

The Harsh Reality

According to our ancient scriptures the six deadly sins are Kaama (Lust/Desire), Krodha (Anger), Lobha (Miserliness), Moha (Temptation), Mada (Arrogance) and Maathsarya (Competitiveness.). The last in the list seems to have been overshadowed by the ones before in people's consciousness. Yet these days, Maathsarya seems to be the order of the day. One finds parents giving children names beginning with A in the expectation that later in life, should they share the same score with someone else for some competitive exam, they should get an edge over the other person at least alphabetically. It is only a question of time before we get to meet people with names spelt Aanand, Aaarathi, Aaaarsehole and so on. I remember reading somewhere that even if one were to score a victory in the rat race, one would still remain a rat. *Ouch!* Yes, one has to earn a living. Yes, it is a cut throat world out there. Yes, one is taught to run faster, push harder, fly higher. While qualities like grace, tolerance, kindness, patience, generosity and gentleness take a back seat, attributes like speed, smartness, efficiency, competence, decisiveness and ruthlessness are lauded. Mass production is in. Individual attention is out. Excitement is in. Tranquillity, out. In the middle of all this, one finds the mad rush of desperately unhappy souls seeking solace in the anodyne company of so called enlightened souls and lifestlye gurus who calmly end up making more money than corporate giants do and quietly satisfy their love of power by spouting tried and tested cliches about the power of love. Consolation pours out, money pours in. And the poor devotees eventually end up seeing the so called Gurus as the ultimate destination rather than as guides to show them the way to salvation. Quite sad really.

In this scenario the need for each of us to find peace, solace and fulfilment Within is more urgent than ever before. And this is where the fine arts come in, be it music, dance, poetry or painting. Here's Gustave Flaubert writing to a friend about great art.

"The most beautiful works....are serene in aspect, unfathomable. The means by which they act on us are various : they are motionless as cliffs, stormy as the sea, leafy, green and murmurous as the forest, forlorn as the desert, blue as the sky. Rabelais, Goethe, Shakespeare and Michelangelo seem to me PITILESS. They are bottomless, infinite, manifold. Through small apertures we glimpse abysses whose sombre depths turn us faint. And yet over the whole, there hovers an extraordinary Tenderness. It is like the brilliance of light, the smile of the sun....and it is calm.....calm and strong." I know dozens of educated, affluent young people who speak with affected accents, write in text messagelike abbreviations and consider themselves super cool who would go "F*** man ! What the hell is this dude goin on about ?" if they were to read Flaubert's lines or for that matter my

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own lines. While wishing them a safe journey to the therapist's couch later in life, let us ponder awhile on the significance of the arts. And what is happening to them these days.

Since the dawn of the fine arts, there have been people who have practised.....rather, Lived....art for art's sake as well as those who have been hungry for fame and fortune. Many of the former have lived and died unknown and unrecognized and some of them have been hailed as having been truly great, long after their time. Many among the latter have enjoyed huge celebrity during their lifetime, but have faded into oblivion later. Having had the privilege of interacting closely with some amazing people from both categories and having seen the downside of sticking to either extreme (Completely idealistic or totally commercial), I have come to believe that it is possible to strike a healthy balance between these two courses of action in art and for that matter, in life itself. But I digress. I wish to share some thoughts about Maathsaryam or competitiveness in the arts. While I enjoy the thrill of a well fought match as much as any normal person, be it the finals at Wimbledon between Borg and Mc Enroe or Federer and Nadal in recent times, watching, enjoying and being inspired by the timeless charm and brilliance of Muhammed Ali's legendary fights against Frazier, Foreman and others or experiencing the mad frenzy of attending a snake boat race, live at Alleppy, bobbing up and down in a boat surrounded by inebriated Keralite men and bemused tourists, I somehow fail to see the point in bringing an Unhealthy element of competition into the arts....."Unhealthy" with a Capital U. Why should we go into who was better.....Mozart or Beethoven ? Kishore or Rafi ? Van Gogh or Remembrant ? Thyagaraja or Dikshithar ? Shakespeare or Bacon ? Maupassant or Maugham ? Asterix or Tintin ? S.D.Burman or R.D.Burman ? Nargis or Madhubala ? While one may certainly have preferences, it is sad to be so fiercely loyal to one artist or school of art art that one is rendered deaf or blind to the charms offered by another. I see art, along with yoga and meditation, as a means to Ease tension rather than to generate further tension. By this, I don't wish to imply that all forms of art should act as opiates or sedatives. Not at all. Clarifying the mind is in fact the opposite of numbing it. There can be tension within art too. And it can be uplifting, energizing and beautiful too. One can be blown away by the passion in the music of Beethoven or the poetry of Jacques Brel. But this tension and resolution within art is completely different from the tension arising from trying to prove that Vilayat Khan was better than Nikhil Bannerjee or vice versa, for instance. These days, tension and competitiveness of the ugliest and unhealthiest kind invades our lives and our homes every day in the form of reality shows on television. Who am I to complain if there are people who are prepared to eat cockroaches or drink vomit to try and win \$25000 ? Or to remain cooped up inside

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a house for weeks together with a dozen other similarly ambitious souls and be constantly monitored by cameras and judged by the viewers ? And who am I to rue the state of mind of the people who view these shows ? It is just a question of economics.....supply and demand. And the silver lining is that these reality shows eat up into a lot of time otherwise devoted to TV serials revolving around sordid family dramas. What pains me is how something as divine and sublime as music gets treated in these shows.....by the producers of the show, by the judges, by the participants and by the viewers. British comedian cum author Ben Elton has written two books.....Dead Famous and Chart Throb....spoofing shows like Big Brother and American Idol respectively. Apart from the fact that they are extremely funny and incisive, they both are rather heart breaking too.....especially Chart Throb...since there is so much truth in what the author says, about what exactly happens in these reality shows. The rigging, the politics, the power play, the artifice, the drama, the destruction of dreams and the total absence of any kind of ethics or morals, purely for the sake of entertaining the viewers, consequently roping in more people to send text messages and ultimately making even more money for the producer. Ben Elton sums it up succinctly in one line "One winner. And a whole bunch of losers." (The winner being the producer of the show, by the way...not the second best contestant who is usually made to win, supposedly based on SMS votes.) What provoked me to write this article was a so called "Carnatic Music based" reality show that has started recently in a Malayalam channel. The contestants are aged between 10 and 15. Since most of them are ordinary kids and not little Mozarts or Ramanujams, their knowledge of and grounding in the science and art of carnatic music is limited at best and quite normal for their age. While the best thing for these kids to do at this stage would be to listen to hours and hours of good classical music concerts by various great masters and Not get involved with any other kind of music till their grounding in the classical idiom becomes firm, solid and unshakable, the producers of the show have added rounds for light classical music (Which pollutes the real thing like few other things do, if one indulges in this before one is firmly grounded), singing for dance, jugalbandis and fusion. According to these parameters, set by the grossly misguided producers, most of the great masters of South Indian classical music would fail to win this contest. Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar, Chembai, M.D.Ramanathan, Semmangudi, Madurai Mani Iyer and others would be knocked out in no time at all. Yes, the times, they are a changin' as the song goes. And it may not be fair to plant musicians from half a century ago in this context and wonder how they would have fared. But what is undeniable is just how wrong a message is being transmitted by the producers of the show both to the viewers in general and to aspiring children and their parents in particular.

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The major reason why nobody seems to be able to make the kind of perfect violin Antonio Stradivarius did more than two centuries ago, why nobody seems to be able to build a structure like the Acropolis any more, why nobody writes the kind of music Beethoven wrote and why nobody seems to be able to accomplish a tiny percentage of what Michelangelo accomplished doesn't seem to be because of a short supply of brilliant minds around..... on the contrary, seriously talented and brilliant children are a dime a dozen these days.....but because the time, energy and focus of our kids these days gets scattered over a variety of things. And we get generations and generations of kids who are okay in several things, who do well in a few things but few of whom eventually do anything so great that they would "leave their footprints in the sands of time", even if the phrase may sound pretentious. And we hang our heads in collective shame each time the Olympics comes around when India comes back with a single bronze medal and perhaps a silver, while countries so many times smaller and poorer than ours rake in the gold medals. But I digress again.....somewhat, though not totally.

To come back to the point in question....why this so called Carnatic music based show bothers me so much.....

- 1) It gives people the completely wrong impression that one has to sing several kinds of related and unrelated music to become a Carnatic musician, especially during the formative years when it is in fact completely destructive, damaging and dangerous for a student of music to do so.
- 2) When the participants are innocent ten year olds who may not yet be familiar with the harsh realities of life, it would definitely crush their spirit and injure them deeply at a psychological level when they know that though they sang better, a less competent singer with greater political clout and consequently more SMS votes walked off with the trophy.
- 3) While it maybe a noble idea to render classical art forms less exclusive, the right way to do it would be to educate and enlighten the listeners and not pervert and bastardize the art form itself in the guise of making it more "User friendly." I already feel sorry for the poor parents of the losers, each of whom will have to cope with a bitter, depressed, demoralized and confused kid in their hands. And because of what? Because of competing by singing songs composed by people like Thyagaraja, most of which are replete with messages which go

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directly against every single thing these TV shows stand for. Ironic, really. At this rate it won't be long before they have reality shows featuring competitions in Yoga and meditation. The kids may suffer, people like me may rave and rant, but the producers laugh all the way to the bank. A handful of heart broken and messed up kids doesn't seem to be too great a price to pay for the money they make or at least hope to make. I do wonder about the parents though. Are they simply misguided or are they so totally blinded by ambition that they fail to see what a mess they are getting their children into ? At least Hollywood has the honesty to call it "Show Business" which is what it actually is. But it is sickening how these people try to promote it as some sort of noble service they are rendering by "bringing more people.....children as well as adults....closer to classical music."

Wise people from all parts of the world ask us to view everything in a positive light. So let us celebrate the fact that our children get a significant head start over people of our generation in gaining first hand experience of one of the six deadly sins. Whether they ever get to sing Thodi or Bhairavi correctly or not, the smart ones from among these kids will soon learn about the six Ms they would need to succeed in life. Money, Money, Money, Money, Money.....and Money. And the show goes on.

May the Best win.