Sampradaya: The First Twenty Years

Ludwig Pesh, Founder Member, Sampradaya

The centre appropriately named Sampradaya was inspired by the musical integrity and genuine affection of Sri H. Ramachandra Shastry (my own teacher) and Smt. Savithri Rajan (the teacher of my associate, Michael Nixon). Neither is with us anymore, but happily both lived to a ripe old age and remained devoted teachers all their lives. Their memories are therefore vivid and precious even today. This has to do with their strong personalities and a boundless generosity that enabled them to make lasting contributions to the lives of all who came in contact with them. They shared everything they had acquired in terms of music, wisdom, humour, and especially the right contacts in the world of Carnatic music: the musicians, scholars and teachers without whom Sampradaya would not have grown and acquired the national and international reputation it enjoys today - neither in the sense of "great musical traditions", nor in the form of a modern music centre dedicated to such music. Both teachers were living encyclopaedias of Carnatic music and enlightened us about the many personalities, past and living who had shaped this music and endowed it with such grace, depth, vigour, and enduring appeal.

It was this appeal which drew us foreign music students to Carnatic music. Did I say "enlightened"? Well, the light emerged from our teachers' side, the darkness about the nature of this music was our condition, and what brought us and others together in a common quest was the realisation that the efforts of a few individuals, however dedicated, would make little difference; but the persisting efforts of many over many years certainly would. For this reason we decided to focus on the professional and personal experience of the Carnatic musicians themselves, not our own notions or expectations of what Carnatic music was all about.

Soon this vague idea concretized in what has since become a flourishing centre thanks to the most diverse contributions and efforts of devoted individuals of all age groups, Indians and foreigners alike. To begin with the beginning, however, it should be recalled that we were saddened by the fact that so little attention had been paid to senior musicians and less-known music teachers and scholars. So many of them had spent all their lives to cultivate and pass on a particular facet of music that they held sacred. How better to do justice to their contribution than by listening to them and learning from them? By also treating them fairly in terms of acknowledgement and decent renumeration for their concerts and recordings!

We realized that prestige, commercial value and public appeal had in fact no meaning at all with regard to the true and lasting value of "their" music which, in fact, belongs to all of mankind. Fashions come and go, but certain qualities are essential to any type of "classical" music. It was the late Smt. Savithri Rajan who taught us that in South India, such intrinsic value or quality is the essence of the concept of "Sampradaya". On the basis of this valuable insight, our public activities were presented, with instant and lasting success, under the Sampradaya banner for more than a year before a society of the same name was founded twenty years ago. Max Mueller Bhavan, the German Cultural Institute of Chennai, graciously provided funds and facilities for several years until the newly founded society could take care of itself with financial assistance from the Ford Foundation.

Hundreds of musicians and scholars have since demonstrated, in association with Sampradaya, that music which is rare and endowed with a special quality can indeed be cultivated, disseminated without having to make any concessions to mass appeal. The
purpose for which Sampradaya was founded, and to which the centre continues to be
devoted, could be summarized in terms of simple questions like "which factors have
shaped musical life in South India?", "who are the exponents of traditional music?", and
"what are the experiences that they can and wish to share with others?"

Sampradaya provides musicians with special opportunities to share their experience in any
way they feel to be congenial, depending on the nature of their music, and their own stage
in life. In the first place, this means listening to the music they treasure most in what can
be described as "public chamber concerts". Thereby, they can share their precious artistic
heirloom and creative genius with like-minded individuals without any distractions like
speeches or any other ceremonial acts. From the beginning, we decided to prepare and
document the musical experience in all conceivable ways so that others could also benefit
from it, now and later. To place this music in proper perspective, documentary material
was gathered or prepared by way of interviews, recording and photo sessions, field trips
etc. Later on, the laborious work of complementing it with additional research data and
documentary material as well as cataloguing needed to be undertaken.

For outsiders, this work behind the screens is, of course, hardly comprehensible; but
everyone is welcome to listen to its outcome and make use of the archival materials,
whether for personal or professional reasons. For this reason, the establishment of a
centre soon became necessary, something easier to conceive than to put into practice.
With help from many members of the music community of Chennai (notably a kindly
landlord and landlady, Sri and Smt. Balasubrahmanyam), this dream has come true and
continues to be a source of strength in South India's classical music circles for two
decades.

Seen in retrospective, this concept - then regarded as "novel" - has had a surprisingly
enduring appeal. While this is what we had hoped for, its validity first needed to be proved.
We were used to rather morose notions so typical of Chennai in the 1970's and 80's, for
instance that "classical values" were losing ground and the younger generation of
musicians had nothing but "money and instant fame" on their minds. Now, we know for
sure that quite the contrary seems to have happened in many instances. This not only
speaks volumes about the cultured youth of South India - the success story of
Sampradaya (in spite of several ups and downs) also reflects the self-rejuvenating forces
inherent in Indian music. Is there perhaps some reciprocity at work that beckons to be
explored? This is what I personally believe although there is no scientific proof or theory to
back up my vision of Indian music in general, and Carnatic music in particular. Suffice to
say here that this unforeseen development is the reason why I trust that Carnatic music
has a larger role to play in world culture, and a future at home, provided attention is paid to
its nuances and inherent potential.

"Small is beautiful" also applies to Carnatic music. Just "cloning" or multiplying this or that
feature, enlarging it out of proportion, re-arranging a few notes and rhythms ever so
cleverly seems to be rather counterproductive. The flaw of such strategies has particularly
been the demonstrated whenever Carnatic music has reached the discerning ears of
classical music lovers outside India for the first (and all too often, last) time. Foreign
audiences don't listen just to be "impressed" (often at uncomfortably high decibel levels) -
they too long to be touched by the subtle facets and deeper meaning, the bhava of
Carnatic music. In this sense, it is no different from any other good music.

Anybody interested in the (after all not so long) history of this centre will be delighted by
the fact that many among the better known musicians of the younger generation have
been associated with the projects initiated by Sampradaya, or just made good use of its
archives. The names of some among them would lend grace to a "Who is Who in Carnatic
music in the 20th and 21st centuries". The strength of this centre lies in its accessibility for
all, young and old, poor and well to do, and especially the fact that the music and its
accompanying documentation remain where they belong rather than being scattered in various archives around the country or abroad.

Let us hope that here, at and around Sampradaya, a community of friends and alumni will grow to ensure that the centre remains active also in the far future, maintains high standards in terms of chamber concerts, projects, workshops, archival value, and, of course, always remains accessible to all in need of musical inspiration and knowledge. To achieve this goal, Sampradaya also needs financial support from those who have benefitted from its work in their careers and private lives. In addition, it needs disinterested and active involvement in the affairs of the registered society which governs the centre and initiates its activities. The continuing activities of Sampradaya are, after all, an original contribution to the cultural life of Chennai, a city which is world-famous as the music and dance capital of India. No non-profit institution can flourish without selfless cooperation and interaction with a discerning public.

Twenty years of its existence is an occasion for Sampradaya to celebrate a new beginning, an engagement with the Carnatic music community as a whole. It can be done with full confidence that there lies a great future ahead for the benefit of all who are or will be involved with this wonderful music.

*Ludwig Pesch*

*Amsterdam, 28 November 2001*