

Madurai Mani Iyer

Mohana Mani

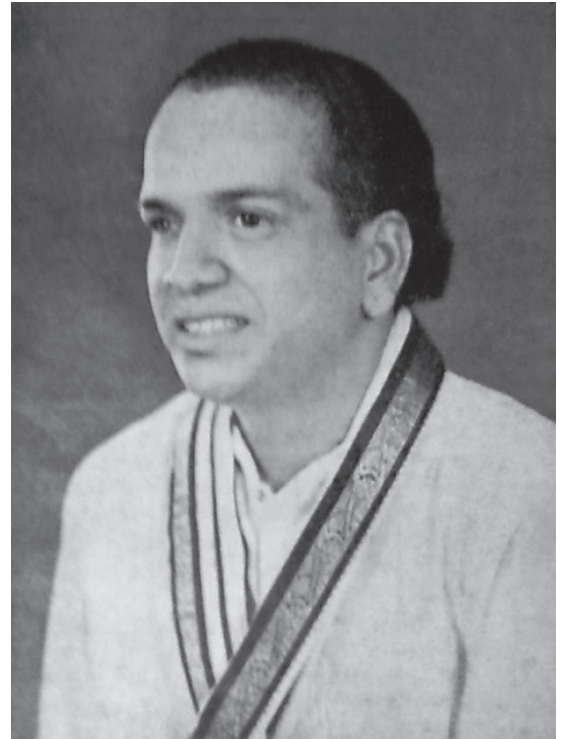
V. Ramnarayan

Madurai Mani Iyer. The very name evokes an affectionate, intimate kind of nostalgia. An outstanding vocalist of an earlier era, he was both a pundit's and a people's musician, whose lilt swayed even the unlettered, uninitiated passerby with its sometimes beseeching, sometimes playful magic of pure sound. He was that rare amalgam of swara and sruti that achieved the ultimate effect of effortlessness; not only in raga alapana and kriti rendering but also in his mellifluous cascades of swara-s did he paint the raga swaroota with utter fidelity. He was one of the most consistent performers in the midst of many giants of Carnatic music, yet his consistency did not mean repetitiveness; critics and enthusiasts remark on how fresh his music was throughout his career, how fresh it continues to be even today.

A nephew of the celebrated Madurai Pushpavanam, Madurai Mani Iyer fashioned a style all his own, a brand of singing quite unlike any other, in the process winning over a legion of followers. His music was original, without leaving the strait and narrow path of tradition. Much beloved by his rasika-s, peers and seniors among vocalists and accompanists, even that much feared breed of human being, the music critic, Mani Iyer kept it simple, his music a direct line to the divine, in its chaste if unusual vocalisation and obvious surrender to his muse. If his sweet voice earned him the sobriquet *Madhura Gana Mani*, his evocative rendering of the raga once so thrilled the Mohanam specialist Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer, that he hailed him as *Mohana Mani*.

Mani Iyer's unique swara singing style was inspired by the music of Mazhavarayanendal Subbarama Bhagavata, a regular performer in Madurai during his formative years in music. Mani Iyer attributed his penchant for apoorva raga-s like Malavi, Janaranjani and Rudrapriya too to his early fascination with the Bhagavata's music.

In his era, Mani Iyer was probably the only vocalist to appeal to the young newcomer to Carnatic music as well as the crusty old veteran of many a timeless concert of its hoary past. The man was by all accounts as lovely as his singing – kindness and affection personified, capable of spontaneous appreciation of his fellows of the day.



Young Mani Iyer

To Mani Iyer, the audience was king and his concert commitments were sacrosanct. He had this wonderful rapport with his rasika-s right through his career. Even in his very last concert, despite illness and a high temperature, he acceded to a request for *Nagumomu* shouted from the depth of the hall by a devotee of his music, after a strenuous couple of hours and post tani avartanam. His constant response to repeated requests for *Eppo varuvaaro* (When will He come?) was "Varuvaar" (He'll come), and invariably come He did, before the concert was over.

Mani Iyer had been quite sick on the day of his last concert at Mylapore Fine Arts Club. His prime sishya and brother-in-law Vembu Iyer wanted him to withdraw from the concert as he was running a temperature. That was possibly the only time Mani Iyer lost his temper with Vembu Iyer. "You haven't tuned the tambura yet despite my many requests. Come, hurry up and get ready, let's go to the concert," he told him, leaving him no choice in the matter.

In the March issue, *Sruti* has great pleasure in paying its tribute to a charismatic vocalist of undying appeal. ■