

MEDIA PRODUCTION REVIEW

Punyapita, Christian Devotional Songs. Genre: Audio Music CD; Production: Davis Thattil CMI and Philips Panackal CMI, for Preshitha Communications, Coimbatore; Language: Malayalam; 2014, Price: Rs 99.

Punyapita would go on to become one of my all-time favourite records, one of perhaps half a dozen albums on Chavara in my collection. Such melodic and theologically deep and passionate rendition of thoughts on and of Chavara are flowing out of a handful of Carmelites and their associates. I was fascinated by each and every entry of the album in varying degrees. Over the years, I have been privileged to meet the producer who did his course in theology a year ahead of me and recently, interviewing him more than once, I have found him to be one of the brightest lights in the darkness, especially in his admiration of the person of St Chavara and passion for his writings.

I was glad to hear that he was putting together a new album. And when it appeared, I was ecstatic to find that it was a twin presentation with an album of songs on Chavara featuring the salient features of the literary contributions that Chavara has made. Its twin-CD gives a rendition. The album features a new melodious rendering of the *Chavarul (The Testament)* of Chavara, an attempt in a new vein within the Indian Spiritual productions. Rather than presenting itself as some clichéd gimmick, however, it serves as a perfect doorway to enter the world of Chavara and listen to his advice on family and religious matters in a spiritual atmosphere. At the very least, it is quite an accomplished piece, worthy of recognition. While most of this label's artists are excellent, a few indeed, have originality and/or spiritual depth that I have so appreciated with the production. The production has variety in terms of the themes that the lyrics feature, the ragas in which they are composed and the artistes who present the entries.

Speaking of the lyrics of the album, they are simple, yet profound. The themes cover almost all the major contributions of Chavara, literary, spiritual and social. For instance, the first entry talks about the educational ministry that Chavara initiated and the spirituality of the *Compunction of the Soul*, his poetic work. The main theme of entries 3, 6

and 11 is family and the instruction that Chavara gives in view of a stable family and the proper Christian upbringing of children. In a similar vein, entries 4 and 9 feature *The Testament* of Chavara and his instructions there. The entry 5 has a social theme whereas 7 and 10 would dwell on the divine experiences of Chavara. For all the entries, except track 2, the lyrics were given by the members of the CMI Preshitha, which is one of the provinces of the religious congregation for men that St Chavara founded. It is praiseworthy that the co-ordinators of the musical project have also tapped the talents of a few budding young lyricists (3). We also note a literary inculturation in the use of *sandhyanaamam* for the evening family prayers that is retained by the lyricist in track 6. All these indeed would go in tune with the theme of the current issue of the Herald of the East - the literary contributions of Chavara. Of all the entries, the producer's choice of the best lyrics is track 2.

Several of the tracks array melodious *alapana* and/or humming which adds immensely to their beauty. The variety of the presentation consists also in the fact that the album contains styles ranging from semi-classical (3) to folk (9) to pop (2). This mix of genre makes the album a feast of melodies. *Punyapita's* featured performer is not just any vocalist, but Kester, the well-known one, among others. It is his voice that gives the devotional songs its unmistakable character. The rich and familiar voice of Kester to open the album and to conclude it is an apt choice, making a statement for the album. The bass voice of Wilson and the more familiar angelic voice of Elizabeth and almost smoky voice of Sukanya interspersed along the album give us an experience of a swing on a gentle musical swing.

Line to line, adds a little something - an intensifier, a surprise. The soulful rendering of track 6 is soothing to your ears and soul. The chorus is jumpy and trendy, but attractive with a symphony of classical and modern accompaniment, which jells with the voice of the vocalist. The pleasant voice of Elizabeth has the twangy stomp of peace and the entry is ecstatically danceable. The percussion on the *ghatam* is noticeable. Track 9 sounds akin to the more recent style of introducing baby musicians to the world of music, and is at least somewhat catchy melodically. It is also one of the more refreshing songs on the album. Maria, Sandra and Aiswarya, all upper primary students, are featured and they make their debut appearance in the album and the track provides a decent change of pace. Their voices make the entry an uplifting worship song. I feel nearly moved to tears even now when I listen to the angelic voices of these children and

worship flows so naturally from the track. Track 3 sung by Madhu Balakrishnan is one of the highlights of *Punyapita*. The semi-classical voice creates a rich and embracing melody, where Madhu's signature vibrato perfectly fits into the piece.

The producers have a record of at least five musical productions behind them. However, none of the composition that is found in the previous albums is replicated on this most recent project. It is beyond obvious that they have a raw talent and ability to once again make unimaginably wonderful and original tracks.

Speaking of the music, the producers have channelled the vague Indian percussion into an increasingly complex weave of deep hues, smeared echo, rippling polyrhythms, and glistening chimes of various kinds of bells. The off-beat of track 2 is positively conspicuous. For long stretches, acoustic and electric tones dominate, with synthesizers and effects frequently relegated to a background role, and much of the time, there is no percussion at all. It is easy to imagine some of the songs, suffused as they are in bells and chimes, being performed on some Tibetan misty mountaintop.

Track 6 is one of the most exceptional tracks on the album. The swaying melody and ambient atmospherics give the song a beautiful texture with the interludes and wordless singing. The Chorus in the polyphony is sometimes jumpy and trendy, but attractive. It has a symphony of traditional and modern accompaniment. The closing song, track 11, delivers the best of the producer's various styles, packaged conveniently into one track. This song leaves the feel of the true anthem of *Chavara* and works to close out the worshipful album in magnificent fashion.

I firmly believe that the group behind *Punyapita* is one of the best songwriters on the writings of Chavara. It is excruciating to be critical of any worship music, especially from a group of artistes who are so passionately in love with Chavara and whom I so greatly respect, but I know that this is far from their best work.

Perhaps the producers did the work in a hurry keeping the canonization of St Chavara as the dead-line. This haste has affected the album unhelpfully. Moreover, perhaps it is because they had to adapt the writings of Chavara into lyrics, that in this project, the poetic nature of their lyrics has taken a hit, and the spiritual depth found on some of the previous albums has somewhat evaporated in the present release. A few theological questions that the lyrics raise are: (1) In the context of worship, whether "praise" is due to saints or to God alone. Track 2 repeatedly acknowledges our *praise* to Chavara. (2) Both to St

Chavara and St Euphrasia, prayer is made that *they* might shower blessings/graces (tracks 8, 9, 11). In a worship scenario, through the intercession of the saints, it is God who gives graces/blessings, and not the saints themselves. At times, the lyrical content fails to impress, but the world of contemporary worship have been so overexerted that a handful of excuses may be allowed. Other times, however, the group's skills as lyricists and composers make a bold appearance. There are no songs that particularly stand out, but as I mentioned earlier, the album is very cohesive and cannot be dissected in a more traditional manner.

Although the orchestration is not of the highest quality, it has done justice to the album. Music-wise, the once-wonderful melodic elements and riffs of the group seem to have weakened in quality. Track 2 being semi-classical, more of classical Indian instruments on the softer side would have rendered the track more enjoyable. Aneesha, as a newcomer and less known voice in the industry, although does not appear to be one of the best voices (track 10), with a touch of professionalism added to her voice, stands a chance for a melodious future. A comment on the otherwise commendable editing work by the studio might be in place. A few vocal blemishes could have been purged digitally (the sound of breath in track 10). Similarly, the synchronisation of the timing of the baby vocalists (track 9) could be rectified digitally making the performance more perfect.

A note on track 8, which is a prayer through St Euphrasia. The Lyrics and the delivery are excellent. Nevertheless, it stands out as a lone piece on Euphrasia on an album titled *Punya'pita'*. An effort to downplay this irregularity is seen in the inside of the sleeve where a portrait of the saint is given along with that of Chavara. However, the unseemly protrusion would have been remedied by adding a few numbers more on Euphrasia or, easier still, by relating the song to Chavara in the lyrics.

To conclude, the presentation of the twin-album is simple but elegant. The physical format is sized in such a way that it is storable. The sober colours used in the presentation enhances the visual effect of the album as serious. Although the sub-title of the album is given in English, as it seems to have become an acceptable way today, in the list of contents, the first entry titled "Title" would have looked better if rendered in Malayalam as done in all the other titles.

Davis and friends are undeniably one of the most prolific and talented group of artistes among the Indian Carmelites. The above-mentioned elements notwithstanding, the present album is no less

fantastic than anything on their earlier compositions, signifying a continued development of artistry. Ultimately, this is one of the best albums on Chavara, and will likely remain so. If you have enjoyed Chavara music on other albums, *Punyapita* is a must-have, especially in its remastered version that will be available shortly. Even if Chavara is not your man, this album is still worth checking out.

Benny Paul Thettayil CMI