

Presenting here a touching article by Shri A.R.S.Mani, a great rasika of Madurai Mani Iyer residing in Dar-es-Salam, Tanzania.

My first initiation to Sri Madurai Mani Iyer's (MMI) music was courtesy AIR, Madras in early 70s. Every Monday after the English News, it used to play the listeners choice in Carnatic Music. I often listened to his famous English Notes and Vellai Thamarai. When we bought a tape recorder, I recorded some of his other famous pieces, like Seethapathe, Marivere, Kapali, Kana kan kodi etc. That was about all until 1986, I knew of Mani Iyer's music. But I used to play them as often as I could.

Then that wonderful thing happened. Probably the best moment of my life. I met my friend Sriraman (we were working for the same group of Companies) in a concert of M.S.Subbalakshmi (MSS). He was recording the concert, at the end of the which, I forced myself upon him and said that I would be visiting him that weekend to take a copy of what he had recorded.

He was waiting for me. I found that he had a good collection of carnatic music cassettes. First thing that I put my hand was on red coloured HMV Cassette with MMI photo on it and looked at the leaflet. I was expecting to read Seethapathe, Marivere, Kapali and so on. But what a surprise was it to read "Sadananda Thandavam - Bahudari". I almost shouted, "What Mani Iyer has sung this song" and implored Sriraman to play it. Well what happened after that is legendary as far as I am concerned.

I completely forgot about recording of MSS (no disrespect to the Great Lady's music. please do not read between the lines) and went berserk with that cassette of MMI. I cannot exactly remember how many times I listened to it that day. I telephoned to Sriraman and spoke for hours on Bahudari Alapana and Kalpana Swaras. That's when he came up with that brilliant idea of going in search of more of MMI music. We advertised in The Hindu, Kalki, and The Mirror and got in touch with a few MMI's fans. Within 2 years, obsessed with collecting more of MMI music, we managed about 150 cassettes. WHAT A TREASURE IT IS! It brought us into contact with some gracious and fantastic individuals from all over India.

I am not competent to comment on MMI's genius. I can only say that it gives a great pleasure whenever I listen to his songs. It is never tiring. never boring. His music to me is insatiable. What makes MMI's music outstanding and appeals to me more than others?

- a) Sukanubhavam that one experiences while listening to his singing. Complete alignment to Sruthi throughout the concert. One can hear his prolonged stretch in Pa and Sa now and then, which was to ensure Sruthi suddham.
- b) He never over did on any aspect of Music, including his strong point i.e. Kalapana swaras
- c) Variation he could bring in his swaraprastharam. I have about 17 different Vathapi of his. There is at least one avartham unique to each one of them.
- d) La.la.... Le.Oooo. They were his special sounds. Sounds like French! How briefly and aptly he sang them, without spoiling the mood and the bhava. He only could do it and when someone tries to imitate him, it only produces a sound without music.
- e) He had a great ability to bring out the image of the raga in a single 'tharana'. One could easily identify the name of the raga without searching for help or waiting for the beginning of the krithi.
- f) His crisp and smooth alapanas for rare ragas. Listen to his Ranjani, Bahudari, Lathangi, Jayanthasena, Sarasangi, Saraswathi Manohari. Suddhabangala. Lathangi is usually Pantuvarali and Kalyani elaborated alternately. But not for MMI. His Sarasangi alapana can never be confused with Charukesi.

I have been reading and hearing about MMI from various people. One thing everyone agrees. He was a very simple man, courteous, polite who could not speak a word in offence to anyone. The following bears testimony to that quality:

- a) When asked whether getting chances for Kutcheries were difficult, his reply was that because of his Uncle Pushpavanam's influence that was not difficult. But he felt the responsibility of performing well to merit such opportunities. (AIR Interview)
- b) He never looked down upon other musicians nor criticised their style. When asked about the "Kanakku Vazhakku" in swaraprastham, his reply was "Yarukku thiramai irrukko ava pannalam. Ennala mudiyathu" (AIR Interview)
- c) It is a well-known and commonly accepted fact that MMI sang more free concerts and in temples. Money was never a factor for him.
- d) I remember a news item that I read long ago. He was rendering a concert in Parthasarathy Sabha. There was a lady sitting in the front row with a child in her lap. The child was crying now and then and the organisers tried to eject her out. Seeing this MMI seemed to have said, "Enakku onnum thondaravu illa. Avamattukku kettutu pora"

I listen to his tapes every day without fail. I may skip my other routines, but not a day passes without listening to MMI's music. Bhakthi bhavam of Carnatic Music is always over emphasised. But thanks to MMIs music, I am able to enjoy Kambhoji and Abhogi behind his niraval in Manikkam Vairam (Kana Kan kodi) and Kirupanidhi ivari pola (Sabapathikku Veru).

Very often a question is asked in the Beauty Pageants. "If there is a chance to change your life, what would you like to do?" The answer is invariably, "I do not like change anything. I would like to re-born like what I am now". If that question is put to me my answer would be, I would have liked to be born in 1930s. That would have given me a chance to listen to the live concerts of MMI. I really envy those who had an opportunity to listen to him directly. But God thank you for making me attend the concert of MSS on that lovely day in 1986. Thank you for letting me come in contact with Sriraman and other MMI fans. Otherwise I would still be thinking that MMI did not sing anything better than English Notes and Vellai thamarai.

His music was great and soulful. Equally, he was a fantastic human being that made him the Great Musician to be remembered affectionately even after 35 Years, since he breathed his last.

I would like to recall the often-repeated anecdote relating to MMI. The Great Sage of Kanchi Mutt Periyava was once passing through MMI's house in Mylapore. He stopped in front of MMIs house but did not see MMI come out. MMI had not finished his morning routines and did not want to see Maha Periyaval without having bath. On learning this, it seems Periyava said, "Unakku ennada Mani madi acharam ellam. Onoda pattavida adhellam onnum perisu illa!! "

Can there be a better recognition for the Greatness of Madurai Mani Iyer's Music!