

Carnatic music has changed. Someone whose natural voice output resembles that of Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavata or K B Sundarambal would be quite unsuited for the Carnatic music being presented today. The demise of Carnatic music concerts being presented in the open setting of a temple or palace courtyard means that Nadaswaram music is dying out and this has adversely affected the quality of Nadaswaram music as well. A hundred years ago, vocalists tried to emulate the Nadaswaram stalwarts of the time, who could be found in every village that had a decent sized temple. Today, good Nadaswaram players are increasingly becoming a rarity, while vocalists are trying to emulate the violin in their voices.

However, it is not as if other Carnatic musicians have all started presenting highly refined music like that of T Brinda. It could be argued that today's sophisticated technology for sound amplification can be used to great advantage for sensitive and nuanced music, but by and large, musicians who do this are few and far between. As things stand, mikes seem to exist in Carnatic music for no other reason than to increase the volume output, often to deafening proportions. No concert, whether in India or elsewhere, is complete without a squeal or a boom emanating from the house speakers or stage monitors and in many such cases, the reason this happens is the performing musician's never ending quest for more volume. Another way in which technology is drastically changing the nature of Carnatic music is the emergence of the electronic Sruti box, which has caused the acoustic Tambura to become nothing more than a showpiece item in living rooms. The first few iterations of the electronic Sruti box, which were eagerly taken up by Carnatic musicians and aficionados, have resulted in a general loss to fidelity to Sruti. One yearns to hear once again that perfection in pitch that was the hallmark of Madurai Mani Iyer. Musicians who are brilliant in all other aspects of Carnatic music seem to be unable to produce that refinement in Sruti alignment that would make a huge difference to their art. Hopefully, with the newer and improved electronic Sruti boxes available nowadays, as well as Tambura apps for the iPhone and Android devices, this quality will improve among the current generation of music students.

Finally, a few thoughts on the instruments used in Carnatic music. We have embraced the violin, but the world of Carnatic music has so far proved incapable of manufacturing decent violins and accessories. The Veena has benefited from developments in amplification technology, but takers for the instrument are few and far between. In the meantime, people who know how to make a good Veena or to reset its fretboard periodically are fast dwindling in numbers. Other instruments native to Carnatic music, like Nadaswaram and Tavil are also facing the brunt of social change, while we attempt to produce Carnatic music on instruments like the saxophone, clarinet, mandolin, guitar and even the electronic keyboard. I am all for the ingenuity that seeks to adapt these Western instruments to our musical idiom, but the lack of cultural interest in sustaining the accessory skill sets that are rooted in the historical milieu of our own music bothers me. In the year 2112, will Carnatic music be defined by the human voice, along with a host of instruments that originated in European musical history? Time will tell.

*Vidyasankar Sundaesan is a chemical engineer by profession. He is an avid music enthusiast and a past President of Sruti.*

### Madurai Mani Iyer – A Personal Tribute

V.K.Balasubrahmanyam

*(This article first appeared in the edition of Sruti Ranjani published in 1997)*

It is with some reluctance that I am writing this article as I have often felt turned off by the writings of music critics, who pen reviews and anecdotal accounts of famous musicians. Their insufferable pretence of belonging to a superior species and throwing superficial comments about some truly great men and women of our times has annoyed me endlessly. I believe that the only useful contribution I can attempt is to pay tribute to such outstanding persons. In this article, I shall try to do so by gathering my thoughts on Madurai Mani Iyer.

Madurai Mani Iyer (M.M) lived during a time, which can be easily called the Golden age of Carnatic music performers. With musicians of the caliber of Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer, Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar, G.N.B., and Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, one needed tremendous talent to be recognized as a first rate performer. M.M. blossomed and won a pre-eminent position during this period by developing a unique style of his own. He acquired a loyal and devoted following of numberless rasikas due to his refreshingly original presentation of Carnatic music to an audience consisting of the elite in society as well as the common folk, uninitiated in the intricacies of Carnatic music. The diversity of his admirers perhaps set him apart from the other giants of his day with patrons belonging only to the



upper class. While every one of the coveted top honors in the performing field (such as the Sangita Kalanidhi, the Presidential award, etc.) were his own by right, the devotion and affection of millions of music lovers were his own.

Continuing on this topic of the obvious difference that characterized M.M, one has only to recollect the utter simplicity of his concert dress. While Jarigai veshti-angavastrams[zari dhoti], diamond earrings and profusion of gold chains etc. were so common in those days, M.M.'s typical kacheri[concert] dress was a white khadi shirt and a four-cubit dhoti. Has anyone ever seen M.M keep talam by banging his thighs vigorously and noisily? There was a gentleness and grace in his stage manners, which is still a lesson for performers today.

Music was central in his concerts and never ostentatious showmanship. The secret of his success can be traced to the ease with which he emphasized the true fundamental values of Carnatic music – Sruti-laya suddham and manodharma sangitam. A traditional account of a music vidwan is supposed to give details of his parentage, gurus, etc. I think that in the case of a genius of this stature of M.M., these factual data are irrelevant having no explanatory value. He was unique gift to the world of Carnatic music and his contributions are entirely due to his own intense explorations into the subtle depths of Carnatic music

M.M.'s music displayed a wholesome blend of the respect for tradition and innovation. His concerts starting often with Dikshitar's Vatapi (Hamsadhvani) or Vallabha (Begada) were incomparably thrilling even though one has heard these pieces many times. The attempt to come to terms with transcendental values represented by phrases and concepts such as "Muladhara kshetra stittam" or Nirantharam" within the confines of the sapta swaras with the free flowing swara prastharas were the introduction to approach the infinite through finite symbols. The hypnotic effect on the audience right from the beginning of the concert should be seen to appreciate the effect of sounds with sruthi, laya and sahithyam with deep mystic connection (and not dictionary meanings). There are many levels of consciousness to which a great musician like M.M. has access.

Many vocalists need to settle down – (opening the voice with varnams, indulging in practice in several speeds) and take their own time to feel at ease before attempting serious music. For M.M. with his whole life centered in music, there was never a need to settle down. Every moment was appropriate and there was a never a let up in the tempo of the concert from beginning to end. He had his own unique pace (Nadai) for rendering each song and Bhava flowed resulting in a haunting melody for his listeners. The seamless blending of melody and rhythm that he achieved was never to be seen in any other performances of even the greatest of his contemporaries. They may overwhelm you with great melody or great rhythm but did not achieve the perfect blend of rhythm and melody so characteristic of M.M.

The tempo of M.M.'s concert was set by the opening song and as remarked before, lasted right up to the very end. Many musicians have difficulty in achieving the even keel. M.M.'s success was due to his natural rendering – (no strains due to loud shouting, beating thighs vigorously and other theatrical extravaganza).

He used to sing the Navagraha Krithis quite regularly. The musical appeal of these krithis is not easily explained. I feel that human life is intimately connected with the solar system and these mysterious connections are explored by science and the arts in many ways. Dikshitar also explores this archetypical connection (in Jung's language). In M.M.'s rendering of these krithis, I have often felt transported to new realms of awareness – (in Thevaram's words *Kandariyadana kandome*) – I have to confess that the complete import of these krithis still manages to elude comprehension.

M.M.'s expositions of the grand (Ghana!) ragas as well as the apoorva ragas of Carnatic music were characterized by intense explorations of the myriad unexpected possibilities in a field accessible only to a genius. I had an opportunity to listen to his words regarding this subject. He told me that a concert without these ragas, for example Kalyani, Thodi, Kambodhi, or Sankarabharanam will not have weight.

The scope of these ragas to present ever new nuances, while being rendered so often by so many has always been a source of joy and wonder. While thinking on Kambodhi, can anyone who has heard M.M.'s *Ma Janaki* or *Kana Kan Kodi* ever forget the impact made on him? After hearing his Niraval "*Manickam, Vairam, Vaiduriam*" or "*Kalinil Silambu Konja*" even once, can any other rendering appeal to the listener. The magic of his rendering used to speed up

the heart beat of the audience – a phenomenon for which no explanation other than the concept of resonance of Nada present in everyone, seem adequate to me.

Bhairavi as expounded by M.M (for example Koluva) was truly phenomenal. Many good musicians sing Bhairavi. On close examination, one detects a certain sadness in many renderings. It was only after listening to M.M.'s Bhairavi that I could discover the happy under-tones of that great raga. M.M. explored the entire Bhava of the raga and not the obvious surface features only.

Mohanam from M.M. (example Kapali, Mohana Rama etc) has been commented upon by such a great musician as Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer who used to call him Mohana Mani (M.M). Recalling the fact that Maharajapuram's Mohanam was considered the high water mark of his times, one can appreciate the depth of this tribute earned by M.M. in the land of giants.

M.M.'s popularizations of relatively unknown krithis such as Sarasa Sama Dhana and Nada Tanum Anisam is very well known. If the beginning of the concert was inspiring, the end with Vellai Thamarai (Bhimplas), Karpagame (Madhyamavathi) and the English note was thrilling indeed.

How did M.M. achieve his status of immortality? The shunning of manipulation – (political power, economic consideration) was total in his life. His gifted voice and genius sought to represent the best of Carnatic music in a straightforward and seemingly simple manner. The trappings of the now too common mechanically rendered, pre-calculated "Kanakkus" with the sole purpose of impressing the audience were completely absent in his concerts. M.M. enjoyed good music and sharing it with one and all. He never made compromises to suit any pressure group. With commercial and political considerations absent from his horizons, he gave what he wanted to give. His Sarvalaghu swaras and brilliant Niravals were true and original characteristics of his style. The constant and noisy competition with the accompanists was never seen in his concerts. He encouraged young and promising accompanists to blossom and give their best in the concerts.

It is said that the highest goal of Carnatic music is to realize "Nada Brahman" – an experience in which the individual self merges with the universal self. The closest that I can visualize this goal and feel even a preliminary aspect of this profound experience has been only in the concerts of M.M. the superb Nada Yogi. There have been other musicians who have entertained us. They may have even helped us to escape the day to day crude, mundane and competitive life. They may have helped us to have a good time. But M.M. alone could make me realize that the world of Carnatic music is full of deeper meanings undreamed of. I thank my stars that I lived during M.M.'s time and listened to his music.

*V.K. Balasubrahmanyam is a retired astrophysicist from NASA. He now lives with his wife Saroja in Minnesota. They were both very close friends of Shri Madurai Mani Iyer.*

### Dr. Sripada Pinakapani – A Brief Biography *Bhaskari and Sindhu Budhavarapu*



Language is the dress of thought, said a great thinker. "Music is the dance of sound," is a one line self-portrait of the great Dr. Sripada Pinakapani Garu. Dr. Sripada Pinakapani was named a Century-Maker in Carnatic Music by Sruti magazine (from Chennai, India) during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Pani Garu pursued music side by side with his study and practice of medicine. He made phenomenal efforts to share his own knowledge and insights with his students and with the large community of scholars and musicians through his books.

Pani Garu perfectly understood so many different styles, with devotion, incisive intellect and intense effort. He made efforts to study the different branches of classical music deeply and assimilated them into himself. He is a *Gana Rishi*, a savant of music, born and living for the divine cause of our heavenly music.

Pani Garu was born on 3 August 1913 in the village of Priyagraham in Srikakulam, Andhra Pradesh, India. His father Sripada Kameswara Rao was a junior professor of education at Government Training College in Rajahmundry. His father was deeply