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ENCORE

Moment of pride for all Indians

SRIRAM VENKATKRISHNAN

The day was October 23. MS held the distinguished audience in thrall.



LANDMARK EVENT: M. S. Subbulakshmi performing at the U.N. General Assembly.

Today, September 16, is the birth anniversary of M. S. Subbulakshmi. Hers was a life of many towering achievements and among them was the concert at the United Nations in New York.

As per the U.N. convention, a leading artiste of a member country was selected to perform on the opening day of its General Assembly session each year. MS was invited to sing in September 1965. The invite was organised by C.V. Narasimhan, ICS, then Senior Under Secretary General at

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the UN. The Indo- Pak hostilities of 1965 however saw a tersely worded communiqué published in *The Hindu* that "in view of the present state of affairs in the country" Smt Subbulakshmi had cancelled her projected visit to the U.S.

The invitation was repeated in 1966 and an announcement was made on September 14 that MS would sing on October 23 at the U.N. in the General Assembly Hall. *The Hindu* of September 15 reported that MS would undertake a seven-week tour of the U.S., giving 15 performances between October 2 and November 19. The same release announced the team of accompanists, comprising Radha Viswanathan (vocal), V.V. Subramaniam (violin), T.K. Murthy (mridangam), T.H. Vinayakaram (ghatam) and Vijaya Rajendran (tambura). It mentioned that performances during that tour would draw on a repertoire of 60 songs including the MS trademark bhajans and devotionals.

The high profile overseas tour and the media interest it generated were unparalleled.

T. Sadasivam, Subbulakshmi's husband and mentor, kept up the momentum by a series of press releases. Photo shoots of the team in full concert attire were organised and published.

Controversy

On September 18, it was announced that C. Rajagopalachari had composed an English hymn for MS to sing at the U.N. Set to music by Handel Manuel, Producer of Western Music at AIR, Madras, lyrics of the song were published on September 20. The idea of an English song had come from Gen. Cariappa. A controversy broke out in *The Hindu* on September 23 with letters questioning the necessity for an English hymn. A respondent wondered if Yehudi Menuhin would ever perform a Carnatic song.

Every halt of MS's concert tour was reported in detail. Reaching Europe on September 19, MS sang in Geneva, at the Redoute Villa in Bonn, where Beethoven had once performed and then in Paris at the Guimet Museum before arriving in London on September 30. At the Gandhi Jayanti celebrations at India House on October 2, MS sang bhajans in the presence of the Indian Ambassador, Dr. Jivaraj Mehta. That afternoon she left for New York to begin her U.S. tour.

On October 7, the lyric of a hymn ("Maitreem Bhajata") composed by the Kanchi Sankaracharya for MS to sing at the UN was published. It was set to music by Vasant Desai. MS sang it first on October 21 at the Carnegie Hall, where C.V. Narasimhan presented her as the "First Lady of Carnatic Music."

MS suddenly lost her voice on the eve of the all important UN concert. Meditating on the Kanchi Acharya she found it restored to normalcy. On October 23 afternoon, MS, wearing yet another unique silk sari from the

looms of Kancheepuram Muthu Chettiar and dazzling in diamonds, mounted the stage to tumultuous applause. Sadasivam had flown in from India the usual circlet of jasmine and roses to adorn her hair.

The sight of the small figure standing on stage, cheered by the audience was captured on film and photographs and was a moment of pride for all Indians.

Introduced to the audience by CVN, MS held them in thrall. The Secretary General of the U.N., U Thant, described it as "extraordinarily good music." MS's rendition of CR's English hymn, though applauded at the U.N., came in for some scathing comments from Indians writing in the columns of the U.S. press.

Contrary to the worries of CVN and Sadasivam, music critic Harold Schornberg of *The New York Times* praised MS's performance sky high and declared that "it would live in his memory forever."

Rave reviews

MS returned to India via London where she performed to rave reviews. She also halted in Rome and was granted a private audience by Pope Paul. On December 4, MS returned to a warm welcome in Bombay. She was described as an "Ambassador at large" for music. "I am glad you are back home. Tell MSS we are proud of her achievement," said Dr S. Radhakrishnan, President of India, in a telegram to Sadasivam.

Arriving in Madras on December 5, MS was accorded a civic reception at the airport with the city's mayor in attendance.

It was a remarkable achievement and invokes awe even among present day jet setting musicians. But MS remained untouched by it all. She knew only her music and perhaps that is what gave her art that pristine quality which made it immortal. *(The author may be contacted at sangeetham@sangeetham.com)*

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