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Madurai Mani Aiyer.

*Excerpts from The Hindu, Sport & Pastime, 05 April, 1952. The peculiarity of Mani Aiyer's style does not arise out of any physical limitations; it is adopted deliberately*

Madurai Mani Aiyer was born in Madurai, a holy centre in South India, on October 25, 1912. His father, M.S. Ramaswami Aiyer a sub-court clerk, was the brother of the famous Pushpavanam. Mani Aiyer He was initiated into music by Rajam Bhagavatar, a disciple of Ettayapuram Ramachandra Bhagavatar who was also Pushpavanam Aiyer's guru. Mani Aiyer acquired swaragnana through a guru who was very sincere, "the like of whom I am yet to find". and in 1922, Sri Harikesanallur Muthiah Bhagavatar started his Tyagaraja Sangita Vidyalaya at Mathurai. Rajam Bhagavatar was on the staff of this institution. Later, Mani Aiyer used to sing in company with Muthiah Bhagavatar who taught the students by playing on the *gotuwadyam*.

Whether in alapana or swara singing Madura Mani Aiyer adopts a style of his own. His music is difficult to imitate and a few efforts to do so either over the radio or in public performances are frankly, crude. He

### On his style

Mani Aiyer himself referred to the difficulty among young vidwans to acquire his style, in the course of a chat with me. In a frank exchange of views I told him how there were some who felt that his peculiar method of rendering kritis and swaras, not to speak of alapana, was not sanctioned by either sastras or tradition. He was not annoyed at this. On the other hand, he took great pains to convince me why he had adopted his so called unique style. First, he referred to the false voice which he brought into play in his music. By false voice he did not mean the softer undertones, but the whistle-like sound with which listeners of his concerts would have by now become familiar. Invariably, after developing the raga fully, he would resort to these shrill notes to heighten the effect. Such efforts, far from marring the performance, have evoked applause. Mani Aiyer thinks that to render sancharas in a false voice in correct sruti is not at all easy — unless the voice is perfectly in tune with the sruti, this will not be possible.

The somewhat unusual syllables like *la, li, tara, avvi*, etc. which he used while expanding a raga were again done with an eye on sruti. It was not because of the limitations of his voice that he had to use these syllables. The reason was more positive. He felt that in some places the syllable *aa* was not as sweet as *la*.

"What about the breaks which are too many while you sing?" I asked him. He said that this was also done for a deliberate reason. He had found that some musicians thought that in order to maintain the tempo of the concerts, they should necessarily go at a breathtaking pace.

“Music is not a start- to-finish race.” By giving a number of breaks while developing the raga he enabled the audience to hear the tambura sruti, and he thought that the listener did enjoy the sruti. Moreover, just as the marginal space, comma, full stops and other punctuation marks were meant to give relief to the eye and enhance the beauty of the page, he was of the view that the breaks would give the same effect in music also.

### **On his repertoire**

On the question of singing the same set of popular kritis, Mani Aiyar felt strongly that it was the first duty of the musician to oblige his listeners many of whom might have come to listen to a specific kriti. He always chose the programme in relation to the local history and tradition. He said, “Surely ‘Aparama Bhakti’ would not be as appropriate as ‘Kapali’ at Kapaleeswarar temple utsavam.”

A picture of simplicity and humility, Madurai Mani Aiyar appears to forget the mundane world when he ascends the dais. His tremendous anxiety for sruti will be borne out by his countless followers who have seen him turn his head quite often towards the tambura and almost recline on the strings during the performance. T.S. Vembu Aiyar and Srimati Savitri Ganesan are two of his notable disciples.

Mani Aiyar's advice to young vidwans is to shed inferiority complex. While they should not think that they have attained perfection, they should not feel unnecessarily modest either about their ability. They must cultivate confidence in their own strength. Confidence within certain limits proved good. Young vidwans should also give up their craving for numerous sangatis and choose only those which suited their voice.

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