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Pleasing violin jugalbandi binds listeners in a spell

By Shuchita Rao

Four distinct Indian classical musical lineages came together at MIT on Oct. 14 to create a memorable violin jugalbandi concert that featured North Indian Hindustani violinist Kala Ramnath (Mewati Gharana) and South Indian Carnatic violinist Lalgudi Vijayalakshmi (daughter and disciple of Lalgudi Jayaraman). Abhijit Banerjee on table (disciple of Gyan Prakash Ghosh) and Bangalore Pravin (disciple of Palghat Mani Iyer) on mridangam provided fantastic percussion support to the artists.

The MITHAS concert was structured in three parts — two 45 minute solo presentations in the Carnatic and Hindustani styles followed by an hour long jugalbandi featuring both artists together with their percussionists. Lalgudi Vijayalakshmi opened the concert with short compositions (varnams) in three raagas Garuda Dhvani, Kaanada and Yadukula Kambhoji. Melody poured out from Vijayalakshmi's violin like a swiftly flowing stream. Fabulous intonation, measured phrases played with varied emphasis, some on beat and some off beat, pronounced rests, intricate oscillations (gamakams) rendered with precision along with sensitive accompaniment from Bangalore Pravin. Pravin provided modulated phrasing all along made the Carnatic recital a beautiful experience for listeners.



Hindustani violinist Kala Ramnath took stage next. She chose to present compositions in one single raga, Puriya Dhanashri, in her 45 minute solo. Starting with a meditative alaap, she played a composition in slow tempo rhythmic cycle of 12 beats (ektaal), building the melodic structure from ground up in a grand manner, through sweeping glides, symmetrical alaap phrases, and fast melodic movements (taans). Tabla player Abhijeet Banerjee displayed virtuosic command in accompanying Ramnath in her second piece, a drut khyaal set to fast tempo cycle of 16 beats (teentaal). Ramnath showed exemplary prowess with violin playing technique.

For instance, she created a terrific rhythmic passage of sound by simply bowing across four violin strings without even touching the finger board in the third and final composition, a taraana played at a very fast tempo. There were brilliant spontaneous exchanges between Ramnath and Banerjee in a savaal-jawaab sequence and they ended the recital in a dramatic tihai climax.

It was clear that the two gifted violinists had made a powerful impact with their presence and talent in the first half of the concert. During the intermission, the excited members of the audience could not stop talking about the strengths of the two artists in the first half and wondered what was to come in the second half. A concert attendee asked "Will there be a tennis match in the second half?" Another concert attendee replied "I think there will be friendly fire."

Lalgudi Vijayalakshmi and Kala Ramnath played together (jugalbandi) in the second half. Ramnath played raga Madhuvanti, a late afternoon melody while Vijayalakshmi played a closely related raga Dharmaavati. The opening refrain of the pallavi was very attractive. Taking respectful turns in playing melodic movements, leading each other to the next note up in the hierarchy, each artist brought out the essence of the ragas through ornamentation specific to the music systems they were representing — intricate phrased oscillations (gamakams) in Carnatic style were contrasted with sweeping meends (glides) played in the Hindustani style by Ramnath. In another interesting sequence, Ramnath played briefly to Mridangam accompaniment while Vijayalakshmi played a short solo to tabla accompaniment. The percussionists took turns to show their command on rhythm in the taani-avarthanam segment that followed. Listeners were reminded of galloping horses (created by broad strokes on mridangam) being encountered by swift and agile deer (created by

racing fingers on tabla) in a volley of energetic exchanges on percussion instruments. In the end, the violinists and the percussionists came together and created a dazzling crescendo that brought the jugalbandi item to a close in a high peak flourish.

The three hour long program concluded with an evocative rendering of Mahatma Gandhi's favorite bhajan set in raag Mishra-Khamaaj. The rendition was marked with a great variety of melodic variations around different phrases in the opening refrain "Vaishnava Jana tho tene kahiye je, peer paraayi jaane re." Listeners left the MITHAS concert with a feeling of fullness and satisfaction after having heard a one-of-a-kind performance by two top-of-the-line violinists accompanied by accomplished percussionists from Northern and Southern Indian traditions.