**Listening and Learning Are Not Mutually Exclusive**

**"The ideal of absolute music is reached only through manodharma sangeetha" (Professor P. Sambamurthy).**

Ten year old Vani is dressed up and ready to get into the car. Today is Aradhana celebrations at the temple and Vani is going to sing two compositions of Saint Thyagaraja. Durga, Vani’s mother, is visibly excited about Vani giving her first public performance.

At about ten thirty in the morning, Vani arrives at the temple, flanked by her father and mother on either side. Vani and her parents enter the auditorium, walk towards the front row and seat themselves. Around 11 A.M., one of the organizers announces Vani’s name as the next performer. Vani walks briskly to the stage, carrying her sruthi box in her right hand, and confidently sits in front of the microphone. After checking her voice alignment with the sruthi with all the decorum of a professional, she starts to sing her first song, Marukelara in Jayantha Sri. She follows it with a second composition, Thelisi Rama Chinthanatho in Poorna Chandrika. Vani, having learnt music for only three years, performs flawlessly and renders the songs exactly as taught by her teacher.

After her performance, Vani gets down from the stage and walks towards her parents. They are already standing up, waiting to escort her out of the auditorium. Vani turns to her mother and says, “Mom, my friend Jayanthi is going to sing around noon. Can we stay and listen?” Durga responds, “Vani. I don’t want to waste another hour sitting here. We have things to do. And besides, most of your friends don’t sing like you anyway. You’re a pro and these other kids are just squawking.” Vani persists,” Mom! Jayanthi is really good. She won first prize in the Cleveland competition two years in a row.” Durga ignored her daughter’s pleas and walked towards the door.

Sometimes listening to music is as much of an art as the performance itself. Carnatic music is a life-long experience and it must be experienced both consciously and sub-consciously through learning, listening, and meditating. While to Durga, listening to her daughter sing is an act of love, while listening to other’s sing is a waste of time. What she doesn’t see is that her daughter’s love of music will last beyond her temporary sense of accomplishment. If it is to translate into true learning, it must be through a lifetime of experience listening to music. Listening and learning are compliments to each other. If Vani learns without having the experience of listening and enjoying, she cannot explore her own creativity. What makes an artist is taking a song and making it their own, not mimicking someone else’s words. This can only be learned by listening to others sing, sometimes badly but if you are lucky, a song interpreted by a genius can bring you to tears.

Creativity or manodharma refers to the ability of a performer to extemporaneously produce ideas and generate emotions. Indian music is sustained on the emotional content of a raga, and the raga is the soul of a composition. A performer must use his creativity to bring out the character and personality of a raga; otherwise, neither the raga nor the composition is worth listening to. Creativity or manodharma is the pre-eminent aspect of Carnatic music. Attributes such as raga alapana, swara kalpana, gamaka evolve out of manodharma. But, manodharma cannot be taught; it has to be absorbed. And this only happens when a performer feels within himself the bhava that each raga and composition generates. Only constant listening to other performers can help an artist feel the emotions that a raga or a composition inspires.

As a child, both of my parents loved Carnatic music and lived for the music season. They never missed a concert and as a young boy, I got dragged to many a performance. It wasn’t too long before I was also made to learn the mridangam, in addition to the rigorous scheduled of attending musical events. Every year, Sadguru Sangeetha Samajam, Purasawalkam organized the Thyagaraja Aradhana. The Aradhana was celebrated as Akandaghana (36 hours of non-stop singing). My father made certain that I was there by his side during the entire 36 hours and that I listened to every performer, regardless of their age or stature. During one of these Akandams, the father of a teenager approached the organizer and asked whether his son could be allowed to participate. It was already late, around 11:30 p.m. There were only a handful of people in the audience, most of whome were professional musicians themselves, some very well-known in their field. Looking around at the titans present in the audience, , my heart went out to the meek-looking young man, as a musician and as a fellow-teenager. “I hope he doesn’t get nervous and forget the song.” But a thin shy boy of 14 approached the stage. Seemingly impervious to the presence of the august audience, he sat in front of the microphone, closed his eyes, and began to sing. His first song was Saint Thyagaraja’s composition in Sahana, “Ema Nadhi Chevo’. His singing was so sincere and divinely inspired that it brought Thyagaraja words to life: ”Swararaga Sudharasa” - only music that evolves from deep within the soul will lead to blissful heaven. (“Mooladharaja Nadha Merungutaye Mudamagu Mokshamura”). The senior musicians were spell bound by the devotion coming out of the small body in front of them. I turned to look at my father and saw tears streaming down his face. The young man, with his sincerity, devotion, and bhakthi (attributes that Thyagaraja says is essential for Nadhopasana or musical Sadhana) had touched the soul of everyone in the room.

Over five decades have passed since I heard that young man sing, but I can still feel the emotions that that I felt that night. That was the night that I fell in love with Carnatic music and I will always thank my father for making experience it.