

Tribute by R.Suryaprakash, the torch-bearer of Madurai Mani Iyer bani in the current generation.

This is Ganakaladhara Madurai Mani Iyer's Centenary year and we are all extremely fortunate and blessed to celebrate the doyen, the phenomenon which has strode the Carnatic Music world like a colossus and almost singularly contributed to the spread of Carnatic music to every nook and corner.

Now what was the quality that made his music the staple food of every household, that earned him the largest number of fans? Often we come across terms such as "sukham", "sowkhyam", "sarvalaghu", "sruti-suddham" etc. being attributed to his music, quite rightly so. Some old-timers who are die-hard fans even describe his swara singing as akin to a train journey! I, for example, was drawn into his divine music at an early age when my uncle and first Guru played a tape of his "Orajoopu", "Dunmarga chara", and "Parimalarangapathe". The voice sounded as though it came from the heavens. The music had an irrepressible flow of a gushing stream. The akaarams were so resonant and the swarams were full of refreshing patterns that it haunted one young mind for days together, giving him no room to listen to any other music.

It was an extremely fortunate turn of events that brought me to study advanced music for a decade, from Sangeetha Kalanidhi T V Sankaranarayanan, the great Maestro and custodian of the immortal baani of Sri. Madurai Mani Iyer.

As I sit down to write this tribute for the Great legend in absolute reverie, I fondly and gratefully recall the valuable inputs on his style and baani impressed upon me directly and indirectly by my Guru, TVS, (who has given a widely celebrated original dimension to the MMI baani) his father and Mahavidwan T.S.Vembu Iyerwal, (an authority- nonpareil on the theory and practical aspects of music), my uncle and first Guru V Rajamani (a disciple of the Pitamaha Semmangudi mama), Violin Vidwan Tirukkodikaval Krishnamurthy Iyer (who was a regular visitor to my uncle's house and accompanied my concert at my uncle's 60th birthday when I was hardly 14), Sangeetha Kalanidhi Dr.T K Murthy who used to thrillingly demonstrate MMI and MVI styles of singing, Violin Vidwan Thirupparkadal Veeraraghavan (both have accompanied my concerts and I consider myself blessed to have travelled with them), Sangeetha Kalanidhi Umayalpuram K.Sivaraman, (the living God of mridangam, also a walking encyclopedia for true perspectives on the style of any Past Master for the matter, who has blessed my concert with his accompaniment on numerous occasions), Sangeetha Kalanidhi Vellore Ramabhadran (the ultimate Master of Sarvalaghu in mridangam), Mahavidwan Sethalapathi "Balu Mama", also my uncle (who used to simply recreate MMI with his singing) Mahavidwan Tiruvengadu Jayaraman, Dr.S A K Durga (with both of whom I have had conversations, albeit rarely), Dr.V K Viswanathan, (a great scientist and the most prominent among the old-timers who have had the liberty of discussing anything under the sun with the doyen during his prime), Vishnu Ramprasad (who is young but comes from a family that was close-knit with MMI) and many die-hard fans of MMI.

Voice

MMI was gifted with a voice that had the right mix of power and melody. His earliest style of raga alapana was totally akara oriented. Even his later style of raga alapana using short phrases had the full quality of vocal resonance. He was completely aware and conscious of the tenet “Suvar irundaal than chitthiram ezhudha mudiyum” and so did not compromise on the quality of voice maintenance and production. He neither indulged in mannerist articulation nor imposed unnatural strain on his voice, even if that meant sacrificing a few sangathis. Hearsay, he used to quip that if the voice sounds progressively strained during the course of a concert, it is not the correct method and when the correct technique is followed, one should feel like singing for 3 hours after the mangalam!

Even while listening to the recording of his last concert (at MFAC) one finds that the quality of tone and timbre doesn't diminish even for a moment. He was aware that music is not about storing a million sangathis in one's musical armory and regurgitating them ad-nauseum at a performance. Even in two sangathis he could bring out the full flavor of say, a Thodi or a Kambodhi.

On a side note, being at a concert, live, is miles apart from hearing a recording, especially in the case of the Past Masters. All of them had powerful live voices, which had very good volume and were more than audible to those sitting on stage and the first few rows of the audience without the aid of the microphone. MMI's voice did not lack any power (courtesy Vellore Ramabhadran mama, whose input I have forgotten to acknowledge in Part I (how could I...?), now edited). This is contrary to the opinion of some people, who must have based their opinion on listening to some scratchy recordings. All the more, when those recordings are played before a sizeable audience in a big hall, the output is like one-dimensional channel-music that does very little justice to the rich grandeur of the live concert that must have mesmerized the audience decades ago.

During his Mayavaram days (evacuation period in the then Madras Presidency), all of MMI's concert in and around Mayavaram(now Mayiladuthurai), Kumbakonam and Thanjavur were electrifying to say the least, vouched for by an old-timer great rasika who had followed each one of those concerts and at the end of each one, was like a bee that ended up drinking honey two times its weight! The open air setting, the temple ambience and the overwhelming audience (who had no Chennai Super Kings to cheer, ofcourse!) must have brought out the Maestro's powerful best. The neraval, swarams in even uncommon ragas (in those days) like

Kapinarayani, Saraswathi manohari brought the house down and each of those concerts lasted nearly 4 hours or even more.

Sruthi Shuddham

No other period in the history of Carnatic Music has witnessed such short shrift accorded by many rasikas of Carnatic Music to the noble basic quality: - “sruti suddham”.

If a musician after intense sadhana, displays sruti suddham, it is dismissed with the condescending remark “Ok sruti suddham, what is the big deal, it sounds melodious! “. If a musician is not able to hold the sruti, it virtually passes unnoticed, sometimes even substantiated as “in our gamaka oriented Carnatic music, sruti suddham is not achievable as in Hindustani, and not very important too”!

It looks as though some of the rasikas of today have graduated to an extent they can shift their reference of “adhara sruti” in their mind, conveniently to appreciate a sangathi of their favourite musician, sung off-sruti! Fortunately, there are discerning rasikas in sizeable number too.

Madurai Mani Iyer was the God of centre point sruti suddham, which could have been practiced and perfected only by a life-time saadhana, nadopasana and “atma vicharam” (self-analysis, rumination).

This particular aspect of centre point sruti came about in one of my discussions, almost a decade ago with Y.Prabhu, the present Secretary of Sri Krishna Gana Sabha and also the son of the great patron of arts, Yagnaraman Mama. The human ear can discern a particular range as sruti suddham when a note is rendered, say tara sthaya shadjam. The lower points of this range could be termed “lower point” or “flatter sruti suddham”.

This type of lower point sruti suddham will normally be exhibited by musicians who are more bhava oriented and approach a particular note by the route of pure bhava rather than technique. Many vocal artistes and some gayaki-style instrumentalists exhibit this type of sruti suddham since the available physical energy level determines the intensity of bhavam in a sangathi. On small downside to this type of sruti suddham is the difficulty in compatibility, say during a studio recording with the unforgiving computerized sruti reference points, how much ever soul stirring the bhavam is.

The higher points of the range or “sharp sruti suddham” are normally exhibited by musicians who are technically very sound. Some vocalists and quite a lot of instrumentalists display H.P. sruti suddham. Sometimes when we listen to a technically sound H.P. sruti suddham violinist

accompanying a bhava-oriented L.P. sruti suddham vocalist, we get an impression that the singer is sounding flat or “kuraichal”, in music parlance. The normal downside to this type of sruti suddham is in spite of the brilliance of technical aspects, the music might sound a little lesser with respect to the intensity of feeling when compared to the bhava-totalitarian!

MMI practiced centre point sruti suddham which is the absolute, wherein every note is pure and is full of “jeevan”. KVN, the Purity incarnate, knew all about the centre point sruti of MMI, infact it was his inspiration.

The awesome, but elusive point about MMI’s approach of the notes, is every note of his had the advantage of the principle of harmonics. This might be a startling revelation to those who reckon Indian Music as a melodic system, devoid of harmony as in Western music. One old timer’s quip “there is adhara shadjam in every note MMI sings...” had me thinking hard.

Now the question how to create the element of Harmony in Indian music where essentially one swaram follows the other in melodic progression? In dwelling on this for a length of time, it dawned on me that it must be the principle of retention of sound by the human ear, quite similar to the principle of retention of vision on which watching television or movie is based on. MMI understood completely, the principle of vadi-samvadi (harmonious and dissonant set of notes), probably impressed on him by his father, an authority on music theory. If two swarams articulated quickly one after the other have a harmonious relationship, a feeling of harmony is created in the mind of the listener. For example, we find him employing to the hilt, “g p n g...” in hamsadhwani and “g...n...” in hamsanandhi (especially in the ending of “needu mahima” – “nithya sukhadaa...”) etc.

Almost peeved at myself getting too scientific, I finish this part here, but propose to dwell on one more quality of MMI, achievable for any musician by nothing short of penance: - sthaana suddham.

Sthaana Shuddham

Sthaana suddham is the purity of the note or gamaka rendered relative to another reference note, for example, adhara shadjam. My uncle used to say "While many mahavidwans rendered the swarams with perfection it was only MMI who rendered even the gaps between the swarams with perfection!" He actually meant the connections or anuswarams also in perfect alignment with sruti. Not just in perfect sruti suddham but having the same intensity as the connecting points, eschewing artificial modulation in the guise of “bhava”. Once I was conversing with my Guru’s father (Shri.Vembu Iyerwal) on the modulation of voice. He told me there is a natural and there is also an artificial modulation. He quipped that it was not correct to deliberately thin out the voice, with the intention of being demonstrative about introducing

"thick and thin" in one's music. This artificial modulation, according to him spelt the speedy death-knell of one's sruthi suddham. He told, "you must sing all notes as 'PERISU' or 'BAARI' (fullbodied articulation) and then coolness and modulation will come naturally within a course of time, with practice, and that is real "gana-naya" or "thick and thin"".

The factor which gave the rasikas maximum thrill as soon as a "la..." was uttered by MMI was probably his sthaana suddham, since the human mind subconsciously visualizes a swara in relation to another swara sthana and gets the imagery of the raga.

The sthana suddham is achieved by giving the right pushing force to reach the next swara from a given swara sthaana, taking perfect cognizance of the distance between the two notes, just like climbing a ladder, sure-footedly, the only difference here being the rungs are not equidistant! The push given should not be aggressive or obvious, otherwise it will sound as "adhattal" and the sowkhyam is lost. The perfect and "pushpamaana" (gentle) pushing force achieved by MMI with respect to swara sthanas was enough to grant him the "Unnatha Sthaana" in the music world!