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The Mani magic



VINTAGE STUFF: “You have sandwiched me between two elephants,” Madurai Mani (top left) is said to have remarked about his accompanists — Chowdiah and Palghat Mani — as he performed for Kalaniketan (top right) at Raja Annamalai Manram in 1959. The felicitation to the artist had the then Chief Minister, M. Bhaktavatsalam, presiding over (bottom right). Madurai Mani performing on another occasion (bottom left).

SRIRAM VENKATKRISHNAN

Madurai Mani Iyer’s music touched both the expert and the novice.

It was a group that prided itself on its intellect. Its adherents were brought together through their support for Manikodi, a highbrow magazine that lasted a few years in the 1930s. Founded by ‘Stalin’ K. Srinivasan of the Free Press Journal, it is still referred to with respect among literary circles. The leading lights were, apart from Srinivasan, T.S.Chokkalingam, ‘Va Ra’ and ‘Chitti’ P.G.Sundararajan.

The support group included ‘Chief’ Srinivasan of Oriental Insurance, ‘Monty’ Srinivasan, Police Inspector Mani, Reserve Bank Viswanathan, ‘Kecha’ Ganapathi Subramanian of AIR Tiruchi, ‘Guhan’ K.S.Ramaswami and J. Satagopan. They prided themselves on being the Bloomsbury group of Tiruchi and their regular meeting place was the ‘Chief’s’ house. Music was not their line. Today, except perhaps ‘Va Ra’ and ‘Chitti’, the group is largely forgotten.

Madurai Mani Iyer died on June 8, 1968. Forty years after his death, he remains a musician whose fan following grows. His concert recordings are in great demand and lovers of Carnatic Music rave about his adherence to sruti, his sarvalaghu swaras and the sheer melody that drenched his listeners. His music was of a variety that attracted the expert and novice alike.

At first glance it would appear that the musician and the intellectual group had little in common. But it was love at first sight and offers an insight into the kind of magic that Mani Iyer wove. Historian KRA Narasiah, in his ‘Sadharana Manidan,’ which is a biography of his uncle Chitti, describes the growth of this relationship.

Chitti and Mani Iyer met at the AIR studios in Tiruchi, where the former was working and the latter often came to perform. A warm friendship blossomed for Mani Iyer was a man who made friends easily, his simple and loving nature endearing him to one and all. A singer who was happy to just be asked to sing, in no time he worked his way into the hearts of Chitti and his friends. He became a part of this charmed circle, his vast repertoire of Subramania Bharati’s songs and his staunch nationalism no doubt being added attractions. During evenings when he was free, he would often perform for the group at the Chief’s residence.

The setting was simple and Mani Iyer sang sitting on the pyol, with barely enough space for the accompanists and the audience sat below him. And yet, when there was a full ‘jama’ of his friends, he would excel himself.

Mani Mandapam

At the instance of violinist Tiruvalangadu Sundaesa Iyer, the house came to be informally called Mani Mandapam.

Celebration of Rama Navami became an annual feature at Mani Mandapam which survived for fifteen years as the venue of Mani Iyer’s triumphs, till ‘Chief’ Srinivasan migrated to Madras.

It was here that the group met upon coming to know of Mahatma Gandhi’s assassination. At Madurai Mani Iyer’s request, Chitti composed a poem titled ‘Masu Kalaindivom.’ Mani Iyer set it in Shanmukhapriya and it became well known through its opening line – ‘Mahatma Mani Mozhi Vazhi Nadappom.’ He was to sing it often in his concerts. He also sang the line as pallavi at times. Yet another creation was ‘Kandan Karunai Puriyum Vadivel’ which was composed by ‘Guhan.. This too was made famous by Mani Iyer.

In 1959, Mani Iyer was conferred Sangita Kalanidi by the Music Academy. At his request Chitti composed the speech of acceptance and it was

Mani Iyer's desire that Chitti read it out too during the inauguration. But the Academy mandarins objected on the grounds that Chitti was neither a relative nor a disciple. Mani Iyer's nephew T.V.Sankaranarayanan did the needful. But in 1963 when the Tamil Isai Sangam conferred Isai Perarignar on Mani Iyer, there were no such problems. Chitti not only wrote the speech, but also read it out on his behalf.

When the final Rama Navami celebrations were held in April 1960 at Mani Mandapam, the group conferred the title Nadalola on Madurai Mani Iyer. It was an honorific that he cherished for the remaining years of his life.

Chitti, unlike Mani Iyer, lived long and till his end never forgot his dear friend from the world of music.

In a dry intellectual terrain, Mani Iyer ushered in the arts and made it flourish. He had done the same for countless other admirers as well and continues to do so as an immortal voice from the past.

Even today, though a physical monument does not exist for the maestro, a Mani Mandapam exists in the heart of every one of his fans. Mani Iyer himself would not have desired a better memorial.

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