## A Rasika's Tribute - By R.Krishnan

Madurai Mani, the magician of carnatic music who could with just a single phrase of two or three swaras convey the essence the raga he was going to sing! Mani Iyer's music captivates the informed and uninformed alike. I first heard him when I was a boy of around ten years from bangalore radio station. The song was Jalandhara in Valaji. The lilting neraval at bava roga nivaarini sounded very catchy to me. Mind you I had no clue about carnatic music at that time. When we bought our record player the first record we got was 48rpm Madurai Mani iyer singing Mari vere in Shanmuga priya. Somehow during the school and college years in north India I lost interest in classical music. I renewed my association with Mani iyer when I was in bangalore again for my Ph. D. I had also started learning Veena. I slowly began to understand why his music appealed to everybody. The shruthi suddham of Mani iyer has seldom been matched by any other Carnatic vidwan so consistently. I am sure all his fans must have noticed how he lowered his shruthi over the years in tune to his voice problems, but never tried to sing out of self-imposed limits to jeopardise his shruthi suddham. That is one of the main reasons why his music just catches you and never lets you go!!

Lot of my friends who donot care much for carnatic music will only listen to him. People have compared his music, Swara singing to many delightful things. To mention a few, a engineer friend said it was a laser hologram wherein the tiniest part had the whole image; this for his raga rendering. It is this profound gnana which gets reflected when sings the raga albeit in bits and pieces. His Swara singing has been frequently compared to children going up and down the stairs in all possible ways, skipping one step, two steps; even sliding down the bannister. The power of his melodious music is so great that most frequently people will imagine that they are themselves singing and try to imitate him, mostly with disastrous effects.

I remember in all my stupidity after learning the Kapi Narayani kriti Sarasa sama dana immortalised by Madurai Mani, tried to repeat his sancharas/swaras on the veena. Of course they did not sound anything like him. I then asked my Veena Guru to play them. Still did not sound like him He then told me about the perfect shruthi alignment and the purity of the notes when a great vidwan like Mani iyer was singing them; that is what made all the difference.

There are many ways to enjoy a beautiful flower. You can delicately pluck it and smell the fragrance or crush the flower to squeeze the essence out. Mani iyers music is of the former variety. Very delicate, deceptively simple and always centered on melody. This is the reason I think at times he took some poetic liberty to round off the sahitya(mazhuppal). I exclusively always listen to him for entertainment or therapy as the case may be. It never fails me. Most of the songs he chose to sing have his agmark muttirai on them. You would never like to hear them sung by anybody in a different manner even though it is technically correct. Such is the power of his mesmerizing music.

With all his greatness, I have been told (by my father and other older people of his era) that he was a very simple man. Only khaddar veshti shirt, no jewelryetc like the other vidwans of his time; Also some people would give him an almost pitiful sum enclosed in an envelope for cutcheries because he would not bother to check things. Thank God, Vembu Iyer was there to manage these things for him.

This is getting long. Let me end this with an episode that I was told happened in tamil isai sangam. The front row rich/sabha member mamis were really loudly talking /gossiping disturbing the performance. Mani Iyer with all his patience; could not tolerate it and reprimanded them with "Konjam sattam podama irundha sowkyama irukkum" What a gentle way to admonish!! There was pindrop silence after that!!!