

THE HINDU Business Line

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The melody wafts...

Raghavendra Rao

Listening to her voice and watching her endearing care of us... My camera would, normally, jump out of the bag on occasions like this. But it did not this time.

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Is M.S. Subbulakshmi no more? In a profound tribute, Gopalkrishna Gandhi, Governor of West Bengal, said "Subbulakshmi cannot die, she can only move from an ethereal presence into immortality. Her music belongs now to the spheres."

An expression that makes you sit up and look at the life of M.S. and her great contribution to sound, voice and music... far beyond the spread of a canvas of listening but creating a total spiritual dimension. What made her creativity stand out? A learned professor Dr Ananth Rao in Australia once remarked that a five-stage model is fundamental to bring out the best of creative element. These stages are quest, direction, illumination, confirmation and product. The life of M.S. and her greatness confirms her innermost, meaningful and endearing

creativity to elements that Dr Rao mentions.

Sadasivam, her husband, was a pillar of strength, no doubt. He was the one who nurtured this creativity of M.S. True, he was a task master, but his strength and direction made it possible for the music of M.S. to flow abundantly and reach out to millions of people all over the world.

Long ago, when the Workers Union of The Indian Express (IE) requested M.S. for a benefit performance, it was readily agreed to. So typical of the couple to reach out for a cause. My job that evening was to get a picture for the next day's edition.

Ear all attuned to a musical feast that awaited, I rushed to the auditorium. A feast indeed it was. The beauty of her voice and her soulful rendering made me forget why I was there.

An hour passed and then suddenly the newspaper's edition time struck me hard. I rushed to the front of the stage as quietly as possible and took out my camera. And there I heard a voice... almost a whisper but a harsh one at that. It was Sadasivam. He beckoned to me and said, "No photography. That will disturb her..." I was taken aback. But I assured him... almost pleaded with him that I was not using a flash unit and that I intended to take pictures in the available light.

He was hesitant but with a warning he let me take pictures. I sat with the stage lighting team in the pit and looked at Subbulakshmi through the camera. Ten minutes later I turned back, bowed my thanks to Sadasivam and headed back to the office. A bit annoyed, by and large, at many photographers whose lack of sensitivity in approaching certain jobs where silence and work ethics count.

The next day was a different day. The Express had used a portrait of M.S. on the front page and our manager called up to say, "Nice picture, Rao". That afternoon, I had a happy surprise. Atmanandan, a close associate of Sadasivam's family, came to the Express office. He said, "We all liked your portrait. More so Sadasivam. Now we are all set to travel to the East and also Japan and Sadasivam is keen to carry with us portraits of M.S. taken by you. I am afraid I am going to ask for a large number of prints. Could we have them, please?" I was thrilled.

And the office was equally excited. "Give them any number of prints and send them with our regards," I was told. And so it was. This also helped me come close to Atmanandan and the family.


And that later H.M.V used this portrait on the jacket of songs by M.S. lingers in my mind... all an outcome of some time spent close to divinity and total surrender.

Another day... many years later... at the home of the Sadasivams in Kotturpuram, along with me was Raghu Rai of India Today. A meaningful time, made possible by Atmanandan. So close to M.S. and Sadasivam, talking to them. Within, it was a soothing tranquillity. Could not help it, but just sat looking. Listening to her voice and watching her endearing care of us. My camera would, normally, jump out of the bag on occasions like this. But it did not this time. It understood my silence... solitude. A divine feeling engulfed me.

Times with The Hindu Business Line... In 1996 'Laya', my humble tribute to the greats of Carnatic music and Bharatanatyam ... in the only language I know... the visual form, found its presence at the Music Academy in Chennai, thanks to T.T. Vasu, President of the Academy. And he fulfilled a great desire of mine... It was none else but the great M.S. herself who inaugurated the show by lighting a lamp and blessing me.

One early morning in Bangkok, many years ago, driving down to the Floating Market, the car reverberates to the music of the Suprabhata. Our guide, a young Thai girl, remarks, "Such a beautiful voice... Who is it? What is it all about?" We explain, "It is a wake up call for our Lord sung by M.S. Subbulakshmi, a great singer of our country." The girl looks at us and says, "That's a beautiful way of reaching out." As the song goes on, the girl looks a bit confused. She asks, "She sings so well, but why has your Lord still not woken up?" A simple answer by my son, "He is awake. He pretends to be asleep. You see, He loves the song to continue."

Jagadhodharana Adisidalu Yashoda... a Purandara Dasa krithi sung by M.S. keeps on coming to awaken a memory of a lady who sang the Dasa krithi many a time during morning pooja. It

 was my mother.

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