

My Gurunathar
MUSIRI SUBRAHMANYA IYER : A MUSIC MAKER (1899-1975)

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My Guru Musiri Subrahmanya Iyer is a total artiste who focussed with clarity on all dimensions and directions. He was a legend in his life time and retired during his peak glory. His concerts were intellectually chiselled and aligned with the highest form of tradition. There was something in his music that radiated uniqueness. He had the expertise in the conceptualisation of the aesthetic essence of a song and the incorporation of the same in his renderings. He was a musician whose passion flowed beyond mere notes to one's ears, heart, and soul. His choice in everything by instinct was classic.

EARLY LIFE: Bom in the Bommalapalayam village, Selam district, Tamil Nadu, on the 9th of April, 1899, he was the second son of the sanskrit scholar Sri Sankara Sastrigal and Smt. Sitalakshmi. He lost his mother as an infant and was brought up by his paternal aunt at Musiri in Trichy District. Child marriages being in vogue, He was married to Nagalakshmi when he was hardly twelve. Marriage was no hindrance to his single minded pursuit of music. He was not blessed with children, and hence brought up his elder brother's children on account of the untimely demise of his brother.

TUTELAGE: As a young boy, he went to Pudukottai, where he was under the guidance of Sri S. Narayanaswami Iyer. After 8 years in Pudukkottai, he proceeded for Gurukulavasa under the famous violinist, Karur Chinnaswami Iyer.

In 1920, my Master moved to Madras and took up residence at Tiruvallikkeni to come under the fold of Sangitakalanidhi Tiruvayyaru S. Sabhesa Iyer, who was the disciple of Mahavaidyanatha Iyer, a disciple of Saint Tyagaraja's senior disciple: Manambuchavadi Venkatasubba Iyer. Thus, my Guru belongs to the fourth generation of Saint Tyagaraja's Sishyaparampara.

Later my Guru moved into a house in Mundakkanniyammankoil Street in Mylapore before taking up residence at Oliver Road, which was subsequently named as Musiri Subramanyam Road, where he breathed his last on 24th, March 1975.

A TOTAL ARTISTE: My Guru had an extraordinary resonant voice; which was a great asset for a performing musician in those mike-less days. The smooth blending of Raga bhava with the Sahityabhava in a professional manner was a special feature of his style. Traditional purity and classicism is my Guru's forte. His raga essays were wonderful portrayals, free of gimmicks. He handled ragas like Janaranjani, Kokilavarali, etc. with as much ease as he would handle

ragas like Todi. He never like to sing scale oriented ragas. Neraval and Viruttam were his forte.

My Guru started his musical career with a performance in Trichy where the renowned F.G. Natesa Iyer presented him/with a medal. From 1922 onwards, his career graph as a performer soared high, denoting his fantastic achievements. There have been occasions when the audience, listening to his soulful renderings, sat totally packed with emotion, forgot to applaud, with tears rolling down the eyes.

He developed a style of singing that was his very own. There is a view that he chose the slow tempo or Vilambakala of rendering in preference to the middle speed or Madhyamakala. He specialised in those great compositions which demanded exposition in the slow tempo to bring out the inherent dignity of their content and nuances of the ragabhava.

From 1932 onwards, my Guru travelled all over India giving concerts. In 1935 he crossed the seas for the first time to visit Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia and collected massive funds for the Ramakrishna Mission. He performed in Ceylon and Rangoon as well. During those visits, he witnessed the hardships of the Indian labourers in the tea plantations and this inspired the topical song "TEYILAIT TOTTATTILE". In the early 1930s, his gramophone records were released by the Columbia Company and these turned out to be big hits. To mention a few: NAGUMOMU, PAHI RAMACHANDRA RAGHAVA, VIRITTA SENCHADAIYADA, TIRUVADI SARANAM, IHAPARAM TARUM etc. In one of the chats with some of his friends, I still remember his telling that he had received around 87 thousand rupees as royalty from the Gramophone company. He also mentioned that initially his royalty was two annas for a rupee and later he increased it fourteen annas per rupee as his share, leaving behind only two annas for the Gramophone company. Such was the demand for his music at that time. South Indian music lovers are still preserving his gramophone records as an asset.

He was so popular that people fixing a wedding would finalise the date of the marriage only after ascertaining availability of my Guru for a performance. In those days arranging his concerts was considered as a prestige by the music lovers. Due to the demand, there had been occasions where he had to give three performances at different places, one in the morning immediately after the MANGALYA DHARANA, one in the evening and another after dinner. Also, he drew the highest remuneration for a performance in those days. He was every alert and had his hand on the pulse of the audience and always provided the maximum variation within the limits of any raga. His admirers used to say that he is the first Sangita Vidwan who used to sing great Tamizh

compositions as a major item in the concert. The immortal song of Gopalakrishna Bharati's TIRUVADI SARANAM and the neraval at 'ADUTTUVANDA ENNAI TALLALAHADU' is still soul stirring in the minds of those who have listened to it.

Certainly it is not an exaggeration to state that there was hardly any function arranged by Maharajas, Zameendars, Industrialists, or social V.I.Ps in South India, where Musiri had not performed.

In 1937, he acted in the film TUKARAM, as the Maharashtrian devotee tukaram, more for his musical abilities since in those days playback singing was not in vogue. The role fitted him perfectly as it related to a devotee attaining his salvation through his spiritual singing. He sang several memorable pieces in this film.

He was a maker of music. He would take up a familiar song and give it his own special stamp. Examples are EVARANI, ENTAVEDUKONDU, ENDU DAGINADO, O RANGASAYI, RAMABANA, BROVAVAMMA etc., besides the gramophone records in which he has sung songs like NAGUMOMU, PAHIRAMA, TIRUVADISARANAM etc.

TILES & HONOURS: At the age of 40, he was conferred the title SANGITA KALANIDHI by the Music Academy, Chennai and in 1940 he became the SAMASTHANA VIDWAN of the Travancore Palace. Later he was made the DEVASTHANA VIDWAN of Tirupati as well. He was the recipient of CENTRAL SANGIT NATAK ACADEMY AWARD for karnatak music as a vocalist in 1957, and was elected as a fellow of the CENTRAL SANGIT NATAK ACADEMY in 1967-68. In 1963, The Tamil Isai Sangam conferred upon him the title ISAIP PERARINAR. He was the recipient of the President's Award PADMABHUSHAN in 1971. There have been many many other awards to his credit, however, he never prefixed any of these to this name. He always went by MUSIRI alone.

AN ADMINISTRATOR: My Guru's career as a performing musician ran parallel to his efficient functioning as the founder principal of the Central College of Carnatai music now named as Tamilnad Govt. Music College. He had a fine command in both spoken and written English. He had formal college education (St. Joseph's College, Trichy) and was highly articulate in English which was rare among the musicians of his times. He was deeply interested in English literature and one of his favourite writers was D.H. Lawrence. He spoke high flown English. He was a man of culture, charm, polish and high values. He also was associated with Kerala University and Venkateswara University in the Dept. of Fine Arts and also was a member of various governing bodies related to Carnatai music. He was one of the Vice-Presidents of Music Academy for several years.

From the year 1940 onwards for more than fifteen years, as the General Secretary, it was He who was responsible for bringing together various groups of musicians into one group and created the Sri Tyagabrahma Mahotsava Sabha (Regd) at Tiruvayyaru for celebrating the ANNUAL ARADHANA FESTIVAL as it is in its present format. My Master enjoyed the unique privilege of commanding respect from his contemporary musicians by sheer virtue of his simple and disciplined nature. "He brought dignity to our profession," remarked Sangitakalanidhi Sri Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, his close friend and admirer.

My Master was known for his sharp and astute comments. "His speech was like a continuation of any concert," wrote Sri S.Y. Krishnaswamy I.C.S. in an article in The Hindu, referring to his speeches often delivered after concerts held in the Music College. An audience often gathered just to hear his rare thoughts.

AN EDUCATOR: My Guru had also trained many students under the Government of India scholarship scheme. To mention a few: Bombay Sisters (Smt. C. Lalitha and Smt. Saroja), Smt. Mani Krishnaswami, Smt. Padmaja Srinivasan, Smt. Suguna Purushottaman, Smt. T.R. Balamani, Smt. Padma Narayanaswamy, Smt. Suguna Varadachari, Puranam Purushottama Sastri, Palghat S. Krishnamurthy and Smt. Prema Sukumar. Among his disciples he had a special affinity for Sri C.V. Narasimhan I.C.S. Retd., Former Under Secretary - General of the United Nations. Besides Sri N.G. Seetharaman, Sri K.S. Venkataraman and myself enjoyed the status of being his direct disciples for the long association for more than 27 years.

He advised me that the proficiency in traditional classical music cannot be acquired by learning alone. Music was to be imbibed by constant and careful listening. This belief shaped the structure of his lessons. Music has to be understood for its emotional content through the expanse of great compositions.

CIRCLE OF FRIENDS: My Guru had a wide circle of friends among whom were doctors, engineers, lawyers, businessmen, politicians, and last but not least, civil servants who held senior positions in the government. His house was the meeting place for this miscellaneous collection of individuals and the way he lived was that of a civilised cultivated gentlemen.

There are many aspects of my Gurunathar that one need to remember - the creative artiste, the elitist, the socialite, the diplomat, the educator and the subtle humourist. A life punctuated with art and elegance to the last is very rare. My great Guru, thus, remains as a legend in the history of Carnatai music and is an embodiment of our country's rich cultural heritage.