

**Frontline**

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**COVER STORY**

**The M.S. phenomenon**

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**The house where M.S. Subbulakshmi was born, in Madurai.**

"WE walked 30 miles to hear you today but arrived only at the very end. We waited in the hope of

offering our respects to you before returning to our village."

The speakers were a dust-streaked couple in crumpled sari and dhoti in remote Ayalur in Tamil Nadu's Thanjavur district - where Carnatic vocalist M.S. Subbulakshmi had given a concert as the finale of a week-long temple festival. Her name had drawn, from villages miles around, thousands who were at that time returning with no thought or word beyond the exhilaration her vocal magic had wrought.

PICTURES: THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY



**Mother Shanmukhavadi. M.S. was blessed by every senior musician who came home to sing and play before or listen to her musician mother playing the veena.**

Drained by the two-and-a-half-hour performance and passage through the adulation of the packed crowds, the (then) 70-year-old musician had no thought but of rest before the early journey of the next day. But she would not, could not, send the couple away disappointed. "Let us sing at least one song for them." The younger accompanist to whom she said this asked, "Do you know it is midnight now?" With a smile M.S. began to sing with the same earnestness and attention she had shown earlier on the stage. For her, music was ever a matter of reverence.

Another instance illustrates her appeal to the cognoscenti:

It was with more than the usual trepidation that M.S. Subbulakshmi faced a distinguished audience of needle-sharp *rasikas* and fellow musicians at the Music Academy in Chennai one evening in the 1950s. She was about to present a pallavi in raga Begada, "Kailasapate, pasupate, umapate, namostute," across the Adi tala cycle. This was a challenge to her virtuosity in rhythm-charged ragam-tanam-pallavi techniques. Star-singer though she already was, she was not particularly known for pallavi pyrotechnics.

What followed was no different from the typical Subbulakshmi concert - thunderous applause greeted her at every stage of the unfolding.

The pallavi piece had been the idea of musician-friend and mentor Musiri Subramania Iyer. M.S. had enthusiastically rehearsed it with the active encouragement of violinist Tiruvalangadu Sundaresa Iyer, whose tuft-waving shouts of "*bhesh, bhesh!*" had punctuated the practice sessions.

The Alathur brothers, known to be masters of laya and pallavi exposition, were to call on M.S. the next day and offer their congratulations. "We have no words to describe the beauty and balance of your presentation. What anchored every part firmly to a finished whole was the accent on the raga and the bhava you brought to it. This is what makes your music so enchanting, so durable. This is what the great Dakshinamurti Pillai found to be special in your singing years ago."

With that the mists parted and M.S. was back in shy girlhood.

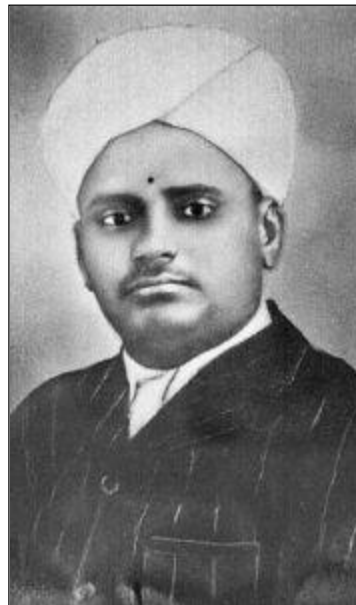
Kunjamma (as she is known to those close to her), brought up with all the rigorous strictness that her mother could impose upon her training in art as in life, had sung at a wedding in the household of Dakshinamurti Pillai, the venerable percussionist from Pudukkottai. The event had drawn a galaxy of artists - including the upcoming Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, Musiri Subramania Iyer, Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavathar, Rajamanickam Pillai, Rajaratnam Pillai, Palghat Mani Iyer, G.N. Balasubramanian and the Alathur brothers.

The next day, in the midst of this starry assembly, Dakshinamurti Pillai suddenly smote his head with vehemence. "*Andavane!*" (oh God!) How will you save your throats for a lifetime if you engage in vocal gymnastics? Leave all that to us drummers. Singers must emphasise the raga and the bhava so that you preserve your voice and let it gain in timbre. That little girl there, she knows this already. Didn't we hear her yesterday? Wasn't it satisfying? Touch our hearts?" At that public praise, Kunjamma shrank even more behind her mother in the corner.

Lost in memories, Subbulakshmi's narrative trumbles. Those were times to recall with tears. She was blessed by every senior musician who came home to sing and play before or listen to her musician mother Shanmukhavadi playing the veena. Some were legendary figures like Tirukkodikaval Krishna Iyer, Veena Seshanna of Mysore, Ponnuswamy Pillai, Naina Pillai, Chittoor Subramaniam Pillai, Venkataramana Dass of Vizianagaram. Invariably, Kunjamma would be jerked forward to sing. "Though I was always encouraged and appreciated by them, I never lost my timidity." She recalls that some of them would teach her a song or two - as did the great Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar.

"What were you like in those days?" brings a change of mood. "You can see it in the old pictures," she

laughs. "A side parting in thick curls pressed down with lots of oil, a huge dot covering most of my forehead, the half saree pinned to the puff-sleeved blouse with long brooch and longer safety pin, eardrops, nose-rings and bangles of imitation gold... Oh, I forgot. The long plait was tied up with a banana stem strip! Or a ribbon which never matched." Getting ready for the stage meant also the addition of a row of medals on the shoulder. A perceptive profile of Subbulakshmi states: "Success and fame bring in their train friends and adulation, as well as jealousy and carping critics. She has been paid the most extravagant tributes by musicians, scholars, high dignitaries of state... I have also heard others dismiss her as a pretty singer with a pretty voice who has built up a reputation on false values. She herself takes all this in her stride." It ends with a tribute to the beauty and grace of her music and looks to its maturing into greatness. The year was 1955.



**Father Subramania Iyer.**

That she reached this greatness will hardly be challenged, even by critics of her style - or those who play the devil's advocate. She was the recipient of the highest awards and honours the nation could bestow upon an artist, and of significant international recognition.

But the impressive list of distinctions can hardly explain the M.S. mystique. Certainly it had to do with her extraordinary voice, which continues to ring in the mind with vibrant power and clarity, whether heard from near or far or from any angle. That her music is not diminished by the absence of instrumental accompaniment is knowledge treasured by those privileged to hear her in private. It was

realised by the multitudes on occasions when her devotional songs were telecast by Doordarshan, as at the time of Indira Gandhi's assassination.

A whole range of explanations are offered for the primeval resonance of her voice - from the metaphysical to the physical.

There are pious devotees who believe it to be a gift as a result of oblations of honey through her previous births! An ENT specialist, on the other hand, declares it has to do with the unusual arrangement of her vocal chords. To hear her is to be spellbound - the experience of more than three generations of men and women in many parts of the world. Over the years, the voice and the charisma melded to irresistibility nonpareil. Admirers range from old-timers, hep youngsters, fellow artists, householders, ascetics, religious and political leaders, atheists, scientists and fact-finders and pundits, to philistines.



**M.S. (right) and husband T. Sadasivam (behind her) with Mahatma Gandhi, at a prayer meeting in Birla House, Mumbai, 1947. When he was informed that M.S. could not fulfil his request to sing his favourite bhajan, "Hari tum haro", Mahatma Gandhi said, shortly before he was gunned down by a Hindu fanatic: "I should prefer to hear it *spoken* by Subbulakshmi than *sung* by others."**

Princes and heads of state have bowed to her music, as when the (then) Maharana of Udaipur said to M.S. and husband T. Sadasivam: "In the old days I would have exchanged my whole kingdom for this Kalyani raga. Now I shall give you whatever help you need by way of horses and elephants in location

shooting." The occasion was the filming of *Meera*, produced by Sadasivam with M.S. in the lead. Jawaharlal Nehru's tribute to her, "Who am I, a mere Prime Minister, before the queen of song?" has been publicised widely as has been Mahatma Gandhi's request, shortly before he was gunned down by a Hindu fanatic on January 30, 1948. A message had been sent to Madras that Gandhiji wished M.S. to render his favourite bhajan, "Hari tum haro", and a response had gone from husband Sadasivam to the effect that since she did not know how to sing this particular bhajan, somebody else could sing "Hari tum haro", and she could sing another bhajan. A reply had promptly come back on behalf of the Mahatma: "I should prefer to hear it *spoken* by Subbulakshmi than *sung* by others."

Nearly half a century after this incident, M.S. and Sadasivam recalled that she heard the news of Gandhiji's assassination when she was listening to a relay of the Thyagaraja Utsavam (festival) and immediately her own singing of "Hari tum haro" came on the air. She swooned from the shock.

Had not Gandhiji called upon her at a prayer meeting in 1947 at Birla House in Mumbai, "Subbulakshmi, Ramdhun tum gao" (You sing the Ramdhun)? His choice of songs and his manner of recognition show that the Mahatma was thinking beyond music. It was that special quality she invokes of peace and bliss, not just with her voice, but from the depths of her own character - simple, devout and *spirituelle*.

Often laypersons with no liking for any classical music still play her devotional verses as an every morning ritual. The *suprabhatams* on the deities of Tirupati, Kasi, Rameswaram and Kamakshi of Kanchi thrill pilgrims at dawn in temples from Kedarath to Kanyakumari. In the midst of roadside blasts of film songs, if an occasional "Kaattrinile varum geetham" or "Chaakar rakho ji" comes on, the pedestrian is arrested into paused listening. There are others who swear that listening to her recorded music helped them tide over troubled times, even traumas and tragedies.

More remarkable is her popularity outside the Carnatic belt. According to traditionalist stereotype, the North Indian is supposed to be indifferent to Carnatic music, but M.S. concerts drew large audiences in Jalandhar and Jaipur, Kanpur and Bhopal, Pune and Baroda, notwithstanding the predominance of heavy pieces in Telugu, Sanskrit and Kannada by composers ranging from Thyagaraja to Yoganarasimham. The initial recognition, of course, came through the bhajans in Hindi that she rendered for the film *Meera* in 1944.

Delightedly surrendering her title "The Nightingale of India" to M.S., Sarojini Naidu introduced her in the film's first reel. A slender M.S. with downcast eyes, corkscrew curls blowing, hands twisting her *pallav*, is overwhelmed as Naidu heaps tributes with this prophecy to her countrymen, "You will be proud that India in this generation has produced so supreme an artist."

After that, M.S. recitals always included bhajans - of Meera first and later Tulsidas, Kabir, Surdas,

Nanak and the abhangs of Tukaram. A few have heard her sing *chhote khayals* and *thumris* ("na manoongi", Mishra Khammaj; "Neer bharan kaise jaaon", Tilakamod; "Mano mano kanhaiyya", Jonpuri), that she learnt in the 1930s from Dwijenderlal Roy in Kolkata and later from Siddheswari Devi of Benares. The latter spent some months in Chennai teaching M.S. *thumris* and *tappas*. It was a lesson in assiduity to see the two great women seated on the mat, facing each other and practising with intense interest the Yaman scales over and over again, with Siddheswari Devi rolling the beads to keep the 108 count.

To many North Indian business barons, an M.S. recital at a family wedding was not a status symbol but a blessing on the young couple.

With excellent singers in Mumbai who can sing bhajans with the greater ease of mother tongue, spontaneity, why did they insist on a bhajan concert by M.S.? A Mumbai-based industrialist's reply to the naïve question was, "True! We can listen to good music from others. But no one else can create this feeling which takes us straight to heaven."

Hindustani musicians themselves have never stinted praise. Veteran Alladiya Khan was charmed by her Pantuvarali (Purya Dhanashri); Bade Ghulam Ali Khan had announced she was "Suswaralakshmi Subbulakshmi", and Roshanara Begum had been ecstatic over her full-length concert. Others from Ravi Shankar to Pandit Jasraj and Amjad Ali Khan have been unfailing admirers. Vilayat Khan folded both his hands and closed his eyes as he spoke her name.

This recognition first came in the 1930s in a Kolkata studio when M.S. played Narada in *Savithri*. (This film launched the nationalist Tamil weekly *Kalki*, a joint venture of husband Sadasivam and writer R. Krishnamurthi.) The M.S. recordings would gather other distinguished artists, K.L. Saigal, Pahari Sanyal, Kananbala, Keskar (the renowned Kesarbai's brother, himself a musician) and Pannalal Ghosh (later to play Krishna's flute in *Meera*). Dilipkumar Roy was another admirer who was later to teach her bhajans and Rabindra Sangeet.



**Since he married M.S. in 1940, Sadasivam remained a lifelong friend and guide.**

"They would make me sing again and again, especially the song "Bruhi mukundeti", with its lightning *sangati* at the end," M.S. would recall happily (in Tamil). "In those days, we had no sense of competition or one-upmanship. We enjoyed good music wherever we found it." Old-timers remember that in the film too, as Narada descended from the sky in jerks, but still singing that enthralling song, the theatre resounded to applause. In the Bombay Studio where the *Meera* score was recorded, it was the same story. Artists who came for other recordings would stop by and become rapt listeners. A thin newcomer, two long plaits dangling behind, refused to record her song after the M.S. session." "Not now, not after that!" She went on to become a legend in her own right as Lata Mangeshkar, while continuing to remain a devoted M.S. fan.

ANOTHER M.S. achievement was that, virtually for the first time, she astonished the Westener into an appreciation of Carnatic music. In the 1960s, the few Indian musicians known outside the country were Hindustani instrumentalists. In the Western world, hardly anyone knew of the complex Carnatic system, which was deemed inexportable. Why, even North Indians found it indigestible. In a conversation with Jawaharlal Nehru, Sadasivam remarked that the West might prefer instrumental to vocal music. "Yes," said Panditji, tapping his fingers. Then, looking straight at M.S. he broke into a smile, "But not in your case!" M.S. would always add, "By God's grace, what he said came true when I sang at the Edinburgh Festival, at the United Nations and the Carnegie Hall."

On the eve of a public concert in New York, U.N. Chef de Cabinet and Carnatic music expert C.V.

Narasimhan was disquieted at the prospect of rejection by the redoubtable critic from *The New York Times*.



**M.S. was meticulous and neat in personal life, even in the delicate lines of the *kolam* she drew every day.**

He was to call ecstatically next morning. "You have won. The press overflows with praise." So it did after everyone of the string of concerts M.S. gave in the U.S. and in some parts of Europe before all-White audiences, most of whom were strangers to any music from India.

*The New York Times* said: "Subbulakshmi's vocal communication transcends words. The cliché of 'the voice used as an instrument' never seemed more appropriate. It could fly flutteringly or carry on a lively dialogue with the accompanists. Subbulakshmi and her ensemble are a revelation to Western ears. Their return can be awaited only with eagerness."

Dr. W. Adriaansz, Professor of Music, University of Washington, wrote: "For many, the concert by Mrs. Subbulakshmi meant their first encounter with the music of South India and it was extremely gratifying that in her the necessary factors for the basis of a successful contact between her music and a new audience - highly developed artistry as well as stage presence - were so convincingly present..."

without any doubt (she) belongs to the best representants of this music."

This writer witnessed that kind of wondrous rapture in Moscow when M.S. performed before a select group of Russian musicians and musicologists in 1988. Midway through the singing a woman came up with flowers. She touched her eyes first and then her heart to communicate her bursting feelings. That this was a shared experience became evident when the applause and the audience followed M.S. as she left the hall, down the staircase, to the car on the street, until she drove away.

The question still remains unanswered: What is this almost transcendental quality behind the unfailing rapture? In the West, such responses are not unknown to the music from great composers like Mozart or Beethoven. Many would attribute it to the Indian Bhakti tradition of poetry and song to which the singer belonged. The 6th-7th century cult of the Nayanmars and the Alvars, spread through Chaitanya and Jayadeva, as the people's movement of Basavanna and Mahadeviyakka inspired Namdev and Tukaram, Surdas, Tulsidas and that extraordinary woman saint Meerabai, who spurned queenship and wifehood in her restless quest of the Lord. The Bhakti polarities of seeking and finding, loss and conquest, desire and fulfilment are realised in their verses.

Precisely these aspects mark Subbulakshmi's singing. This is true of those portions without verbal elements, like the raga alapana. Just as the devotee individuates the deity through incantation and description - detailing every limb, look and ornamentation - the singer shapes the raga, always starting with clear strokes to pedestal its identity and going on to breathe it to form and life. The enunciation of the *antara gandhara* (Sankarabharanam, Khambhoji, Pantuvarali, Kedaragowla) in the upper register - as a long-held note, as the end-point of embellishments, or the pivot of note clusters, mounts to fever pitch. Hands sculpt the air, face turns upwards, eyes gaze at the beyond, and suddenly there comes the *madhyama/panchama* climax and the rounded process of the conclusion, all accomplished with seemingly effortless grace. After plumbing the depths and soaring to the heights, the listener emerges into quietude. That is how the Meera archetype gets superimposed in this Tamil daughter of the 20th century.

What was M.S. like in real life? The answer would be: except for the taut-nerved hypersensitivity of all great artists, no different from any other South Indian housewife, mother and grandmother of her generation. Fame, the approbation of the world's *haut monde* and glitterati, the adoration of hundreds of thousands, left her transparently untouched. Home needs and little chores were given the same attention that she gave momentous affairs. She was meticulous and neat in personal life, even in the delicate lines of the *kolam* she drew every day. She excelled at putting all kinds of visitors at ease, with a genuine interest in what they had to say of themselves. Gifts which pleased her most were strings of jasmine and mild French perfumes.

In appearance and lifestyle, she remained conservative: the long pallav of her handloom cottons or

silks tucked round the waist, flower-wreathed "kondai", diamond nose and ear rings, glass bangles between gold, not to forget the row of *kumkum* and *vibhuti* from many temples dotting the turmeric-washed forehead. Regular in the performance of puja and sloka recitations, she was a strict follower of all the prescribed rituals of the *sumangali* householder. "My mother-in-law told me before she left for Kasi" would precede these observances.

Owning no jewels beyond what she wore and quick to give away the silk sarees gifted to her by admirers, she never tried to appear younger than she was. Thousands saw her as the embodiment of grace and ancient tradition of Indian womanhood - kind, considerate, compassionate, soft-spoken, self-sacrificing and somewhat unworldly. She breathed the tenderness of the mother to the child, the bhakta to the God.

Looking at her self-effacing deportment, one had to remind oneself forcefully that she was a world-travelled artist, a globally acclaimed career person who changed the definition and image of Carnatic music in the 20th century. A first-time foreign listener at her concert was quick to note the ethereality of the M.S. image. "It is not right to describe her as the Maria Callas of India. Callas has fans, frenzied legions of them. But not devotees! M.S. does not sing, she makes divinity manifest."

How did M.S. train this voice, develop grasping power, and learn to refract emotional colours through it? How did she absorb the aesthetics and the techniques of a hoary musical tradition?

BORN in the temple town of Madurai on September 16, 1916, to veena player Shanmukhavadi (her initials M.S. record the birthplace and mother's name), little Kunjamma, brother Saktivel and sister Vadivambal grew up surrounded and filled by music. Grandmother Akkammal had been a violinist. Their tiny home in the narrow, cattle-lounging Hanumantharayan lane was close to the Meenakshi temple. Whenever the deity was taken in procession through the main streets, the nadaswaram players would stop where this lane branched off and play their best for Shanmukhavadi's approval. "My earliest interest in music was focussed on the raga. I would try to reproduce the pipers as well as I could. My mother played and rehearsed constantly. No formal lessons, but I absorbed a whole wealth by listening and humming along with the veena." Much later, experts were to wonder at the way in which M.S. vocally rendered some of the rare and singular *gamakas* and *prayogas* of both veena and nadaswaram.

The family was rich only in music. Otherwise, for mother and children, and for the numerous uncles and aunts who crowded their home, it was a frugal existence. For the two girls it was confinement within the home, while the brother enjoyed a little more freedom.

Vadivambal died too early to fulfil her promise as a veena player. But for Subbulakshmi it was to be vocal music. The coconut was broken and offerings made to God and guru Madurai Srinivasa Iyengar.

But the lessons could not go much beyond the foundations because the guru passed away. "I also learnt Hindustani music for a short spell from Pandit Narayan Rao Vyas. 'Syama Sundara' which I sang in the film *Seva Sadan* was one of the pieces he taught me. I listened to a lot of good music on the radio (the neighbours'; we didn't own one!) from the window still above the staircase. I loved to hear Abdul Kareem Khan and Bade Ghulam Ali Khan in the silence of the night."



**November 29, 1953: "Who am I, a mere Prime Minister, before the queen of song?" Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru said, presenting a silver tray to M.S. after she concluded her concert in aid of the Ramakrishna Mission in New Delhi.**

Her formal schooling was stopped in class 5 when a teacher's beating brought on an attack of whooping cough. But she practised music for long hours, lost in the vibrations of the tambura which she would tune reverently. The M.S. hallmark of *sruti suddham* can be traced to a game she evolved in her childhood. As she sang, she would stop playing the drone at intervals and check if she continued to maintain the pitch with and without it. Throughout the day she would sound the *shadja panchama* notes and pluck the strings to see if she was still aligned to them.

This natural ability, consciously developed through a kind of yoga, was responsible for the electrifying effect her opening syllables had on the audience, whether she plumbed the depths (*mandara sanchara*) or scaled the heights (in *tarasanchara*) of a fantastic voice range. Another little known fact of her early life was her fascination for the mridangam which she learnt to play from brother Saktivel.

Intrigued by the gramophone records, Kunjamma would roll a piece of paper for the "speaker" (as in the logo of His Master's Voice) and sing into it for hours. This game became real when she accompanied her mother to Chennai and cut her first disc at the age of 10. The songs were "Marakata vadivu" and "Oothukuzhiyinile" in an impossibly high pitch. In fact, it was through the Columbia

Gramophone Company records that she was first noticed in the city - before she was 15 years old.

To balance and leaven maternal stringency, there was lawyer-father Subramania Iyer who lived a few streets away. In the faded photograph which hangs in her home today, his soft look and sensitive features bear an unmistakable resemblance to his "Rajathippa" (princess darling). That is how he called his pet daughter. He was wont to saying that he would arrange her marriage with a "good boy" who would love and cherish her music. Not a singer himself, he was a true *rasika* and bhakta. In the yearly Ramanavami festivals he organised, there would be puja, music and a procession each day. How wonderful it felt to the little girl when his strong loving hands picked her up and placed her next to the picture of Rama taken round the streets on a chariot! The recollection of such scenes from her childhood brought real happiness to her.

The first stage appearance? "When it happened, I felt only annoyance at being yanked from my favourite game - making mud pies. Someone picked me up, dusted my hands and skirt, carried me to the nearby Sethupati School where my mother was playing before 50 to 100 people. In those days that was the usual concert attendance. At mother's bidding I sang a couple of songs. I was too young for the smiles and the claps to mean much. I was thinking more of returning to the mud."

From regular vocal accompaniment in Shanmukhavadi's veena concerts, M.S. graduated to solo performances. Of her debut at the Madras Music Academy when she was 17, a connoisseur wrote: "When she, with her mother by her side (who played the tambura for the daughter), as a winsome girl in her teens, ascended the dais in 1934 and burst into classical songs, experienced musicians of the top rank vied with one another in expressing their delight in this new find." Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavathar came forward with loud hyperboles. Tiger Varadachariar nodded approval. Karaikudi Sambasiva Iyer was to say later: "Child, you carry the veena in your throat."

At this time Thiagarajan Sadasivam entered her life as a dashing suitor. He became her husband in 1940. Kasturi Srinivasan, Editor, *The Hindu*, was instrumental in arranging their marriage at Tirunelveli. He insisted on registering it and also witnessed it. He remained a lifelong friend and guide.

With that began Subbulakshmi's ascent from being a South Indian celebrity to a national, even world, figure; and from a brilliant young virtuoso to consummate artist.

Her image, the course of her career, the direction of her music - they were all carefully fashioned by Sadasivam who, from the earliest stage, had a clear vision of what she was one day to attain. This freedom fighter, who sang nationalist songs himself in public while courting lathicharge and arrest, introduced M.S. to the great Congress leaders - Rajaji, Nehru and Gandhiji. Sadasivam, who made an early mark in the advertising field and in publishing, was always the organiser.

To Sadasivam and M.S. means were as important as the end. And therefore, though he persuaded her to act in a few movies with specific financial objectives in mind, they were on idealistic and chaste themes, with the accent on music. *Sakuntalai* featured songs still remembered today, by M.S. and G.N. Balasubramaniam - "Anandamensolve", "Premaiyil" and the sparkling "Manamohananga". Sadasivam also inspired M.S. to sing lyrics steeped in patriotism such as those of Subramania Bharati ("Oli padaitha kanninai") and Bankimchandra Chatterji ("Bande mataram"). Their ardour was such that they prepared to walk out of the then Corporation Radio, Madras, when refused permission to include one of these songs in the programme.

If M.S. came to be regarded as a symbol of national integration, one reason was the inclusion in her repertoire of compositions in languages from many parts of India. This catholicity was consciously developed at the insistence of Sadasivam who saw music not as an aesthetic exercise, but as a vehicle for spreading spirituality among the populace. For this reason he insisted on her giving predominance to bhava and bhakti in alapana, kriti and niraval, while minimising technical displays in pallavi rendition and kalpanaswara. Though M.S. had learnt pallavis from the old stalwart Mazhavarayanendal Subbarama Bhagavatar, she readily followed her husband's instructions.



**With guru Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer. "No other singer can sing tanam like her. For me her**

**reach in the lower octave, rare among women, is as impressive as her obvious essays in the higher."**

Believing that his wife's wealth of voice should not be used for personal gain, Sadasivam channelled the proceeds of the concerts into charitable endowments. Starting in 1944 with five concerts for the Kasturba Memorial Fund, this grew into a public service contribution of major proportions. Many causes and institutions (medical, scientific, research, educational, religious and charitable) have benefited from M.S. raising over Rs.2 crores through singing.

WHAT was responsible for the flawless presentation of an M.S. `Concert'? Undoubtedly it was the shrewd programming masterminded by Sadasivam to suit each place and event. While this strategist design the format and all the numbers from *varnam* to the lighter *tukkadas*, the combination of composers and languages, the main and ancillary ragas of the evening, he also allotted the duration for each individual piece. M.S. herself laid out and embellishes the major pieces mentally, rehearsing constantly, even if outwardly engaged in other activities. She used to say: "We can only bring out a fraction of the thousand ideas we get at home. The stage is a constant examination ground." From his seat in front, Sadasivam would signal changes likely to please the day's audience. But the couple also made experiments, propagated lesser known/unknown composers, or flouted hidebound conservatism by championing the Tamil Isai cause of the 1940s.

Recognising Sahitya as an integral part of Carnatic music, M.S. cultivated impeccable diction in the different languages of the lyrics she sang. She is known for attention to every detail such as breath control, pauses in the right places, voice modulation, changes in emphasis and breaking phrases into their proper components. These techniques highlight the meaning. Here her knowledge of Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Sanskrit and Hindi was of immense help.

To watch her learn a new composition was an experience in itself. For the Annamacharya kritis (five cassettes produced for the Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam), the lyrics were read repeatedly with an expert in Telugu to explicate the sense as also methods of splitting the words and syllables for the musical score; the whole rehearsed until neither text nor notation was required at the recording session. Even more awesome was her mastery of that magnificent edifice, the *mela raga malika* by Maha Vaidynatha Sivan, a string of 72 ragas mostly rare, with hair's breadth variations between them. The Sanskrit libretto was equally taxing. But the finished product had natural ease and flow. When he heard it, the Paramacharya of Kanchi pronounced his blessing: "This will last as long as the sun and the moon stand in the skies."

The M.S. classical repertoire in several languages is a formidable one, representing composers from the ancient to the contemporaneous. She acquired these from several musicians and scholars over the years, from guru Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, Seithur Sundaresa Bhattar, Musiri Subramania Iyer,

Papanasam Sivan, T.L. Venkatarama Iyer, Turaiyur Rajagopala Sarma, Mayavaram Krishna Iyer, K.V. Narayanaswami, S. Ramanathan, Nedunuri Krishnamurti *et al.* She learnt a few *padams* from dancer Balasaraswati as well as from T. Brinda, both scions of the Dhanammal family renowned for this music. With a voice particularly suited to these delicate and quintessential depictions of *ragabhava*, M.S. soon shed them from her repertoire, perhaps because of their sensuous content.

In the architectonics of kriti rendition, M.S. was inimitable, whether in simple structures or in the careful tier-by-tier build-up of `Giripai' (Sahana) `Dasarathe' (Todi), `Chakkani Raja' (Kharaharapriya) or `Sri Subrahmanyaya namaste' (Khambhoji). She was meticulous in maintaining the authenticity of *pathantara* as taught to her, drawing thus a clear line between *rachita* (composed) and *kalpita* (improvised) sangita. However, the songs do get modulated and inflected according to her personal genius. That is why `Durusuga' (Saveri) sung by M.S. and Musiri (from whom she learnt it) become different experiences for the listener. When she sang his composition `Brochevarevarura' in Khamas, eminent musician Mysore Vasudevachar said, "The daughter had only black beads and glass bangles when she got married. I feel like her father when she visits him now in a dazzle of jewel and silks." Her understanding of the text and the distinct flavours infused into the score by each composer make for variations in the same raga when she sings different kritis in it. Her `Needu charana,' `Talli ninnu', `Nidhitsala sukhamā', `Birana brova yite' and `Bhajare chita', all in Kalyani, reflect different moods and facets of bhakti.

The universality of her appeal owes in large measure to the vast collection of songs in several languages over and above the impressive range of classical compositions. Whether Hindi, Gujarati bhajan, Marathi abhang, Rabindra sangeet, Sanskrit sloka or Tamil Tiruppugazh, they are all marked by lyrical allure, poignant feeling and philosophic content. Thus the lighter numbers acquire a seriousness of their own. As critic and admirer Dr. V.K. Narayana Menon saw it:

"She is, no doubt, constrained to sing music she would rather not. But that is the price one has to pay for being a celebrity. A musician is at once an artist and public entertainer and it is not easy to set aside the wishes of large sections of one's audience. This is not succumbing to popular acclamation. It is a kind of invested responsibility."

M.S. did not flinch from self-criticism. What seemed satisfactory while in the emotion-charged stage ambience was reviewed for improvements. She would tell you that she had to work on *varja* ragas for easier control.

Though she had the maturity and wisdom to transcend showmanship and mere technical virtuosity, a critique noted, "She was the earliest to compete with male vidwans in the form and substance of the concert, including niraval, swara and pallavi singing, a fact hardly noticed in her early years because it was accomplished with a quiet innocence and humility which have characterised her eventful life."

Guru Semmangudi too singles out three aspects of technical perfection as special to the M.S. style. "No other women can sing the tanam like her. For me her reach in the lower octave, rare among women, is as impressive as her obvious essays in the higher. Thirdly I should rate her niraval singing among the best I have heard from women."

Particularly in the niraval the listener can perceive her *vidwat* - in the permutations of rhythm, in the spacing of syllables, in the perfect *anuswaras* connecting the curves, the *sangati* blitzes at crucial spots, the remarkable length of phrasing and the *karvai balam* (strength in dwelling on a single note). Through these technical feats, she retained and enhanced the qualities of raga and the sahitya, seeing them as inseparable. "Kadambavana nilaye" (Sri Kamakoti; Saveri); "Rama, rama, rama yanutsu" (Ennaganu; Pantuvarali) and those wordy lines in "tiruvadicharanam" (Khambhoji) where the devotee begs the Lord to save him from countless rebirths - these have long been lingering niraval experiences.

There is a school of thought that Subbulakshmi was a natural genius, that her music is not so much cerebral as inspired. However, the discerning listener knows how her music is crafted and polished; how the conscious and the unconscious elements are balanced. On those rare occasions when she was induced to talk about her approach, she would say: "The *ragaswarupa* must be established at once. Don't keep the listener in suspense as to whether it is Purvikalyani or Pantuvarali. This difference must come through in the way you dwell on the notes common to both ragas, even before the introduction of dissimilar notes. In Sankarabharanam stress the *rishabha*, but in Kalyani accent the *gandhara* quickly."

She would go on to sing out differences in treatment between Durbar and Nayaki, Saurashtram and Chakravakam, Devagandhari and Arabhi. At a crowded wedding she could suddenly call your attention to the distant nadaswaram's mishandling of Sriranjini to sound those phrases exclusive to Ritigowla. She could fascinate with her demonstration of the tonal levels of every note in Bhairavi, their inter-relationships, permissible degrees of oscillation.

"Much of this I kept discovering as I listened and sang. Learning the veena from Vidwan K.S. Narayanaswami later in life was very beneficial in this search to search to understand raga intricacies."

Yet, popular rather than critical acclaim has more often not been the outcome of the M.S. efforts. She aroused devotion more than analytical scrutiny, despite her undoubted musicianship. In a nation quick to canonise and deify, she was first transformed into a saint, then to the veena-holding Saraswati - the goddess of learning and the arts.

The golden voice was a divine gift which could not fail the possessor, who remained a stranger to the struggles and labours of the less gifted.

Through her long career M.S. had drawn strength both on and off the stage from Radha (Viswanathan). Radha trained herself from childhood to accompany M.S. vocally in concerts. A major illness curtailed her supportive role, a loss which M.S. felt deeply.

The warbles and trills of youth - the fine careless rapture of the songbird in springtime - gave way in course of time to richness of timbre, to chiselled, polished execution. The *brika* flashes and organised raga edifices with high note crescendos were replaced by longer journeys into less trodden ways in the middle and lower registers. These explorations were now undertaken with the freedom and ripeness of an autumn majesty. Retaining the sonorous sweetness and vitality through all these years of upward growth, "M.S. music" now made an even more ravishing impact on the mind. "As I grow older, I feel more and more overwhelmed by the music." One saw this happening at times on the stage. Then she had to exercise great control just to go on singing.

Not the least of her achievements in over six decades of singing is the development of a style of her own. This is not based on identifiable techniques of execution, but on the communication of a mood; of an ecstasy of emotion. What the ancient theoreticians called *rasadhvani*, when art became an experience of that ultimate bliss within and without, both immanent and transcendent. This was accomplished through *auchitya* - a wide term which embraces contextual appropriateness, adaptation of parts to one another and to the whole, a fitness of things, and poetic harmony. And M.S. exemplified them all in her choice of raga and sahitya, balance of mood and technique, in her "mike sense" and timing, in the consonance she established with her accompanists and audience.

Towards the end of each recital M.S. would sound the cymbals in eyes-closed concentration for the Rajaji hymn "Kuraionrum illai" (I have no regrets). It becomes obvious that for all the splendour of her music, it is her image as a saintly person which will probably endure for long, just as in the case of Meerabai. For, in the highest tradition of the Indian way of life, Subbulakshmi linked her art with the spiritual quest, where humility and perseverance assure the *sadhaka* of grace.

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