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Songs shone with his quiet genius

He blended raga and bhava to present lilting lyrics. A tribute by GOWRI RAMNARAYAN to Kadayanallur Venkatraman, who passed away recently.



"CAN YOU imagine a Carnatic musician manning a telephone booth?" he once asked with one of his rare smiles. It was difficult to know just what he felt at that moment. But Kadayanallur Venkatraman was like that, he spoke little and had the complexity of a thinking artiste.

For many years he assisted his disabled son who was in charge of the telephone booth in Chennai's St. Isabel Hospital. Few customers could know that the spare, silent man who took shifts beside the telephone was a master in setting lyrics to music. He passed away with the same quietness on February 6, at the same hospital.

Even fellow artistes knew little about him. Ask him about his background and he would say, "I have the good fortune to know Iyerval (Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer) and Amma (M. S. Subbulakshmi). What more can I say?" Born in 1929 to K. V. Subbier, a PWD employee whose love of music found an outlet in bhajans, Venkatraman studied at the Swati Tirunal Music College, Tiruvananthapuram, and served as a tambura artiste at the city's radio station. At different times he had a year's training with Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar and in Muthuswamy Dikshitar's kritis from B. Rajam Iyer. Joining AIR Madras made for closer association with Semmangudi, whom he began to accompany in concerts. His radio music classes came to be known for their clarity. Musicians who came to perform at the radio station noted how perfectly he tuned the tambura for them. But Venkatraman never made it in the city's concert circuits. He did not even try. Luckily one aspect of his talent came to be recognised, without any effort on his part.

When the Tirupati Devasthanam decided to popularise Annamacharya, the 14th century saint composer of thousands of verses, most of which existed only on copper plates, M. S. Subbulakshmi was entrusted with the task of recording them in cassettes. Their music was wholly lost. A few could be acquired from singers like Nedunuri Krishnamurti, but most had to be fitted into ragas afresh. That is how the self effacing Kadayanallur Venkatraman found himself working with the legendary M.S., recommended for the task by Semmangudi. Thus began a creative collaboration that shaped some of the unforgettable gems of the MS repertoire, including Rajaji's hymn "Kurai Onrum Illai," a universal favourite today. MS loved to recall how the young man who looked as if he could barely speak, came up with wonderful tunes to suit every need. He could set a Kedaragowlai in the grand concert mould as in "Koluvudi," a Khamas that could swing with the Lord on his ritual oonjal ceremony, or a Kapi in "Jo Achyutananda," where every sangati is steeped in the love of the mother for the child, of the devotee for the Lord. Kadayanallur stood out for internalising the lyric's bhava, and finding the raga to go with it. He was at home in the heavy classical melody as with the light. More interestingly, he could make a classical raga sound nimble, or turn a fluffy melody into a serious one.

Since the rasa of the lyric guided him, he could sometimes surprise himself. After setting "Kannula dutite" to music, he confessed that he was not sure of the raga, "Is it Hindustani Jog?" He certainly surprised others with his brilliant handling of an MS signature song "Enta Matramu." If you asked how he managed to tame something so overwhelmingly wordy into a tala-raga grid, his eyes would gleam with a shy pleasure.

Some of this music was composed in slow spells, and with conscious attempts at achieving the required effects. Others came in a burst of spontaneity. "I can't forget the day he came in and without saying a word, started playing the sruti box, and sang the first two lines of ``Bhavayami Gopalabalam," MS remembered.

The lyric describes little Krishna in the same spirit as "Krishna ni begane" does, and Kadayanallur invoked the radiance of the old song in his setting, which also testifies to his originality and imagination.

The Yamuna Kalyani begins with a gentle, tender love, and ends in exalted rapture. MS was always visibly moved when she sang it, particularly when she touched the rare suddha madhyama, used sparingly, but with a tingling effect. Years later, he was to make more vatsalya magic in Senjurutti with "Ra ra chinnana." These settings seemed simple, but demand an austere fidelity to sruti and swarasthanam - in the sangatis and straight notes - just try out the dhaivata in the phrase "Kamalanabha nee" (Sriman narayana,

Bhouli).

There are those who believe that Kadayanallur's compositions are tailor made for the MS style, and only someone endowed with the lady's golden voice can do justice to them. This is true not only in the demanding sangatis he shaped, but also in certain straight notes that his placement made luminous and crucial. But his tunes have gained currency with other, particularly younger musicians, and seem ready to pass the test of time.

He excelled in ragamalikas - he could glide superbly from raga to raga, "Kandu kandu" is a fine example. His swara gnanam is evident in the chittaswaras.

The one in Kalyani appended to Annamacharya's "Sarvopayamuna" is quite simply, unique. On the rare occasions when he was coaxed to do raga alapana, longish parts would be enunciated as swara passages, with unexpected dattu prayogas and jarus.

Watching him compose was an experience. Sitting on the mat, eyes closed, with nothing but sruti in his ear and mind, he would come up with endless variations of the line, all of them beautiful. What irked him at such moments was the break in the trance when someone began to notate the sangatis before they were forgotten. He was as happy to compose a kriti for a Music Academy concert as a song for a family wedding.

An oonjal on the Srirangam deities was never sung on the dais, but remains one of the best examples of Venkatraman's mellow musicianship.

Kadayanallur was as much a perfectionist as MS herself. That is why his presence made her recording sessions produce flawless results. He would be present at rehearsals too, to edit, suggest and fine tune. For her concerts, he aligned her Lakshmi and Saraswati tamburas to tranquil resonance. Sometimes he accompanied MS on the tambura. Few realised then that the man behind the drone had so much to do with the music presented.

At a Tirupati concert Venkatraman's contribution was not only noted, but applauded by the musicians present. One of them was struck by the Madhyamavati format (Ni namame maku) and the choice of Manirangu to round off the mangalam.

His views on music, when he expressed them, were sharp, often illuminating. His grasp of the raga swarupa was uncompromising, and this was the one subject that he loved to talk about when he had just one or two auditors. He did not understand commercial goals in the arts. "We don't take up music as a profession because we want to make money. There are many other surer, easier ways of making money. We take to music because... Well, if you are the sort of person to whom I have to explain it, you will not understand it anyway."

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