

Book Review - Voice Culture by S A K Durga

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VOICE CULTURE by S.A.K. Durga, Indian Musicological Society, Baroda, 1978, Rs. 40.00 or \$ 8.00 (In English).

Dr. S. A. K. Durga's M.Litt. thesis on Voice Culture confirms renewal of interest in voice as an instrument of singing and speech in India. This is heartening, since it was barely 35 years ago that Ananda Coomaraswamy was virtually defending the Indian indifference to quality of voice by suggesting that actual music is heard better when it is devoid of the sensuous perfection of the voice!

With its five-section and fourteen-chapter structure (listing anatomy, physiology, methodology and history of the science of voice), Dr. Durga's work does arouse interest. One also notes that in spite of the avowed intention to treat the subject with special reference to South Indian music, she casts the net wider to include some information about the western practice of voice production and also devotes some space to 'ancient' voice culture in India. In addition, she touches upon various important subject-heads: a comparison of the singing and the speaking voice, breathing techniques, psychology of singing, vocal techniques of South Indian music and vocal impurities and remedies. Students of Indian music have so few works on voice culture to refer to that Dr. Durga is bound to get credit for at least filling the 'sources' gap.

Unfortunately the work remains a promise and does not become an achievement. The reasons for this are not far to seek.

The main drawback of the work is that it is unfocussed to a disconcerting degree. The author has clearly fallen a prey to the unimaginative stereotyping of our academic (!) 'thesis'-turning-out processes. The work simultaneously tries to be a treatise, a compendium and a manual – all in about 115 pages of textual matter! Hence, it is not surprising that many vital themes receive an unceremoniously sketchy treatment. For example, chapters entitled 'Voice and its Greatness', 'The Singing Voice', 'The Psychology of Singing', 'Voice-Culture Methods of Different Nations through the Ages' and 'The Ideal Voice' - all represent important investigation-lines. But their

varying individual lengths range from one and a half page to two pages! Only Panini and Patanjali could have done better! It is obvious that none of the themes suggested by the titles could have received satisfying treatment. Time and again one comes to the conclusion that till such time as our universities set higher standards for thesis-level research, the reproducing of thesis material as a scholastic work should be totally discouraged.

A further complicating factor is the lack of precision in her arguments in respect of many important aspects of the subject. Culture-based disciplines like voice-science have a speculative content which proves to be essential when decisions are made about the questions to be asked, the methods to be adopted, and the conclusions to be arrived at. Hence certain basic conceptual distinctions need to be precisely made. In the present context, discussion of problems like nature of the discipline of voice culture, pairing of acoustical facts pertaining to voice production and corresponding psychological responses, parameters of good or ideal voice etc. must evince conceptual precision. In this area Dr. Durga tends to go awry. Her distinction between the 'empirical' and 'scientific' study of voice (p. 6), her passing references to the intensity-loudness syndrome (p. 39), her causal linking of the lowering of the soft-palate with emotions and of both with the intrinsic difficulty of vocal music (p. 47) do not inspire confidence. There is a casual approach in formulating the conceptual framework. It will be no exaggeration to say that the groundwork in Dr. Durga's work is firm and precise only when the number of lobes in the right and left lungs or the number of cartilages in the larynx are mentioned. Unfortunately precision is wrongfully confined to the factual elements and the result is a considerable shrinkage of the available discursive field.

Lack of conceptual precision is also debilitatingly coupled with a slackening of logical rigour at key-points. Hence conclusions, statements of import are inserted without substantiating evidence. For instance, Dr. Durga's important assertion that 'fourteen persons out of twenty produce their voice in singing as they pronounce the vowels and consonants of their mother tongue' (p. 13) certainly needs more supporting data. Similarly her statement that the Islamic prayer call and the shepherd calls have carrying power because they have vowels (p. 43-44) requires supplementary proof and a finer distinction between the carrying power of a call and a musical sound. Her remark about the psychological impediments to wider vocal compass (p. 47) and her observation 'only at the age of puberty an interest to sing with emotion arises' (p. 77) hang loose for want of corroborative evidence. Her 'investigation' into 'the influence of the physical makeup of the face upon the quality of the voice' (p. 79) also falls in the

same category. Her hypotheses are interesting but the patience and the rigour required to establish a theoretical framework are hardly in view.

Indian musicologists today must realise the need for a flexible approach vis-a-vis the methodology to be adopted for tackling problems of an interdisciplinary nature. They have also to face the wider problem of making living sense of the established performing traditions. For a science like voice-science both the physical and the cultural sciences have to be associated and laboratory methods as well as ethnomusicological procedures are to be used with discrimination and thoroughness. Not that Dr. Durga is not aware of these matters—her description of vocal techniques of South Indian music (Chapter 9) is a good example of documentation with a perspective. But a chapter cannot carry a book, nor can a number of insights result in a work of uniform quality. It does not come as a surprise that her 'conclusions' (p. 105) are equivocal in the extreme. For a nascent discipline like voice culture this might prove harmful.
