

## Secular Hymns

T M Krishna's concert in Delhi was a statement on his commitment to democratising traditional music.

M R SHARAN

In Delhi's Nehru Park a few years ago, I attended a concert where Carnatic singer T M Krishna swayed gently as he performed a song his teacher—the great Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer—had bequeathed to him. Midway, overcome by emotion, he fell silent: the tambura droned on, the mridangam (the main rhythm accompaniment in Carnatic concerts) pulsated, and the violin whispered. For minutes, not a word escaped Krishna's mouth. It was riveting.

So, last month I was excited when the newspaper advertised another T M Krishna concert at Nehru Park. Krishna has, over these years, grown into more than a Carnatic legend-in-the-making, someone who challenges conventions within the concert structure. He is the author of a tome on Carnatic music, *A Southern Music: The Karnatik Story* (2013); he is a provocative columnist, taking well-articulated positions on caste, class, society, the environment and beyond; he is a Ramon Magsaysay awardee, a cultural icon. His intellectual admirers abound. Yet, in the conservative heart of Carnatic music, Krishna is disliked, for he questions too many traditions and politicises his art.

A few days later, I learned that the concert at Nehru Park was postponed. The Airports Authority of India (AAI), faced with immense opposition from critics—mostly online—of Krishna, succumbed to the pressure. On Twitter, where it is hard to tell the fringe from the mainstream, hate abounded. Krishna was labelled an “anti-national” and an “urban naxal,” terms once endemic to the fringe, but now debated on television, in literary festivals, the highest courts, and political speeches. Krishna responded to the cancellation—on Twitter, again—saying he would be willing to perform on the same

day if invited by someone else. A few anxious hours later, an unusual but fitting host stepped up. The Government of Delhi invited Krishna to perform at the Garden of Five Senses for a concert titled *Awam ki Awaz* (the people's voice), in south Delhi.

We plodded through the unusual Saturday evening traffic in Saket and reached the Garden of Five Senses. We were late. A red carpet was laid out along the pathway to the part of the garden where the concert was. In the distance, over what felt like a thousand bobbing heads, sat Krishna, surrounded by his team: R K Shriramkumar on the violin, Praveen Sparsh on the mridangam, and Anirudh Athreya on the *kanjira* (a frame drum). The crowd was an unusual

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one: at the margins, where we were, I strained—and failed—to catch a word of Tamil or Kannada or Telugu. The *mamas* (uncles) and *mamis* (aunties) of the Delhi Tamil Sangam concerts were replaced by young men and women in shawls, scarves, and sweatshirts over kurtas, who wouldn't be out of place at a Jantar Mantar protest.

Manish Sisodia, Delhi's minister for education, and Arvind Kejriwal, the chief minister, ascended the dais to speak. In what would rank among the shortest speeches made by active politicians, they thanked the organising team and, crucially, reinforced the message that India is for everyone. Krishna said he would let his music do the talking.

Under a starless sky, Krishna—the unquestionable star in our midst—began to sing. He began with a multi-denominational prayer that segued into a Marathi *abhang* by Tukaram. In doing so, Krishna made two things clear. One, the choice of an *abhang* at the start—as opposed to a *varnam* or a fast *kriti* (traditional short compositions sung at the beginning of a Carnatic concert)—indicated his now well-known disregard for the conventional *kutcheri* (concert) format. Two, by invoking a multi-denominational prayer favoured by the man who first conceptualised and popularised the idea of a secular and inclusive India—Mahatma Gandhi—he demarcated his political stance clearly from his opponents' more narrow view of India and its cultural heritage.

As the concert progressed, Krishna repeatedly emphasised both, his idea of India and his understanding of what Carnatic music encompasses. “Baro Krishnayya” in Maand raga, which was beautifully rendered, was made even more moving by his pithy recounting of the manner in which the idol of Gopala Krishna in Udupi turned to face the great saint-musician Kanaka, who was denied entry on account of his caste, according to legend. Over two-and-a-half hours, we heard songs in praise of Jesus, Allah, and Rama; songs in Malayalam, Bengali, Tamil, vernacular Hindi, and Kannada; songs by classical composers, rebellious saints, contemporary poets, and even songs from movies.

The bulk of the crowd was swept away by Krishna's performance. They cheered loudly when the *taniyavartanam* (percussion solo) rose to a crescendo. They laughed when Krishna cracked a joke. The crowd shouted requests that were non-traditional: "Poromboke" (a Carnatic song with lyrics in vernacular Tamil that Krishna originally performed in a bid to save the polluted Ennore creek in Chennai), and an Arabic song "Salatullah Salamullah Alah Taha Rasoolillah." During "Rasoolillah," Krishna even encouraged the crowd to sing along! People still left in trickles after every song, but that only left the faithful happier: for the last quarter of the performance, everyone could be seated.

"Nadopasana" in Begada raga was the centrepiece of the concert: in his adept rendering of the *sangatis* (musical variations of a particular line in a song) and *swaras* (notes), Krishna showcased his complete mastery over the art form. It left some of us salivating for more of the sort: a deeper examination of a raga, a *vilamba kala kriti* (a slow tempo song),

a *neraval* (extempore improvisation) that goes on for more than a few minutes, but that never arrived. Instead, Krishna gave us a stunning "Amar Jonmo Bhumi" (Dwijendralal Roy's Bengali composition, which M S Subbulakshmi sang to a great reception most famously during her last public concert in 1997). For much of the song, this was a solo performance as the violin and the mridangam were set aside. It was only Krishna and his audience. The slow, dreamy rendering reached out and pulled us in. As he glided past notes, they seemed to linger in the air.

Like that winter concert in Nehru Park many years ago, Krishna was consumed by his music and, in turn, had his audience captivated. Only, now, it was a slightly different Krishna and a very different audience.

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