

October 19, 2010

Enchanted evening



The Hindu
IN SYNC: The Octet Cantabile. Photo: M. Vedhan

Billy John walked the bass line. Kingslin. P kept the beat. Augustine Paul and Samcy Philip, the tenors, supplied the guitar rhythms, and the horn section (with plenty of scat thrown in) — Maxyn Kingston, Anupa Paul (sopranos), Pearline Roopkumar and Jayanthi Prabhakar (altos) — pulled it all together. But, there were no instruments in sight. They were hidden in the voices of the eight men and women of the Octet Cantabile.

The sound was mostly gospel, with a tinge of jazz and a sprinkling of doo-wop in an a cappella package, with plenty of clapping, finger-snapping and laughter. It stirred quite a few souls in the process.

'Choral Enchantment', a concert held last weekend to celebrate 15 years of the music group, was laced with humour and gratitude to all those who made the journey possible.

Drawn from members of the Madras Musical Association, the Octet Cantabile has, through its seven albums and over 200 concerts in India and abroad, given audiences purity of sound coupled with the use of voices as instruments, whether emulating a double bass or expressing a piano arpeggio with accuracy.

The group chose the evening's repertoire well — Tamil hymns sung to pre-recorded music, a Carnatic *keerthanai*, a Malayalam gospel song, a Latin mass, popular English hymns, country gospels, a Bach fugue and a Beatles favourite.

Varied repertoire

Beginning with 'He Knows' set to a rollicking Christmas tune, the group then sang 'Almighty God', the comforting Psalm 91 version in Tamil — 'Unnathamavarin', the 'Kyrie' from a Spanish mass by Padilla, and strummed the guitars to sing the lovely 'Watching', a country gospel piece led by Samcy.

The ethereal 'Ave Maria' (Bach/Gounod version) followed, with Anupa's bell-like voice soaring heavenwards in the maiden's prayer.

'Uruhiyozhuhum', a Malayalam gospel song, had an easy rhythm to it with Billy anchoring the bass, Anupa and Maxyn singing the verse and Samcy going solo.

Billy led 'Bali Peedam', with Pearline's strong diction underscoring the spirit of the song.

'Fat Baby', a gospel standard made famous by Amy Grant, was sung with much gusto, a cappella style with the clarinet and bass thrown in, followed by a Kings Singers' original and an Octet Cantabile favourite, 'Train', pretty much reminiscent of steam engines and *Chattanooga Choo Choo*.

The first half of the concert ended with 'Aiyane', a Carnatic *keerthanai*.

Much of the music for the second half was light and easy from 'By and By', a spiritual arrangement by Bob Chilcott, a delightful and moving rendition of 'My Daddy's Hands' by Maxyn, The Swingle Singers version of 'Bach's Organ Fugue in B minor', and a soulful rendition of The Beatles' 'Yesterday' by Samcy with drum rolls, guitar strums and all performed by Billy.

'Italian Salad', which followed, was made up of Italian musical terms — a flashy, spirited shout of a work when singing fortissimo, a whispering, captivating piece when singing pianissimo and liberally charged when finishing off with opera.

Imaginative, using Latin rhythms, Italian serenades and doo-wop harmonies, The Octet Cantabile led by Augustine Paul enchanted with its blissful blending and crisp voices.

Kinetic and full of spontaneous energy, the mixed voices complemented each other with perfect pitch control and a colourful tapestry of vocal hues.

Teachers of musical instruments often encourage pupils to copy the human voice. At the Museum Theatre, The Octet Cantabile turned the tables on such theories with such elegance that it deserved every bit of the applause. Fortissimo.