

THE HINDU

Online edition of India's National Newspaper

Monday, Dec 13, 2004

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ONCE IN AN EPOCH

THERE ARE RELATIVELY few creative people about whom it can be said, without exaggeration, that their achievement is likely to have a following a hundred years from now. In India, we can say it about a major poet like Rabindranath Tagore or Subramania Bharati, a beloved short story writer such as Premchand, a great novelist like R.K. Narayan. We can say it about artists like Ravi Varma, Amrita Sher-Gill, and M.F. Husain. We can say it about Satyajit Ray, filmmaker and polymath. We can certainly say it about India's genius of song, M.S. Subbulakshmi (known popularly as M.S.), who passed away on Saturday at the age of 88. Her music will remain fully accessible to future generations thanks to audiocassettes, compact discs, and the rare offerings on video and film.

M.S.' musical genius encompassed a range of qualities that define greatness in the classical tradition. Born into the tradition, she absorbed classical values from her home and began her career on the stage as a child accompanying her mother's *veena*. She was a lifelong student, learning from musical giants belonging to different generations who contributed rare facets and refinement to her art. Marriage to the freedom fighter and journalist, Thiagarajan Sadasivam, in 1940 took her beyond stage performance, into perceiving her own gift as something to be gifted to the world. M.S.' musical greatness was recognised equally by expert and mass audience, Mahatma Gandhi as well as humble rural folk, over something like six decades. Its building blocks are

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well-known — purity; an uncompromising fealty to the south Indian classical tradition combined with a creative willingness to adapt and change to keep up with new times; an expanded, all-India domain; a progressive reaching out to other traditions, especially the Hindustani classical genre, without ever lapsing into eclecticism; unsurpassed *bhava*, or feeling, in the great *bhakti* mode, resulting in a singular "capacity to lose herself in her music"; "perfect alignment of *sruti*, complete command of *laya*, clarity of diction, faultless pronunciation in every language, immaculate execution"; a lifelong habit of meticulous practice and hard work; sincerity and humility that is humbling; "a voice that is heard once in a millennium"; and when everything else is said, a transcendental beauty that transports and elevates.

An attribute of M.S.' artistic greatness that deserves celebration is its accessibility. Her appeal cut across social classes as well as generational and geographical divides. Her musical offerings in many languages and her respect for diversity have been a force for national integration and civilisational goodness. "Who am I, a mere prime minister, before the queen of song?" exclaimed India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, who half a century ago showed a touching concern that M.S. should not strain her voice through overlong concerts. "I should prefer to hear it *spoken* by Subbulakshmi than *sung* by others," Mahatma Gandhi remarked famously in 1948 with reference to his request that she sing his favourite bhajan, *Hari tum haro*. There are equally interesting stories about humble folk trudging miles to hear M.S. sing. There was no other artist or creative figure in modern India who so consistently, over a lifetime, gave away all that genius earned. When added up and converted to present value, the donations made to a range of national, philanthropic and public causes through M.S. concerts and recordings over the decades would run into crores of rupees.

Every conceivable recognition and honour came her way — culminating in the Bharat Ratna in 1998. *The Hindu* joins millions of Indians in saluting one who brought beauty, grace, *bhakti* and humanity to everything she touched, a musical genius of the kind encountered only once in an epoch.

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