

May 13, 2013

Raising the bar



The Hindu

A scene from Carmen. Photo: R. Ravindran



The Hindu

A.R. Rahman with his family. Photo: R. Ravindran



The Hindu

A scene from *The Lobby*. Photo: R. Ravindran



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A scene from *The Mikado*. Photo: R. Ravindran

The students of KM Conservatory showcased their musical prowess as they recreated well-loved operas

How do you present Gilbert and Sullivan's Savoy masterpiece *The Mikado* to a Manga-mad world? Or incorporate deeply moving soliloquies set to techno beats into Gandhian philosophy in *The Lobby*? Or portray sexual tension cloaked in a graceful veneer as in *Carmen*?

Take a cue from the students of A.R. Rahman's KM Music Conservatory, who presented as their annual offering, 'Opera Scenes 2013', at the Sir Mutha Venkatasubba Rao Concert Hall, recently. Performing western operatic music, a sound that is rarely heard in the city, complete with costumes, set and staging, the students showcased three one-act sequences that were directed by the Conservatory's celebrated international vocal faculty.

As an orchestral prelude, Leonard Cohen's 'Hallelujah' complete with a double bass, tabla, violin, guitar and drums was sung, followed by a dramatic black entourage that rendered Claude Debussy's 'Noël des enfants qui n'ont plus de maison'.

And then the stage opened in a shower of cherry blossoms, striking black and red kimonos and pastel hand fans to showcase the happy story of the Mikado's son, Nanki-Poo (played by Lijo), Yum-Yum (Aarthi and Shivangi) the girl Nanki-Poo and Ko-Ko (Roopteja and Zeeshan) love and a crowd of Japanese caricatures who Gilbert and Sullivan introduced to an imperial Britain in the 19th Century.

The chorus of Japanese gentlemen sang 'If You Want To Know Who We Are' followed by Nanki-Poo's 'A Wand'ring Minstrel I', Koko's 'I've Got a Little List', updated for a modern generation, and 'On A Tree By A River', the charming 'Three Little Maids From School Are We' and 'Miya-sama'. The extraordinary singing lent a perfect equilibrium never letting the melody sag or rush through the sequences. Vocal beauty alone wasn't the point here; the direction by Namrata Shah with Brian Clark at the piano resulted in a well-rounded theatrical piece.

The second scene, 'The Lobby', directed by Gilles Denizot with Adam Greig at the piano, explored how people exist, communicate and share a common space. A technically sound piece in terms of voice, music and acting, it incorporated a modern story of love, longing and lust. Arpita Gandhi, Varun Kumar and Sandeep Gurrupadi, among others, flawlessly switched from French to German to Italian to sing to the grand notes of the piano and the upbeat tempo of modern percussion and cymbals. Light sensitive tenors melded with dark powerful baritones to lend dignity to the message of harmony.

Finally, the Spanish gypsy in Bizet's *Carmen* took the stage, bringing to the Hradsjuhi Aramian-directed scene an earthy voice, sensual lyricism and a story for our times. Sharanya Natarajan played Carmen to Jimmy Joy's Don Jose and both gave an impassioned portrayal of forbidden love set among the orange orchards of Seville. 'Funiculi funicula' and 'O sole mio', two Neapolitan songs were sung with verve and power soaring to top notes and dabbling with melodic embellishments. The beauty of the scene lay in the naturalness of the soldiers' performances, the bass-baritone chasm that echoed in the popular 'Toreador' and the spirited attention showered upon them by the gypsy women dancing to a frenetic tempo set off on the piano by Rachintan Trivedi.

Throughout the opera the voices had a rich sound and an absolute feel for the tone and nuance of a phrase, and appealing sensuality. The grainy texture of the percussion mingled well with the intensity and refinement of the guitar, accordion and violin. And it all finally rode the crest when A.R. Rahman went onstage to congratulate the students.

That night, beyond the arabesques of sound and the ecstatic sweep of voice and language, there was one sentiment that linked both student and audience — delight.