancer, presented the foundation paper. She explained how every art contained ingredients of other arts.

Therefore, it was necessary for an artist specialising in any art to know the rudiments of other arts. All arts were sensual expressions of the human mind and, as the senses formed a unity, the arts were bound to be multi-sensual. A dance incorporates music, sculpture, theatre, etc.

Shanta Nisal, a music teacher, gave an erudite exposition of the Rasa theory as expounded by ancient thinkers. Shrirang Sangoram examined the linguistic, semantic, poetic and musical aspects of the compositions.

Rajabhau Dev, a veteran music teacher, showed some mathematical designs in music. Suresh Talwalkar, with his keen insight into the aesthetics of percussion, demonstrated the aesthetic distinctions of the various patterns of rhythm, such as *Amad*, *Quaida* and *Rela*.

Madhav Vaze, an all-round theatre artiste, expounded that the theatre was an aesthetic unity of images. It should, therefore, give up its traditional fondness for words and meaning.

Talking about classical music



MUSIC

ROSHAN SHAHANI

THE SPIC-MACAY programmes have their own character. Sometimes a renowned artist will come and play or sing for an hour providing an exposure of music to a young, novice audience. Sometimes, the artist will speak about music and it is heartwarming to be in the company of children, striving to understand the sounds of a great heritage.

This time round, the featured artists were Gangubai Hangal and her daughter Krishna Hangal who gave a small recital at the Birla Public School in south Bombay. Though classical Indian music is unfortunately a small pursuit in the broad spectrum of culture, it was plain to see that young minds, given the chance, can give all of their attention to art or at least maintain a discipline of quietude even if the music is beyond common understanding.

Gangubai Hangal in any case is an impressive personality. With that strong voice emerging from her diminutive frame, she appears heroic and in command of a particular idiom of the khayal. She began with a leisurely *Miyan ki Todi* with the vilambit bandish, *Daiya bata doobar*, expanding on the econ-

omies of the raga notes, with light emphasis on the *mukhada*, using it as a start and finish rather than as a cathartic flourish. It seems that Krishna Hangal has indeed to support her when it comes to the long-breathed *meends* and the hold on notes.

Together they presented the pieces briefly. The *drut, Langara Turata Jina Chhivo* was delivered as an outline. This was followed by a Shuddha Sarang, a Prem Piya bandish.

IN THE course of a full season of music, there have been two remarkable programmes which one hopes will be repeated over and over again because of the nature of unique research which backs the performance. A special attention to Neela Bhagwat and Aruna Sayeeram's Samantar recitals is demand. Both the artistes, one a singer from the Gwalior khayal gayaki and the other, a Carnatic vocalist have placed themselves in an arena full of challenges wherein they conduct a dialogue with each other and their divergent music systems and, significantly, question their own tradition and form as well.

In the Samantar concerts, we have seen Neela and Aruna singing compositions in ragas alternatively, sometimes trying to match rasa and mood, sometimes presenting similar types of configuration in compositions as the *tarana* and *pallavi* or simply responding to each other with the multitudinous themes of love or devotion. They have even shared the percussion in-

struments of the tabla and mridangam. This experiment being suggested by no less a person than the scholar and critic, Madanlal Vyas, who it might be added, is a central figure of reference when it comes to the nitty gritty of raga and chalan and the history of music itself.

Neela and Aruna are not attempting fusion of the Hindustani and Carnatic modes of classical music. Rather, they both recognise that an anchorage in the depths of the system learnt and cultivated is necessary for them to take their tradition forward. Learning from each other in terms of voice projections and a kind of lock-in engagement with the sur for example, have helped them realize their own potential with their particular traditions. A detailed delineation of their musical research will be featured here once the Samantar programmes have achieved a volume and, let us say, an ecstatic give-and-take sonority.

Speaking about roots and the anchorage in tradition and, in this case, the little ephemeral ones, one has to give attendance to Ashok Ranade's specially compiled programmes, *Devgane* and *Baithakachi Lavani*.

Ranade is committed to musical orders which obtain outside the mainstream of the grand classical traditions. He clearly believes in the vitality of musical form, puts an emphasis on poetry in music and the almost uncultivated and free spirit of the bhakti poet, the wayside singer-pilgrim and musician. He

feels that the folk forms have been a base for the stricter khayal form of music and their importance is not to be missed. He seems to suggest that we will all be losers if we ignore the music and poetry of religious music and that of other forms as the *lavani*.

In the two-day programme, he presented religious music, its various literary and rhythmic modes and its manner of address which poets like Tukaram employed to express the the struggles of ordinary life as reflected by the devotee, sometimes the *varakari*. In the evening of *lavanis*, the word dispensations over the beat, the lucidity of the Marathi language as it is virtually melted into song structures was presented. They were totally absorbing their lilting patterns. Classical musicians could take one hundred and one lessons from this kind of robust form. It has everything of importance, except perhaps the strict grammar of the raga. Does it matter when an enjoyment is promised, complete with a homely dose of philosophy?

If Ashok Ranade would care to repeat these programmes from time to time we'd be benefited and blessed with the knowledge that we are living amidst a rich culture — all here, in Maharashtra. The group of excellent singers need to be applauded for this *lagan* with the melodic song forms. The straightforward, no-nonsense renderings were fuelled with energy and explosive *sureela* tonalities.