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A voice that enchanted

By Gowri Ramnarayan

CHENNAI, DEC. 11.

"Child, you carry the veena in your throat," said veena maestro Karaikudi Sambasiva Iyer. "Suswaralakshmi, Subhalakshmi," (goddess of perfect tone and auspiciousness) pronounced Bade Ghulam Ali Khan. Yehudi Menuhin was enraptured by the golden voice. Zubin Mehta was reluctant to take the stage after an M.S. concert.

The entire audience of musicians and musicologists broke into standing ovation after her special performance at the Rachmaninoff Hall, Moscow, and followed her with unceasing applause down the aisle, out of the theatre, until her car disappeared from sight.

Madurai Shanmukhavadiyu Subbulakshmi mesmerised both lay listeners and connoisseurs. More, she won plaudits from fellow artistes belonging to different cultures and systems of music. She introduced Carnatic music at the Edinburgh festival in the 1960s, she sang for the United Nations General Assembly, for Queen Elizabeth

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II at Royal Albert Hall in London, at New York's Carnegie Hall, and the Kremlin Palace of Congresses.

Though sometimes criticised for lightening the load, her bhajans and songs in different languages made M.S. a pan-Indian favourite. A Marwari industrialist in Mumbai insisted on an M.S. concert to `purify' his new built home, an Assamese plantation owner's daughter was given a south Indian name because her parents were Subbulakshmi fans, Indira Gandhi declared that the project she inaugurated was assured of success with M.S. singing the prayer, Satyajit Ray said he would come in person to accept an honorary doctorate from the university if fellow nominee M.S. would sing after the ceremony.

Raj Kapoor believed that the best thing at his daughter's wedding was the M.S. recital to bless the couple with her music. Rajiv Gandhi deviated from his path through the milling crowds to greet M.S. at the Tyagaraja utsava in Tiruvaiyaru.

Amazingly, M.S. remained untouched by the overwhelming adulation she received all her life, from every quarter. Each concert brought trembling anxieties, she prayed for divine assistance to pass the `test.' What mattered most to her was to stay rooted in her tradition. Though she could switch from an elaborate "Sri Krishnam bhaja" (Todi) or "Amba Kamakshi" (Bhairavi) to a Marathi abhang or Meera bhajan, you never heard the least trace of anything light or non-traditional in her Carnatic renditions of alapana, kriti or swara. Her grasp of technique and tradition was inexorable.

Honours have been heaped upon Subbulakshmi, including the President's Award, Padma Vibhushan, Kalidas Samman, Konarak Samman, the Ramon Magsaysay Award, Fellowship of the Sangeet Natak Akademi, the Desikottama and doctorates from several universities, the Hafeez Ali Khan Award and the Indira Gandhi Award for National Integration. She was made National Professor, Member d'Honneur by the International Music Council, Producer Emeritus by the AIR and Doordarshan, and Trustee of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts. One of those tributes came as a real surprise. She was overawed when her guru Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer and senior musician Musiri Subramania Iyer announced the proposal to accord her the Sangita Kalanidhi of the

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Madras Music Academy. She became the first woman to be so honoured and at the peak of her career.

In her twilight years the crowning glory of India's highest civilian award — the Bharat Ratna — came with thorns. Husband Sadasivam who had set her on the shining trail, was not alive to see his wife receiving the honour from the President of India. After his death, M.S. retired from stage and public life. Her health deteriorated progressively until the bedridden figure was reduced to wraithlike fragility. The radiance remained intact.

Subbulakshmi became a cult figure not only as a singer par excellence. She will be remembered as one of the most loved representatives of the best in traditional Indian values. Her patriotism was no bar to her belief in universal brotherhood, a profound religiosity enhanced her respect for other creeds, and conservatism underlined concern for others, particularly the underprivileged and the destitute. She belonged to the generation influenced by Gandhi and Vinoba Bhave to believe that to be human was to discharge duties towards fellow human beings.

Austerity and sacrifice were no catchwords. They were a way of life. Having known insecurity and deprivation in her personal life, she was happy to be guided by freedom fighter husband Sadasivam into offering her music to the service of others, for benefit performances. This was done easily, without fuss, as a matter of course.

M.S. sang nothing that she did not understand. Weren't the verses she intoned the outpourings of saintly souls? Whether it was Tyagaraja's "Teratiyagarada" (Won't you part the curtain?), or Guru Nanak's "Naam japan kyon chod diya" (Why have you given up chanting the Lord's name) the pleas came from deep within. Her bhakti sprang from knowing the meaning, from internalising the bhava. When she celebrated Mother India in a Bharatiyar song, the tears coursing down Sadasivam's face before her made visible the throb of her aural image.

"Maitreem bhajata," composed by the Paramacharya of Kanchi to be sung by M.S. at the United Nations, became her finale in every subsequent concert. The last two lines echo the Upanishadic injunction for control, generosity and compassion ("Damyata, datta, dayadhvam"). You could believe in the utopian dream because the ideals were intoned by one who practised them in her life.

"Kurai onrum illai" she sang. No regrets? We can only try.

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