

A Year of Madurai Mani Iyer

The Hindu, October 26, 2012

October 25 marked the completion of 100 years of the music phenomenon known as Madurai Mani Iyer. The year 2012 has seen several events commemorating him, ranging from grandiose Sabhas to humble tributes at terrace gatherings leaving one with the sneaking suspicion that the maestro would have been more at home at the latter. Be that as it may, all this brings to mind another year that was undoubtedly Madurai Mani Iyer's – 1960, a year of triumphant progress with successive honours and felicitations. And The Hindu faithfully followed and reported on it.

It began with the Sadas at the Music Academy, Chennai, which took place on January 3. Mani Iyer's response to the grand panegyrics on him was a simple observation. "Music is a delicate art," he said. And he was always endeavouring to do better.

Next came the Tyagaraja festival conducted by violin maestro Marungapuri Gopalakrishna Iyer at Srirangam. The event lasted for four days, from January 16 to 19 and on the last day, Gopalakrishna Iyer felicitated Mani Iyer on his receiving the 'Kalanidhi.' A gold-bordered lace shawl was gifted to Mani Iyer who replied thanking Gopalakrishna Iyer for all the support he had given him over the years. The Hindu (January 24) noted that a 'large gathering of musicians and music-lovers was present.'

On January 31, 1960, The Hindu published a detailed critique of Madurai Mani Iyer's music, written by 'Aarabhi.' This was prefaced by the report that on the previous Sunday, Mani Iyer had performed at the Mylapore Fine Arts Club, Chennai, prior to which Prof. P. Sambamoorthy had spoken on him, observing that Mani Iyer in some respects "was the musician of the year." T. Chowdiah, who was to accompany Mani Iyer gave him the title of 'Ajatashatru' – he who has no enemy.'

Aarabhi's précis on Mani Iyer's music noted all the salient points that have made him immortal. First came the sincerity. "He pours his heart out in his music, whether it is at a highly paid Sabha performance or at a free kutcheri performed at a temple." Then his performance – "He must sing as he likes, unfettered, with his audience waiting breathlessly upon the next stage of development in a raga or a swaraprastara."

"His swaraprastaras are always full of unexpected details though by now the broad outlines of their development have become familiar to us." His attitude towards accompanists was summed up next. "He never denies his violin accompanist time and opportunity. He is not bothered if sometimes, it is the fiddler who wins the applause. And the mridangam vidwan has a full time job on his hand when he has to follow the ramifications of Mani Iyer's genius." And finally, Mani Iyer's attitude – "at no time is he guilty of assuming an air of superiority, to which, as a matter of fact, his genius perfectly entitles him. That is why we continue to share his tremendous pleasure in his own music, with ever-increasing delight on his part."

Aarabhi noted that his mastery over ragas such as Behag, Kaanada, Ranjani, Sindhu Bhairavi and Dwijavanti “keeps his audience glued to their chairs.” The writer also paid oblique praise to the English Note by stating that Mani Iyer, though a traditionalist, “had made certain inevitable concessions to modern tastes by the introduction of a touch of somewhat foreign flamboyance towards the end of each kutcheri.”

It is difficult to tear away from Aarabhi but there is more to report from 1960. On March 31, The Hindu announced that Mani Iyer was to receive the Central Government’s Sangeet Natak Akademi award. That very evening, the Sri Ram Samaj of West Mambalam, Chennai, whose Rama Navami concert series was in progress, organised a felicitation function. R.M. Seshadri, ICS (Retd.) presided and Mani Iyer gave a concert. The Hindu reported this on April 3. On April 17, the Tyagabrahma Gana Sabha, Chennai, organised a function at Vani Mahal. With Chittoor V. Nagiah welcoming the guests, the event was presided over by Justice M. Ananthanarayanan, ICS. Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer spoke in praise of Mani Iyer. It was a throwback to the past, for several years earlier, when the citizens of Thanjavur had banded together to confer the title of ‘Gana Kala Dhara’ on Mani Iyer, it was Ananthanarayanan who had presided and Viswanatha Iyer who had felicitated the awardee.

Many more events, in other cities and towns were to follow, all of which were graced by the maestro. His speeches were brief and he preferred to express his thanks through the language he knew best – that of music. Aarabhi was bang on target when he/she wrote presciently “the sweetness of his sincere music should continue to please us for many more years to come.”

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