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Remebering Madurai Mani Iyer: A singer for the masses, and classes

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TRICHY: The former principal of Trichy National College (1991-97), 74-year-old S Thiyagarajan and son of Sivasubramaniya Iyer, one of the team that comprised the famously known Alathur Brothers, recalls that Madurai Mani Iyer, aka Mohana Mani, had performed many a concert in Trichy's Nootukkal Mandapam (100-pillared portico) along with the Alathur Brothers.

One of the greatest traits of Mani Iyer was that though he sang for both the masses and the classes, he "was so down-to-earth, and would never sing for money," reminisced Thiyagarajan, who conducts the little-known annual Srirangam Thiyagaraja Aradhana in Srirangam around the same time as the one held in Thiruvaiyaaru. He has also built a small temple for the great Carnatic composer saint in Srirangam. This year, T V Sankaranarayanan, Mani Iyer's nephew, would perform at the concert, he said.

Thiyagarajan himself is not a musician, but he has been treasurer of the Thiruvaiyaaru Thiyagaraya Aradhana Festival during 1988-89 when Balamurali Krishna was its secretary. This was by virtue of a music tradition that his father had left behind. Though Sivasubramaniya Iyer passed away at 49, he had already become famous in his time, and had composed the music (Sangeetha Sikshai) for the 1948 comeback film of M K Thagaraja Bhagavathar Raja Kukthi that had also starred M G Ramachandran in addition to introducing M L Vasanthakumari who sang a duet with the lead actor himself.

In those days, one Appaswamy Iyer used to conduct Pillayar Urchavam (an annual festival in honour of Lord Vinayaga) at the Nantudiyaan Koil which is now at the Fort in Trichy.

Alathur Brothers and Madurai Mani Iyer used to sing here on alternate days. With a rare amalgam of swara and sruti, Mani Iyer achieved the raga alapana and kriti rendering effortlessly. Unlike tantrum-throwing vocalists, he was not particular about who accompanied him on the Mrudangam. It could be Palani Subramanian, Ramanathapuram Murugaboopathy or anybody, and the layman, without any knowledge of music, listened and appreciated his music.