

As pitch-perfect in life as in music

- [Chitravina N. Ravikiran](#)



The Hindu Photo Archives
Madurai Mani Iyer

Centenary Notes: What made Madurai Mani Iyer attain such Bradmanesque standards?

From my very early years, I was fortunate to be raised on a diet of some of the greatest styles in both Carnatic and Hindustani. By the time I was about five, it was evident that Hindustani artistes had to invest a major part of their energy in pleasing tonality and pure intonation (its twin pillars), whereas Carnatic dynamics demanded command over lyrics, a repertoire of hundreds of songs as well as improvisatory skills in well-defined modes (neraval/kalpanaswaras), to name a few. While the multiple challenges of the Carnatic system were highly fascinating, they were also bound to distract the mind from shruti and tone. (It took me a few more years to accept that a highly skilled Carnatic artiste could still make magic.) Against this backdrop, I could see that Madurai Mani Iyer stood out as an icon of intonation.

He is undoubtedly among the greatest India has produced. His life symbolised shruti shuddham and his music transcended the region- and-culture-specific values of the Carnatic genre. His music could sit seamlessly in the pantheon of pitch-perfect artistes in any part of the world across time. My grandfather, Gotuvadyam Narayana Iyengar, is known to have phrased it colourfully — “Even if the sun rises in the west and the oceans trip over themselves, Madurai Mani would never deviate from shruti.”

Desire for perfection

What makes an artiste attain such Bradmanesque standards? It may sound like a truism but to do well consistently, one has to have an intense desire to do so. The intensity of the cause is directly proportional to the effectiveness of the result. The sort of commitment that Mani Iyer had towards shruti is matched by few in the Carnatic world and it comes through even to me who has never heard him live. The manner in which he cultivated his voice ensured that he had absolutely no insecurity about any note. In a field where numerous artistes feel diffident about singing certain notes even after 50 years of performing experience, this achievement alone is sufficient to put Mani Iyer among the all-time greats.

But that is still only one side of him. His visualisation of music in its fundamental form was so clear and complete that even his introverted *sadhana*-style singing transformed itself into a mass-appealing celebration. He would lose himself in his music but he could — verily like Pied Piper — take literally everyone along with him. While he commanded immense respect from his peers and contemporaries, his success with uninitiated listeners is unprecedented and unsurpassed. Viewed against the backdrop of the high classical content in his recitals, it is mind-boggling. The turnout for some of his concerts would surely have rivalled that of cricket test matches.

His success is the victory of shruti and music as a whole, a model for every artiste and student. I have tried to pin this down to a formula for

students: If one sings tunefully, the music sounds twice as awesome; if one is off-shruti — the music sounds 10 times more awful.

Mani Iyer's treatment of attractive non-major ragas such as Jayantasena, Kapinarayani, Ravichandrika and Pratapavarali elevated their status several notches. His mastery over the 'big' ragas, Todi, Kalyani, Bhairavi and Kambhodhi was second to none just as his command over other popular parent ragas such as Keeravani, Charukeshi, Shanmukhapriya and Vachaspati. His concert formula (at least in later years) studiously eschewed ragas that sounded melancholic or poignant (Mukhari, Neelambari) and even when he chose to sing a raga like Varali, he preferred the crisp *Kaavaava* laced with swaras. His choice of rakti (evocative) ragas would lean towards Anandabhairavi, Sahana, Devagandhari, Dwijayavanti followed by kritis such as *O jagadamba*, *Shree kamalambikayam*, *Seetavara* or *Chetashree*, rendered almost cheerfully!

Madurai Mani Iyer was synonymous with swara singing and was an indisputable master of this. He could repeatedly spur even the most stoic audiences to express themselves through rounds of thunderous applause. And he didn't need to resort to a Ramanujan-level of arithmetic to woo audiences.

To me, his nerval singing was equally enchanting — he would get engrossed in songs like *Sarasasamadana* and *Niravadhi sukhada* and create a transcendental experience for listeners.

In masterpieces like *Shree subrahmanyaya namaste*, he would bring larger-than-life images of Kambhodhi in each phrase. His raga alapanas were edifices built on small but soulful blocks of musically sound material glued together by tunefully sustained notes.

Close associates of his such as violin maestro T.N. Krishnan have attested to his keen analytical mind that could explain and illustrate subtle musical points with startling clarity especially while discussing the music of his idols Maharajapuram Vishwanatha Iyer and Rajaratnam Pillai.

Vast repertoire

The torch-bearer of the Madurai Mani Iyer bani, T.V. Sankaranarayanan reminisces about his uncle's incredible repertoire, memory and musicianship. "Mama taught me numerous songs that one would have rarely heard him sing at concerts — *Idisamayamura* (Chayanata), *Sanatana* (Phalamanjari), *Evarunnaru* (Malavashri), *Paramatmudu* (Vagadheeshwari), *Samukhana nilva* (Kokilavarali), *Namoralagimpa* (Devagandhari), *Etavuna nerchitavo* (Yadukulakambhodhi), *Nadachi nadachi* (Kharaharapriya), *Ninnuvinaga* (Poorvikalyani), *Durusuga* (Saveri)... I can go on and on," he says. "What is incredible is that he would not have revised these songs in 20 years but would access them from memory at will."

This was augmented by the celebrated mridangam vidwan T.K. Murthy. "At a concert in Delhi, Mani Iyer sang outstandingly but a critic, known for his inconsistent and perverse reporting, had a dig at him the following day for singing his usual fare. Mani Iyer just smiled but in another concert the same day, his list consisted of pieces that even I — who had accompanied him for several years — had never heard him sing. The critic, who also made it to the concert, apologized profusely!"

TVS adds: "His voice had just the right balance between delicateness and weight and his sense of *gamakas* was impeccable. And the way he could hold any note almost endlessly was mesmeric! It would create an all-permeating tranquility that had to be experienced to be believed."

Anyone who has spoken to me about this distinguished musician has been unanimous in accrediting him as a human being of impeccable qualities. He was gentle, courteous, well-meaning, helpful to younger artistes, loving towards his disciples, committed to the art, and devoid of negativism even in jest. In short, as pitch-perfect in life as in music...

(The author is a Carnatic instrumentalist, composer and writer. Email: ravikiranmusic@yahoo.com)

RELATED NEWS

[View comments\(26\)](#)

[A genius who redefined the art of mridangam playing](#) December 28, 2011

[The Mani Iyer legacy](#) December 28, 2011

Printable version | Mar 1, 2016 1:52:45 AM | <http://www.thehindu.com/features/friday-review/music/as-pitchperfect-in-life-as-in-music/article2750157.ece>

© The Hindu