

MLV - THE SPRING-TIME BIRD WHO TOUCHED OUR LIVES

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It is hard to write about MLV without smiling a little, weeping a little. For, she was one of us. She was vulnerable, impetuous, witty, sometimes unwise, always imaginative, often unrealistic, super-intelligent, independent, daring, a charming woman of the world, who knew her strengths and her weaknesses. Above all this, she was the grandest among the women vocalists of the twentieth century. Her music was indeed grand.... it had the lustre of a royal gem, crafted by a master craftsman with a unique design. Her music and her voice remain to this day, one of a kind.

I cannot say much about her early life. Much has been written about her training, her mother Madras Lalithangi, and Guru GNB. I got to know her through my mother Alamelu Viswanathan who treated her as a daughter. We called our mother 'Ambu', and so did MLV. My sister Charu went to MLV as a disciple when she was in school, and I was in college. This everyday connection between our families became strong. Whatever happened in MLV's life, 'happened' in ours too. When she passed away, the loss was inexplicable. I could not listen to Carnatic music for a year after that tragedy. Such was her music, that others could never fill the void.

MLV's genius was such that she had mastered every aspect of Carnatic music and went beyond the heights which the veteran male musicians had scaled. The energy of youthfulness was the shining force in her music all through her life. The vim and vigour, combined with a joyous brilliance which touched on melody like a magic wand, made her music a celebration of life itself. The eagerness with which we used to follow her every concert in town is today the stuff of dreams. She never seemed to be striving to impress. She just let her imagination take off, and cruise in the air like a huge Garuda bird, letting us raise our minds to a higher level of appreciation. Spontaneity was the key to her music. We were well aware that a Raga like Natabhairavi in a Pallavi needed some preparation. But for MLV it was only a mental preparedness. She threw surprises in the air, making us pick them like flowers from a bouquet. Her accompanists and disciples had to rise to the occasion with alacrity. Her speed left us breathless in amazement. Along with it her sense of proportion, and her fine tuned aesthetic sensibilities created a musical harmony which only she could craft.

One can list a huge number of Ragas and songs which she has made unforgettable. It was she, who made Kalyana Vasantham come to life and

dance in my mind's eye. No words can portray the majesty and sheer beauty of her Todi, Hindolam and Mohanam. Each time she sang such Ragas, we were treated to new subtle nuances. She was the queen of Ragamalikas..... thrilling us who knew that these flights of imagination were totally unrehearsed.

It is widely known that her Purandaradasa repertoire was fantastic. From the Ugabhoga flourishes to the final crescendo, she painted the songs with her colourful imagination. It was she who made even Muthuswami Dikshitar's complex songs more approachable to listeners, with her clear diction and delightful selection. I can never forget her concert at the Music Academy during the Dikshitar bi-centenary year. Her 'Pahimam Parvathi' in Mohanam, 'Jambu Pathe' in Yamuna Kalyani, and the Chaturdasa Ragamalika made us all sit up in wonder. She had only recently 'learnt' that song from her disciple Charumathi, and wove her spell around it like a magician.

She had a special feeling for Purandaradasa considering her mother was a pioneer in popularising that Vaggeyakara, and publishing his compositions. The year she received the Sangita Kalanidhi, MLV sang an entire Purandaradasa concert as part of the morning conference. The range from 'Jaya Jaya Jaya Janaki' to 'Bagyadhalakshmi Baramma' was indeed so full of musical richness that it created another renaissance in musical history. Whether it was a Tiruppugazh concert, or a Purandaradasa concert, MLV sang from the heart, using the genius of her head to communicate the intricacies of Carnatic music with her audience. They never failed her. She smiled at them with that inimitable warmth, and put all her strength into making the best music.

Many of us grew up listening to her film songs, without sometimes even knowing that they were 'film' songs. Like 'kurathi' dance, we children were sometimes taught 'marwari' dance. My sister learnt this dance set to 'Gopalanodu', a song from 'Vazhakai' danced by Vyjayanthimala. It is true that MLV sang innumerable songs for dance in films. This, it appears to me, was because of her close friendship with her neighbour, Padmini the incomparable dancing star.

When MLV sang for her daughter SriVidya's dance performances, it was another exciting event for us. Her 'Krishna Nee' had her own extraordinary charm. Besides, she sang a host of other songs including Guru Dandayudhapani's Varnams and Thillanas.

MLV has many disciples, and I can claim to know the musical genius of at least two of them... my sister Charumathi, and her husband Ramachandran

who learnt from both GNB and MLV. Apart from a vast repertoire and a sound technique, they have also inherited that vital originality which matters in music. MLV used to constantly enrich her repertoire, learning songs from her peers. When an entire programme of songs in Raga Kalyani sung by her was broadcast on the Radio, we were stunned by the variety and exploratory prowess of the singer. And when she sang the Javali, Enthati Kuluke, it was surprisingly evocative in its mood. Soon I added it to my dance repertoire and it has remained one of my favourites. The same goes for 'Baro Krishnayya', 'Chandrachuda' and other songs.

MLV was generous to a fault. She helped a lot of people, and expected nothing in return. She had many friends and to all of them she became a member of their family. They loved her, worried about her, and kept pace with her hectic life. She was one of the few Vidwans who spoke impeccable English. She had a wonderful sense of humour, enjoyed jokes, relished gourmet food, told 'funny stories, and made all around her feel that they had a friend in her. She praised other artistes generously, and showed great respect to her elders. What is more, she also appreciated artistes who were her juniors. She was thoroughly unconscious of her celebrity status, and was approachable to all. Her music reflected not only her genius but also her personality. She was vivacious, witty and sharply intelligent.

Some of the best concerts of MLV were held in Sri Krishna Gana Sabha. Those who listened to her music in the heydays can consider themselves extremely lucky. As for those who also knew her personally, it is enough to say that she was a most lovable and delightful person, whose wit and warmth, matched her golden voice which rang like a resonant bell even when she spoke.