

Gayatri Sriram at the musée

Guimet

On Friday the 14th of March, I decided against going for Schonberg's Gurre-Lieder played at the Pleyel hall by a vast number of musicians to head for the Guimet museum where the Bharatnatyam recital of Gayatri Sriram whose skill in narrative dance I was able to appreciate at the NCPA in Mumbai in July 2011, was going to be held. I did not regret it! (*Full disclosure*: Since the danseuse had contacted me a few weeks before the recital to suggest that I attend it, I had asked her to provide me with the themes that would be evoked during the different parts of the programme. The danseuse having given me a very detailed response, I was able to attend the programme in better than ordinary conditions ; usually I discover the dance pieces as we go along and am not always able to understand the performance....)

The programme is titled "*Mukti Marga*"; it involves a series of dance pieces exploring the theme of love for the divine. The first dance is a *Surya Kautwam*, a type of dance in which rhythm dominates over music and whose tempo is rather rapid. This piece invoking the Sun (Surya) includes passages of pure dance executed at varying speeds. I appreciated being able to recognize some sequences that I have learnt and was delighted to see the danseuse present geometrical figures not only through her gestures but also through quarter turns that she performs around herself. In this piece, the different parts of the day are associated with the different gods of the Hindu trinity. If I did not recognize Vishnu, I do believe I recognized Brahma and Shiva (his Lingam was represented). The most striking image was that of Surya represented as a coachman of a carriage drawn by seven horses.

The succeeding piece *Ardhanarishwara* seemed to be particularly well performed. The danseuse evokes Shiva with the left half of her body and his spouse Parvati with her right side. I particularly appreciated the cycle of beats used in this piece *Rupaka Tala*. This three metre rhythm was interpreted in a delightfully slow fashion as befits a piece such as *Ardhanarishwara* in which the danseuse continually metamorphoses from Shiva to Parvati and vice versa. During a Bharatnatyam recital, the voice of the singer can alternate with the rhythmic onomatopoeic sounds in various ways: in terms of the concert as a whole by alternating between narrative pieces and pure dance pieces, within a piece by alternating between narrative passages and pure dance. This

alternation took on an unusual form in this *Ardhanarishwara*- towards the end of the piece, the alternation could be heard at the level of the rhythm where two of the three beats were used by the singer to sing the notes while the last beat was for the onomatopoeic sounds (unless it's the other way round).

The *Varnam*, the principal piece of the recital is dedicated to Krishna. It is composed of alternating passages of narrative and pure dance (*jatis*). The first of these *jatis* seemed to me particularly original in that in spite of the predominant rhythm and the rather rapid tempo of the music, the dance was a narrative: it evoked the childhood of Krishna. This manner of doing things is quite rare, I distinctly remember two danseuses using it: [Shantala Shivalingappa](#) (kuchipudi) and [Rukmini Vijayakumar](#). The *jatis* that follow will be less original in their form than this one but I will appreciate certain distinctive details. For example, in one of them, I will appreciate the guru Minal Prabhu's manner of using a very variable tempo in the course of the rhythmic cycles (*Adi Tala*) and in another I will appreciate the surprisingly melodious character of the music.

I did not totally understand all the narrative aspects of this very rich *Varnam*. The first chapters of this piece narrate the childhood of Krishna and the seduction he holds over the milkmaids (*gopis*). He dances with them after having attracted them with his flute. The danseuse uses her expressive ability to portray the sentiments of one of these young women: while she is separated from the god with whom she wishes to be united she is upset and is unable even to eat. Certain exploits of the young Krishna are mentioned. Unless I am mistaken, one sees him kill the demon Kamsa, lift the mount Govardhana with his little finger and dance on the serpent Kaliya. However, the passage which made the strongest impact on me is the one that narrates in great detail the birth of Krishna. Krishna was adopted by Yashoda who often takes centre stage in bharatanatyam choreographies, but this *Varnam* portrays his biological parents Vasudeva and Devaki. The demonic king kamsa had a curse upon him: the eighth child of Vasudeva and Devaki would kill him. When Krishna is born, Vasudeva takes off secretly to exchange Krishna with the girl to whom Yashoda as just given birth. By exquisitely illustrating filial love, the danseuse represents Vasudeva's journey. Leaving his home, he carries the baby Krishna on his head and leaves for the countryside where he arrives to place Krishna in his new crib.

The end of the varnam represents Krishna the way in which he manifests himself in the *Mahabharata*. The scene of the game of dice in which he comes to Draupadi's aid is represented very briefly which frustrated me a bit but not for long. I did not understand very well at the time the last minutes of the *Varnam* which illustrated the *Bhagavad-Gita*, the dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna in which Krishna succeeds in convincing Arjuna to take up arms. At one point, Arjuna asks Krishna to show himself in his universal form. I suppose that was the meaning of the most impressive passage (and quite indescribable!) of this varnam which concludes with the majestic mobilization of Arjuna's chariot of which Krishna is the charioteer (one of the classic images associated with the *Mahabharata* in Hindu iconography). I would have liked to better appreciate this passage but was disconcerted by the music. Having watched and listened to *Varnams*, I have discerned that the last minutes of the music are supposed to be joyful. This *varnam* did not go against the rule and I found it rather strange in the context of the *Bhagavad Gita* which is certainly a spiritual revelation but also a war-hungry harangue. Thus, when a joyful piece of music accompanied the movements of an archer, I wondered if it was really about Arjuna or rather the god of Love (Kama who shoots floral arrows), especially since the voice-over preceding the *Varnam* had compared Krishna to Kama- I will not hold Isabelle Anna responsible for my confusion since a few months ago another one of her apt interpretations allowed me to appreciate a magnificent scene in a recital by [Janaki Rangarajan](#) which I never would have understood without this preliminary explanation.

It must be highlighted that during the recital, the orchestra included a musician who used electronic percussions (and other instruments, including the *morsing*, the Indian mouth harp). I admit to being a little wary of this practice, since I believe that the *mridangam* and the melodic instruments (violin, flute, vina, etc.) already offer a large range of special effects in order to emphasise certain dramatic moments. By using electronic and other sound effects, there is a great risk, in my opinion of polluting the atmosphere by veering into ridiculous kitsch, something I have already experienced during a recital of the dancer [Zakir Hussain](#). Fortunately, during Gayatri Sriram's recital, this accompaniment was sober and in good taste.

The recital continued with two Ashtapadi extracted from the Gita Govinda. They were the last two of these Ashtapadi (or cantilenas), the twenty-third and the twenty-fourth cantilenas which are found in the twelfth (and last) chant of

this poetic text by Jayadeva (whose translation by Jean Varenne I greatly appreciated: the following extracts are from the translation by Gaston Courtillier that I have with me). They glorify the love between Radha and Krishna. In this type of piece the music is extremely melodious, and the danseuse spends most of the time seated with a sensual attitude and expresses with her eyes and gestures the feelings of the characters. In the 23rd Ashtapadi Krishna invites Radha: “At once now, Radha and as closely follow Narayana as he’s followed you”. Radha only follows him in the 24th Ashtapadi where Radha responds to him by asking him to arrange her diverse ornaments: More glistening than the massing bees the eye’s collyrium you kissed away and loose the arrows of the loved-one’s looks. These words she spoke while Krishna played, delighting Yadu’s family and her full heart. It is difficult to summarize the visual impression of these two pieces, so great was the temptation to be carried away by the continual flux of the dance. I do recall however, Krishna’s commitment to shield her from her awakening and throw flowers at her.

The recital first concludes with a particularly technical *Thillana*. I have to admit that I listened to rather than watched it: I was perplexed by the particularly complicated rhythm with which it was composed.... For a while now, I am able to tap to the *Adi tala* or the *Rupaka Tala* but sometimes other types of cycles are used and some do not have short names like “Adi Tala”, which is an abbreviation of “Chatusra-Nadai Chatusra jati Tripura tala”, which means that the cycle has eight beats (sub divided into four) which is tapped as follows “x---xoxo” (tap-nothing-nothing-nothing-tap-undulation-tap-undulation), “undulation” corresponds to the movement of rotation of the hand to the other side and “nothing” indicates the beats that one counts with the fingers in order to keep time. I do not recall the name of the Tala used during this *Thillana*, but it seemed to be a long, extended name. I had the impression that it was a cycle with nine beats (I scribbled “x----xoxo in my notebook), but remarkably more complicated than *Adi Tala* because the first five beats did not seemed to be sub divided in the same way as the last four. That one is able to dance to such a rhythm, seems extraordinary.....

After a brief traditional salutation, the audience greatly applauded the danseuse who came back to dance to a *Mira Bhajan*. Owing to exchanges that I had had with the danseuse, I knew that a piece of this name figured in the

program but was not aware of the precise theme. Of course, the name Mira Bhajan refers to the sixteenth-century poetess Mirabai (who is the main character of the novel *La Princesse Mendiante*). A temple was even built to honour this devotee of Krishna at Chittorgarh (a place that I greatly appreciated)

The general theme of the poem was of course Krishna, but when the piece started I was unaware of which aspect of the divinity would be highlighted and then an incredible thing happened: I recognize Yudhishtira, the eldest of the Pandavas in the Mahabharata, in the process of losing the game of dice against Shakuni. He loses his crown, loses himself, then his wife Draupadi who is forced while she is menstruating to join the men where the game of dice is taking place. Dushasana pulls her by the hair. Further away, Duryodhana obscenely uncovers his thigh as he watches her. Meanwhile, after a debate solicited by Draupadi to know if Yudhishtira had the right to stake her after having lost himself, Dushasana tries to further humiliate Draupadi by pulling at her sari. Having addressed a prayer to Krishna, her sari keeps extending miraculously as Dushasana proceeds to disrobe it. This is surely one of the most moving scenes from the Indian epic. If I was a bit frustrated by the brief evocation of this scene in the *Varna*, I was enthralled by the well-developed form that it took on in the last piece. The most extraordinary moment of this piece was the one during which the danseuse represented three characters almost simultaneously: Draupadi, Dushasana pulling on her sari and Krishna making new pieces of cloth appear with a wave of his hand and an expression of serene tranquillity. It was truly magnificent!

