

Feature

M.S.SUBBULAKSHMI - A DIVINE MAESTRO

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Few gestures of the Central Government have been received with such universal acclaim as the conferment of the much coveted Award of Bharat Ratna on Sangitha Kalanidhi M.S. Subbulakshmi (MSS). Her life is a seventy-year long saga of dedication to the muse of music as well as great charitable causes, approved by no less a person than Mahatma Gandhi himself. What enhances the character of this Award by the President Shri K.R. Narayanan is that this is the first time it is given to an artist in the music field, albeit to one of its most glorious exponents. This is probably a unique case of universal appreciation of the gesture of the awardee, equalled only by the totally deserving character and achievements of the recipient. Thus, the award has "blessed him that gives and him that takes"!

Although undoubtedly Bharat Ratna is the Kohinoor of her musical crown, the other gems adorning it were coveted ones such as her participation in the Edinburgh International Festival of Music and Drama in 1963, the sensation she created by the concert at the United Nations in 1966, the India Festival in Britain, Soviet Union and similar appearances which awakened the world at large to the glories and the divinity of classical Carnatic music in its pristine purity. Through these and other public appearances, honours came to her in a steady stream like the Padma Vibhushan, the Kalidas Samman, 'Sangita Kalanidhi' title from the Music Academy, Chennai and the Magsaysay Award. No other musician in India has her halo, with such a string of honours and awards that adorn her musical crown. The Bharat Ratna seems therefore, to be a logical culmination of a life dedicated to great public causes through the god-given instrument of a golden voice without a peer in India.

God's Own Journey

The Gods had ordained her journey to greatness right from birth. Born on September 16, 1916 at Madurai in south Tamilnadu to the celebrated Veena maestro Smt. Shanmukhavadiyu, MSS was the interior of a rich tradition. She gave vocal support to her mother's recitals from a very young age, with her God-gifted golden voice. Her mother's house was frequented by the great artistes. On such occasions, young MSS was heard with respect and they told Shanmukhavadiyu that a great musical career awaited her daughter. Normal teaching of the basics of Carnatic music by Srinivasa Iyengar, the patantara of her mother and her own burning zeal soon made her a good singer who could give vocal recitals of astonishing brilliance and depth at the age of 16 years of astonishing brilliance and depth.

Fate took a hand in giving a promising turn to the artistic career of MSS when the great film producer Dr. K. Subramaniam, visited the household at Madurai along with his wife and heard MSS in person. She was 17 then. He was so struck with the dazzling timbre of her voice that he signed her up for his film "Sevasadan", in which her singing and acting singled her out for a career in films as well. Thereafter, there was no looking back for her as she gave memorable performance in films like "Savitri" and "Shakuntala".

MSS also gave concerts all over India and stabilised her artistic personality in terms of warm, disciplined, yet charismatic music that rendered hard-boiled melody, devotion and sangitha sastra's tenets.

Meanwhile in 1940, Subbulakshmi got married to Shri Sadasivam, in a simple ceremony in a temple. It was said of a great Prima Donna's husband that he is "his wife's sounding board, listener, benevolent critic, press Secretary, father confessor, manager, and psychiatrist. He stayed discreetly in the background in her moments of triumph.

Subbulakshmi has always had a profound respect and faith in husband Sadasivam's judgement in every matter concerning her life and career. Sadasivam was unsurpassed in planning every stage of her development their venue and fulfilment. The pair were indeed inseparable until recently when fate snatched Sadasivam away and let her totally disconsolate, not having him by her side to enjoy the thrill of becoming a Bharat Ratna. In one sense, the Bharat Ratna only made her regret more deeply the death of her husband just a few weeks away, for even when the Magsaysay Award came along in August 1974, she had publicly stated thus: "I owe my all to my husband, Shri Sadasivam. By his loving care, he is my parent; by his unerring guidance, he is my preceptor. The latest award, welcome as it is, poignantly reminded her of the one person who was responsible for every honour conferred on her and who, alas is now no more.

The Mahatama Backons

In 1944, Sadasivams proceeded to Wardha Ashram to pay homage to Gandhiji. They joined the prayer meeting which was in progress. At the request of Bapu, MSS sang a few bhajans. Gandhi was greatly impressed with the sincerity and devotional fervour of her singing. This was in 1941.

In April 1944, revered Rajaji visited the pair and told them that he had promised Gandhiji that he would use his good offices to persuade Sadasivam to agree to five benefits recitals by MSS for collecting funds for the Kasturba Memorial Fund. Sadasivam, of course, readily agreed. Up till then, MSS had given a few benefit recitals in favour of schools .

Later when the Kasturba Memorial recitals were in progress, Smt. Subbulakshmi received the letter from Gandhiji in his own hand, blessing her for the good work she did for the Memorial.

In September 1947 on the occasion of Bapu's birthday, MSS mastered the song 'Hari Thuma haro', a Meera bhajan at the behest of Gandhiji. It was recorded by AIR and sent to Delhi. Gandhiji heard it at his evening prayer meeting on October 2, 1947 and was happy. Little did anybody in India expect that Bapuji's life would be snuffed out by Godse's bullet on the January 30, 1948. To MSS at Madras, the news on the AIR came as a tremendous shock and when her own rendering of Gandhiji's beloved 'Hari Thuma Haro' was played on the network, she was distraught and swooned. Such was the trauma that Bapu's demise had given her that for nearly a year thereafter, she could not render the song without breaking down completely.

A National Saint-Artiste

The Hindi version of the film 'Meera' and the charismatic appeal of her role as Meera, the saint- singer, with her impassioned songs mounted on a glorious voice, not only swept all audience off their feet but enabled MSS to become a national celebrity. After this film venture, MSS was not a simple, talented south Indian musician albeit with extraordinary appeal, but a truly national saint-artiste who could take her listeners away from this

humdrum world to put them in a kind of celestial sphere wafted by the seductive appeal of her golden voice and the see-through sincerity of soul that backed it.

Her conviction was that only bhakti can plumb the depth of human heart - as she put it, her songs have the higher purpose of directing the minds of listeners towards God and his manifestations. To be equally at home in a Sri Tyagaraja Kriti on Lord Rama as well as in a bhajan of Tulsidas or of Meera is an unsurpassed asset of Smt. Subbulakshmi. It is such a blend of divine aspirations that could have made Smt. Sarojini Naidu, Babu Rajendra Prasad, Jawaharlal Nehru (vide the now famous quote viz. 'You are a Queen. I am only a Minister'), Dr. Radhakrishnan, Lord Harewood and the United Nations General Assembly succumb entirely to the charms of her music.

Too often, people are apt to emphasise her golden voice as if great and soulful music is only a matter of vocal chords. The kind heart and soul of MSS, behind her art, gave the real thrust to help music and made her career a mission in life.

Very conspicuous in her is the trait of contentment. Though crores were earned by her recitals and gifted away to worthy causes like hospitals, schools and helping the poor. The ideals of plain and simple living had soaked into her system from the very beginning. Her scrupulous regard for correct pronunciation, whether it be verses or songs in Sanskrit, Hindi, Kannada, Bengali or Tamil is evident from her bhajans and songs recorded on tapes and played on AIR and Doordarshan almost every day and heard by millions.

Empress of Carnatic Music

As a carnatic musician, her virtuosity is unquestioned. For example, in raga alapana, she has few peers, as she can traverse the three sthayis with ease and scrupulous srutisuddha. Ragas like Sankarabaranam, Kambodi, Todi, Bhairavi, Kirwani, Kalyani, Sriranjini, Kedaragowla and others are explored in such detail and colour that they resemble the paintings of a Rembrandt, Da Vinci, Turner or Van Gogh, remaining etched in the heart's memory long after they have been heard. She can lay the Antaragandhara in tarashthayi out on the air so sweetly that it stays there, as a painter lays a colour on canvas.

As a stylist, MSS could do instinctively what other singers take infinite pains to do and never achieve the technique was so astonishing that it was no longer apparent. She gives the impression that she enjoys bringing off a tour de force every time. It is the unique voice of the world - its beauty, clarion quality, splendour glow with brilliance. Yet, while executing the brilliant chords and phrases in the tara sthayi, her voice would stay within, rather than beyond its limits of resonant power. In her bird-like flights, her great sweeps, one would come across precious masterpieces of vocal jewellery. How much inner life she must have to achieve such triumphs is well left to the imagination.

Ever since the Bharat Ratna award was announced, great leaders of the nation, politicians of every hue, not to speak of the music fraternity itself, have been visiting her in an unending stream of callers to congratulate this humble, one had said almost diffident lady. It would be invidious to mention names. Suffice it to say that every cross section of public opinion, has unanimously felt as if they themselves had been honoured with the award. Few other things in India's public life have evoked such universal and international acclaim. One hopes MSS would resume her services to society and the great causes before long. Dr. M.S. Subbulakshmi is not just an artiste, but an Epoch in herself.
