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Matters of the voice

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LEC-DEM Dr. T. Unnikrishnan spoke about disorders pertaining to the vocal chords and how singers can prevent them.

Photo: K.V. Srinivasan



TECHNICAL: T. Unnikrishnan.

Voice Disorder and Remedy' is probably one of the most critical topics to throw light on the principal piece of vocal music. Dr. T. Unnikrishnan, Dean, Faculty of Music, Indira Kala Sangita Vishvavidyalaya, Chattisgarh, presented an interesting lecture demonstration on this topic for Sri Parthasarathy Swami Sabha at Vidyabharati, Mylapore.

Dr. Unnikrishnan touched upon the medical, musical and practical problems faced by musicians and suggested how these could be remedied. Starting with some common problems faced by musicians such as strain in the voice, breathlessness, dryness and an uneasy sensation leading to frequent clearing of throat, he classified the disorders into two categories: organic and functional.

Organic disorder, Unnikrishnan said, is mostly due to medical problems including infection, thyroid, tonsils, sinusitis and bronchitis, and even genetic. This disorder needs medical intervention. Functional disorders are mainly due to wrong usage of throat resulting in hoarseness. Nodules (similar to pimples) can be formed in the vocal chords and if not attended to at once, can lead to voice damage, Unnikrishnan warned. Air pressure applied through the diaphragm from the abdomen and the lungs creates a vibratory effect of sound waves through resonator chambers, he explained. When the vibration passes through the various chambers of the resonators which act more or like the sound mixtures provided to the human body by nature. How one channelises the sound through these resonator chambers is what matters.

Some causes

Energy, space behind the tongue and depth decide voice power. Singers, announcers, speakers and choreographers use their voice to a great extent. The upper respiratory track can be affected by air pollution, sinusitis and cancer.

According to the speaker, functional disorder occurs in many cases because of incorrect ways of breathing, lack of practice and lack of knowledge about the importance of maintaining the vocal chords. Wrong way of applying air pressure is the main reason that cause improper vocal loading, he added.

Dr. Unnikrishnan said in the West, singers generally never use their voice for different styles as we do in our system. If a singer sings in soprano or bass, for an opera or a chorus, they just stick to that. In India, as singers use their vocal chords for different types of singing, it needs more attention.

Control techniques

Chest voice is the normal one and that should be used optimally by one and all, was his advice. Open throated singing is recommended for youngsters to discover their range, and this should be done optimally and carefully. That is the first level of control. The second level is to keep the same air pressure but use it according to the way one needs to sing. Unnikrishnan demonstrated by singing an open throated raga Khambhodi ('Maragatha Valleem'). He also sang Chalanatta ('Yedayya Gati') and Ritigowla ('Dwaitamu Sukhama') which do not demand too open throated singing; a softer or optimal touch can bring out the best.

The third level is singing bhajans and Hindustani where, he said, one has to reduce the air pressure. To explain this, he sang Brindavanasaranga. The fourth level is light music where depth of the voice should be maintained but pressure and volume have to be reduced even while reaching the upper registers. The fifth is the use of falsetto by reducing more than 50 per cent of the pressure and singing with low pressure on the voice. However, the speaker said open throated and falsetto singing has to be practised for short times only.

On the remedial side, Dr. Unnikrishnan believed correct breathing and proper modulation of voice can help a lot. How the sound emanating from the resonators is thrown out intelligently is what decides the depth of a person's voice.

Fixing the pitch according to the voice is essential, he felt, and clarified that one has to keep the pitch at his/her own comfortable level. Pranayama, regular practice, diet control, abstaining from heavy and unwanted medication and avoiding cloves or peppercorn can help a singer gain good lung power. He recommended drinking warm water and protecting the body from dehydration also.