

The Place of Music in Our Lives

A man tells his little boy about the song streaming from the speakers in the mall, ' I used to sing this song for you when you were still inside your mother's belly.'

'Was that you, dad? '

Music pervades life. Beginning with the lullabies sung at infancy, through various stages of life till the very end, there is music for events auspicious and sad, mundane and spiritual. Even a baby in the mother's womb responds to music. Sage Narada singing the praise of Lord Vishnu to Kayadhu when she was carrying Prahlada in her womb made the latter a Vishnu devotee even though his father, Hiranyakashyapu, was a Vishnu enemy. "*sisurvethi pasurvethi vethi ganarasam phanihi*" is an adage implying babies, animals and even snakes enjoy music.

Some people might remember how exalted a place musical talent commanded on the selection criteria for eligible brides. Anecdotaly the famous movie actor, singer and director, Chittoor Nagaiah was won over by the strains of the composition in pentatonic scale ' nanu paalimpa nadachi vachchitivo' as he was entering the house of his future bride. Saint Thyagaraja composed that kriti when Walajapet Venkataramana Bhagavatar brought Pallavi Ellayyar's portrait of Lord Sri Rama to the wedding of the Saint's daughter, Sitalakshmi.

The beneficial effects of music have been recognised by our ancient seers. Music therapy is now a rapidly developing specialty encompassing multiple conditions both physical and mental. Though the exact mechanisms are not clearly identified, music has been employed to treat ailments like high blood pressure, insomnia, stress, memory loss, chronic pain, pain related to childbirth, cognitive defects, emotional conditions etc. Besides other factors, release of endorphins and immune-boosting hormones is believed to play a part.

Music is the only form of art that can be practised and enjoyed without special equipment or prior knowledge. There are no constraints of time or place. It promotes good posture, breathing and discipline. Many

musicians live long lives. Vocal or instrumental? While instrumentalists generally have some knowledge of vocal music, the converse probably is not common. Notable exceptions in the past were Saint Thyagaraja and Mudduswamy Dikshitar who were both Vainikas in their own right. In recent times composer/musician Harikesanallur Muttayya Bhagavatar was an adept at playing chitra veena and mridangam; composer/musician Sangeeta Kalanidhi Mangalampalli Balamurali Krishna can play the viola, violin, mridangam and kanjira; vocalist Sangeeta Kalanidhi T.N. Seshagopalan is also a Vainika. There is no doubt that a vocalist's skills can be enhanced by knowledge of playing an instrument.

Though childhood is the preferred age to start learning music, as also any new language or skill, advancing age should not be considered a barrier. Physical handicaps did not preclude some outstanding musicians from scaling new heights. One of the most celebrated western composers and pianists, Ludwig van Beethoven, had to fight emotions and turn his body to face the audience to notice their applause -- he was congenitally deaf. A prolific and influential composer of the Classical era, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart suffered from Tourette Syndrome and had mood swings. George Frederick Handel, Baroque composer famous for his operas, suffered from epilepsy. Sangeetha Kalanidhi Dwaram Venkataswamy Naidu, regarded not only at home but also by western violinist Yehudi Menuhin as one of the most important carnatic violinists of the 20th century, was blind. He used to advise his disciples, "If you don't practice for one day, you will notice your mistakes; if you don't practice for two days the audience would notice your mistakes!!" Supplementing zealous practice or *sadhana* should be continuing study. This idea is reflected in the guru's exhortation to the graduating disciples of Gurukulas of yore:

"*satyam vada dharmam chara swadhyayanma pramada*" (speak the truth, observe dharma; delight in self-learning).

The pursuit of music is a lifelong journey. Aesthetic pleasure, health benefits and spiritual satisfaction are but a few rewards for the student of music.

(G. Ramakrishna Rao)