

When comes another?

K.V. Ramanathan

Madurai Mani. What memories the name conjures up! Of hours of unalloyed delight across the years; of performances in the Rasika Ranjani Sabha of Mylapore; none less than four hours; of concerts during the Vidayetri utsavam of the Kapaleeswara temple that started at 9 pm and went on past 1 am; 'tengaimoodi kutcheri-s'; short concerts in the Tiruvaiyaru Tyagaraja Utsavam; performances over All India Radio between 7.45 and 9 pm (those were the hours then)... the list is endless.

The purists frowned at his ooh's and eeh's in the alapana. The wonder was that right through the alapana the sruti remained eternally faithful. He could go up and down and sideways, but the adherence to sruti remained perfect and that ensured pure melody. Finally the purists (at any rate most of them) who came to scoff remained to praise.

The famous Tamil writer, T. Janakiraman, working in AIR-Delhi in the 1970s and a Mani aficionado, once put together a programme consisting of parts of Mani's concerts over AIR, each of course, consisting of one or more kriti-s. In his introduction, he said that Madurai Mani was indeed, Madhura (sweet) Mani and proceeded to prove his own description by his choice of pieces from the concerts. That was how his admirers regarded him and they felt that Janakiraman had hit upon the 'mot juste'.

Mani was a crowd pleaser. Whether it was a learned critic or a commoner with not much knowledge of the technicalities of Carnatic music, they were all slaves to his music. In the Vidayetri utsava kutcheri-s he would pack in all the songs which he knew his rasika-s craved, all the Ranjani-s – *Nadatanumanisam* (Chittaranjani), *Durmargachara* (Ranjani), *Smarane sukham* (Janaranjani). Kapinarayani, Poornachandrika and Ravichandrika. He sang the ever popular *Kaanakkan kodi vendum*,

Kapali, *Taye Yasoda*, *Chakkaniraja* and *Eppo varuvaaro*. And then the tukkada-s – oh, the tukkada-s – *Kandan karunai puriyum Vadivel* or *Vellai tamarai poovil iruppal*, the *English Note* of Muthiah Bhagavatar – all looked forward to eagerly and received with acclamation. And this in a performance for which he received nothing but a tengaimoodi (coconut) and prasadam!

That was one complaint against Mani: that he sang the same songs again and again.

It was even whispered that his repertoire was limited. This was far from true. If he repeated many songs it was because his audiences wanted them. I have heard him sing songs rarely heard from him. I remember a performance where he sang Tyagaraja's *Pabi Ramadoota*. Many of us were left wondering what raga it was. We were told it was Shadvidhamargini but the books, on consultation after reaching home, said it was Vasantavarali.

The story of the rickshawala who spurned a 'savaari' because he preferred to listen to 'Iyer's kutcheri' is well known. I have myself seen a rickshawala outside the Rasika Ranjani Sabha with his ear firmly to the wall when a Mani performance was going on. And I have stood behind the

audience on more than one occasion and seen them sway to the music, particularly the kalpana swara-s where he was an unchallenged master.

I do not want to say much about the swaraprastara-s for the obvious reason that everybody knows about them. The admirable part of it was the adherence to sruti that permeated the sarvalaghu rendition which made it retain its sweetness throughout the whirls and twirls and the incredible permutations and combinations.

The alapana-s were exquisite, the oohs and eehs notwithstanding. I remember several Kambhoji-s, Kharaharapriya-s, Todi-s, Poorvikalyani-s and



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Mohanam-s preceding one or the other of favourite songs in those raga-s.

A Todi, in the comparatively short time available for an alapana in All India Radio, sticks in the memory.

There was a special relationship between Papanasam Sivan and Mani. Reported to have said *Kaanakann kodi* and *Kapali* owed their rise to fame to Mani, Sivan was gracious in his acknowledgement.

Mani was unique in that he was a friend of everyone in the musical world, thanks entirely to his attitude to his fellow musicians – respect to most of them who were senior in age, and willing acknowledgement of their talents, particularly of those nearer his age. There were, in the 1940s and 1950s, devoted fan groups of GNB and Mani. GNB was a star that shone brightly and enslaved many regular music aficionados. Some of these were not great admirers of Mani. And there were some Mani fans whose appreciation of GNB was nowhere near the hero worship that he commanded. But Mani himself was an admirer of

GNB's music and would attend his performances. The story of his asking for *Chintai arindu vaadi* is again well known. I was a personal witness to one such incident that took place in the Rasika Ranjani Sabha. GNB had reached the tukkada stage of a brilliant concert and in one of the pauses came a voice *Chintai arindu vaadi* from the audience. I was seated on the platform to the right of the performers and therefore had a good view of the audience. I could see that it was Mani, seated in the sixth or seventh row on the men's side (in those days, men and women were seated in separate halves). He had his left hand up with his head tucked under it. GNB's view was blocked and he could not see who it was but Rajamanickam Pillai, the violinist could and he leaned across to GNB and said "Mani Iyerval". "Mani Iyervaala? Besha paaduvan," said GNB and proceeded to do so. GNB is supposed to have personally requested Mani to speak during the sadas in which he was awarded the Sangita Kalanidhi.

Such was Mani. When comes another? ■