

## **Close Encounters**

I was in the bus leaving Thiruvaiyaru. As usual I was returning to Madras just before the Thyagaraja Aradhana Celebrations because I disliked crowds. In the bus there were very few people, mostly local peasants transporting their wares to the city.

Two seats away from me sat an old man who looked vaguely familiar-perhaps one of those eternal *Rasikas* who had "seen them all, heard them all" - you know the type, I am sure - one finds them at concerts all the time, just waiting for some willing listener to latch on to and to regale them with "Those Were The Days" kind of stories.

My suspicions were more or less confirmed when I caught this one humming to himself. But he made no attempt whatsoever, to catch my attention. In fact he seemed to be quite content, smiling to himself benignly and humming "*Gandhamu Payyaruga*" to the rhythm of the bus on the country road.

As the bus settled into a comfortable pace, so did his singing. After some time I found myself being drawn irresistably to his singing. Not only was there a lot of *Bhavam* in his music, but also his voice was rather impressive for a person of his age.

Normally I do not attempt to strike up conversation with strangers but with this gentleman I felt I had to compliment him on his music. So when he finished one song - it was Shyama Sastri's "*O Jagadamba*" this time - rather, snippets from it, I ventured "Pardon me sir, but I couldn't help overhearing you sing. I must say I am deeply impressed." "Thank you, my son," he said, obviously pleased with my taste in music. "So how come you are leaving Thiruvaiyaru?" I asked, "Aren't you going for the Aradhana?" "Well, if you are so fond of music yourself, how come you are leaving?", he countered. I replied, "I hate crowds."

"I hate crowds too," he confessed. Then he asked "Do you like Thyagaraja?" to which I replied in the emphatic affirmative. "Are you more happy," he continued, "that he was born or that he died?" "That he was born, of course," I exclaimed. "Then how come these people are 'celebrating' his death?" he asked. I honestly did not know that it was his death they - as my fellow-traveller sarcastically put it, "celebrated". In fact, I was put-off by the whole thing, from what I had seen on television.

In direct contrast with the unity, synchronisaiton and perfection of western classical symphonies which I so loved, here was a bunch of idiosyncratic egomaniacs,

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each one outdoing the other in trying to establish his or her individuality by brandishing their hands in the air as though shouting slogans, clamouring for a slot covered properly by the television crew and generally making fools of themselves. In fact, the only unity these chaps ironically seemed to arrive at year after year seemed to be the fact that they were all uniformly ridiculous, though individualistically so, I wondered what poor Thyagaraja would have to say to all this.

"Exactly," said the old man, as though reading my thoughts, "that is precisely the reason why I go elsewhere during the Aradhana though I am a native of Thiruvaiyaru - and a composer to boot too, if I may say so myself". I was taken aback. Every other fellow one ran into these days seemed to be a composer. One found them at railway stations, at wayside cafe's, at public toilets, in libraries . . . everywhere. But with respect for his age and for his singing I suppressed my city snicker and managed to mouth a suitably impressed "Oh?" "I presume that you've even heard a few of my compositions", he added "I am Thyagaraja".

Though I was reasonably ignorant about the customs and traditions of Thiruvaiyaru, I did know that virtually every other person born at Thiruvaiyaru was called Thyagaraja. And this one at least fit the bill - looked the part. "You don't believe me, do you?" he asked with a twinkle in his eye. "Why should I disbelieve you? I replied "I heard how well you sing. And I know that a lot of people at Thiruvaiyaru are called Thyagaraja" "Yes, but the point is," he said, "That I am not a Thyagaraja, but - with all due modesty - *the* Thyagaraja". Now I had seen quite a few wierdos in my time - the music field is full of them, as everybody knows. But nothing had prepared me for this. Not his claim itself, because I have seen people claim that they are God Himself. But they looked, spoke and behaved "with a distinct personality" as one of my diplomatic uncles puts it, while talking about similar madmen and madwomen in the family. But this gentleman seemed utterly sedate and dignified and normal.

Then the resemblance struck me. No wonder his face seemed vaguely familiar. It was a distorted version - though a distinct improvement - of the various Thyagaraja portraits I had come across here and there. "My God!" I exclaimed and fell at his feet. After blessing me he patted me on my shoulders and said "*Guruthwam* does not seem to be as fashionable these days as it used to be." I don't remember the spluttering sounds I made during the next 15 minutes or so. Imagine! To meet *the* Thyagaraja face to face!

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Afterwards the conversation flowed more or less smoothly - apart from the frequent interruptions from my side. I asked him why he composed in Telugu and Sanskrit though he was a Tamilian. He replied that Telugu was simply more musical, as the words ended in vowels most of the time - and Sanskrit was of course the language of the Gods themselves. I expressed my surprise at having heard him hum bits from Syama Sastri's "*O Jagadamba*". He said it was one of his all time favourite pieces. In fact after hearing "*O Jagadamba*" he ceased to compose pieces in Anandabhairavi altogether, acknowledging Shyama Sastri as the Master of that Raga.

I asked him how he felt about his compositions being manhandled by so many people with no knowledge of Sanskrit or Telugu whatsoever - and sometimes not much knowledge of music either. He said it was painful, yes, but then came along one M. D. Ramanathan or one Balamuralikrishna who would give such fantastic interpretations to his *krithis* that he himself would be stunned by the beauty of his own compositions. About M. D. Ramanathan he said, "Up there, we hardly give him any rest. Particularly Shyama Sastri who composed his *Swarajathis* in the lower octave, goes on making him sing them again and again as they tend to be mostly inaudible when others sing them. Even in my own *krithi - Pancharathna*", he added self-consciously "In Gowla, I use the *Rishabham* in the *Manthra Sthaayi* . . . and what do these idiots do? They sing it in the higher octave!"

It had never struck me how painful and exasperating it must be for a composer to have his compositions murdered by all and sundry. May be there was something to be said in favour of the American system of copyrighting anything and everything that was of any value. I plucked up some courage and asked him an off-colour riddle I had heard somewhere "What is there in common with good composers and bad composers?" "Ho Ho Ho!" He laughed, "I've heard that one before: Both decompose after they die! Our friend Wolfgang told us that the other day. Now he's a funny one, that Mozart!"

"Mozart?!" I exclaimed. "God! I can't imagine the kind of music you people must be making up there!" "Yes, I confer we do get some passable music made. The main reason for our developing further and further in our own idiom of music is that we never try to mix the one with the other. I would be like mixing good rice and *sambar* with . . . um . . ." he paused. "Good coffee?" I suggested. "Exactly!" he said. I was happy to know that the Great One himself thought that fusion was confusion. "But then how about your own songs like "*Vara leela gana lola*" and "*Sarasa nethra*"?" I asked. "Oh those." he brushed them aside. Apparently they

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were composed just to show his colleagues and rival Muthuswamy Dikshithar - who had a weakness for English ditties - that he could too if he wanted to.

I confessed that I was fond of western classical music - and that I was fond of Dikshithar too. "Western Classical music is one thing while little folk tunes are something else altogether," he said, "And yes, your Dikshithar made everyone aware about the importance of Veena-playing in our music." I quoted one of my musician friends: "One should sing like one plays the Veena and one should make one's Veena sing." "Voila!" he exclaimed.

During the course of our conversation he suddenly took off the ring which he was wearing and put it on my unadorned finger. It was a simple gold ring with the conch shell of Vishnu on it. Apparently he was pleased with my responses to his various comments. Modesty prevents me from recounting what he said about young men like me having the right values and so on and so forth.

The conversation rambled on pleasantly for some more time, when I was jolted out of my wits by an ear-shattering ring. I woke up and answered the phone. It was a call from *The Hindu* asking me whether I had written the article for their Music and Dance supplement yet. "Oh God!" I murmured, realising that the whole Thyagaraja encounter was but a dream. And here I was, at my table, with ten white sheets of unwritten paper, my trusty pen in deep slumber and my normally bare ring finger adorned with a simple gold ring with the conch-shell of Vishnu on it.