

ARIYAKUDI THE COLOSSUS

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GAYAKA Sikhamani, Sangeetha Ratnakara, Sangeetha Kalanidhi, Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar was a colossus among the great "performing musicians" of the last five decades and more.

The Tamil saint, Tiruvalluvar, has said :

"What is it that you do not have if you have a good wife? What is it that you have if you have a bad wife?"

On the same lines, it could be asked of Ariyakudi's music :

Is there anything good in Carnatic music which is not in Ariyakudi's concert?

Is there anything bad in Carnatic music which is ever found in Ariyakudi's music?

Ariyakudi's music contained the quintessence of all that is best, chaste, rounded and refined in our ancient and great system of music. He avoided all excrescences, impertinences and deviations from "Sampradaya". Today many deviate from artistic "Sampradaya" and "Suddha Paathaantharam" in the name of 'originality' and 'creativity'!

The late G. N. Balasubramaniam, who belonged to the next generation after Ariyakudi, once observed that it was Ariyakudi who set both the pattern and the standard of the type of concerts (*Kucheri*) which pleased both the lay-listeners and the experts. Connoisseurs of Carnatic music of those days like Prof. P. Sambamoorthy, Kirtanaacharya Shri C. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, Shri N. V. Raghavan, and Vidwan Namakkal Sesa Iyengar, found Ariyakudi's music absolutely impeccable both in the *grammar* (in the *tala* and rhythmic aspects) and in the *poetry* of music (like *raga alapana*s, *krithis*, *niraval*, *pallavi*, *jaavalis* etc).

Another remark of GNB is unforgettable :

"Iyengarvaal holds each concert like a *Durbar*". What he meant by this was that Ariyakudi never allowed his concerts to be dominated by any of the accompanying instrumentalists, whether it was a violinist of the eminence of Chowdiah or Rajamanickam Pillai or Papa Venkatramaiah, or mridangam accompanists like Pudukottai Dakshinamurthy, Kumbakonam Azhaganambi Pillai or Palani Subbudu or even that genius Palghat Mani Iyer. To each accompanying artiste, he undoubtedly gave his due. But, none was allowed to dominate or steal the thunder.

PERFECTIONIST

Another remarkable feature of Ariyakudi's performance was that he never slurred over either the *swara* or the *sahitya*, or allowed any "false" voice to creep in. Every sound was fullthroated and came from the "naabhi" or the navel, which is another way of saying that it was all rounded and perfect without any pricking edges.

Equally striking was Ariyakudi's reputation for "AKAARA SAADHAKAM". He abhorred the use of "OOOs" and "EEEs" and "Thatharinnas" in rendering ragas. This is by no means a reflection on very eminent performers who were even more popular than Ariyakudi, but who indulged in using these sounds, only because it suited their health and their style. They could not sing continuously and had to develop step by step, and therefore it looked as though they were "cutting" the raga piece by piece! Their music belonged to another order of excellence.

Ariyakudi made no facial contortions like several eminent performers, past and present. Ariyakudi's face will be absolutely normal,

and it will appear as though he was not at all straining himself while producing the musical sounds he wanted.

Two decades ago, the late Palghat Mani Iyer said at the Shanmukhananda Hall (Bombay) that he had accompanied Ariyakudi for 38 years and that more than half of his (Mani's) performances were with the maestro. No other vocalist gave him so much unalloyed joy as Ariyakudi.

Iyengarvaal's music was simple, but, not easy. It will look as though we can all sing like him, but it is only an illusion that is created in our minds, because it is so attractive, but the moment we attempt to produce even one 'sangathi' of Iyengar, we will find how miserably we fail". Mani Iyer pointed out that all great things were simple but not easy. Vedic precepts like *Dharmam Chara* or *Satyam Vada* appear simple, but were not easy to translate into action.

The doyen of Carnatic music, Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer echoes Mani Iyer's views, and his admiration for Ariyakudi's repertoire, full-throatedness and 'Akshara Suddhi' is profound.

Ariyakudi was a pace-setter, standard-bearer, and pattern-maker. He neither believed in speaking in the middle of his concerts nor allowed much interval between one item and another item. He did not indulge in too many rare or *apoorva* ragas. He said that the rare ragas must be used rarely. He believed in including in a concert several "prasiddha ragas" like Sahana, Kanada, Begada, Kapi, Sindhu Bhairavi, Panthavarali, Yadukula Kambodhi, Poorvi Kalyani, and a few "rakthi" or "ghana ragas" like Thodi, Kalyani, Bhairavi Kambodhi and Sankarabaranam.

AMAZING SENSE OF PROPORTION

In his concert there was a place for every thing, but there was not too much place for anything! For example, he never had a raga

prelude for every kriti. Nor did he indulge in "Kalpana Swaras" for every kriti! Some kritis will be started by him straightaway without any raga prelude, and will be ended also without any swara rendering. There will be items which will be rendered in Madhyama Kaala, some in Vilamba Kaala and some in Duritha Kaala. However most of them will be in Madhyama Kaala. Ramanuja Iyengar believed that Madhyama Kaala is like rice in a South Indian vegetarian meal. There will be in his concerts some compositions of the great Trinity, of Swathi Thirunal and Purandaradasa, and of Arunachala Kavi and Kshetragna. But there will be more of the compositions of the greatest of them all—one to whom Bhagavan Ramachandra gave "Prathyaksha Seva", namely, Saint Thyagaraja.

In other words, he had a remarkable sense of proportion. He was a master of humour and puns, called in Tamil as "sledai". On one occasion, he told me that a music concert should be like a well-proportioned bungalow. "Should it not have a small compound with useful trees and flowers, a drawing room, a kitchen, a bathroom etc? Will you like a bungalow which has only a drawing room and nothing else? Similarly, in a music concert there should be a place for everything but not too much place for anything".

When it was pointed out to him that his music concert was criticised by some as being stereotyped, his reply was that anything perfect would appear stereotyped. "If your wife makes excellent coffee today, and makes equally excellent coffee everyday, will you, on the ground of the coffee becoming stereotyped ask her to put some salt and asafoetida in it?"

Ariyakudi knew how to make every concert of his a success. He knew how to sing when his throat was in a perfectly healthy condition. If, however, his throat was badly affected by a severe cold or laryngitis, he knew what songs he should select and how he should sing

them! Therefore, he always made a success of his concert.

One of the very eminent Vainikas of today, Sangeetha Kalanidhi, Principal K. S. Narayanaswamy remembers a concert of Ariyakudi performed before a large gathering in Tanjore some two decades ago, when his throat was very hoarse. Ariyakudi chose such songs and rendered them in such a way that the listeners enjoyed them from the beginning to the end.

GENUINE HUMILITY

Ariyakudi was a master not only of "Sangeetha" but also of "Ingitha" or appropriateness. Never did he speak a single word derogatory to fellow-musicians.

His humility was deep and genuine. Whenever admirers gathered round him immediately after a concert and expressed their joy, he would attribute his successful performance to Thyaga Bhahmam and Sri Raghavan sahayam. Palghat Mani Iyer once said: "It is not Ariyakudi who is singing so excellently, for four hours continuously, at the age of seventy and more! It is Saint Thyagaraja who enables him to sing like this. How else can any mortal sing at this age so full-throatedly and yet so sweetly and admirably?"

One of the most popular and outstanding performers of the same generation or even slightly older than the one to which Ariyakudi belonged, namely, Sangeetha Samraat Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar, sent a special emissary, Shri P. A. Raman of Bharatiya Music & Arts Society, to Kumbakonam to fetch Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar to Chembai so that he could sing on the occasion of the Chembai's Shashtiabdapoorthi.

It is well-known that Kalki Krishnamoorthy was one of the earliest and staunchest sponsors and supporters of the "Tamil Isai Movement". Ariyakudi was among the earliest performers who introduced a very substantial number of fine Tamil songs in his concerts—compositions of one of the greatest composers in Tamil, Shri Papasam Sivan, Arunagiri Nathar, Gopalakrishna Bharathi, "Kuthambhai" Siddhar and so on. In fact, his repertoire of Tamil, Telugu, Kanada and Sanskrit songs was truly amazing. He made such songs as "Mangaai Paal Undu", "Siva Dikshaa" in Kurinji "Antha Rama Soundaryam" in Kedaragowlam and several others, truly unforgettable.

Ariyakudi used to sing without the aid of any mike for more than a decade and was heard, in pin-drop silence, by many hundreds of listeners in the very old sabhas like Sri Parthasarathy Swamy Sabha of Madras. ♥

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