

## SEMMANGUDI - THE MUSICAL LEGEND

by V. Subrahmaniam

To be in the top echelon of CARNATIC MUSIC as a vocal Maestro for over seven and a half decades is no mean achievement. Dr. Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, who shed his mortal coils on the 31st of October this year, after living a glorious life of more than 95 years was the only maestro who would fall into this category. His last concert was hardly three years ago. God blessed him with an abundance of SANGEETHA JNANAM (musical insight), apparently to compensate the lack of felicity he experienced in his voice. Semmangudi had spared no efforts in his early days to do tireless SADHANA- vocal exercises- to tame his voice to favourably respond to the reservoir of his musical prowess. It is commonly observed that musicians with uncooperative voices bring forth music laden with rich BHAVAM.

Born on the 25th of July 1908, in the star Arudra-Thiruvathirai, Srinivasan was the youngest of the three sons his parents Radhakrishna Iyer and Dharmambal had. The mother was the younger sister of the great Violin Maestro Thirukkodikkaival Krishna Iyer and that was Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer's connection to a great musical lineage. Neither of his two elder brothers took to music. He started his lessons in music at an early age and joined his elder maternal cousin, Semmangudi Narayanaswami Iyer, a renowned Violinist, as his disciple. Subsequently he had intensive coaching under Gottuvadyam Maestro, Tiruvidaimarudur Sri Sakha Rama Rao, with Maharajapuram Sri Viswanatha Iyer and Umayalpuram Sri Swaminatha Iyer. Swaminatha Iyer was in the direct Sishya Parampara of St. Thyagaraja. The Umayalpuram School is acknowledged as the most authentic in the rendition of St. Thyagaraja's compositions and Semmangudi belonged to that.

At the age of 18 he had his debut concert at a temple in Kumbhakonam and that was the beginning of his three quarters of a century long brilliant music career. It was a steady upward climb and he reached the pinnacle of glory in no time. It was a time when other stalwarts, his senior contemporaries, Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar, Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer, Musiri Subramania Iyer, etc., were adorning the concert platform. Almost vying with them Semmangudi carved a niche for himself.

### Wholesome Patanthara

Carnatic Music has been handed down the generations through the oral tradition, especially the creations of great composers. The core of Carnatic Music being the use of "anuswaras" (half notes) "gamakas" (Oscillation of the notes) and subtle nuances, only a guru could impart such subtleties correctly. A written notation of a composition cannot replace the Guru in conveying the finer aspects of the Raga Bhava. There are always possibilities of unsuitable Sangathis

(musical phrasings) that are not in conformity with the "Lakshana" (grammar) of the raga, getting unwittingly introduced into the compositions. Semmangudi always would examine any composition that he chose to render in detail and would eschew such unwanted Sangathis. After reshaping the compositions to ensure best musical appeal the Doyen would write the final format in notation. The songs would then be taught by him to his disciples ensuring that all the musical contours of the songs were completely understood by them. Before the pieces were presented on the concert platform, they would be rendered by him with his students, at least 25 times and with such analyses and practice they would become such a wholesome complete musical mould, that any attempt at improving them would be a failure.

The musical continuity that Semmangudi built into the compositions with definite, smooth-flowing Sangathis pregnant with Raga Bhava and linkages is noteworthy. In addition, the Sangathi patterns would be so structured that they would set into the basic rhythm (sarvalakhu). Thus, even if the singer did not keep beat externally, the song would easily flow perfectly on the Tala Structure. Semmangudi has held audiences spellbound with mere Kriti renditions without any Raga Alapana or kalpana swara embellishments. Kritis which Rasikas looked forward to listening at every one of his concerts included masterpieces like, Ksheenamai (Mukhari), Marubalga (Sriranjani), O Rangasayee (Kambhoji), Amba Neelayatakshi (Neelambari), Akhilandeswari (Dwijavanti), the Bhairavi Swarajati, Amba Kamakshi, just to mention a few.

This great veteran had been captivating his listeners with his unparalleled, wholesome Kirtana Patanthara through his musical career, and they would haunt the minds of thousands of his students, rasikas and associates forever. The present day trend is to learn kritis, new ones, in the morning and render them at concerts in the evening. This is quit a disturbing trend and would it not be wise for the upcoming musicians to emulate "Semmangudi Mama" in this aspect as preservers of the Carnatic Music tradition?

### **Concert patterns planning**

Our Vedic scriptures declare that Music emanated from God. This has been portrayed by St. Thyagaraja in his composition "Nadatanumanisam" in the Raga "Chittaranjani", where he says that the "Sapta Swaras" flowed out of the five faces of Lord SIVA. Most of our musical creations have been outpourings of Bhakthi, and traditional music is considered a spiritual exercise for the upliftment of the soul. Presentation of Kritis in the form of a concert began in the post Trinity era (the second half of the nineteenth century), by the disciples of the great composers and has steadily developed to its present stature. Concerts of the nineteenth century were mostly held in Royal houses for private listening. Public concerts for large audiences came into being only by the end of the first quarter of the twentieth century.

Semmangudi Mama's, (as he is known to his students, friends, rasikas and close associates), ascendance to the concert platform coincided with this. His first public concert was held at the National Congress Convention held in 1926 at Madras. And that was the year of the birth of the Music Academy, Madras. A concert artiste's success and popularity depend entirely on the person's capability to please the audience. The audience, in those days, were familiar with no other form of music except the Carnatic variety, and being fairly knowledgeable, were hard to please.

The first step for a successful concert is its thoughtful and planned structure and presentation, to ensure that the audience had no dull moment during the concert. Every one of Semmangudi Mama's concerts would be well planned. This does not mean that he prepared a list of items that he intended to sing and meticulously adhered to it. He would, usually tell his disciples (who rendered vocal support to him at concerts) what he proposed to sing. But almost always it so happened that he presented an entirely different set of Kritis at the concert, which would be in accordance with his form, the mood of the audience and accompanying artistes of the concert. The concerts usually opened with a piece in medium tempo with a short Neraval and a few crisp rounds of Kalpana Swara, which set the tempo and mood of the concert. Following this would be a less pacy (two Kalai) piece with Kalpana Swaras in slow and fast tempos. The next item would be a Kriti with a short Raga prelude. And thus the concert would be built up towards the main piece, a Ragam, Tanam, Pallavi, or a major composition, with elaborate Raga Alapana, Tanam, Neraval, Kalpana Swaras, etc. The concerts generally tapered off with Javalis, Rgamalika Slokas, and Tillana.

An analysis of the content and composition of his concerts would reveal that they contained the compositions of St. Thyagaraja, Deekshitar, Shyama Sastri, Swati Tirunal and other composers. He would include only one or two rare compositions, as he rightly felt always, that to have a close rapport with the audience, the concert should contain pieces, which are very familiar to them. Unfamiliar compositions failed to evoke the emotional response. Of course, even the rare compositions attracted the listeners as they became enriched with Bhava when Semmangudi Mama presented them.

In the concerts Semmangudi Mama ensured that kritis in ragas, with similar Swaras did not follow in succession. A raga with "Antara Gandhara" would be followed by one with "Sadharana Gandhara", so that the audience would never be lead into monotony. He would also take care to include compositions in all commonly used talas, such as Adi, Roopakam, Misra and Khanda Chapu, etc.

Another significant aspect of his concerts was his sense of proportion in handling Raga Alapana, Neraval, Kalpana Swaras, etc. The length of the raga delineations

would be in consonance with the position of the piece in the concert. It is often found these days that the first Raga that is taken up for Alapana is elaborately rendered with excessive Kalpana Swara for the piece tiring the audience and making them restive. And ultimately the Ragam, Tanam, Pallavi or the main piece gets relegated to a minor fifteen or twenty minute ritualistic exercise. This never happened in Semmangudi Mama's concerts. The RTP/Main piece had the prime of place with the right quantum of creativity.

Semmangudi Mama invariably followed the tradition of rendering Slokas in Ragamalika, with three or four ragas towards the close of the concerts. At this stage of the concert, his voice would have become so well warmed up, that the Ragas would flow with Bhava and emotion. It would be no exaggeration to say that he had no equal in this.

Mridangam Maestro Palghat Mani Iyer used to remark, "Not a single concert of Semmangudi was a failure" The concerts have been haunting the audience over the years and it would be very hard to erase the effect of their loftiness from their memory.

### **Raga Alapanas**

Raga essay or Alapana is a unique aspect of the Indian system of music, where the performing artiste is given ample scope for showing the depth of his musical insight through his imagination. In other systems of music, the place for the artistes' individual imagination is limited, as it is exhibited only in the presentation of compositions by great masters through orchestration. In spite of the strict technical boundaries that rule our Raga system, we have plenty of Ragas, which can be handled comfortably in the Alapana. At the same time, there are a number of Ragas that are highly appealing when compositions in the Raga are rendered, but evoke no aesthetic appeal when Raga Alapana is attempted. Semmangudi Mama was very particular in the choice of Ragas that he took up for Alapana. He generally handled only those that had scope in this regard. Being a person endowed with a great sense of proportion, he handled smaller Ragas with short crisp essays and the bigger ones with appropriately lengthy Alapanas. He would say that each Raga was an entity with a distinctive character and personality, the Swara structure thereof being only a skeletal framework.

In handling the Alapana of a Raga, artistes are guided by two aspects: the intention or aim i.e. LAKSHYA and grammar i.e. LAKSHANA. In handling a Raga Alapana, the first driving force of the artiste is the LAKSHYA or the aim to convey the concept of that particular Raga, absorbed by him through listening to his Guru or other eminent artistes as well as compositions in the Raga. The Raga thus rendered proves most effective. Therefore, Lakshya can certainly be designated the more powerful of the two. In due course the artiste

becomes well versed in Lakshana too and the Raga renditions become a blend of Labksya and Lakshana. Semmangudi Mama always emphasized the prominent role of Lakshya Jnana, as he believed that only this would allow the uninhibited flow of imagination. Over dependence on Lakshana would prove counter productive in this respect, as it would inhibit the singer from attempting new phrasings in the Raga. He always advised his students to have a correct blend of both. Mama's Lakshana Jnana was of no mean order. He would view Lakshana from the practical angle. His expositions had the correct Lakshana, although this would never come in the way of his brilliant imagination. Even when he handled Alapanas with gay abandon not a single phrase that was against the Lakshana would creep in even unwittingly.

Certain Ragas came to be associated with Semmangudi Mama because of his brilliant handling of those Ragas. In the early 1930s he had cut a disc of a short essay of Kharaharapriya Raga followed by a Tamil song "Navasidhi Petralum" which shot him into fame and his Alapana of that raga always used to be so brilliant that other artistes almost shied away from handling it. Sri Ranjani, Shankarabharanam, or any Raga for that matter acquired glowing lustre when delineated by him.

#### **TANAM AND PALLAVI**

In concerts "Tanam" is rendered after a lengthy Raga Alapana, before the Pallavi or the main piece. In olden days this aspect used to be known as Madhyamakala. Tanam played on the Veena, is highly pleasing and so is regarded the most suitable instrument for Tanam. In Veena concerts, artistes normally rendered Tanam not only as a prelude to the main piece, but also for other Raga Alapanas.

Tanam Singing was very dear to Semmangudi Mama and he was easily the best one in this aspect. His Tanams were highly musical, pleasant and devoid of monotony. He followed the Veena method closely. He had indicated that while at Tiruvananthapuram as the head of the Swati Tirunal Music college, he had the occasion to closely associate himself with Veena Vidwan Venkatadri Bhagavatar, who belonged to the family of Palghat Anantharama Bhagavatar, because of this he was able to embellish and polish his Tanam singing very well. Semmangudi Mama rendered Tanam only in the "Madhyama Kala" -Middle tempo, which he would maintain right through. There have been many instances where he had started concerts with a few flashy phrases of the Raga and a short crisp Tanam, the whole prelude lasting just a few minutes before taking up the first Keertana.

Rendering a Pallavi as the main piece in a concert is an established practice of the Carnatic music system. A Pallavi is conceived with a set of words meaningfully linked to a rhythmic pattern and running normally to one or

two Tala sequences. Artistes with a flair for rhythmic juggleries adopt Pallavis intricately woven into tough Tala patterns. Semmangudi Mama has indicated to us, students, that he used to handle intricate Pallavi in the early years of his career and that as his Sangeetha Jnana matured, he settled for simple, musically rich Pallavis. He was always of the view that Raga Bhava and musical abundance should never be subjugated to rhythmic exuberance in Pallavi renditions. His Pallavi singing never made the Rasika move to the edge of the seat, tense as if watching a tight ropewalk. He chose for Alapana, a Raga having ample scope for the Pallavi. In most of today's concerts the Pallavi is either absent or pushed to the end without being given the pride of place and is finished off as a short rhythmic ritual in a not too familiar Raga.

### **KALPANA SWARA EMBELLISHMENTS**

Semmangudi Mama was a past master in Kalpana swara renditions also. His style was based on strict adherence to the Sarvalakhu-basic rhythm. The Swaras that he rendered in the slow tempo would abound in Raga Bhava with all the nuances, Gamakas and Anuswaras. His fast tempo renditions of Swaras would rush as the flow of the river Ganga in Haridwar, the fastness in no way marring the melody of the Bhava laden raga, packing the fast tempo Swaras with speed, clarity and easy flow. Semmangudi Mama's Kalpana Swaras would never leave the listener weary and there was never an overdose of Swaras at any time. The lengthy fast tempo Swaras without even one Deergha Swara (elongated note) is unparalleled and it would be no exaggeration to state that Semmangudi Mama was the only maestro to achieve this.

### **A GREAT TEACHER**

According to our Sastras an ideal Guru should be a "SROTRIYA" and a "BRAHMANISHTA". A "SROTRIYA" is one who is well versed in Vedas and Sastras and the methodology to teach, and BRAHMANISHTA one who, knows for himself the truth of the scriptural revelation "AHAM BRHMASMI".. Only that person who has both the qualifications is an ideal Guru. In this respect Semmangudi Mama was an Ideal Guru as he possessed deep knowledge in the Sangitha Sastra, and was a performing musician immersed in Nadopasana.

All concert artistes are not necessarily good teachers. Semmangudi Mama was an exception. He would take care to see that the student got all the contours of the piece that he taught reasonably perfectly. In the traditional style many students have stayed at his residence and undergone training. He never took any money as fees from his students. From those who came to learn from him under scholarship schemes he would take the scholarship money from them, keep it separately and return the sum to them on their completing

the period of training. Competent students normally got opportunities to give the Doyen vocal support for his concerts and the experience and knowledge the student gained out of this is immeasurable. Many of his students are top concert artistes.

### **SEMMANGUDI THE PERSON**

It is our common experience that great personages who contribute a great deal to society are not blessed with longevity. And those who live long are affected by mental and physical disabilities, preventing them from functioning effectively. Semmangudi Mama defied both the above premises. He lived a glorious life of more than 95 years with all mental faculties in good order till the end. Even though he was physically weak due to advancing age, he was conversing freely with everyone who called on him reminiscing on the past, especially on music, with clear memory. Everyone who called at his residence to pay his/her last respects to the doyen had an anecdote to recall underlining the personal touch he bestowed on relationships.

It is hard to come by a person possessing such great attributes to be very humble. Semmangudi Mama never exhibited any arrogance or haughtiness. He treated the young and old alike with the same amount of affection and regard. Once a Rasika of his was talking to him and in the course of the conversation told Mama, "How many wonderful cutcheries you have performed thrilling us all!" and Mama shot back pointing to the photograph of Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar which was in the room, "Compared to him I am nothing." He lived up to the saying "VIDYA VINAYA SAMPANNAH".

Blessed with a sharp intellect, Semmangudi Mama was very systematic in whatever he did. Not only as a musician but he would have been at the top echelon in any other avocation as well. His administrative abilities came to the fore when he was Principal of the Swati Tirunal College of Music, Tiruvananthapuram. The college was situated in the mid residential area of the city and the students, both boys and girls, had easy access to the institution. After the Government passed on from the Royalty to the elected one, the Government for some unknown reason decided to move the college to a far away location. The then Chief Minister of the State called the Principal (Semmangudi Mama) and informed him about this. Mama heard the C.M. and then told him that it is a government decision and we would abide by it. He also said that the college contained many girl students and the new location being in a remote area necessary transport arrangement should be provided by the government for the students to commute to and from the college, and this should be assured by the government. On hearing this C.M. immediately rescinded his order of relocation and the college still stands in the same central location. This shows his tact in solving administrative problems.

Semmangudi Mama's interaction with the Travancore Royal family gave him an opportunity to learn so many finer aspects of life which no other musician was gifted to have. He had many close friends in high circles and he moved with them with great dignity and decorum. He was the recipient of many honours and titles, and to mention a few, Sangitha Kalanidhi, from the Music Academy, Madras, Rajya Seva Nirata from the Travancore Royalty, Padma Vibhushan, from the Government of India, and scores of others.

A good orator, his speeches were as scintillating as his concerts, sparkling with wit and humour. In any congregation where he was scheduled to speak the audience eagerly waited for his speech, as they waited for his concerts.

On the opinion that Classical Carnatic Music is not what it used to be, that it has lost its depth and that the values have undergone changes, he would say such changes are inevitable. Any art form would be subjected to changes as otherwise, it would become stagnant. He also had a high regard for the young performers of today.

Semmangudi Mama was a person of very simple needs. A true Gandhian, he wore only Khadi, and until a few years ago, he spun yarn on his own Charka. He never adorned himself in grand Dhotis with wide Zari borders and Angavastram, as is the habit of musicians. He believed in simple living and high thinking. He led a disciplined life with regular religious practices. Almost everyday, he would chant 1000 Gayatris in the morning and then only have his coffee. Other Japas and parayanas would follow.

He was invited by organizations in the U.S. and other foreign countries for concert tours, which he turned down, as he was a firm believer in the Sastric injunction, which prohibited overseas travel. Semmangudi Mama's father also had taken a promise from him that he would never cross the ocean.

He was a true NADOPASAKA revelling in music and singing with gay abandon whenever he was relaxing at home. Or he would be involved in looking up new compositions and setting them up in notation form. Semmangudi Mama was a MATRUKA PURUSHA and the young aspiring musicians should spare no effort in emulating him. I consider myself most blessed for having been with him for over 46 years and the privilege of giving him vocal support in thousands of his concerts, which has given me rich musical experience and insight that words cannot adequately convey.

One is reminded of Shakespear's description of Julius Caesar, "He doth ride the narrow World like a Colossus and we petty men walk under his huge legs and peep about to find ourselves dishonorable graves".