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He charmed young and old alike

He enjoyed his music and the rasikas went into raptures listening to him. Madura(i) Mani was indeed a real entertainer. A tribute by LAKSHMI DEVNATH, on his birth anniversary.



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"PLEASE PATTI, I want to listen to this wonderful music. It is only two in the morning." The little girl pleaded with her grandmother. The performing artiste was Madurai Mani Iyer. A vidwan with a unique style, Madurai Mani had indeed cast a spell on the listeners of Carnatic music, young and old, connoisseurs and even the rickshawallahs of those times. People came in hordes to listen to his singing. They sat on the walls, on the floors and wherever they could find a place to sit or stand. They did not mind the inconvenience. They only wanted to listen to Madura Mani as he was fondly called. Madurai Mani was certainly *Madura* (sweet) Mani.

His music was melodious. More than anything else, he enjoyed singing and that reflected in his personality both on and off stage. In fact he often eschewed lyrics that smacked of disillusionment with the world and other worldly matters. He firmly believed that music should enliven the listener. That was his conviction right from the start of his professional career as a musician, a joyous journey that began in 1924 at a temple Kumbhabishekam in the district of Ramanathapuram. He

was 12 years old then. However, his association with music began from the age of eight when he formally began his lessons in music or perhaps even from his birth (October 25, 1912) for Mani was born with music in his blood and rhythm in his veins.

Mani's father Ramaswamy Iyer was adept at both the theory and the practical aspects of music and his mother Subbalakshmi was also well versed in the art. His father's brother was the immensely popular Madurai Pushpavanam. Mani quickly mastered the art first under Madurai Rajam Bhagavatar and later on under the renowned Harikesanallur Muthiah Bhagavatar. When the Bhagavatar inaugurated his Tyagaraja Vidyalaya in that city, Mani Iyer was among the first batch of students to enrol and he graduated from it with flying colours. The rest of course is history.

Madurai Mani sang his way into the hearts of people. To him, the rasikas were of paramount importance. They looked forward to his raga alapana, neraval and eagerly awaited his kalpanaswaras. The same girl, now a septuagenarian remarks: ``His swaras created the feeling of going on a joyous boat ride." Such was the buoyancy with which he sang them. His kalpanaswaras were in myriad patterns, one swara gracefully dovetailed into another sending the rasikas into ecstasy. Right from the start of the concert to the end, not a single person left the venue. They awaited the delectable tukkada items at the end of the concert with the same eagerness with which they awaited the start of the concert. In fact, the Western notes of Muthiah Bhagavatar came to be popularly referred to as the Madurai Mani notes.

It was not only the rasikas who were fond of Madurai Mani's music; other vidwans were also appreciative of his art. An anecdote goes that once when Ariyakudi was asked to comment on Madurai Mani's music he remarked "his music is indeed a `mani' (gem)."

Awards aplenty came in search of him. As early as 1925, the Paramacharya of Kanchi, on listening to his music honoured him with a shawl and a gold coin. In 1927, a music conference took place at the Congress session in Avadi. In that was arranged a programme on the 72 melaragamalika of Maha Vaidyanatha Iyer. Mani's father expounded on the theoretical aspect of the composition while Mani sang. Father and son walked away with the awards. The Ganakaladharar in 1944, Sangita Kalanidhi in 1959, President's award in 1960, Isai Perarignar in 1962 and many more came his way. But, they all rested very lightly on his shoulders. Madurai Mani was as renowned for his humility as he was popular for his music. Affable and genial, his dress and demeanour shone with simplicity though he did display a special affection for his Rolex watch. He was a great believer in the heavenly stars and avoided singing the song ``Grahabalamemi" (How strong can the planetary influences be compared to the grace of Rama?) for the same reason. He also refrained from singing "Nidhi Chala Sukhama" (Is money the cause for happiness?) for he thought that it was hypocritical to sing this song when he was accepting money for his performances. However, while Mani Iyer accepted remuneration he never demanded a stipulated amount be it for a wedding concert or a sabha recital. Whatever amount was given, it was accepted happily.

Madurai Mani Iyer was indeed passionate about music but he had other interests too and one of them was the English language. Though a school drop out, Mani Iyer mastered this language and an anecdote goes that he would trudge from his house in Mylapore all the way to the Connemara Library to pick up books in the Queen' s language. He loved Bernard Shaw and was a fan of Charlie Chaplin. A compulsive listener of both the English and the Tamil news, Mani Iyer was a keen observer of politics too. He was fond of good food and somehow believed that coffee was good for the vocal chords. Throughout his life, Madurai Mani Iyer

remained married only to his art and when he died on June 8, 1968, left his legacy safely in the hands of his nephew, T. V. Sankaranarayanan.

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