

The late Shri G. N. Balasubramaniam would have been 75 on January 1985 had not death snatched him away prematurely. Here is a tribute to that Carnatic music maestro by a well-known connoisseur of music who was also the musician's playmate.

GNB—The Phenomenon of Carnatic Music

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Sangeetha Kalanidhi G. N. Balasubramaniam was indeed a rare phenomenon in the world of classical music. For his thousands of admirers, he was a prodigy. He was not one of those musicians who rose to fame with amazing rapidity and sank into obscurity soon. He reached the eminence of great musicians like Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar, Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer, Musiri Subramanya Iyer and Chembai Vaidyanatha Iyer, with remarkable rapidity, despite the fact that he started his career as a performing and professional musician very much later than these savants. The veterans were also surprised that this talented but much younger person became popular within a short time. Even more surprising to them as well as to those who were familiar with the "great musicians" of those decades, was that GNB maintained his position among the giants throughout his life.

What was all this unrivalled achievement due to? The word "unrivalled" is used deliberately by the writer because, even "Amarar" (which is the equivalent of the English word "immortal") Pushpavanam, who, like GNB, had a wonderful voice ("saareera"), died more prematurely. But GNB, by God's grace, and as a result of the prayers of thousands of his admirers, continued to sing, and sing very well throughout his life of 55 years, in spite of his poor health during the last one year of his life.

Yet another achievement of GNB was that he made a great name for himself in the two "talkies" also, in which he acted reasonably well and sang with his usual competence.

Oftentimes acting in the "talkies" had been the graveyard of the reputations of good vocalists in the world of classical Carnatic music. GNB was one of those few who proved exception to this.

Sri R. Krishnamurthy, better known as 'Kalki' wrote in the forties that GNB's voice had great strength and force. (Actually, in Tamil the word used by 'Kalki' was "Jeevan"). He further said that the voice of that young maestro filled the hall with its musical resonance. Amazing "brigaas" and "ravaas" flew out in his concerts with uncommon effortlessness which 'Kalki' rightly called in "Tamilised" Sanskrit as "Anaayaasa".

This is not all. However gifted one may be with an excellent voice, it will deteriorate soon unless he constantly exercises that tone by what is usually called "Saadhakam". GNB did this throughout his life. That is how and why he could develop that very rare combination of "Brigaas" with "Gamakaas", realising that without "Gamakam" classical Carnatic music will be like trying to stage the Ramayana without Rama.

Furthermore, in those decades as in the present one, even very outstanding vocalists were often guilty of sacrificing the text ("Saahitya") to what appeared to them as melody. For instance, a top-notch in vocal music sang the famous and moving Panchratna Kriti of Saint Thyagaraja, which starts with the words "Endaro Mahanubhavalu" not as it should be done but thus:—

"Enda romaha nubhavulu"!

GNB, however, even in his very first public concert, started the the practice of never

splitting the 'saahitya' by indulging in mutilating the words (what is traditionally referred to as "Pada Chhedha"). The great writer 'Kalki wrote thus :

தோடி ராகத்தில் "கடைக்கண் நோக்கி
காவாததும் ஏனோ?" என்னும் பாபநாசம்
சிவன் கீர்த்தனையில்,
" அடைக்கலமென் - றடியேன் "
என்று தடியால் அடிக்காமல்,
" அடைக்கலமென் (று) - அடியேன் "
என்று பதம் பிரித்துப் பாடியதைக் கேட்க
மிகவும் சந்தோஷமாய் இருந்தது.

One of the greatest violinists of recent decades, who had a specially charming style of his own, was the very popular Dwaram Venkataswamy Naidu. The tribute that he paid to GNB in the Commemoration Souvenir published in 1964, on the occasion of his appointment as the Principal of the Swati Tirunal College of Music in Trivandrum, reads thus:—"I know Sri GNB is a musician with an emancipated mind and his service to the cause of Carnatic music were incalculable. He has the largest following among vocalists, both men and women. He has popularised Carnatic music keeping to the high ideals" Can there be a greater tribute to a great prodigy like GNB from a more eminent judge of talent than this? It should be remembered that in 1964, when this tribute was paid in writing, there were very eminent vocalists like Madurai Mani Iyer, the great Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar and Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer. And yet Dwaram said that GNB "has the largest following among vocalists, both men and women!" If this does not show that the inimitable GNB shot up like a meteor to join the ranks of the greatest veterans (including Sangeetha Vidushis like that world-famous MSS, DKP and MLV), and also maintained his position as an equal to them in many respects, and even better than them in a few other respects, what else can this show?

I was GNB's collegemate for two years, and was senior in age to GNB by less than two

years. We were also playmates from childhood. GNB's father, Shri G. V. Narayana-swamier was a "Sangeetha Rasika" of the highest calibre, and was the Secretary, continuously for many years, of one of the finest music sabhas of those days, known as Sri Parthasarathy Swami Sabha. He treated both GNB and myself as his sons. Along with Shri C. K. Venkata Narasimhan (affectionately called Babu), who subsequently blossomed into a leading criminal lawyer of the Madras Bar, and was also elected as one of the Secretaries of the music Academy, Madras, we used to attend every concert of Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar, Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer and the great Nagaswara Vidwan Sri T. N. Rajaratnam, during the years 1924 till 1927. No wonder, GNB was profoundly influenced by these outstanding performers, each having developed a distinct and specially attractive style of his own. Though GNB's regular guru was Madurai Subramanya Iyer (the very erudite violinist), his "manaseeka" gurus were the three mentioned earlier. When GNB was felicitated by the Shanmukhananda Fine Arts & Sangeetha Sabha, Bombay, as the President of the Sabha, I said:

"GNB absorbed the best in the styles of Ariyakudi, Maharajapuram and TNR, allowed them to pass through the crucible of his own creativity, imagination and insight, and developed a special style which was GNB's own style and which style became one of the most charming and gripping baanis."

Unshakeable faith in Raja Rajeswari

GNB had totally surrendered himself to his favourite deity ("Ishta Devatha") Raja Rajeswari. Most of his compositions were on Raja Rajeswari (out of a total of more than a 100 kritis which he composed). Such, however, was his total self-effacement that he voluntarily imposed on himself a complete embargo on his singing his own kritis in any of his concerts!! Is it not so utterly different from

he practice of many present and past musicians who composed kritis? Do they not make it a point to sing at least a few of their own kritis in their concerts? This is not all. **In GNB's compositions he did not allow even his "Madra" (which is the term used to indicate the composer's chosen name) to be put in.**

His disciples and admirers popularised his kritis by singing them in their own performances.

Humility

The above is not the only example of his humility and dedication to the high values which his very eminent predecessors cherished. **He made it a point never to accept any money for teaching music to his disciples. Secondly, he did not expect them (as many eminent musicians, who were his contemporaries, were doing) to serve him personally by washing his clothes, preparing for his daily bath, etc.**

Further, as his foremost disciple M. L. Vasanthakumari pointed out in her recent lecture-demonstration on the subject "My Guru Shri GNB" at Bhakta Rasika Ranjani Sabha, "GNB had developed a specialised technique of his own for giving effective teaching to his shishyas".

GNB adopted the very effective and successful technique of splitting up difficult "sangathis" into its various parts. He would then teach them, part by part, before asking the students to sing the "sangathi" as a whole. The success of this method of "Guru GNB" is proved by the fact that he could develop and inspire many disciples of high popularity and merit. To mention only a few, MLV, his devoted and very able T. R. Balu (who unfortunately passed away very prematurely), S. Kalyanaraman, Trichur Ramachandran, Someswar Babu and also the popular Shrimatis Radha and Jayalakshmi.

GNB's remarkable humility was known to all his close friends. He never spoke even a

single word in disparagement of any of his contemporaries or past musicians. On the other hand, he would speak appreciatively of, and listen to the music of, even promising "beginners".

There was no leading violinist or mridangist whom he did not have as his accompanying artiste for his concerts. To mention only a few among violinists, Kumbakonam Rajamanikkam Pillai, T. Choudiah, T. N. Krishnan, Lalgudi Jayaraman and Thyagarajan, were some among those who played on the violin, and GNB had the knack of eliciting the best from each of them, and they did their best to make the concert, as a whole, a grand success. This was exactly the part played by leading Mridangists also, some among whom were that great prodigy Palghat Mani Iyer, that wonderful player of both mridangam and kanjira, Palani Subramanya Pillai, T. K. Murthy, Murugaboopathy and Palghat Raghu. He treated all of them with the utmost courtesy and appreciation.

GNB, A Lakshana and Lakhsya Vidwan

GNB diligently studied and scrupulously practised both the "grammar" and the "poetry" of the great, chaste and enthralling system of classical Carnatic music. He would not sacrifice "art and aesthetics" at the altar of "grammar." At the same time, he would not take undue liberty with and frequently violate the "grammar" of music. GNB was not unaware of the fact that English poets like Shakespeare and Milton, or Sanskrit poets like Kalidasa or Tamil poets like Kambar did take advantage, to a certain extent, of "poetic licence". But, he was equally aware of the important fact that these eminent poets did not frequently resort to the use of this freedom. The great poets thus maintained a beautiful balance and steered clear of the two extremes. **This is what the great maestro GNB did too.**

To take another point in this regard: it must be noted that GNB did not yield to

the temptation of making too many departures from "Sampradaaya" or tradition. Neither did he treat "Sampradaaya" as an ever-inviolable principle.

He certainly believed in and glamorously displayed the art of "improvisation" by exercising his great "manodharma". At the same time, he never allowed his manodharma to run riot and play havoc with the aesthetic beauty of his brilliant rendering.

GNB believed in "innovations", but only in those innovations which resulted in "improvements". It is these qualities of maintaining a fine sense of poise and equilibrium which were responsible for the admiration he elicited from famous musicians — vocal and instrumental — like Dwaram Venkataswamy Naidu Garu, Dr. Balamurali Krishna, Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, Lalgudi Jayaraman and even from the nagaswaram vidwan T. N. Rajaratnam of undying fame.

GNB would sing certain krits in "Ati druta" Kaala, some in "Druta" Kaala, some in "Madhyama" Kaala, and certain others in "Vilamba" Kaala and "Ati Vilamba" Kaala also. Here again, he maintained a sense of poise and proportion. Most of his kritis were in "madhyama" Kaala.

The way in which he developed his special style of raga aalapana in the "rakthi and prasiddha" ragas like Kalyani, Kambodhi, Sankarabaranam, Karaharapriya and Shanmukhapriya was unique. He would render these ragas, stage by stage, exhausting all the aesthetic features of each stage, slowly and steadily proceeding to the next stage, and so on.

The audience used to be carried along with the singer, unconsciously and involuntarily, through all these stages! Particular noteworthy and especially marked by this stage-by-stage delineation, was his aalapana in Thodi raga. It was the Nagaswara Chakravarthy Rajaratnam who made Thodi tremen-

dously appealing and widely popular by his unique style of dealing with every aspect of the raga fully but beautifully. In fact, his gramophone record of Thodi used to be played and heard, with rapture and wonder by all the vidwans—vocalists and instrumentallists—who kept it as an ideal which they should endeavour to reach. But, even Rajaratnam became a great admirer of GNB's rendering raga !.

Here is an incident which took place a couple of years before GNB passed away and few months before Rajaratnam died. It was a four-day marriage at the house of a wealthy rasika at Kallidaikurichi. On all the four days TNR was playing, in his inimitable way, in the mornings and also at the time of the 'Janavasa' procession. On each of the four days there was a concert by one or other of the great vidwans. Among those who were sitting in the front and listening to the concerts was T. N. Rajaratnam. On the day when GNB was singing at this marriage, he sang Kalyani, Kambodhi and several other ragas but not the Thodi. TNR stood up and said "Ayya, konja neram Thodi paadungo" (which meant in English "please sing for sometime the Thodi raga"). GNB would not and could not say "no" to the request of his "hero", and sang Thodi in his unique style based, of course, on TNR's method, but by no means a mere imitation thereof. At the end of this concert, TNR stood up, held the hand of GNB, with tears of joy in his eyes (Aanada Baashpam) and said in Tamil, "I forgot myself and was continuously engrossed in your most melodious Thodi". This incident was narrated to this writer by a disciple of GNB, who was singing with him that day.

GNB was invited for a concert at Trivandrum to be held in the palace of His Highness Sri Chithira Tirunal Maharaja. Gayaka Sikhmani Muthiah Bhagavathar was the Principal of Swati Tirunal College of Music and Asthana Vidwan at that time.

GNB was singing one of the kritis composed by Muthiah Bhagavathar starting with the word "saarasamukhi" in the raga "gowda malhar". Being an *apoorva raga*, generally the kriti is sung without a raga prelude. However, GNB sang with astonishing detail and elaboration the gowda malhar raga! Gayaka Sikhamani Muthiah Bhagavathar, who was listening to this, was lost in wonder and joy. He was one among the audiences; and after the kriti was over, he stood up and embraced GNB and said, "I bless you with all my heart. Your fame will spread more and more. I have been always singing with one of the four tamburas which I had got specially prepared for me. One is called Rama, the second one is called Lakshmana, the third one is called Bharata, and the fourth Satrugna. I am giving you my tambura named Bharata, because your

devotion to music is similar to the devotion of Bharata to Rama."

I have touched upon GNB's genius, his originality, his equipoise, his faith in God, and his love for his disciples and above all, his basic humility and have quoted Dwaram, TNR, and Muthiah Bhagavathar. What more can one say about him ?

It is a pity he passed away in Trivandrum a few years before he could celebrate his 61st birthday. He can never be forgotten by the generation which had the pleasure and privilege of hearing his incomparably superb music rendered in a voice and with a *manodharma* for which there were only two equals—Madurai Pushpavanam and S. G. Kittappa both of whom died at even younger ages than GNB. Whom the Gods love die young. ●

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