

ARIAKUDI RAMANUJA IYENGAR

Ariakudi Ramanuja Iyengar's future as a great musician was predicted by his own father, an astrologer. Whether one believes this bit of lore or not, Ramanuja Iyengar was indeed great. K. S. MAHADEVAN draws a leisurely sketch of the vocalist who is credited with fathering the 'cutcheri' in Carnatic music.

Michelangelo's remark that "no man or woman is born into this world whose work is not born with him", is never more true than in the case of the great Carnatic musician, Ariakudi Ramanuja Iyengar whose birth centenary fell on 19-5-90. A measure of his greatness is that, even 23 years after his death, his great art remains unequalled and inimitable.

His music has a special significance to the present generation of musicians because today the cultural current flows not towards the simple, beautiful and lucid, but towards the novel and singular at any price. These days novelty is at a premium, every idiom is personal and the artiste finds it necessary to startle by departing from tradition. This is where the celebration of Ariakudi's centenary acquires a point, a focus, not lightly to be disregarded.

Born to Thiruvengkatachariar, an astrologer by profession, whose reading of his son's horoscope led him to foresee a great future for his offspring as a musician. Ariakudi had his training duly planned out from an early age. Malayappa Iyer of Pudukottah initiated him in the early lessons of Carnatic music. Namakkal Narasimha Iyengar, famous for his imaginative singing of raags like Kedaragowla and Varali, and for his unique ability to render complex *pallavis*, was the next guru

Young Ramanujam learned a lot during his stimulating apprenticeship, marked by daily *sadaka* of hours and hours of singing in the temple hall of Srirangam. As his guru's health deteriorated, Ramanathapuram Srinivasa Iyengar (disciple of Patnam Subramania Iyer of the Tyagaraja *sisya parampara*) took over the reins of guidance for Ramanujam when he was 18 years old.

For the next 10 years, the young student received the best training any budding musician could hope for. There was mutual respect and understanding between master and pupil. Being a fine composer himself, he taught his pupil his own great creation *varnams*, *kritis*, *jawalis* and *padams*, and Ramanujam was put through the paces of a demanding discipline. Co-singing with the guru, who was a very popular performer (his voice was so sweet as to earn him the sobriquet of 'poochi' meaning the hum of a beetle) built up Ramanujam's confidence and experience of concert techniques.

The young man had not long to wait for his own chance on the public platform. It was a debut beyond his wildest dreams. At a concert for which the celebrated accompanists, Tirukodikaval Krishna Iyer (violin), Alaganambi Pillai (mridangam) and Dakshinamurthi Pillai (kanjira) had been invited to accompany "poochi" Iyengar himself, the latter stood down in favour of young Ramanujam in response to public request.

That was an ambience which would have taken the nerve and poise of even experienced vocalists. But Ramanujam's self-confidence, stemming from his immaculate training and his native genius, enabled him to purvey Carnatic music of such a high order that at one stage, even Tirukodikaval was enthusiastically encouraging him to give of his best.

As Ariakudi, in one of his reminiscent moods of later years would recall, this was the moment of truth for him and gave him the necessary confidence to set his sights upon a great career.

Always functioning within the parameters of tradition, Ramanuja Iyengar was an innovator nevertheless. Before his time concerts used to be of about four hours duration, held mainly in temples but filled in with elaborate singing of a few raagas—sometimes for hours—followed by the technical, largely rhythmic exercise of *pallavis*, structured with *taals* of mind-boggling complexity. They were designed, more often than not, to confuse and perplex the percussionists, a battle of wits in which the listener was a passive spectator and music was largely a casualty.

Thereafter, the older musicians used to sing religious pieces like Thirukkural or Thevaram or Krishna Karnamrita *slokas* and other pieces from religious literature, to regale their listeners. In sum, it was an elaborate exercise of skill, with little store set by melody, *ranjakathwa* and all those charming aspects of music.

One consequence of this charade was that the vast bulk of wonderful *kritis* of the trinity—Tyagaraja, Muthuswami Dikshitar and Syama Sastry—remained unexplored. As far as the *rasika* was concerned, that wonderful corpus of creative music remained hidden from him, like the other side of the moon.

The shrewd Ariakudi, whose repertory included *varnams*, hundreds of *kritis* of the trinity, short but exciting *pallavi* and *tukadas*, boldly decided to revamp the old, tiresome programmes with pulsating music based on a large cross-section of ragas, their *kritis*, with crisp and sparkling *swaraprastharas*.

This was a shot-in-the-arm for Carnatic music bulls who, fascinated by this varied presentation of the cream of music, flocked in large numbers to hear him. Music had been shaken out of its torpor and revitalised.

Rightly does Semmangudi, a great maestro himself, designate Ariakudi as the "greatest salesman for Carnatic music" since the *cutcheri paddhatj*, now in vogue and so popular, owes its origin to him.

The charm and vitality of his music defy analysis even today, but one may try to delineate the main components of his unique style. He had a clear perspective of dimensions. He struck the right balance between intellect and emotion. His raaga *alapanas*, were an orderly and intellectual exposition of the form, thrust and complexion of every raaga, with a tinge of asuterity as often as not. *Akara* and full-throated articulation of note ensured a smooth and graceful tenor.

His controlled imagination could produce fascinating and detailed pictures of major Carnatic raagas like Thodi, Kalyani, Kambodhi, Sankarabaranam and impressed listeners with their majestic sweep. But he had no peer when he sketched, in a short synopsis, raagas like Varali, Useni, Anandabhairavi, Atana, Saveri, Khamas, Kapi and Sindhubhairavi, and presented their essence in a few delicate tonal inflections. It was all natural, unforced music. Its very restraint gave it a suggestion of infinite power and penetration.

Ariakudi's music was a gospel of proportion often lacking in modern singers who seem to be carried away by one or the other aspects.

Restraint is often mistaken as evidence of lack of Ariakudi's career (an unbroken span of 60 years) disproves that. Restraint implies that the artiste has fought down or subdued all those primitive, extravagant impulses that threaten the chaste integrity of art. To choose is to reject—a painful thing for those who indulge in experiment for its own sake.

Two aspects of this towering giant need special mention. He was always humble at heart and would go out of his way to show a special concern for a young and rising artist. Violin veteran T. N. Krishnan owes his career to the maestro's unflinching

encouragement. Similarly, many a young mridangist got a chance to accompany him and improve his chances in life.

Ramanuja Iyengar jealously guarded the musician's prerogatives. For instance, when the Tamil Isai movement (only songs in Tamil to be sung) wanted to draft him, he insisted upon starting with *varnam* (generally in Telugu) and including a few Tyagaraja *kritis* in the programme and got his way.

Honours and titles chased him—"Sangita Ratnakara" (1937); "Sangita Kalanidhi" (Madras Music Academy, 1938). "Gayaka Sikamani" (Mysore Durbar); the President's Award (1952); the Padma Bhushan are some of them. His disdain for such honours had to be seen to be believed! □

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