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MEDIA PRODUCTION REVIEW

Anayatha Deepam (Immortal Lamp): St Kuriakose Elias Chavara and St Euphrasia Eluvathingal. Genre: Audio Music CD; Production: Benny Pulparampil; Music: Jerry Amaldev, Pradeep Tom and Sabu Panakkal; Language: Malayalam; Orchestration: Jerry Amaldev, Pradeesh Kothamangalam and Pradeep Tom; Studio: Film City Riyan, Metro Vazhakkala, Marian Digital, Kochi; Price: Rs 95.

The idea of common worship has long been a key element in binding those who come together to seek a deeper knowledge of God and the mysteries of God reflected in his people, especially their saints. There is something beautiful about singing and worshipping together, something catechetical about commemorating the saints in folklore and ballads, knowing that other believers who share their faith have sung these kinds of songs before, be it anywhere from ten minutes to four thousand years ago. There is something beautiful about new contributions to this musical tradition; about the reality that there are scores of lyricists and composers who write and compose hymns and songs which spread like fire throughout dozens of worshipping congregations making the life of the people vibrant. This is a stunning testament to how God is still very much alive today.

When we sing a hymn, we do so in humility for the purpose of drawing near to God and praising him for who he is. When we sing folklore on a saint or a hero/heroine of the Church, it delivers a breath of fresh air and we are inspired to emulate the way they had glorified God.

Sunny Pulparampil CMI is not a novice in the field of spiritual media production. *Anayatha Deepam (Immortal Lamp)*, the album that is being reviewed is his 21st production. His previous projects included devotional music albums, video CDs and retreats, which had brought him to the sitting rooms of the believers in the South and those migrant believers in the North whose life was touched by the Word of God and its interpretations that found expression in these productions. The setting of the retreat centre that he founded and established gave his albums a contemplative aura.

When it comes to today's Christian music world, it is the worship genre that rules. The market is saturated with music bands and individual musicians who release new albums of material every year.

Anayatha Deepam falls into the genre of live album where never-before-released songs find an audience already singing along with some of the artistes. The music bounces back and forth between folk songs and meditative worship fare.

The lyrics are another distinct attribute of the project, with intelligent but straightforward song-writing. The album contains entries on St Kuriakose Elias Chavara and St Euphrasia Eluvathingal. Out of the twelve entries, seven are on Chavara. As a ballad singer, Sunny Pulparampil travels through the alleys of the life of Chavara and Euphrasia, picks up imageries and brings them to life both in poetry and music. Hence, the project is as versatile and varied as the life of the saints. He has brought in a melange of styles that make the project attractive to the children with Christeen rock music, to the youth with the cinematic style, to the adults with his folk style, to the seniors with a contemplative style and to complete the spectrum, the album also showcases an entry for the liturgy. Within some of these, there is plenty of cross-pollination between the various genres which are delightful to the young generation, but brow-raiser for some of the conventionalists.

Over recent years, there has been a shift in worship music. Gone are the days in which sound doctrine and theology were on display at the forefront of worship music, they were pieces of real poetry. Contrary to the trend, since all the lyrics for this album were written by Sunny himself, there is a continuity of language that is saturated in spirituality that the lyricist acquired by means of his higher studies of literature, psychology and theology. From time to time, he moves away from more theological source material, and draws from his own emotions, experiences and metaphors that have their roots in his preaching and counselling ministry. He has left a deep mark as he delivers each song with hopeful encouragement to believers that every moment of your life matters. However, nothing here comes across as cliché; it comes from a place of depth that only experience can inform. The lyrics do tend to stick a little too close to familiarity in terms of messages and metaphors, but the delivery feels authentic.

The in-depth study that Sunny Pulparampil made on the poetical work of Chavara, in turn, turned him to a poet. Sometimes, true to his name, Sunny is setting off for points unknown and transcendental, points that are seldom found on other albums. In some of these, he has invented his own textural language of baby-talk and has proved that he could say much in concise formats. These entries are surprisingly accessible and captivating, that you need not be a Christian or a seeker

of any kind to recognize the power of the poems on these saints and the pull of the music.

The project is Sunny's most compositionally ambitious work yet because the subject matter of the lyrics was limited. The album breaks from the rest of his catalogue in one very important way. Much of his early work featured Jesus and Mary. This is the first time he has ever worked with the lives and activities of two Carmelite Saints and he has stuck to them throughout the presentation.

The entries on the album and the selection of most of the artistes are thoughtfully done. Some artistes come and go, fade from memory almost as quickly as they spring up. Then there are those musicians who stick with you long after their last notes sound. Some of these entries in *Anayatha Deepam* have certainly left their mark in the south Indian world of devotional music, especially because of the voices of some of the well-known vocalists who appear on the back of the sleeve and the musicians behind the various accompanying sounds, who appear nowhere on the sleeve. Then, there are those composers who have given life to the lyrics, which are the literary creation of Sunny Pulparampil. Jerry Amaldev who is a Scribe in the south Indian musical industry, along with Pradeep Tom and Sabu Panakkal, the other two are stars that are still on the horizon have given wings to the imaginative lines. The orchestration of the production is done by Jerry, Pradeep and Pradeesh Kothamangalam. These groups of people have been brought together by Benny Pulparampil the producer of the album and collectively they have done a commendable job in their own various ways.

The album comes with a great introduction to what this release is all about from Sunny Pulparampil, the lyricist, presenting the overall theme of the album. Sunny opens with his own priestly vocation in connection with the person of St Chavara. He dedicates the album to St Chavara and St Euphrasia on the occasion of their canonization, that many may reach God through music, through prayerful voice and the enhancing sound. Christian music is a genre defined less by its melodic distinctions and more by the content of its lyrics. Nonetheless, the contribution is so connected to the spiritual foundations of Christian music that it stands as a unique gift to the pilgrims who seek after Christ in imitation of his Saints. The album is a musical journey through the lives of these saints. Leading to a worship experience, some of the entries are suitable for a gathering to sing and worship God through the Saints.

Since I am a Chavara fan, I was immediately stoked to hear what the album may have in store. Even though this kind of release does not come around very often, and what comes out often fail to respond exactly to what you expect, I daresay, a few of the entries pleased me.

The musical project that begins with the voice of Biju Narayanan (2), the apt opener on Chavara, depicted as an Indian ascetic. It presents Chavara as a contemplative in an earthy background. His voice soars up to the heavens and then swoops back down to take you along for the ride, you are swept away even before you realize. The flute is a perfect garnish to the number. In fact, flute dominates the album as the accompaniment. The booming and extravagant enunciation and familiar voice of Kester, heard in this number (4) borders on a semi-classical style. Percussions enhance the voice. The entry is suffused in bells and chimes. Beautiful as the entry is, since it is a solo, semi-classical, it does not seem apt for a communal liturgical worship. Chithra gives rendition to the thoughts of Chavara in her beautiful voice (6) and the *tabla* artiste gives her voice a lift. However, there is at least one occasion on which the flute competes with her voice to be heard.

The angelic voice of Elizabeth is a perk (7). Probably this is the most impactful song, which lovingly and firmly calls out the children to love as Jesus did. She gives this invitation to her younger self, saying from the future that life could be different for you with the prayers of the saint. She would have done much better if accompanied by younger artistes in the chorus with voices below her voice in depth. Similarly outstanding is the entry on Euphrasia to which Mithila gives rendition (12). The contemplative tone in which the piece is given voice lulls your mind in meditative moments. With the repetition of certain phrases, this piece seems to have been designed to bring both the musicians and audience to a heightened plane of reality, an almost trance-like state of existence. Mithila also positively breaks the flow with a folk song (9) and brings in a variety. The chorus is natural as their voices blend in as they promote the eco-spirituality of Chavara. The twelve-track, album is Sunny's most rhythmically dazzling work to date that they carry a very chill vibe for listeners to slowly nod their heads to and comes with a bonus entry of two on karaoke.

In spite of all these above-mentioned goodies, the presentation of *Anayatha Deepam* comes with minor quibbles. Although there is nothing terribly wrong with them, these objections come across to me as disrupting. The excesses of illustration have a cartoonish aspect about the sleeve that the album is presented with. It is in keeping with

children's cartoon book with photos and snapshots and paintings on the cover art. These illustrations infest the presentation and distract the attention of the user. The repeated picture of Chavara (four individual ones apart from the one on the CD itself) and Euphrasia, the two photos of Sunny, the lyricist himself, and the milestones of the lives of the saints captured by the brush of a painter, complete with the signature of Chavara, presents a visual overload. The details of the contributors given on the sleeve are highly informative, but to have the name of the lyricist on the sleeve 24 times is a bit too repetitive. The sequence of the lyric-music-voice introduced before each transcript of the entry could be made uniform. The numbering of the entries on the back sleeve should have been done better as number 14 is repeated. The quote from Chavara at the bottom of the front sleeve should have been more accurate as the words of St Chavara.

The introduction, given by the lyricist should have been perfected from the perspective of enunciation and linguistic delivery. Some of the voices are beautiful, but they strain to cram words in the metre. A few lyrics should have been polished to take the rough edges and the protruding segments away (3, 6, 9). Some of the entries fail to keep you keen until the end as they get monotonous (3, 13). There are at least two entries of which the lines are repeated by the chorus making it sound like a bhajan and fail to impress (2, 13).

Although the inclusion of the last two numbers of karaoke is not a bad move per se, simply adding tracks did not feel interesting enough to warrant repeat listens. These downsides notwithstanding, overall, there is more in the album to like than dislike. It is always my desire to temper any more critical review with words of grace, but the reality is that good music and good lyrics are not often developed quickly, and worship music especially needs to take time. It must ferment in the heart and be deepened with reflection upon. Like his other excellent works, unless attention is paid, the production tends to grow old quickly and get abandoned at the back of the shelf.

In conclusion, if you love worship music and enjoy albums on saints, this album will sound good somewhere in your collection depending upon how good a collector you are. However, if you are looking for something musically innovative and lyrically off the beaten path, you may be disappointed. *Anayatha Deepam* is fine on its own standing, but it is ultimately an average collection of praise songs in honour of the saints. Although it lacks real depth of theological merit in deep poetry, it can be an emotional release for people wanting to

revel in God's love for us through other men and women who have done so and have gone before us.

It is worthwhile to purchase the physical CD because it comes complete with a booklet incorporated into the sleeve in four folds, which is a mini-museum of paintings and photos and the lyrics of the entries in order to give you a visual enjoyment as well as auditory. These images are worth pondering alongside the songs.

Benny Paul Thettayil