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With Madurai Mani Iyer on a rainy evening

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The Hindu
Madurai Mani Iyer. Photo: Special Arrangement

It was an unusual meet of rasikas gathered to listen to a music concert. Not a live concert. It was a CD of a 1957 kutcheri. And it was an evening when it just incessantly poured. That, however, did not stop people from attending. For them the singer was a God.

“We are celebrating the 98th birth anniversary of Madurai Mani Iyer, and on this occasion, we recall the friendship of my father Chitti, the writer, and Guhan, the poet. What united them all as a thread was Iyer’s music!” announced Venugopal at the informal get-together at the sprawling hall of Kuppusamy’s residence in Shastri Nagar.

According to him, all the three were chums. “A group of fans of MMI including Chitti, Guhan and R.A. Padmanabhan, Bharati scholar, were great admirers of his music. MMI would not begin his concert unless this group arrived, whenever he performed in Tiruchi or around and the group had even built a ‘Mani’ Mantapam in his memory in Tiruchi. Ramanavami concerts were held in this mandapam for fifteen years,” he added.

“We are actually fanatics,” announced Kuppusamy unabashedly. He is the nephew of poet ‘Guhan’ whose poems have been sung by a few vidwans in their kutcheris. Pazhani Vijayalakshmi, the yesteryear Carnatic singer was his sister, he added. “You have heard of Arya – or Bhashyam, the artist who painted the portrait of Tiruvalluvar? He is my uncle!” The brave Arya, who unfurled the tricolour at Fort St. George, climbing up the flag-post and removing the British flag during the thick of the freedom movement. “And you know the Tamil writer R. Choodamani, who recently passed away? She is my niece!” said Mrs. Kuppusamy.

Some one welcomed the chief guest, R.A. Padmanabhan, nonagenarian scholar who produced ‘Chithira Bharati.’ Everyone reverentially greeted him till he settled down in a chair. Venugopal mentioned that he was honoured by Dr. Kalam when the third edition of his book was published recently. Padmanabhan was also on the staff of Tiruchi AIR for some time, when Chitti and Guhan served there, we are told.

The trickling flow of audience was received warmly by Venugopal and Kuppusamy. They settled down in vacant chairs or on the blanket spread in the corner.

“Once Madurai Mani Iyer heard the song, ‘Beena Madhur Madhur kuch bol’ in raga Bhimplas, from the film ‘Ram Rajya.’ He asked Guhan to compose a poem in the same raga and my uncle obliged him. That song is ‘Kandan Karunai Puriyum Vadivel,’ the popular ‘thukkada’ we heard perhaps in every concert of Madurai Mani Iyer!” reminisced Kuppusamy.

Venugopal recalled an incident when the Kanchi Mahaswami came to Mylapore. He visited Madurai Mani Iyer’s house early morning,

unannounced. Mani Iyer was doing the usual sadakam, when some one said that Paramacharya was entering his house. A stunned Mani Iyer took time to react.

Mahaswami asked Mani Iyer to sing a song. Mani Iyer replied hesitantly that he had not even had his bath. "You always swim in the sangita saharan, you do not have to have a bath to sing before me!" told the smiling Acharya. Moved to tears, Madurai Mani fell at his feet, crying "Parameswara!" Meanwhile, the mridanga vidwan had left after being blessed by Mahaswami.

"Now, start!" said the Acharya. "You saw the mridanga vidwan leaving. How do I sing?" pleaded Madurai Mani. "Don't worry, I will keep the taalam for you!" Paramacharya began the beats with his hands and Mani Iyer had to sing.

Venugopal announced that Balasubramanian alias Balu from Sait Colony, Egmore, had something to say. "Please tell us, Balu, how crazy you were in your college days." Balu reluctantly responded, "On the last day of the final exams of IIT, I heard the AIR announcement that Madurai Mani Iyer's concert would follow. I just ignored the exam and sat near the radio and enjoyed the music of Mani Iyer." That Balu subsequently joined Indian Bank is a different story. He has a collection of MMI's recordings running for hundreds of hours.

Venkatraman who came all the way from Mumbai specially for this get-together said that whenever there was a concert of MMI broadcast over AIR, he and two of his pals in Pollachi would go to the nearby Haja Mohideen's tea shop, who would arrange a special bench for the boys to sit and listen comfortably, while he himself enjoyed the melodious music along with them!

Vishnu, nephew of A.K. Ramanujan, an ardent fan of Madurai Mani Iyer, had visited all the cities and towns where MMI had sung! He had arranged to play the CD of MMI's concert, in which Tiruvalangadu Sundaresayyar had played the violin and Ramanathapuram C.S. Murugaboopathy had accompanied on the mridangam. "I chose this particular concert today, because Tiruvalangadu Sundaresayyar's son had promised to come here," briefed Vishnu.

When the Ragam-Tanam-Pallavi segment in Shanmugapriya arrived, Venugopal said that the pallavi 'Gandhi Mozhi Vazhi Nadappom' was written by Chitti and given to MMI when he came to sing for Tiruchi AIR and he instantly used it in the concert.

There was never a dull moment in the one hundred minutes of CD music. Everyone was mesmerised. Tiruvalangadu Sundaresa Iyer was at his best and so too, was mridangam Murugaboopathy.

All the rasikas were linked by the Trio – MMI, Chitti and Guhan. They were fifty in all, from different walks of life for whom MMI's music was nectar. But for the inclement weather, it would have easily touched a hundred or more, felt Venugopal. Half of them belonged to the younger generation and it showed how Madurai Mani's rhythmic music had a special quality to attract the younger lot, too.

The centenary celebration of MMI begins with an inaugural concert on January 1 at the Ragasudha Hall, when the ardent admirer of MMI, V.K. Viswanathan of the U.S. who had organised the event, will be present and details of the centenary celebrations beginning from October 25, 2011 will be chalked out then, according to Venugopal.

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