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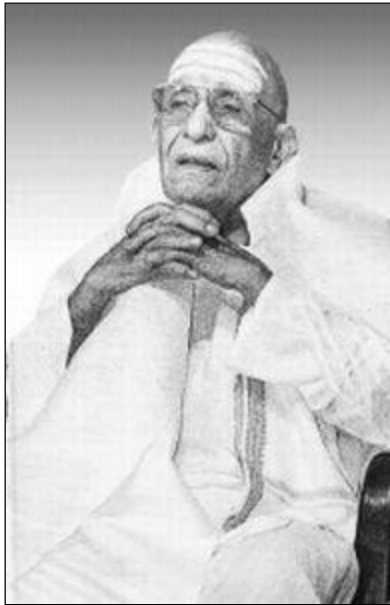


TRIBUTE

### End of an era

Semmagudi Srinivasa Iyer was not only a titan on stage, but also an outstanding teacher. Four generations of his students speak to GOWRI RAMNARAYAN on the memories of the venerable patriarch of Carnatic music, who died recently.

K. PICHUMANI



A RARE chamber recital has Semmagudi Srinivasa Iyer singing favourites like "Amba Kamakshi" (Bhairavi) and "Sri Dakshinamurte"

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(Sankarabharanam). M.S. Subbulakshmi accompanies him on the veena.

Even in the amateur recording we can see why she acknowledged Semmangudi as her guru. The way they render each line and its variations (*sangat*) is identical. Even on the veena, her support and *swara* improvisations bear the unmistakable stamp of the Semmangudi school.

By extending Subbulakshmi's repertoire, Semmangudi imbued her style with depth and grandeur. "No one can teach with his precision," Subbulakshmi used to say. He had his own metaphors for teaching — "Here the *panchamam* must pierce like a needle"; and "*Swaras* should end on the right beat like a bus halting at its stop."

As houseguest or daily visitor, Semmangudi's voice was an inspiring presence in the M.S. household. Playing cards with her husband Sadasivam (theirs was a 50 years partnership), Semmangudi would still be humming a Sriranjini or a Sahana. The car that took him to some evening function would resonate with his famous brand of *sarvalaghu swaras*, deceptively simple in their even rhythm.

When Semmangudi travelled with the M.S. party, he would continue to teach or sing on the train — on one occasion he rendered Dvijavanti right through the trip.

He needed no auditor for these singing-in-self-forgetfulness sessions. He could pull a child by her pigtail and explain how the national anthem began in Sankarabharanam, and then coil himself into the *raga*. Once, he drenched his hair with oil but forgot to wash it off as he lost himself in Kharaharapriya. When he found himself again, he remarked to his hosts' daughter Radha, who was awed by the rain of melody, "What is the use? All your mother has to do is to strike the upper *shadja* and stay there in perfect *sruti* alignment. I'd lose." M.S., for her part, preferred to precede him at their house concerts because, "Who can make an impact after *guruji*?" She had her guru's blessings in Lakshmi and Saraswati, the *tamburas* flanking her on the stage, his gifts.

Semmangudi was a titan on the stage; he was also an outstanding teacher. His profound knowledge of theory was not book learned. He had grasped precepts through his own practice, and by listening to great musicians from childhood. Four generations of disciples found him an authoritative guide.

He urged students to practice the grand compositions where they could grasp all the dimensions of the *raga*. *This would stimulate them to improvise at will*. Every song he sang or taught had its form "settled" to perfection.

A musician on a U.S tour met a 1950s disciple of Semmangudi, who sang the *navagraha* composition "Srisukra Bhagavantam" (Pharaz) exactly the way the young man had learnt the song 40 years after her.

"He was music mad," says P.S.Narayanaswami, disciple and vocal accompanist of 20 years. "He had little patience with slow learners. He would ask us to expand a *raga* and then forget he was teaching as he began to demonstrate its range. Before we could sing *swaras* for two *avartanas* (rhythm cycles) he would sing 50. That was the real lesson. Disciples-in-residence would be thrilled by his breaking into *alapana* at unexpected moments, midway through the meal, late into the night. You could never experience that imagination in public concerts, subject to many checks, including the state of his voice on a given day." If the voice was malleable he would do wonders with the *raga*. If it was refractory, he would impress with his fiery *swaras*.

The research was arduous, into every phrase. But it never showed in the music. Semmangudi's definitive clarity made learning easy. "You will never hear him sing an odd phrase, or dwell on a note uncharacteristic to the *raga's* form, no gimmick or distracting flash." Narayanaswami adds, "His brilliance overwhelmed, but did not disrupt the flow of mood."

By 1969 when Seetha Rajan began to take lessons Semmangudi had become mellow, introspective, delving into deeper dimensions. Daily lessons would start at 10 a.m. and could go on till evening when suddenly the master would realise that it was getting too dark for the girls to linger. No breaks in the regimen, the pupils joined Musiri Subramania Iyer's classes when Semmangudi was out of town.

Frequently he would take Seetha to some evening function or concert, and suggest books to improve her knowledge. Much later he sent her for a course with T. Mukta, to develop maturity and feeling. He could be tender, as when he sat in the balcony at her concert, so that she would not be scared by the knowledge of his presence. When she rushed to his house after the concert she found him singing the Varali she had rendered that day.

"`Send your son to me,' Semmangudi told my father after listening to my concert," says 27-year-old vocalist T.M. Krishna. "So I started going to him from 1996."

By then Semmangudi had been long established as the venerable patriarch of Carnatic music. "But he treated me like a friend, and gave me all the freedom to discuss and question."

When there was a long break between classes due to Krishna's tours,

the doyen called him to ask, "You have learnt half the song. Don't you want the rest?" "He seeded, fired your imagination." One day Krishna heard Semmangudi trying out something new in *swara* singing. It found a place in a concert that followed. "I was stunned. In his 80s, the man still wanted to give something unexpected, and worked for it!" The only thing that upset the ageing maestro was that he might forget his music.

Krishna sums up, "His raconteuring and biting humour fascinated us. At the same time, he maintained his dignity and stature. Semmangudi is a role model for every musician, not only for his music and scholarship. He showed us how to lead our lives."

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