

# THE HINDU

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### He strode like a colossus

Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer blended lakshya and lakshana beautifully to make his music enthralling, observes senior disciple V. SUBRAHMANYAM.



STALWARTS TOGETHER: Semmangudi flanked by K. S.

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### **Narayanaswami Iyer (right) and Prof. Sankara Iyer.**

IT IS our common experience that great personages who contribute a great deal to society are not blessed with longevity. And the few who live long are affected by mental and physical disabilities preventing them from functioning effectively. Sangita Kalanidhi Dr. Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, defied both the above premises. He lived a glorious life of 95 years and with all mental faculties in good order till the end. Only for about 20 of his last days did he slowly withdraw from his surroundings, keeping his eyes closed all the time opening them only when he wanted to see someone, and using minimum words to convey what he wanted. It appeared as though he had decided to close his worldly innings and was deliberately folding in. Prior to this, even though he was physically weak due to advancing age he was conversing freely with everyone who called on him reminiscing on the past, especially on music, with clear memory.

Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer was the only musical maestro who blended the Lakshya (imagination) and Lakshana (musical grammar) aspects of Carnatic music in the right proportion. No doubt, his music abounded with imagination as he always laid emphasis on the Lakshya. He would advise his students that the grammar should never be allowed to smother their musical imagination and at the same time imbibe the Lakshanas well so much so, even unwittingly, the boundaries are not trespassed.

A past master in kutcheri craft Semmangudi had enthralled audiences through his life. Wholesome kirtana renditions with touching nuances, gamakas and half notes, with highly imaginative raga renditions and bhava rich kalpanaswara expositions made his concerts memorable and successful always.

Mridangam maestro Palakkad Mani Iyer remarked "Not a single concert of Semmangudi Srinivasa has been a failure." All his concerts left in the listener haunting impressions for years on end. Certain compositions such as ``Marubalga" (Sriranjani), and ``Ksheenamai" (Mukhari), are just a few pieces which no other musician could surpass him in rendering. Kharaharapriya was his forte and the brilliance of his rendition of this raga made other artistes hesitant in attempting an alapana of that raga.

All concert artistes are not necessarily good teachers. Semmangudi Mama was an exception. He would take care to see that the student got all the contours of the piece he taught reasonably perfectly. In the traditional Gurukulavasam style many students have stayed at his residence and undergone training. He never took any money from his students as fees. From those who came to learn from him under scholarship schemes he would take the scholarship money they

received and keep it separately and would return the sum to the students when they completed the period of their training. Competent students would, normally get opportunities to give the doyen vocal support for his concerts and the experience and knowledge the student got out of this was immeasurable.

It is rare to find a person with such great attributes to be very humble. Semmangudi Mama had never been arrogant. He treated the young and old alike with the same amount of affection and regard. Once a great rasika of his was talking to him and in the course of the conversation told Mama, "How many wonderful kutcheries you have performed thrilling us all" and Semmangudi Mama shot back pointing to the photograph of Ariyakkudi Ramanuja Iyengar which was in the room, " compared to him I am nothing." He lived up to the saying "*Vidya Vinaya Sampannah.*"

A good orator, his speeches were as scintillating as his concerts sparkling with wit and humour. Everyone who called at his residence to pay his/her last respects to the doyen had an anecdote to recall underlining the personal touch he bestowed on relationships.

On the opinion that classical Carnatic music is not what it used to be, that it has lost its depth and that the values have undergone changes, he would say that such changes are inevitable. Any art form would be subjected to continuous changes as otherwise it would become stagnant. He also had a high regard for the performers of today.

Semmangudi Mama was a person of very simple needs. A true Gandhian, he wore only khadi and until a few years back he spun yarn in his own charka. He never adorned himself in grand dhotis with wide zari borders and an *angavastram* as is the habit of musicians. He believed in simple living and high thinking. He led a disciplined life with regular religious practices. Almost everyday he would chant 1,000 Gayatris in the morning and only then have his cup of coffee.

Of course, other japas and parayanas would follow. He was invited by organisations in the U.S. and other foreign countries for concert tours which he turned down, as he was a firm believer in sastraic injunctions which prohibited overseas travel. Semmangudi Mama's father also had taken a promise from him that he would never cross the ocean.

Blessed with a sharp intellect Mama was very systematic in whatever he did. Not only as a musician but he would have been at the top echelon in any other avocation as well.

He was a true Nadopasaka, revelling in music and singing with gay

abandon whenever he was relaxing at home. Or he would be involved in looking up new compositions and setting them up in notation form. Semmangudi Mama was a Matruka Purusha and the young aspiring musicians should spare no efforts in emulating him. I consider myself most blessed as I was with him as his disciple for over 46 years and had the privilege of giving him vocal support for thousand of his concerts, which has given me rich musical experience and insight that words cannot adequately convey.

One is reminded of Shakespeare's description of Julius Caesar: "He doth ride the narrow world like a colossus and we petty men walk under his huge legs and peep about to find ourselves dishonourable graves".

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