

The one and only Sri Lalgudi

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Mr. George-another 'the one and only'-Bernad Shaw has said there are two ironies in life; one is not to get one's heart's desire, the other is to get it. An ardent listener of Sri Lalgudi for around four decades, my desire, to praise him is-yes-quite natural. I am at my so-called wit's end. What to begin with, how to proceed and with what to close.

For, Sri Lalgudi's achievements are monumental and he is already a legend. And I am a mere, lay rasika only.

However paper stretched, and pen poised, I try, I fumble, and occasionally stumble mercifully on truth.....

A concert of Messrs Alathur Brothers with Sri Lalgudi, Sri Palghat Mani Iyer and Sri Swaminatha Pillai. Pat from "Rama Nee Pai" (Kedharam) to Mangalam it was a classic. "Amba Para Devathe" (Rudhrapriya) was there. They sang swara for "Amba" "Para" and "Devathe" (2 units, 7 units and 1 unit from samam respectively of that Kanda chapu). In the Thodi "Enthuku Dhayarathu", they chose, in the saranam portion "Thyagaraja" for crisp permutation laden niraval, swaram. To reach "Thyagaraja" which is 4 units from samam, they always used a 5 swara phrase only. During the contracting and culminating phase, they ably manipulated the swaras to end in a few 6 then 7 swaras phrases. All in breath-arresting break-neck succession, in one round of that misra-chapu. And then, there was a Pallavi in Shanmuga Priya, in kanda jathi thripudai 4 kalais. Eduppu was 14 units from samam, treated with anulopam. pra-

thulopam in slow, thisra, fast tempo's. For swara singing they reduced the Thala to 2 kalais. That put the Eduppu into a tricky spot, 7 units from samam. Sri Mani Iyer was his supreme best.

And Sri Lalgudi !

Having heard him perform from Everestian heights and aware of his Himalayan dimensions, I had to restrain with effort, the use of my hind sight of this knowledge to enjoy his part on that concert. (It was a vintage tape very kindly lent by an understanding friend). Yes. All through all these Sri Lalgudi was all game. His reception, his responses were reflex-like, so instantaneous. He was the singer's alter-ego; what they perceived and exercised, he echoed with an indefinable complement, all his own. It was touching.

Having written this much, I went over it to assess its worth. After all, what have I said? Except the very fact, the very obvious! If I wrote Sri Lalgudi was game, it was just as if I wrote honey is sweet or sun is the sustainer of the solar system. So let me try another track.

The brothers had come to the concluding stages. "Chandrasekhara" was one of the choices. In mellowed tones - in the Nadhaswaram Pair Pattern - while Sri Srinivasa Iyer was rendering the song, Sri Subbudu was bringing out the sweet nuances of Sindhu Bhairavi either by singing together or by dwelling on the raga itself for one or more Thala rounds. Sri Mani Iyer's Mridangam - the dainty steps of the dancing deer, or the thundering

cataract or what all else, appropriate as the need arose earlier in the concert-was itself singing ; both the sides of it.

All the time how was Sri Lalgudi ?

Had he merged his violin in the song! In a way he had. But what a way! Scarcely his bowing be distinguished as a separate entity. The conjoining was so complete, yet unobtrusive. Ever so slight an emphasis here; the touch of a slight stress there; a cue to the singer's once. A flowing; a following; an enhancement without which the total effect could never be what it was. So entranced was I that I had this portion re-played once too many.

This tape reminds me of another tape. Here, Sri Lalgudi's expressions were vocal. Yes. It was a talk. In this he developed the topic as he would a raga. As his vidwat in his raga elaborations, so his in-depth understanding of the assorted topics, revealed itself in that talk. Music; its multi-splendours; the essential spiritual content of it; the great composers; their poetic geniuses; now the artists, their artistry manifesting its hidden worth; then the technology of the artists; vocal, instrumental, percussion; their individual circumscribing factors.....well, here is a mind which is as much methodical as it is musical.

A concert at Nagercoil. A detailed Ragam, thanam, pallavi in Nattakurunji; Father and son alternately presented ragas galore in the raga-malika swara part. A splendid and memorable Thani by Sri Dorai and Sri Harishankar followed and there was an interlude of sorts. Now, Sri Lalgudi chose 'Enna Thavam Seithanai' rather abruptly. No preamble; my mind was touched to the quick at the absence of the raga alapana.

The song was coming out beautiful. On the point of completion Sri Lalgudi weaves the magic touch. In every repetition of "Enna Thavam Seithanai," "Yasodha" was portrayed in different and different angles. Now, the final "Enna Thavam Seithanai", and in the "Nai" he zoomed to the pitch and glided in a multi-mixture of trapeze, zigzag, to and fro, up and down, and down and up, all in a flash, all in jet-set speed. The raga Kapi all the time showing pure, pristine. My mind gulped.

Another instance. "Maara vairi Ramani" was coming in moderate tempo. Yes, again, no raga preamble. With the three parts of the kirthna rendered scientifically one would justifiably feel one had seen all the aspects of the raga. No! the raga has a few more secrets to unfurl. Sri Lalgudi would repeat 5 times-while concluding-"Maara vairi Ramani" and each time would infuse "RAMANI" with a subtle and different prayoga of the Swara sthanas, Nasika Bhooshani would be priding itself at the discovery of its hidden charm! For a change Sri Lalgudi would employ this artistry at a stage which is literally 'to begin with'.

'Marukelaraa' he initiates. An inflection, an intimate application of the swara of the very first letter 'MA' of 'Marukelaraa', augments manifold the quaint nature of Jayanthasree. Not contented he would concentrate and pour extra sangathis on-round after round-'RAA' of 'Marukelaraa'.

That Jayanthasree is etched deep in my mind.

Do all these qualities-this acumen, this expertise, the insight, this cultured expression - do all these evolve in a person by the wielding of a magical wand ?

I was told that Sri Lalgudi's illustrious father was a taskmaster and disciplinarian. The result of his bringing-up is the up-bringing of the great Lalgudi.

As saint Thiruvalluvar would have it, his father enabled Sri Lalgudi to attain the fore-front (அவையத்து முந்தி இருப்ப). The grace and glare with which Sri Lalgudi occupies that fore-front of the fore-front earned to his father-the சொல் "இவன் தந்தை என் நோற்றான் கொல்". Reversing the roles, Sri Lalgudi-as a parent himself-did and does unto his children what his father did unto him. And happily, these children-true to lineage-are promising, proving.....

It was ONAM festival time in Kerala some years back. Sri Lalgudi was in Trivandrum to give a couple of concerts. He had just visited us and we were returning to his lodging place. So—and with us - were a very dear and mutual friend of ours and his daughter.

En-route was a flower bazaar and our friend's daughter wanted to purchase some. So we stopped the vehicle and she got out. It was the season when cost would be sky-high and commodity less. When she returned with a minuscule quantity of flowers for the enormous price paid, Sri Lalgudi with the innocence of a child, but a suggestion of a smile showing in his chins-asked :

பூ ! இவ்வளவு தானா ? !

A pun, packed into that single letter பூ !
For a Pallavi he could if I remember correct—

வேலவா

உந்தன் மேலவா

கொண்டேன் எனை ஆளவா.

A single rhyme, and 3 different meanings squeezed into the same.

May I just touch now one of his compositions ? A thillana in Madhuvanathi.

Innovating the style to which this raga is said to belong Sri-or is it Pandit-Lalgudi enunciated this tillana to suit its spirit. And the kick from this "Madhu"vanthi is quite sobering ! all the same.

It is only proper to end this write-up by taking a look and revel at how Sri Lalgudi invariably ends his swara prasthara, the now very famous அந்தாதி pattern.

An Annual number of a periodical once re-produced the picture of an architectural marvel found in one of the temples of Tamilnadu. It was a stone carving in which an elephant and a bull of equal proportions were shown facing one another. Sculpting an artistic trick the faces of these two animals were carved in one piece. Looking from an angle, the elephant could be seen in full, tail, its physical bulk, legs, the broad ears, mere eyes, tusks, trunk - yes all as a whole. Continuing only the body of the bull, neck downwards, could be seen. Now, looking from an angle from the bull's side-wonder of wonders-the whole bull could be seen from its tail to the tip of its nose, its protruding tongue, horns and all ! again continues, only the body of the elephant, neck downwards could be seen on the earlier side. A Magic in carving-visual.

Now ; a poem !

When you *smile*, the other *smiles*

When the other *smiles*, all the others *smile*

When all the others *smile*, there will be
MILESMILESMILES OF SMILES

Here the words are so juxtaposed as to create - when audibly uttered - an audio visual magic. Now Sri Lalgudi also imagines and executes a magic which is in the realm of concept. I shall cite one instance which is the simplest for me to handle.

'Raanidhirahu' in Manirang

After the completion of the kirthana, there is a momentary pause. In mid-tempo he recounts the well known 'Paa MaaGaaRee Saa' to couple with 'Raanidhee. Sri Krishnan (GJR) dittoes it. Now Sri Lalgudi's magic - rather mathe-magic-emerges. Retaining the 'Paa maa gaa ree saa' he conjures up another format 'Paa maa gaa ree saa Ree maa Paa.' (The Ree maa paa of course are the corresponding Swaras for Raa nee dhee' and here in lies the touch of Sri Lalgudi's genius). This is a thrice repeatable one. And he does it too, but how! By an incalculably intelligent shifting of the place from where it should normally start, to another place so that in the third round his 'Paa maa gaa Ree Saa Ree Maa Paa' automatically turns into "Paa maa gaa ree saa Raa needhee"

"Paa maa gaa ree saa *Ree ma paa*

Paa maa gaa ree saa *Ree ma paa*

Paa maa gaa ree saa *Raa nidhee*"

Aldous Huxley would define one's memory as one's private literature. The memory lane Sri Lalgudi has paved in my mind are strewn with gold.

'Thodi, Bhairavi,

Bilahari, Bhindumalini,

Kalyanavasandham, Khandhamani,

Vachaspathi, Vanaspathi.

Here is music; golden music; mature and majestic music. A music that adorns the Gods. ●

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