

The Divine Music of Ganakaladhara Sri. Madurai Mani Iyer

By S.A.K. Durga

Being a student of the great “Nada Yogi” Madurai Mani Iyer, I value him not only as a performer but also a great teacher. He was a man of great virtues and values in life. He worshipped “Nadabrahma” and when he sang the composition of Thyagaraja Swamigal in the raga Chittaranjani with the Sanskrit words “Nadatanum anisam Sankaram Namami Manasa Sirasa” it sounded as if he meant what he sang.

Madurai Mani Iyer was born in October 25, 1912 in a family of musicians at Madurai. From his early years, he learnt music at home and his primary teachers were Madurai Rajam Bhagavathar and Harikesanallur Muthiah Bhagavathar. He gave his first recital in his 12th year in a temple Kumbabhishekam festival at Alavakottai in Ramnad District. He has given a huge number of concerts in temples in Tamilnadu and people used to throng in thousands far and near and enjoy his music for hours together. Both laymen and experts appreciated his Sruthi Suddham, the fine tune of sruthi and his Kalapramana-the medium, slow medium and medium fast variations for the different compositions and his excellent Swarakalpana. He made the audience enjoy his raga alapana in rare ragas which are Swara-oriented ragas such as Kapinarayani, Rasali, Ranjani, Vijayanagari, Goudamalhar and others. He was the first performer to handle Swara based ragas with aesthetic beauty.

In his early days Mani Iyer sang more of swara oriented ragas than raga oriented ragas such as Yadukulakambodi, Natakurunji or even familiar ragas such as Thodi, Kalyani and others. He did not have much liking for vivadi ragas. As he was a master of rare ragas and swara based ragas, his raga alapana was different from other musicians who sang more of Bhava and Rakthi Ragas. His perfect intonation or Sruthi Suddham and Kalpramanam of tempo made his music attractive to enjoy his musical skill by everyone.

The Kalpramanam or tempo in raga alapana was slow medium and the phrases were in madyama kala or medium tempo and a few sancharas were in medium fast tempo. He never resorted to Vilamba (slow) and Durita (Fast) Kalas (tempo renditions) either in rendering compositions or in raga alapana, Niraval, or Swarakalpana. His music was “Panditha-Parama ranjika” meaning both scholar musicians and laymen could appreciate. His alignment with sruthi was so perfect, it gave divinity to his music.

His style of singing compositions in a performance

Very rarely he used to begin a concert with varnam in later years. Generally, he will start with compositions on Vinayaga or Sri Rama. He was a Ramabhakta. He sang the compositions with correct articulations of the letters and Sahityabhava.

He checked whether he sang with correct sahitya and understood the general meaning of the composition even if it was not in Tamil so that he could sing it with Bhava. Vocal music shines more as the “singer speaks and sings at the same time” were his words. In his performances, he was the first performer to have included more Tamil songs in his time. He many times started his concerts with a Tamil composition such as “Tatvamariya Tarama” in Ritigowla, “Karunai seivai” in Hamsadvani and others. He popularized many of Papanasam Sivan’s compositions in Tamil through his soulful renderings. At that time, Tamil compositions were sung only at the end of the concerts as “Tukkudas”. His music became enjoyable for listeners in Tamilnadu who could easily understand the meaning of the text of the song.

He had regard for the Navagrahas (nine planets), and in his mid-career began to sing the song of the day of the week for the appropriate planet regularly in his concerts. He worshipped god by singing. As he typically performed four hour concerts, the compositions took a prime place intermingling with the short and long compositions of the trinity, Muthiah Bhavagathar, Patnam Subramanya Iyer, Papanasam Sivan and compositions of other Sanskrit, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada composers.

Towards the end of his performances were many compositions which audience expected to hear from him. He would often sing them at his concerts though a few may remark that he did not sing new Thukkudas or light songs. Rasikas expected eagerly “Eppo Varuvaro”, Jonpuri raga, Kaavaa, Kandan Karunai, Bimplas, English note, Karpagame in Madyamavathi.

Other compositions in his performances which were looked for by the audience were ‘Thaye Yashoda’ in Thodi, ‘Chakkani Raja’ in Karaharapriya “Sarasa samadana’ in Kapinarayani, ‘Durmarga’ in Ranjani, ‘Sarasamukhi’ in Gowdamalhar, ‘Kana kan kodi’ in Kambodhi ‘Kapali’ in Mohanam and ‘Endhuku Bedhala’ in Sankarabharanam. Undoubtedly the credit goes to Sri Madurai Mani Iyer for popularizing Tamil compositions in Carnatic music. For him, it was not about any political motive to popularize the compositions in a regional language; he understood clearly that the listeners would be happier and enjoy vocal music if they understood the text also along with the melody of the song.

His rendition of Raga Alapana

He developed a unique attractive style in rendering raga alapanas. The raga alapanas would not only be Sanchara oriented but also swara oriented phrases. This blend gave a new color to his raga alapana.

One may say that he was the first performer who in early days of his concerts sang more swara oriented ragas than bhava ragas. He did not have much liking for Vivadi Ragas and almost avoided the alapana of vivadi ragas but more interested in swara based mela ragas like Charukesi, Sarasangi etc.

Mani Iyer used to build up the raga step by step with much “Karvai” or prolongation of the notes prescribed in the raga lakshanam as “Jeeva Swaras” which gives the personality of the raga. There will be more of madyama kala or medium tempo phrases than fast passages. Sometimes he sang fast medium phrases which were a little faster than medium phrases. In the same way, he avoided very slow phrases and preferred slow medium.

Once can say, he used more of medium tempo and its variations such as slow medium and fast medium in the rendering of the compositions, raga alapana and swara kalpana which made his music lilting and enjoyable to learned and laymen.

Swara Kalpana, His Forte

Madurai Mani Iyer established a unique style of Kalpanaswara which was admired by every listener. He was a genius in singing Swara Kalpana with wonderful combination of swara phrases within scale of raga. In his concert, more time was devoted in singing the swara kalpana. He sang all types of ragas. Mela ragas or janya ragas, well known ragas and not so well known ragas or rare ragas were rendered with ease. The combination of swaras and swara patterns made the listeners enjoy the music though the listener might have not known the grammar of the raga. The way of pronouncing the swaras were perfect and he sang the swaras with perfect “Sruthi Suddham” or perfect intonation and not mere alignment with tone or note (Swara suddham). The tempo of the swara singing was mostly medium tempo, though sometimes he used to sing two kalas or first and second tempo for the Kriti and Pallavi. His ragamalika swaras for Pallavi were attractive and enjoyable to everyone in the audience because of the choice of ragas and brought out the raga identity in the very first phrase of the swara kalpana. He brought out the identity of the raga he was going to sing in one swara of the raga clearly. For example, he would make the listeners understand that he was going to sing Swarakalpana in raga Ranjani by merely singing the swara Ri in madyastayi with karvai or prolongation of the note followed by “ga sa”. The phrase is Ri (ri) ga sa which should have brought out the full raga bhava of Ranjani.

His method of performing swara improvisation was singing more of swara patterns. Within the scale of the raga, he would sing enormous patterns with what is described in technical terms as “Sarvalaghu” patterns. For example, when a phrase occurs such as rgmgr in the higher octave, the patterns he brought were “rgmgr-srgs-nrsn-dsnd-pdndp-mpdpm-gmpmg-rgmgr” in the raga Charukesi which was interesting. In the same way, every raga was handled with ease with enormous patterns making the audience “swing” for his swara improvisation. He established an individual “style” in singing the Manodharma sangeetham (improvised music) whether it was swara, niraval or raga improvisation.

His voice was more suitable to madyama kala in singing which he mostly used. He also used slow medium or fast medium in kriti rendition or swara singing or niraval or Raga alapana. His music was based on medium tempo. Though he did not have a very deep voice it was very

pleasant and flexible and he successfully rendered through his voice what he intended to sing. He was able to communicate his talents through his voice which made his listeners appreciate and enjoy his talent.

In the realm of Ragam, Thanam, Pallavi, his Thanam was very tradition oriented in madyamakalam (medium tempo) and his Pallavi rendition was not highly complicated in rhythmic aspects but simple with aesthetic beauty. His Pallavis were short, simple and crisp. The Raga Alapana for Pallavi was elaborate. The Pallavi Ragas were usually major ragas generally. He did not have the enthusiasm in adding 'Sangathi' or variations for the songs and also did not like the habit of singing the variations of compositions twice which was the traditional practice. Generally, he did not start the performance with a Varnam. He believed that varnam was more of a technical composition for practice. Occasionally he used to start the concert with a Varnam. He would maintain the interest of the listeners upto Mangalam. Many listeners would be waiting for the songs at the end. "Ka vava", "Eppo varuvaro", "Kandan karunai" and "English Note" which were the favorites of his rasikas. He used to always oblige the listeners if they ask for any song of his masterpieces.

Madurai Mani Iyer as a teacher

I feel so fortunate to have had a guru like Madurai Mani Iyer. He first introduced to me as to what was Sruthi Shuddham and how the voice should be given to have perfect intonation. He insisted that when I sang, every note should be perfectly in tune and not only just Shadja and Panchama (Which most of the teachers mostly paid attention to). He emphasized the need for the prolongation of notes with sruthi alignment and without wobbling.

Importance was given to medium tempo (though slow and fast tempo also should be practiced to have perfect execution). When singing Sa Pa Sa notes in the beginning, he did not want to Produce Pa as a glide from madyashadja as Sa Pa and also as Pa Sa to higher Sa. Each note must be produced on its perfect place according to him. He taught what and how he used to produce purity of any notes. He did not want excess gamaka or excess speed to be produced which he believed interfered with correct intonation (Sruthi Shuddham)

He taught Varnams in two Kalas- medium and second speed and not Atidurita (very fast) or Ativilamba (very slow). He never taught how to sing Tisram for varnam but when two speeds were practiced accurately, it will not be difficult to sing Tisram. The madyamakala and Sarvalaghu were perfectly taught which made all the the Tala intricacies to be understood well and also to perform correctly. He taught to the student what he practiced.

His method of singing will make the student sing with Sruthi Suddham without much effort. He taught hundreds of small keerthanas of various composers which enabled the student to sing perfectly well. Later on he taught heavy compositions of the Trinity and other small composers.

He always believed that the singers should know at least the general meaning of the song they were going to sing in whatever language to sing with Bhava.

In the improvisation part he was unique in Raga Alapana, Niraval and Swarakalpana. He taught me first to sing swara oriented Ragas like Janaranjani, Vijayanagari, Nalinakanthi and Bahudari and then he will allow me to sing sanchara oriented ragas. He will show the route as to how in raga alapana, the singer must know the swaram behind the sancharas and the singer must be able to sing the complete raga alapana with swara on his mind. He will also emphasize when the Kriti is sung, the swara part of the Kriti should be clearly in the mind to have accuracy in the phrases as well as in Sruthi.

In the same way, he will develop the improvisatory capacity of the student by asking the student to sing the alapana, swara and niraval. In Niraval, he would emphasize that the words chosen for Niraval must have good and complete meaning. Though he had his original style of singing Niraval, Alapana, and Swara Kalpana, he would tell the students to follow the traditional method and "never to imitate" him. He did not want his students to follow his mannerisms.

He used to teach simple Pallavis and if one masters the simple Pallavis he felt it would become easy to master the difficult Pallavis as one develops laya suddham and mastery in Sarvalaghu. He taught his disciples all his masterpiece compositions and Tukkudas including the English Note. He did not have any reservations in teaching compositions or extemporization.

He always wanted his disciples to sing well and bestowed his blessings along with music. Madurai Mani Iyer was not only a great performer but also an incomparable Guru or teacher. He is remembered by lakhs of ardent listeners and his music is still lingering in the ears of those who have heard him in his time.

Madurai Mani Iyer sang for his happiness even at the public concerts and the audiences were thrilled by his perfect intonation which was his forte. His style was simple and attractive to laymen and vidwans. His way of singing cannot be imitated by any singer and he had his own way of handling raga alapana, niraval, swarakalpana and rendering of Kritis that were different from other great musicians of his time.

As a person, he was kind to all and easily approachable. In everything in life, he had a high taste and never used harsh words to anybody. He used to wear only 'Kadar' - a variety of textile handwoven and was simple in his way of life. He liked the Gandhian way of life which made him wear Khadi. As his student for many years, I believe that he was a unique person in the field of Carnatic music with an inimitable style of music which captivated the mass and the elite. Madurai Mani Iyer had two sisters. His brother in law Sri. T.S. Vembu Iyer was also his disciple and he accompanied him in all his concerts. His nephew Padmabhushan T.V. Sankaranarayanan is a well-known performer and his two children are also keeping up the Madurai Mani Iyer Bhani.