

Margazhi Bhajanai

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Published in Sangeetham, Vol. 18 (2001). Sangeetham is published by the Carnatic Music Association of North America (www.cmana.org)

For me, one of the great attractions of going to Madras during the December music season is attending the daily bhajana conducted every day during the month of margazhi (approx. Dec. 16 - Jan. 15) near the Kapaliswarar temple in Mylapore. While there are many bhajana goshtis (groups) the one that I join is the one that was established by Papanasam Sivan, hereafter referred to as just the bhajana. It can be distinguished (visually) from other bhajana goshtis by its use of a tambura. The bhajana (not a bhajana in the usual sense of the term - i.e. a group of people singing in a chorus - and certainly not in the sense of people singing bhajans) usually starts around 6 AM and proceeds slowly (faster if there are fewer people in the group) around the Mylapore tank with frequent stops on the way. During these stops people sing kritis of Tamil composers like Papanasam Sivan, Kotiswara Iyer, Nilakanta Sivan, Gopalakrishna Bharati, Arunagirinathar, etc. Occasionally one hears a Thyagara kriti or a Dikshitar kriti. The bulk of the compositions sung are usually Papanasam Sivan's compositions and one can get to hear rare compositions of the master. In general the atmosphere is very peaceful and it is quite an experience to hear Karnatic music in such a setting. (Of late, however, the traffic around there has become pretty loud - a moratorium on horns in Madras, at least during the music festival, may be essential quite soon).

The bhajana has been going on for about 70 years now, since the time it was established by Papanasam Sivan. Even before moving to Madras in 1929, Sivan used to come for joining the bhajan around Kapaliswarar temple. Having become interested in music largely through the bhajanas he attended as a child in Tiruvananthapuram (which was led by another Sivan – Nilakanta Sivan of Karamana), it is not surprising that the bhajana tradition had a special place in Papanasam Sivan's heart. This is also portrayed in some of his kritis which describe in rapturous terms the processions around Kapali temple, another occasion for performing bhajanas.

One can only imagine how things would have been when Sivan himself was alive. A story narrated by his daughter Smt. Rukmini Ramani is illustrative. One day Vidwan Ramnad Krishnan visited Sivan at his home “when the latter was singing *Ninnuvina* in Navarasa kannada. Krishnan was enraptured. The next night was Sivaratri, and there was a bhajan in one of the Mada Streets of Mylapore. Krishnan asked Sivan: “Uncle, won’t you sing that Navarasa kannada again?” Sivan said: “Krishnan listen to this.” And while the bhajana party paused at the corner of the South and West Mada Streets, he sang a song he had made up on the spur of the moment in Navarasa kannada: *Nan oru vilayattu bommaiya?* (Am I a toy for you to play with?) Unmindful of the fact that it was the middle of the road, Krishnan prostrated himself before Sivan, the master.”¹

After Sivan’s demise, Mani Iyer (a disciple of Papanasam Sivan) and Smt. Rukmini Ramani carried it on. Mani Iyer died some years ago and since then the bhajana has been kept alive by some diehards. Even after Sivan’s death, many prominent artists, such as S. Ramanathan and D.K.Jayaraman (who used to come once every year, usually on New Year’s day) came, at least once in a while, to sing there. More recently musicians like Sanjay Subramaniam and Papanasam Ashok Ramani (Sivan’s grandson) used to come regularly till they hit the concert trail. Vijay Siva has followed DKJ’s tradition of coming on New Year’s day.

The bhajana has clearly seen better days and it shows.² There are few participants and the repertoire has become somewhat limited. During earlier (good) years, when direct disciples of Sivan, such as Mani Iyer and Duraiswamy, were participating, the bhajana averaged over 200 Sivan kritis in a year. Not any more. What makes it sadder is that if one were to go by numbers of concerts or corporate sponsorships, Karnatic music never had it so big. The bhajana tradition has always been a great source of inspiration for most Karnatic music composers - Thyagaraja is the best example of this - and hence has to be kept alive. One concrete suggestion to revive the bhajana has come from Prof. Pasupathy (University of Toronto). Musicians could come forward to sponsor particular days and come and/or send their young disciples to sing that day. He has even coined a clever

¹ S. Krishnan, “Interesting Glimpses,” *Sruti* 69/70 (June/July 1990), p. 29.

² <http://www.chennaionline.com/musicseason2k/features/margazhi.asp>

slogan: “Sing a Day, Sivan’s Way”. All we require are 30 musicians to sign up. Any takers?