

**Following is a translation of an Interview given by Shri Madurai Mani Iyer to All India Radio (A.I.R) recorded during early 60s.**

**A.I.R:** Namaskaaram. I would like to record your reminiscences about your gurukulavaasam. Whom you did study with at the very beginning?

**Madurai Mani Iyer:** I learnt under Shri Rajam Bhagavathar in Madurai

**A.I.R:** Whose Disciple was Rajam Bhagavathar?

**Madurai Mani Iyer:** He was a disciple of Ettayapuram Ramachandra Bhagavathar. My Paternal uncle Madurai Pushpavanam Iyer and the nagaswara vidwan Madurai Ponnuswami pillai, were also disciples of Ramachandra Bhagavathar.

**A.I.R:** How long would you have learnt from Rajam Bhagavathar and when did you start performing?

**Madurai Mani Iyer:** I learnt for 2 years from him. We lived in a portion of his house itself on rent. So, it was very convenient to learn from Rajam Bhagavathar.

**Madurai Mani Iyer:** After that, Harikesanallur Muthiah Bhagavathar established a music school in Madurai in which Rajam Bhagavathar was appointed as a teacher. So I happened to join that school. I learnt there too for about a year and a half. After that I started performing in concerts.

**A.I.R:** Can you recollect your very first concert?

**Madurai Mani Iyer:** I had been to the Sivagangai area along with my father who had friends there. My first concert was held there, in a place called Alavaakottai, during the kumbhaabishekam festival. Since the organizers of that festival were well-known to my father, my first concert took place!

**A.I.R:** Who played pakkavaadyam (accompaniment) for your first concert?

**Madurai Mani Iyer:** Nattam Seetharama Iyer, who lived in Kumbakonam, played the Violin. Tiruvaarur Kunju Iyer alias Rajagopala Iyer played the mridangam.

**A.I.R:** How old were you then?

**Madurai Mani Iyer:** I was 12 years old then.

**A.I.R:** So you started performing from then?

**Madurai Mani Iyer:** Yes I started performing from then on.

**A.I.R:** In order to get so many concert opportunities at that age itself, you must have had help is in it?

**Madurai Mani Iyer:** What helped me was my paternal uncle, Pushpavanam Iyer, had been so famous that people who had listened to his music would readily agree to hold my concert if someone recommended my name.

**Madurai Mani Iyer:** My only responsibility was to perform well in the concert that had been arranged. Getting the concert opportunity itself wasn't very difficult. Had to perform well in the arranged concert, that's all. It would make things even easier.

**A.I.R:** Then, as you got older, your voice would have changed.

**Madurai Mani Iyer:** Yes, my voice changed. When I first sang concerts, I used to sing to a shruti of 5 kattai, 4.5 kattai. My voice (shaareeram) used to be very facile. Later, my voice dropped in shruti, way down to 1 kattai. It all happened quite rapidly in the space of 2 months. And even at 1 kattai, my voice could only reach the taara Shadja for the highs and the madhya Shadja for the lows.

**A.I.R:** A range of only 1 sthaayi (Octave)?

**Madurai Mani Iyer:** 1 sthaayi, exactly, effectively that's all it would speak (!) Singing higher than the taara Shadja was difficult, and so was singing below the madhya Shadja. Hence I was constrained to sing within 1 sthaayi at that time.

**A.I.R:** So you must have done a lot of saadhakam at that time to get a handle on your voice and strengthen it.

**Madurai Mani Iyer:** I practised for about 3 hours every day with the tamburaa.

**A.I.R:** How did you practice then?

**Madurai Mani Iyer:** I used to set the shruti high and then try to hold the taara Shadja which used to be difficult, but I would practice this for a while, I would take a suitable raga and practice the phrases D N S, P D N S, M P D N S etc, along with the proper bhaavam of the raaga, in order to try and strengthen the Shadja then I would proceed upward to halt on R and then take a look at G and then try M. I only managed to reach the M this way. Then I would lower the shruti to 2.5, 2, kattai and sing the high notes a little easier, and then move to 1.5 kattai and sing with even more ease. I had to practice really hard, had to sing open-throated and practice hard to bring the voice into shape.

**A.I.R:** In your career, you must have heard the concerts of a lot of vidvaans. can you talk about it a little bit?

**Madurai Mani Iyer:** In Madurai, I have heard a lot of concerts of Mazhavaaraayanendal Subbarama Bhagavatar. Harikesanallur Muthiah Bhagavatar, I have heard a lot of his musical discourses he also used to perform concerts, in his performances, there would be a lot of Tyagaraja compositions and other great pieces, the discourses would be very musical.

Also in Madurai, there was Nagaswami Bhagavatarvaal who sang a lot of Tyagaraja kritis in his concerts. He would not repeat the kritis he sang from concert to concert in the many concerts I heard! I had a great opportunity to listen to a lot of different kritis of Tyagaraja, all those in vogue as well as many rare ones. he was a disciple of the Walajapet Venkataramana Bhagavatar, a prime disciple of Tyagaraja.

I have heard concerts of Karaikkudi Brothers with Dakshinamurti Pillai on the mrdangam, Kancheepuram Naina Pillai, with Malaikottai Govindaswami Pillai on Violin and Dakshinamurti Pillai on Mridangam etc.

I have heard lots and lots of concerts of Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar & Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer.

Then I have listened to Veena Dhanammal. And I have listened to lots of performances of great naagasvara vidvaans during temple festivals, and night processions staying up all night long and walking behind them.

**A.I.R:** What is your opinion of current performance methods?

**Madurai Mani Iyer:** The Current performance methods setup by various senior musicians of our time and their aesthetics, I must say I like it and hold it in high regard. And I try to proceed along that route as much as possible.

**A.I.R:** What is your opinion regarding shruti?

**Madurai Mani Iyer:** You mean setting an aadhaara shruti (base shruthi) it should be set such that the taara Shadja is easy to reach not too easy however otherwise it would be floating and fragile. It should not be too easy, if you hold the taara Shadja in an extended manner i.e. kaarvai, you should be able to hold it with firmness and strength, without tiring. Only then you would be able to sing the further higher notes like R, G, M, easily and attuned to shruti. A lot of musical phrasing, in our current music, is in the upper reaches. These are also the notes that are heard with clarity and which grab the people's attention. If you sing in the lower octave, people nearby can hear it clearly and only knowledgeable rasikas would like it.

However, we are required to sing a lot in the upper octave these days, and for that one should not tire. Even though there are mikes and speakers these days, one should be careful not to tire, since otherwise you would slip from the shruti. if that happens, your singing will not be

fulfilling or pleasing. And if you dont satisfy the listeners with your singing in that range, then there is no point in singing in the lower reaches either, having lost their attention.

The aadhaara Shadja should also be held well and with firmness. Even if you are only able to intone the lower N D P in a soft manner, thats OK. But the taara Shadja is very important, it should be held with strength and firmness.

**A.I.R:** In singing svaras, i.e. kalpanasvaras, you seem to have a unique style could you let us know about the evolution of your style?

**Madurai Mani Iyer:** Unique style? Really not. Mazhavaaraayanendal Subbarama Bhagavata used to sing svaras like this. When I was a student and a novice performer, I have heard a lot of his music. He used to sing svaras even for many rare raagas, his sarvalaghu manner of svara singing used to be very good. I tried to sing like that and develop my svara singing, my style is a direct outgrowth of that.

**A.I.R:** Thanks for that information. In svara singing, people sing tisram, misram, etc. what is your opinion on this arithmetic (kanakku)?

**Madurai Mani Iyer:** As long as the raga bhaavam is not spoiled, there is nothing wrong in singing arithmetic swara prasthara with thisra, misra etc. If the voice admits of this exercise, and if the arithmetic is also interesting, then there is no problem at all. We can all be happy and enjoy.

People who are well-qualified only should attempt it. Everyone need not feel a compulsion to engage in this. If we do arithmetic, troubling ourselves, losing raga bhaavam and losing the shruti also in the process, there is no point. The sukha bhaavam in the Kutcheri would be lost. Without losing sight of the overall sukha bhaavam and the raaga bhaavam, when someone who is intelligent, has a strong memory and has had good association with laya vidvaans, does this arithmetic, then we also can enjoy it and appreciate it.

**A.I.R:** What advice do you have for the youngsters who are learning music and desire to perform, and others who have just begun to perform?

**Madurai Mani Iyer:** They should hear many concerts of the senior vidvaans, ie the established vidvaans. Because, however much they are talented, since they lack the experience, their music will not be sufficient or fulfilling. They should observe how the senior vidvaans make their concerts a success and please all varieties of listeners, how they use their voices in a concert hall, how they employ the various thick and thin shades in their voices, how they plan their concerts, these are all to be learnt only by direct observation. It does not happen otherwise, however well one sings by themselves or practices their music.

They have to hear the senior vidvaans over and over again, no other way. But, they dont have to imitate them. It will all jell together over time as they keep singing, and hearing the senior vidvaans attentively.

They should pay sufficient attention to setting the shruti before singing. They should give sufficient time to the accompanists to adjust their instruments to the shruti. Before proceeding to sing, they should attune themselves to the shruti by intoning Sa-Pa-Sa in a manner audible just to themselves. Steadying themselves thus, if they sing, there would be no problem. If in the midst of a concert, the shruti drifts, they should adjust it properly and then only should continue. If the shruti wavers, sukha bhaavamm will be lost, the felicity will be lost. The more and more we are attuned to shruti, the easier the music will flow. Hence one must pay great attention to it.

**A.I.R:** Thanks very much for sharing your experiences and your pointers to all aspiring musicians. Namaskaaram.

**Madurai Mani Iyer:** Namaskaaram!