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### "You sing like an angel"

By Gowri Ramnarayan

CHENNAI, DEC. 11.

RUNNING HER hands over her singing throat, the blind and deaf Helen Keller exclaimed: "You sing like an angel!" Over seven decades, three generations of listeners have known the same exaltation in Madurai Shanmukhavadi Subbulakshmi's vocal magic. They see M.S. as a saint, even goddess incarnate. Her art transcends the sense and enters the sacred sphere of light. Living in the age when music became a packaged product for consumerists, often tailored for export, Subbulakshmi retained the old tradition of reaching out. Instead of shrinking into elitist classicism as a few purists did, she followed the singing saints of the bhakti cult. She sang in ten languages but never one word without internalising its meaning. Her own spartan living, and donation of most of her earnings to charity, made the singer merge with the ideals she sang about.

M.S. was born in Madurai on September 16, 1916. Her auspicious Bharani star `presaged' the conquest of the world. Mother Shanmukhavadi was a respected but

### RETIREMENT HAVEN !!!



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impoverished veena player, supporting a family of three children, uncles, brothers, and their wives, all crammed into the airless rooms of a small house on Hanumantarayan Street. Now the house is marked by a small metal image of the veena nailed above the threshold.

Knjamma (as she was called at home) was to know the perplexities of seeing her lawyer father living with his own family in an adjacent street. But Subramania Iyer was exceedingly fond of his "Rajathippa" (princess). He singled her out to ride with him on the open carriage bearing the portrait of Lord Rama through the streets on the days he offered bhajanai to the deity. It is he who gave Kunja her serene features, and "made me see that bhakti was everything." Her father had shown her the ardour of devotional singing, much before husband Sadasivam put bhajans on a par with classical compositions.

Sibling bonds with Vadivambal and Saktivel were a source of joy in their restricted life. The children absorbed music from the air around them. Vadiva would play the veena while Kunja sang, and Sakti drummed along. "He was very good on the mridangam," M.S. would say with pride. After his death her voice trembled, "Now I have none to call my own." Bedridden at 87, her mind slipping into unconsciousness, "Anna!" was the name she called out in yearning, along with Amma and Appa. She had returned to her childhood world.

The family just about managed to survive. Kunjamma knew only coriander coffee and country jaggery, and grew up always checking to see if others had enough before helping herself to anything. But the home was rich in music. The nadaswaram players on temple processions would stop by Shanmukhavadvu's home and play their best. Mother made music, while musician visitors sang and played instruments from gottuvadyam to jalatarangam. They invariably asked Kunjamma to sing, and blessed her. Being asked to sign another piece or a cryptic "You must come up well," meant high praise. Some of them even taught her a song or two. Devotion to god, respect for elders, self-effacement and humility were part of her home culture. Her fawnlike timidity was her own. She was never to lose it.

Did the child know she was gifted? Beautiful? "Mother was

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a woman of few words. I remember how irksome she found it when she spread my thick, curly hair over the washing stone and cleaned it with shikai and water. We didn't talk about talent. We were simply told to practise." Singing came to little Kunja as leaves to trees, bees to flowers. Her concentration was phenomenal, it gave her perfect sruti alignment, and raga fidelity. There was nothing else to think about except music. She heard the temple nadaswaram, a few concerts, the neighbour's radio (they didn't have one), and folk song from street beggars. Singing was as inevitable and essential as breathing. Listening to the tambura was rapture.

Schooling was given up after a beating by a teacher, which aggravated her whooping cough. To the family's amusement, an old mendicant pilgrim took upon himself the task of teaching Kunjamma the grantha script, as also Sanskrit shlokas. Formal music lesson began with Srinivasa Iyengar, whose sudden death was a shock to the child. (Years later, she was to be similarly disheartened by the demise of doyen Mazhavarayanendal Subbarama Bhagavatar, who had started training her in pallavi singing).

By this time Kunjamma had already begun to sing with her mother's veena on the stage. This happened as a matter of course, without fuss and fanfare. When mother cut a 78 rpm record in Madras the accompanying child too was asked to do her bit — that is how the impossibly high-pitched Khamboji in "Marakatavadvu" released her voice on the gramophone `plate'. In course of time, concert notices announced "Miss Shanmugavadvoo" as accompanist to "Miss Subbalakshmi of Madura."

The scrawny girl on the stage dressed with provincial gaucherie, wore imitation `jewels' and glass bangles, and a row of medals pinned to her shoulder. "I looked awful, but so did most of us, not knowing any naagarikam (finesse)" she would chuckle. However, Kunjamma began to draw people's attention with her limpid voice, winsome expression, and childlike demeanour.

What warmed her heart, and boosted her confidence — never high — was encouragement from senior musicians. The irascible laya maestro Dakshinamurthy Pillai not only asked her to sing for a family wedding, but praised her pure voice and emotive approach in public, before a galaxy of musician guests. Veenai Dhanammal was

another to express cryptic approval when Shanmukhavadiyu took her daughter to see the redoubtable old lady in 'pattinam' (Madras).

By the 1930s Madras had become the capital of Carnatic music and Shanmukhavadiyu shifted quarters (a garage in Georgetown), trying to establish her daughters' career, little knowing that Thiagarajan Sadasivam would enter into Kunjamma's life and take her away, into dizzying heights of success.

Employed in marketing the Tamil weekly Ananda Vikatan, freedom fighter Sadasivam came to monitor a photography session of the young artiste. His fearless strength promised her the security she craved. She had no hesitation in entrusting herself to his care. In 1940, they were married in Tiruneermalai, with Kasturi Srinivasan, The Hindu, and "Kalki" Krishnamurti witnessing the registration.

Sadasivam had lost his job. "Surely you and I can earn a hundred rupees each per month, enough to manage," said Kunjamma. She was talking about Sadasivam's family of two daughters, an orphaned nephew and niece wholly in their care, an aged grandmother, and numerous relatives who needed to be financially assisted, housed, educated, married, treated in times of ailment. Hidebound grandmother Mangalam was to leave the brood in charge of M.S. with these guidelines before departing to Varanasi: "Make sure that Ambi (the nephew) goes to college. Get the girls married suitably. I know you are god fearing and will observe every pandikai (religious festival) with customary rites; remember we don't have navaratri kolu or varalakshmi nombu in our family."

Kunjamma thrived on the love she found among the children in her care. She fed, oil-bathed, clothed and showered affection on them. Her evening Ovaltine making was a ritual treat. Moonlight nights found the children nestling round her on the terrace, as she ladled out curd rice with a drop of vathakuzhambu into each hand by turn.

Elder daughter Radha and M.S. became and remained inseparable. The vivacious, intelligent child was to become more than M.S.' right hand through the decades of glory. Radha was her vocal accompanist, emotional support and sympathetic companion until her illness in

the 1980s, a shock from which M.S. never wholly recovered.

M.S. acted in four films (1937-47). Savitri was to raise money for Sadasivam and family friend "Kalki" Krishnamurthy to launch a nationalist magazine. Meera, the last, made her a national icon, and in a sense, made her know herself. The shy girl from Madurai could hold her own with experienced film actors, and make American director Ellis R. Dungan weep unabashedly when she sang, every note throbbing with the rapture of devotion. Dungan is credited with giving her a new 'look', best suited to highlight what he called "ethereal" features. That quality of course, came from within. Did she not swoon before the Lord in the Dwaraka sanctum? For that moment, film became reality.

M.S. was a lifelong learner. Until her last concert she continued to acquire compositions in several languages from a host of practitioners as varied as Narayanrao Vyas, Dilip Kumar Roy, Srinivasa Rao, A. Kanan, S.V. Venkatraman, Papanasam Sivan, Musiri Subramania Iyer, Piano Vaidyanathan (who set "Vaishnava janato" and "Hari tum haro" to music for Gandhiji), G.N. Balasubramanian, Sandhyavandanam Srinivasa Rao, K.V. Narayanaswami, Nedunuri Krishnamurti et al. Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer was her revered guru, influencing her to think more deeply and ripely about raga and kriti. He taught her the imposing compositions of the great vaggayakaras in his burnished pathantara. He judged her to be the best to revive the forgotten 72 melaraga malika, which demands a hair's breadth swara precision. From the north, Begum Akhtar had wanted to teach M.S., but it was Siddheswari Devi who came to live in her Kalki Gardens home for six months and taught her thumri, bhajan and even chhota khyal. It used to be a thrilling experience to watch the two doyennes sing raga scales, Siddheswari Devi rolling the 108 beads each day to keep count. When the disciple finally sang a chhota khyal on the stage, the beaming guru was in the hall to approve.

For the last 25 years of her life, her music, rehearsals and recordings were monitored by self-effacing Kadayannallur Venkatraman. He set to music many of the Annamacharya lyrics that the Tirupati Devasthanam commissioned her to propagate, as also a host of other M.S. favourites from "Kandu Kandu" to "Kurai onrum

illai." Theirs was a special relationship — M.S. always wanting everyone to know his contribution, Venkatraman fighting shy of any publicity.

Though M.S. did not become as internationally known as Ravi Shankar, or later, Zakir Husain, she did introduce Carnatic music to the West in a significant way — first at the Edinburgh festival, later at the United Nations Assembly, and coast-to-coast tours of the U.S.

Nehru's prediction that Subbulakshmi's music would cross the barriers of culture came resoundingly true. The Times, London, 1963, thought her an "excellent introducer of the beauties and intricacies of Carnatic Song." The New York Times exclaimed in 1966, "Her vocal communication transcends words... Subbulakshmi and her ensemble are a revelation to western ears." No compromises for audiences from circles wider than NRIs. The same expansive alapana overflowing with brikas and gamakas prefaced "Sarojadalantetri" in her signature Sankarabharanam, or "Kaligiyunte" in Kiravani.

Fellow artiste Rukmini Devi Arundale once quipped, "Kunjamma, you must leave some awards for others!" But M.S. had something more than the rain of awards: the adulation of pamara (lay) and pandita (erudite) listeners. Listening to her Vishnu Sahasranamam, Agnihotram Thathachariar could wonder, "How does she have that flawless enunciation we scholars are unable to achieve through several birth cycles?" Householders innocent of Sanskrit, identify with the bhakti in the M.S. suprabhatams of Venkatesvara, Visvanatha or Meenakshi. Though her Hindi bhajans made her known beyond the south, Subbulakshmi's Tyagaraja Kritis too could keep north Indians in their seats. Pilgrims thrill to her voice amplified in temple prakaras from Kedarnath and Badrinath to Rameswaram and Kanyakumari. When she was given India's highest civilian honour, many declared that by accepting the Bharat Ratna, Subbulakshmi had conferred honour on the award.

Shaped by the liberal humanist ethos of their youth, the Sadasivams only vaguely realised it had crumbled in meaner climes. Sadasivam's own firebrand nationalism landed him in protests and prisons, and identified his wife with the freedom movement. Rousing nationalist songs were part of her concerts always. The couple remained close to national leaders from the Gandhi-Nehru era.

Their loyalty to C. Rajagopalachari grew stronger in his times of adversity. Times changed, but their values remained constant. To M.S., her husband's word was law. Contradiction and argument were unknown. "If you surrender yourself, there are no problems left." It was as close as she got to a rebuke for a granddaughter's feminist leanings.

Conservative to the core, Subbulakshmi performed religious rituals with a meticulous faith. The Paramacharya of Kanchi had her total allegiance. When she lived in the Kalki mansion, it was before his lifesize portrait that her lips moved in silent chants.

Subbulakshmi would not have known the meaning of "secularism." But staunch in her culture, she remained a stranger to bigotry. She had known what it was to be poor, insecure and marginalised. In the final analysis it is her empathy for the downtrodden — in daily life, not just in cheques donated on platforms — that gave her music the quality of mercy.

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