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In perfect unison

Never allowing an intrusive moment, the voices of M.S. and Radha sounded like one. GOWRI RAMNARAYAN writes on the deep and abiding bond the two shared.

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M.S. and Radha ... inseparable in their heyday.

“SHE HAD no disciples,” people shake their heads in regret. Others wonder, “Why didn't she train someone to carry on her bani?” But Carnatic vocalist Madurai Shanmukhavadivu Subbulakshmi (1916-2004) did have someone who not only imbibed her style — and knew her entire repertoire — but was also a flawless accompanist on the stage, giving invaluable support in life. From the day MS entered their household, Sadasivam's daughter Radha (then four years old), developed a special bond for the woman who was to become mother and guru to her. Their mutual attachment was deep and abiding.

Right from the start the child sat next to the performer on the stage and joined in the tailpieces. “No one taught or told me to sing, no one stopped me either,” Radha recalls. MS beamed fondly at the little girl, and so did the entire audience. On one occasion, when a song failed to draw the customary ovation, the child mimed, “Why no applause?” To everyone's delight, the hall thundered loud and long.

They were inseparable. MS had Radha with her in Calcutta during the shooting of “Savitri” where the child nursed her through fever and fatigue. In the next film Radha played Bharata to her mother's Sakuntalai, and was later to be the winsome child Meera in the film

which made MS a national cult figure.

The musically precocious girl rehearsed the orchestra before MS came to record her songs, and picked out Hindi bhajans for the tunes of the original songs in the Tamil version of the movie.

One day Musiri Subramania Iyer caught the child on the swing, singing her mother's ``Anandamen solvene" from ``Sakuntalai." When he asked, ``Can you sing a kriti?" Radha burst into ``Sudhamayi" in Amritavarshini. At Musiri's instigation she began formal training, first with T. R. Balu, then Mayavaram Krishna Iyer and Ramnad Krishnan. ``Mother was my guru really. She did teach me, but I learnt more by listening," remembers Radha. Soon the young girl became indispensable to the seasoned performer. It was her computer memory that absorbed, filed and recalled everything that mother and daughter learnt together from a whole range of gurus through the decades — from Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, K. S. Narayanaswami and T. Brinda to Dilip Kumar Roy and Siddheshwari Devi.

Trained by guru Vazhuvoor Ramaiah Pillai, young Radha had the privilege of MS singing for her Bharatanatyam recitals. Her most memorable performance was in Birla House, New Delhi, before a desolate Mahatma Gandhi when he was fasting against the Partition. As Radha danced to her mother's lilting ``Ghanshyam ayaari," describing Krishna's sportive play, a smile appeared on Babu's face. The ashramites thanked the child for making Gandhiji forget his cares for a few minutes. ``Babu then took me on a walk. Gandhiji's hand on my shoulder! I thought it was a dream!"

At another time, when Radha came down to take Pandit Nehru's autograph during the interval of her Bharatanatyam recital, C. Rajagopalachari took the book and drew a dancing figure beside the Prime Minister's signature.

Why did she give up dancing? Radha doesn't say. You suspect that music was the greater love. Certainly she recalls a rare solo recital in Bombay's NCPA with yearning, and the fact that the reclusive artiste Annapurna (Allauddin Khan's daughter and Pandit Ravi Shankar's first wife) surprised everyone by attending it. What did she say? ``Nothing to me. She told Amma `Your daughter is very good.'" Didn't Radha want to give more recitals on her own? ``I did," she admits. ``But father wanted me to be always there for Amma." Fortunately husband Viswanathan proved most understanding, as did sons Chandrasekhar and Srinivasan. Any regrets? Radha's answer is a smile.



Certainly she has performed with MS at prestigious occasions and venues, for national leaders, royals, statesmen, scientists, artistes and international celebrities of every kind. Her autograph book has signatures from Helen Keller and Marshall Tito.

Radha was a crucial contributor to MS's concerts at the United Nations and Carnegie Hall. Her retentive focus was even more essential at home, as when they rendered the imposing ``Koniyadi," or the 72 mela ragamalika at the Madras Music Academy, and in recordings of the Venkatesa Suprabhatam, Vishnu Sahasranamam, Annamacharya lyrics... Never an intrusive moment, the two voices always sounded like one. ``Once D. K. Jayaraman told me, `You are the best vocal accompanist I've heard.' Years later his disciple Vijay Siva said the same thing," she laughs.

What did her mother say? Chuckling even more Radha replies, ``She always insisted innum nannaa paadanum" (must do better). Until illness compelled her to slowly bow out of the stage no one had ever seen MS perform without Radha by her side. Radha's first CD double album brought out this year by Jass, has the navagraha kritis sung by her at a family function with a sruti box, to which violin (R. K. Shriramkumar) and mridangam (K. V. Prasad) have been added. The selection includes Banturiti (Hamsanadam), Sri Rajagopala (Saveri), Teye Tripurasundari (Suddha Saveri). E natinomu (Bhairavi) and a ragamalika viruttam.

``Before she passed away Amma took the tape in her hands and

blessed me."

Finally you ask what made MS a special person. Through a rain of tears Radha replies, ``Her patience. It was endless. Amma put up with every inconvenience, problem, demand. She never thought of herself."

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