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EXCELLENCE

Jewel in the crown

M.S. Subbulakshmi becomes the first musician to receive India's highest civilian award, the Bharat Ratna.

GOWRI RAMNARAYAN

WHEN the President of India telephoned Madurai Shanmukhavadi Subbulakshmi to convey the decision to confer on her the award of Bharat Ratna, India's highest civilian honour, she was deeply moved. It was a rare recognition, and she is the first musician to be so honoured.

Subbulakshmi, however, could not but feel a profound sense of loss at this moment of fulfilment. Had the honour come her way two months ago, her husband Thiagarajan Sadasivam, who was alive then, would have shared the joy with her. For more than 50 years he had devoted all his energies to guiding her in her pursuit of excellence and in using her art to serve God and man. No individual who approached them with requests for help was turned away unassisted. With their simple, even austere, lifestyles, the couple believed that it was their duty to do as much as they could to improve the lot of others.

Starting in 1944 with concerts for the Kasturba Memorial Fund, Subbulakshmi's performances have raised over Rs. 4 crores for endowing religious, educational, medical, scientific and art institutions. At another level, the electrician who came to repair a fan in their residence would not fail to get financial assistance to educate his son, or get his daughter married. Subbulakshmi could be singing later in the day before Indira Gandhi or Marshal Tito, but she would ensure that every caller, from family friend to chauffeur, was given "tiffin" and coffee. This remains as much part of her culture as the magnificent music she makes.

S. THANTHONI

India is acclaimed the world over for its spiritual legacy. Its traditional arts continue to draw



inspiration from this collective heritage. The more historical Bhakti poets and music composers were revered as saints through successive centuries. They found music an indispensable aid to propagate the message of self-surrendering devotion, and service to humanity. They braved criticism from the diehard pedants.



A study of Subbulakshmi's development as a classical musician and a torchbearer of the Bhakti tradition will show that she has followed the same path.

Starting with the conservative and limited repertoire of a family tradition with veena artist Shanmukhavadiyu, her mother and first guru, Subbulakshmi improved her skills during her brief tutelage under vidwan Srinivasa Iyengar. After his early demise she enriched her skills by listening to the eminent musicians who visited her home to pay their respects to Shanmukhavadiyu. They were invariably surprised and delighted by the young girl's extraordinary voice, its range and sweetness.

Her early gramophone "plates" (78 rpm) "Oothukuzhiyinile" or "Marakata vadivu" testify to nothing more than that. But by the time she was 17 inborn discernment had brought her control and greater finesse. Her modesty made her ever eager to learn and improve, and to revere the stalwarts of classical music - qualities which have never left her.

It was after she left her home town of Madurai, settled in Chennai (in the 1940s) and started learning from Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer (one of her husband's closest friends) that Subbulakshmi's music began to acquire grandeur and depth. Semmangudi reserved his originality for the improvisational elements of his music. His style was majestic, virile and overwhelming. Subbulakshmi absorbed the fine-crafted precision, the weighty classicism and steel, but dovetailed them to her feminine *bani*. She developed a method of highlighting the *sahitya* as much as the *sangita*. More, she expressed the feelings of her own soul in response to what she sang. She was to do that throughout her life whether learning a Meera bhajan from Dilip Kumar Roy, *chhota Khyal* from Siddheswari Devi, or a complex *pallavi* from Mazhavarayanendal Subbarama Bhagavata. As M. Balamuralikrishna once said, M.S. was the first Carnatic musician to bring modulation to her art.

S. THANTHONI



M.S. Subbulakshmi with husband T. Sadasivam.

Everyone who has listened to M.S. knows that the radiance that envelops singer and listener when she performs arises from the emotional elements dominant in her presentation. But the effortless is neither magical nor mystic. It came from years of training, practice and thoughtful reflection. With Sadasivam to guide her (until the concert she gave in August 1997 it was he who drew up her schedules and finalised the details of her programme), the purpose of that singing was very clear: a self-forgetful immersion in the *bhava*. This naturally ensured a similar experience for the listener.

Quite early on, listening to his wife's golden voice, Sadasivam became convinced that it should do something more than entertain or arouse wonder with technical virtuosity and musicianship. He directed her to explore the possibilities of moving people towards patriotism, devotion and humane goals, which he had done in his days, as a freedom fighter, through Subramania Bharati's songs.

In this journey M.S. acquired several "firsts" without even being quite aware of them. She was the first Carnatic musician to have a following in North India, the first also to introduce the South Indian classical system to the West. More obviously, she was the first woman to be awarded the title of Sangita Kalanidhi of the Music Academy, Chennai, a title which is the dream of every Carnatic musician.

In 1966 at the peak of her career, when Subbulakshmi sang at the United Nations, she concluded with the verses of her spiritual guru, the Paramacharya of Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham. This prayer for friendship among nations and the end of warfare urges the cultivation of *damyata, datta and dayadhvam* (control, charity, compassion) mentioned in the Brihadaranyaka upanishad. When sung by an artist who practised these tenets in her life and art, it became a thrilling finale.

The indescribable quality of her music made M.S. a legendary figure in this country. It made Mahatma Gandhi say that he would rather hear his favourite bhajan spoken by M.S. than sung by any other. It is equally well known that Jawaharlal Nehru hailed her as a Queen of Song. Sarojini Naidu surrendered her title "The Nightingale of India" to M.S. after watching her actualise the experience of the saint poet Meerabai. The 1947 film, produced by her husband, made M.S. a household name in the North as well as the South. Premiered in the year of India's Independence, the film has a message that is even more important now. Meera's rebellion is against power and pelf, against divisions of class and gender.

While she continued to widen her traditional repertoire, M.S. added to it songs, old and new, in different languages, always infused with poignant devotion. Narsi Mehta's "Vaishnava Janato" (a favourite with Gandhiji) was given the same loving polish as the verses of Rabindranath Tagore. Poonthanam Namboodiri, Narayana Tirtha, Sadasiva Brahmendra, Jayadeva, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, Kabir, Surdas, Tulsidas, Nanak, Mirabai... all the poets across the land are part of the M.S. treasury. She never failed to sing in the language of the region, often the lyrics of a favourite poet-composer, wherever she performed. This built instant rapport with audiences everywhere, particularly as her diction was always chaste and lucid.

Among her contributions to Carnatic music, her painstaking labours to propagate the lyrics of the 15th century poet Annamacharya rank high. Contemporary *vaggeyakaras* like Mysore Vasudevachar and Papanasam Sivan were delighted when M.S. sang their songs in her inimitable style. She never ventured to present anything in public until it was perfectly honed and rehearsed. No one saw her using notebooks as she sang on the stage.

A 1954 photograph.

Whenever M.S. learns a new piece, she familiarises herself with the text, writes it down in a notebook

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with the meaning of each word, phrase, sentence and the verse as a whole. When she learns the music it is with attention to the diction, emphasis and pauses which do not distort the sense. Finally the whole is so completely internalised that she has no longer any need to think of the parts. She is free to infuse the piece with a range of feelings straight from the heart.



At the height of rapture, the careful listener can perceive the restraint, the order and the measured skills. Excess in anything is abhorrent to her as an infringement of good taste. Extremely canny about the editing, she believes that it is vital to creativity. Technical display for its own sake has never interested her, even though with her voice and training she could bring off any flourish in any tempo. M.S. is convinced that music must not draw attention to itself with showiness. It must point to something beyond that. In the last two years or so, on those occasions when the voice was not always in form, M.S. continued to mesmerise with a search more delicate, contemplative, ripe....

Subbulakshmi and Sadasivam sought the blessings of the Kanchi Paramacharya in every endeavour. It was he who chose the pieces for Subbulakshmi's five cassettes of the Balaji Pancharatna mala, which, along with her impeccably rendered "suprabhatams" (morning prayers) to several deities, resound from temples from Kedarnath to Kanyakumari. An arduous task was the recording of Mahavaidyanatha Sivan's magnum opus - a long, imposing composition in the 72 parent ragas of the Carnatic system. When the Paramacharya of Kanchi heard it, he raised his right hand, in benison. "This will last as long as the sun and the moon shine in the sky." Even today, recalling that moment becomes tearful joy for Subbulakshmi; she considers it her highest accolade.

Over the years certain ragas like Sankarabharanam and Khambhoji have come to be recognised as bearing the unmistakable stamp of the best of M.S., as also certain compositions, particularly on the Mother Goddess - "Saroja dalanetri" and "Mayamma" of Syama Sastri, or that stately progression of "Kshirasagara-sayana" in Mayam-alavagowla. The excitement is audible in the hall when she starts "Enta matramu", Annamacharya's philosophic exposition of the oneness of Siva and Vishnu. This last was a favourite of her husband. "Sing it in every concert, sing it for me," he would say.

Among the tailpieces that are lighter but nevertheless have profundity of thought and feeling, her Mira *bhajans* never failed to move. "Kurai onrum illai" (I have no regrets), a verse by the statesman C. Rajagopalachari whom the Sadasivams venerated as their guide and leader, evokes sighs and tears when M.S. renders it as her concluding piece in every concert.

Since it was first rendered in 1944 for the earlier Tamil version of the film *Meera*, the song "Kaatrinile varum geetam" invariably sets the audiences applauding even as they hear its first note and syllable. Written by "Kalki" Krishnamurti to bring out the deep, wistful yearning of the human soul through music and poetry, the lyric uses the iconic visuals of the Krishna who blows magic through his flute.

The Upanishads talk of "*raso vai sah*" - the bliss of oneness with the Absolute. The ancient aestheticians have analysed *rasanispatti* or the evocation of bliss through art. When M.S. Subbulakshmi sings, the fantasy and hyperbole of the Krishna's flute become living experience for listeners of three generations across this country.