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The guru on his sishya



LIFELONG BONDS: Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, M. S. Subbulakshmi and her husband T. Sadasivam.

THOUGH M.S. Subbulakshmi assimilated her vast repertoire from many sources, she always acknowledged the late Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer as her guru. He infused depth and grandeur to Subbulakshmi's music,

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strengthened her *alapana*, *niraval*, and *swara*, and taught her majestic compositions. Semmangudi's acquaintance with M.S.' husband, T. Sadasivam, began with their serving as judges in the 'khadi' section of the swadeshi exhibition during the Mahamakham festival at Kumbakonam in 1933. Semmangudi claimed not only M.S. but also Sadasivam as his disciple, having taught him to play cards. At times he even joined M.S.' concert tours — as Sadasivam's rummy crony.

Semmangudi shared his thoughts on M.S. with **Gowri Ramnarayan** in 1986. Excerpts:

Subbulakshmi's mother Shanmukhavadiyu was not just a good veena player, she knew her theory (*varjaavarjakramas*, *lakshanas*) and could play with feeling. A woman of few words and dignity. I had heard about her, but heard her for the first time, with young Subbulakshmi's vocal accompaniment, in Kumbakonam. The daughter was around 12 or 13. Voice and veena made an agreeable blend. I didn't know them well, though I did visit their home whenever I went to Madurai, to pay my respects to the senior artiste.

Initially I think Subbulakshmi's brother Saktivel accompanied her on the mridangam, and Sankaranarayana Iyer on the fiddle. Later, other accompanists replaced them.

M.S. became popular after cutting records with HMV. [N.C.] Vasantakokilam who died young, had a voice similar to Subbulakshmi's. People often mistook one for the other. Can't weigh them on scales and say which voice was better. But I can say that right from the start Subbulakshmi had a good, pleasing voice. It had clarity, sharpness, *sruti* alignment, and the rare attribute of sounding strong and clear from close quarters as well as from a distance.

She is a *gnaanasti* (cognoscenti) who relishes what she sings. Later she went into the *bhakti* track, that's what her husband wanted. That's what the whole world loved. But now as then, she is capable of high-serious classicism, second to none. She kept *swara* singing at a premium, and rightly. Aggressive *swaras* are distasteful in women, and ruins the voice. Subbulakshmi allotted the right time and energy to it.

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Technique-wise I'd say that among the women of her times, she is the best *tanam* exponent. Naturally. Isn't hers a *vainika vamsham* (veena heritage)? Mind you, *tanam* is not easy for women, it needs strong, powerful enunciation. She has it. Her *chowka kala* (slow) *niraval* is excellent. Both T. Brinda and M.S. have unusual reach in the *mandara* (lower) *sthai*. Her *vak suddham* (pure diction) is rare among musicians. It is not acquired through effort but is a gift from Devi. Though we musicians accepted only Dhanammal as a musician's musician, all musicians, even those who are envious of her fame, enjoy listening to M.S.

Subbulakshmi has that which is most difficult to reach — *sowkhyam* (tranquillity). No, it does not come through effort or feeling. It goes beyond the 'good' and the 'fine.' Very few possess a voice that intoxicates you as soon as you hear it. She did. Have you heard her in the film *Sakuntala*? Delightful! The other day as I was playing cards with Sadasivam, I overheard her rehearsing *Bhavayami gopalabalam* in Yamunakalyani. Can't tell you how it moved me. Yes I have heard *Krishna nee begane* in the same raga from Balasaraswati. That glow came from the entire school and tradition of Veenai Dhanammal. Subbulakshmi's music is her own.

How to explain how butter melts into ghee? Subbulakshmi's voice merges into the *sruti* inseparably — can there be any higher joy? Those who say that her raga *alapana* lacks originality are largely prompted by envy. I have heard her sing Sankarabharanam, Khamboji and Todi with an expansiveness second to none. Where she pauses, what she touches, when she connects ... all reflect continuity of thought and form. I have wanted her to stay in the higher octave *sancharas* and never come down. There are women more beautiful than Subbulakshmi, but their singing has not drawn the same crowds. No music can last unless it has worth and is touched by the divine.

True, Sadasivam controlled her in every way and control is not easy on creativity. But he was a very intelligent man. He ensured that M.S. reached the peak and stayed there, not in popularity or social status alone, but in dignity, elegance and *bhakti*.

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