

Madurai Mani Iyer the Memorable Music Innovator

(Dr.V.K.Viswanathan)

Several articles and a few books have been written about the mesmerizing music and life of the one and only immortal Madurai Mani Iyer. The website WWW.TRIPOD.COM/MMI authored by Sri.Vishnuprasad (an admirer who had never heard him live in a concert!) has the most comprehensive coverage of the details of the multifaceted life and career of Madurai Mani Iyer (MMI). This article will attempt at a personal level to cover certain areas not generally addressed or discussed properly in previously published literature so far.

The basic content is derived from the memories of the interactions of the following persons at a personal level with MMI: Dr.V.Radhakrishnan (V.R.) also known as Swami Bhuvanananda, a scientist who learnt music from leading musicians from M.D.Ramanathan, Flute Ramani, Ramachandra Bhagavathar, T.K.Murthy among others for a long period.

N.V.Subramanian (N.V.S.) Founder of Saraswathi and a violinist himself.

Dr.V.K. Viswanathan a scientist who also learnt music and has been actively involved in musical activities for over half a century in India & USA. He is especially interested in the world knowing more about his hero MMI.

(Late) S.S. Venkataraman also known as L.I.C. Venkataraman one of the countless number of ardent fans of MMI.

S.Ramanujam who was the first Indian chosen by Burmah Shell Oil Company to go to Holland from India (where he has been living for over half a century). His SLR Camera- one of the first in India- enabled us to break the ice with Carnatic Musicians!

We were all classmates at the Madras Christian College during the forties and fifties as well as in High School and also lived in Tambaram. We almost never missed a concert of MMI at any venue during this period even if it meant standing at the outskirts of halls and outside at wedding receptions even! At the end of the concerts we used to propel ourselves towards the stage to express our admiration. However our regard and respect was such that for a long time we just used to stand silent making mental notes while others talked to the maestros!

For example, MMI was told by Palani Subramania Pillai that T.N.Krishnan had just bought a new Fiat car. MMI remarked that S.Balachander's Studebaker apparently looked like a small aeroplane; T.N.Krishnan's Fiat sounded like one Palani chimed in! We gradually "advanced" to the green room before the concerts started and were

able to observe the critical and elaborate attempts to reach PERFECT alignment between the voice and the various instruments before ascending the stage for the concert. This was the moment when the perfection of the process was truly amazing and we were instantly transported to another world. We would then move either to front, back or the outskirts of the concert venue depending on the circumstances and were invariably transported to heaven on earth listening to MMI. It was an amazing sight to see the entire audience- including the accompanying artists- in union being ecstatic just being immersed and moved into another plane for the next 3 or more hours. I can never forget the sight of the entire audience including all the music vidwans being in a trance during many of the MMI concerts.

It took me more than a year before I could utter a word to MMII Gradually we expressed ourselves and MMI was so gracious we were emboldened to discuss the nuances as well as the new things he had introduced in his renderings that particular day. Like his famous and charismatic uncle Madurai Pushpavanam Iyer many times MMI used to start the concert with Vataphi. Before he started he always used to enquire whether his admirers like LIC SSV were present! Every time he rendered any kriti there were so many insights as well as innovations he could impart in his rendering. Very soon we started regularly visiting him at his house opposite Nageswara Rao Park in Luz Church Road in Mylapore. The bus stop in front of his house came to be called Madurai Mani Iyer Stop by even the bus conductors! He would talk to us and freely discuss music and other assorted subjects for 2-3 hours. He even invited us into his house when we had any doubts and patiently clarified and explained things. Must have liked our company?! He would especially

dwell on what he attempted to do and how far he was successful in the attempt. Though we were exhilarated about his new and novel variations in the rendering of say Vataphi he was always quite critical in his assessment of his renderings.

To give an idea of the scene and illustrate the ease with which he could communicate to persons at various levels let us examine typical scenes I was fortunate to be part of. A young college student just walked into the front room where MMI used to sit usually listening to the radio -actually singing in a low volume improvising on the song that came over the radio an exciting moment as he used to invariably improve on the renderings broadcast over the radio!;- His house was open to anyone practically and MMI always took time out if he was free to talk to visitors. The student had the audacity to ask MMI why he sang Vataphi hundreds of times while there are so many other songs he could render! MMI calmly replied: You said hundreds of times but it is closer to thousands of times actually. I am trying to find out if I can sing it at least ONCE to PERFECTION in terms of the composition technically as well as how the composer had intended it to be rendered and so far I am yet to succeed. This summarizes what a PERFECTIONIST MMI was in his approach and attempts.

Contrast this with another occasion when I happened to be present when the great composer Papanasam Sivan just dropped in. It happened a day after one of MMI'S famous Kapaliswarar temple concert where the crowd almost reached Luz Corner! We had managed to hang on to Sri. Lalgudi Jayaraman and managed to sit near the artists in the front. The good advice of GNB to someone who was planning to attend

such MMI Concerts to make sure to eat before they showed up as no services would be available- everything closed!- was literally true. Sivan & MMI discussed the emotions, inspiration, poetry and technical aspects of Kanakkankodi vendum which Sivan had requested. MMI was very modest and prostrated to Sivan when Sivan complemented him and said while he was the composer its greatness was obvious to anyone only when MMI rendered them. Such was the approach and genuineness of the exchanges! In another instance S.S.V. told me that a famous vidwan (famous for his careful dressing) just charged in and complained about a certain well known violinist had insulted him during the concert in symbolic and other ways. MMI just said "Appadiya"- is that so- and stood flabbergasted. The vidwan in his Vesthi and Thundu thanked him and duly returned to his home satisfied. These descriptions would sound far better in Tamil..... Once S.S.V. & I went to MMI'S house on his birthday to present a picture mosaic of him surrounded by the trinity as we felt he was born to present their compositions. MMI instantly ordered us to dismantle the pictures right away as he said it was inappropriate and we had to do it instantly in his presence with considerable difficulty and effort. Similarly when a rasika showed up and complained about Chowdiah's loud playing as an accompanist MMI asked him to please leave and said that he cannot tolerate anyone passing such comments about such a senior vidwan in his presence. While he was very sharing of his opinions he would not brook any negative comments about anyone else especially fellow artists!

The best part of observing him was witnessing MMI listening to the radio. Apart from the News, Cricket commentaries etc which have been written about the

exhilarating part was his listening and singing along in a low volume in real time to AIR concerts. It was a divine experience as he explored and improved the renderings on the spot. He used to telephone many such artists most of them not famous etc and congratulate, offer suggestions etc. Flute Ramani told me of such a call with excitement after all these years recently and was still moved by the call to him. I hope these give some idea of how MMI was always positive in his approach to persons at various levels of knowledge.....

Next let us discuss and dispel a few incorrect statements that have a certain degree of circulation about various aspects of his concerts and rare music. It is mostly due to the inability to fathom the genius and innovative ingenuity of MMI that many critics tried vainly to take cheap shots as well as some musicians who were just plain jealous of his popularity with experts and laymen alike. His appeal and popularity even today with even listeners who have not been fortunate to listen to him in person is a testament to his greatness. Usually these were couched by talking about his health etc as a reason while the facts are that the detractors just came up with incomplete and many times incorrect analyses. The best way to address these is to examine in detail various aspects of what MMI presented in his concerts and that is what I propose to do in the rest of this article.

MMI has not only publicly stated his admiration for the Ariyakudi Bani but initially followed the format devised by Ariyakudi and later modified it to suit his own innovative creative abilities. Like GNB Ariyakudi was his hero also. He has stated that he tried unsuccessfully throughout his career to capture the ability of Ariyakudi

to sing an alapana or kriti for half a minute or for hours and make the audience feel it was COMPLETE. Similarly he recounted an instance in the so called "Low-tech" days- without the amplified volume with its attendant distortions of the "Hi-tech" age when Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer(SSI) and he continued to retreat from the front rows (to show proper respect) to the back of the Tiruvaliyaru Aradhana Concert of Ariyakudi and was amazed to find that the voice never got dimmer bit filled the ears fully! Talk about honesty! Also MMI has stated how he used to go by bus 90 miles to hear Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer.....

In the initial stages of his career MMI started with Varnams; this is usually done by most artists so they can gauge how pliant and compliant their voices were on a particular day etc. But in the case of MMI it was totally unnecessary as his adherence to Swarasthanam, Sruti, Sarvalaghu Suddham and Kalapramanam as well as the range of his voice were magically perfect (due to his extensive practice and training- more on this later). The Kattai of the Sruti was the only parameter he decided on the particular day based on his judgment. Actually he found out that when M.S.Gopalakrishnan was the accompanist he usually raised the Kattai by a half as he felt that improved the concert etc. As a result he preferred to start with a kriti- it could be any one of many compositions by any major composer- as he could render one more composition which could convey more. Usually it would be a request by a rasika. When Sivan was present he would ask him for his choice (though Sivan preferred a trinity composition over his own compositions). So he rendered Varnams only when there was a request etc. Similarly regarding Ragam-Thanam-Pallavi, when Tiruvengadu Jayaraman was both surprised and taken aback

in a Hyderabad Concert where both Chowdiah and Palghat Mani Iyer(PMI) got so excited PMI played during Thanam- rare occurrence outside the Travancore Maharaja's presence in his palace- and they were still excited after returning to their rooms well past midnight! MMI had rendered a pallavi in 4 kalai chowkam in 3 speeds with various eduppus etc. The surprised Jayaraman observed he did not know MMI could do that & MMI observed that when he started his career no one who could not do that could even dream of appearing on stage for a concert. The fact is that there were two schools of thought regarding rendering R.T.P. In addition to the current scheme emphasizing complicated kanakkus and rhythmic patterns (memorized ahead of time thus preventing spontaneity etc) there was an approach attributed to Mazhavaraya nendal Subbarama Bhaghavathar in which simpler ragas were chosen with the ragamalika swarams being rendered in rare and exotic ragas. The older generation of musicians preferred this approach as it gave scope to real time creativity etc. MMI & Semmangudi typically followed this scheme. MMI has explained this in detail in interviews.

The general pattern of MMI concerts followed the Ariyakudi approach with compositions of trinity, HMB and leading Tamil composers like Sivan being prominently show cased. MMI was very sensitive to the desires of his audiences as well as the capabilities and strengths of his accompanists. His whole aim was to make the audience listening experience paramount. Invariably Gana ragams like Thodi, Kalyani, Karaharapriya would be present along with rare ragas and pieces sprinkled along side. In the R.T.P. and Viruthams he would include ragas requested which he did not sing as main pieces. There was a distinct phase of conclusion in

which was more or less fixed because of the popularity of the various songs for which he was famous. On the whole he was particular about the needs and satisfaction of his listeners. This resulted in an exhilarating experience most of the time.

Next we discuss various aspects of his music we had discussed over the years in our discussions with him.

First we examine the choice of his Guru. While practically every leading vidwan of his youth would have been happy to have him as student and he could easily have followed the Charismatic Madurai Pusphavanam style etc he specifically chose Harikesanallur Muthiah Bhagavathar (HMB) as his Guru. V.R. extensively discussed his choice and tried to understand his reasons.

HMB was a multi-talented person as well a musical genius. He lived in style and luxury like a prince. He was patronized by rich Zamindars and Maharajas and respected by vidwans and rasikas alike. He mastered the Vedas and other religious and philosophical writings and knew many languages like Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, as well as Sanskrit. He came from the Maha Vaidyanatha Iyer tradition and many great songs in different languages were composed by him in new ragas invented by him. As Mysore Maharaja's guest in Benares he absorbed Hindusthani music also. After many years as a performing musician he exclusively shifted to Harikatha especially concentrating on Thyagabrahmam as he was a brilliant speaker too. He got the D.Litt degree with the first written thesis in Carnatic music titled: "Sangeetha Kalapadruma". In short he was a giant in carnatic music! Passion for

Perfection was born with MMI. He was not merely satisfied with a brilliant concert rendering ability but was keen on learning the Theoretical Foundation along with it also. Only HMB could satisfy his demands, needs, and requirements. Hence MMI was naturally attracted to this Collosus in Music and chose him as his Guru.

We can easily guess what a strong foundation he would have acquired. "Lakshana" was equally important for him as "Lakshya". As many skilled performers existed then and he keenly listened to as many of them as he could- he has said he walked several miles to listen to concerts of great musicians- acquiring Lakshya skill was easy for him. HMB was a research scholar all his life and MMI could imbibe both Lakshya and Lakshana skills from him. V.R. has wondered if MMI privately followed the footsteps of his guru as composer as he felt that MMI's love for Sivan's compositions gave such indications but he did not ask him that question being too young etc. My own opinion is that he probably felt like GNB that the period of the Trinity was one for compositionally creative giants and his period was meant for exponents who could elaborate and explain compositions.

It is well known that contrary to the statements that his repertoire was limited as he tended to sing 10-12 songs each season MMI was considered by many senior vidwans to know the maximum number of songs in the second half of the twentieth century. His repertoire was at least 1000- equal to Veena Dhanammal- and he was a perpetual listener and student till the very end. As a matter of fact I used to ask Vellore Ramabhadran in Cleveland (about various songs he was not associated with) about songs that I thought he might not have rendered when I heard them in

concerts there. For example when I saw someone dance to "Ksheera sagara" I asked if MMI ever sang that & he readily said that in the fifties in a concert at Suriyanar Koil some one shouted a request for that song from the audience he rendered it in great detail! The only exception that I know of is that he did not render a kriti in Keeravani – I have not heard him at least-though he sang R.T.P. frequently! MMI said he would select 10-12 compositions each year and keep singing them over and over till he felt he could not improve their rendering any further. It is somewhat in contrast to Ariyakudi who apparently would not sing any song in concert before trying it out close to a hundred times in practice. Next year he would substitute 4 new songs etc. Of course he would accommodate requests of rasikas for other songs etc. Like Palghat Mani Iyer MMI emphasized "Quality" over quantity. Probably he felt that even if a small number of songs, ragas, thalas were selected they should be perfected before replacing them with new songs. Thus every season he would see to it the listeners got the satisfaction of hearing songs being perfected by him.

When asked whether he kept written documents of songs he had learnt he said "no" and he kept them all in memory! A contrast to many today who keep the written songs right in front of them. On the subject of how he learnt new songs he said that among vidwans it was known there were songs that they had worked hard to specialize; He would go to them and request them to sing the particular song he wanted to learn. His level was high enough he could grasp the "frame" of the song; he then practiced and modified it to suit his own style of rendering. This probably explains why any song he sang had the unique MMI STAMP in it. In contrast Flute

Mall who was staying with Papa Venkatarama Iyer was once playing marbles ("Goli") and heard him practice a song he did not know. Next evening Malli rendered it in his own style surprising Papa who applauded his playing! These illustrate how great vidwans were able to incorporate new songs after hearing it just once!

Dr. S.A.K. Durga has explained in detail how he taught his students. The key point is that he would not teach a line of the song before the student could sing the swarams in the correct swarasthanams & the laya aspects of that line. He also would not teach his own additions etc but insist on the original way in which it should be sung though he did not mind if they incorporated his nuances on their own. She also said that he would insist on being aware of the swara behind the song whether in an alapana or composition. Suddenly in the middle he would stop and ask what swara was being rendered there! MMI also did not have a general pattern but taught the students according to their capabilities.

One of the special features of his singing was his "Swara singing". Deceptively simple looking but as T.N.Krishnan pointed out very difficult to execute! His inimitable smoothly gliding and imaginative sarvalaghu patterns flowed effortlessly. The seven swaras are known to everyone but MMI combined them in the way only he could do and every one would love to sing swaras like him! When V.R. asked him how he acquired this unique skill he said: "If you taste one spoon of Rasam from the top you will know what ingredients were used- they will be the sediments in the bottom-. Similarly if you listen to my swara singing you would know the ingredients that were in my mind that produced the output. You must spend several hours in

practice in SaralivarisaI, JantavarisaI, ThattuvarisaI more than the usual limited number of lessons usually allocated. Then keep on singing the swarams without worrying about thalam etc with the free flow of creativity and imagination. You have to give special attention to Varnam singing (learning as many as possible) carefully noting the swara patterns, especially the third swara after the charanam which will be in the sarvalaghu pattern. Keep in mind that "Kalapramanam" must be maintained throughout perfectly to be effective". He was inspired by two sarvalaghu specialists of his time: Mazhavarayanendhal Subbarama Bhagavathar & Tiger Varadhachariar.

Sruti mata Laya pitha- Sruthi is the mother & Laya is the father- is the well known dictum & truism of music. Strict adherence to this with perfection was the basic foundation for MMI's Music with his creativity and imagination producing an astounding output. Let us examine this in some detail.

Again as explained by V.R. what is Sruti Suddha? The Thambura is tuned to the basic Sa & Pa the two Prakriti swaras of the seven notes in an octave. It is not enough to sing with just keeping accuracy to these boundary conditions of Sa & Pa. This raises the question of what Sruti is. It is the minimum frequency interval needed to recognize two notes as separate. Music has evolved all over the world. Results that are universally accepted divides the octave into 22 Srutis. The 22 low pitched srutis typically emanate from the chest, the 22 medium pitched from the throat and the 22 high pitched from the head areas. Each of these are grouped into 7 swaras in each of the above three called the Mantra, Madhyama and the Thara

Sthayis. So within an octave 7 Swaras 22 sruthis exist and the sruthis are distributed in the 7 swaras and in carnatic music form the basis for the Melakarha classification. Unless one places the 7 swaras at the correct sruti for the particular raga true ragha bhavam will not be produced. The Lakshya or hearing from expert musicians alone will help landing correctly at these srutis correctly. In addition every time irrespective of the speed one should exactly hit the correct spot. Just being accurate in Sa & Pa of the thambura is not good enough. Easier said than done. MMI could do this always! Dr.S.Ramanathan has said that Malaikottai Govindaswamy Pillai could do this effortlessly in Sankarabharanam as he knew the "Veedudus" (veena analogy) perfectly.

Next, Laya. Laya is the ability to allot a time interval for each swara, all exactly equal for each swara throughout the singing. This is called "Kalapramana" or uniform speed maintenance. It is not enough to maintain average speed. Each swara must have the chosen time interval. This subtle point can go unnoticed due to various instruments drowning the error as most musicians will be correct starting and ending at the proper points in the cycle but committing errors in duration in between and a laya expert will easily detect the error. K.S.Kalidas played excerpts from MMI concerts to demonstatrate how MMI employed laya decorations subtly with beauty and originality in swara singing and niravals. It was interesting to observe Thanam phrases being employed by MMI during raga alapana & kriti renderings especially when T.Chowdiah accompanied him. Of course it required a certain amount of knowledge to recognize these subtleties as they looked deceptively simple to the layman.....

MMI (Like M.S.Amma) was blessed with this ability to sing to Sruthi with Laya. The listener even if ignorant to recognize these subtleties has the ability to sympathetically vibrate with perfect sruthi and rhythm and combined with the bhavam and empathy felt blissful though they may not know why it was occurring. This is why MMI's music appealed the expert and lay person alike.

Speaking in terms of science producing and listening to music involves plasticity of the brain as well the servo feedback capabilities of the performer as well as the listener. First the singer has to get the CORRECT impression in the brain due to Lakshya & Lakshana- by listening to experts, acquired knowledge and storing the information from all the sounds from the Thambura etc-. It is well known that the Sa, Pa etc from the Thambura has other notes and the practice of merging voice with Thambura is the best way of attaining this skill. MMI & MSS used to practice with more than one thambura for hours every day: MMI's Guru used to sing with at least two Thamburas. This gets stored in the brain. When they start singing they hear their own voice and the brain compares the two and real time corrections are made by the servo system fast enough to make it perfect. The better the brain-voice-correction system the closer they are to perfection. MMI had this skill and talent better than most practitioners and his practice for hours on end no doubt helped also. His amazingly correct bio-feedback system resulted in correct delivery of notes. Many listeners while they cannot sing perfectly can still hear correctly.

Next in importance is the sustained concentration power throughout practice sessions and the concerts. Masters like MMI could do this effortlessly with

emphasis on Sruthi and Laya. For vocal music there is the added dimension of the lyric (Sahitya). Being trained under a Guru a great scholar, musician and multi-linguist MMI was very particular himself about the pronunciation, moods and knowledge of the language. The position of the sahitya letters in the composition in the tala cycle as well as the optimum place for Neravals was given great emphasis by him. Many do not realize why he used to stop now and then (intently listening to the thambura) and sing “e-e-e” instead of other sounds as opposed to the Akara usually used in practice by most. It is well known that the most accurate vowel to check accuracy and merge with sruthi is “e-e-e” and not akara sounds. M.D.Ramanathan (MDR) according to V.R.-He studied with him- used to emphasize this point. After all the sounds are converted to frequencies and the brain then compares with the stored notes to find out if the sounds are perfect for starters. When this is combined with the emotions and musical content of the composer the whole experience is elevated to a much higher level. His renderings of say Sivan's compositions with such feelings and passion not only moved rasikas but got Sivan himself emotionally merged with the Bhava of the raga as well as the contents of the song.

Another significant aspect of MMI's career was his encouraging young accompanists and showcasing them. Vellore Ramabhadran's concert career took off to its glorious pinnacle after he accompanied MMI in 1964 academy as a last minute replacement for Palani who fell ill. Same is true for LGJ as he came to Madras as a virtual unknown violinist. Madras Kannan described to me how he used to positively encourage and enjoy the playing of the accompanists openly in the

stage as well as outside. He would never brook or allow negative things said about another musician in his presence. LGJ has said how he would keenly observe as well as express appreciation (like a child according to him) during concerts. He was very particular (like Flute Mali) to include as many accompaniments as possible. For example the only prominent recording of DHOLAK is in a MMI Concert in which Balappa accompanied him. He also made sure the accompanists were properly paid by forgoing his own compensation many times. There is the well known instance of Palani wanting a sum that happened to be more than what the organizers could pay MMI. He said the success of the concert was more important than the fees etc and asked the organizer to take the extra amount from his compensation! Of course close to 75 percent of his concerts were FREE ("Thengamudi") and he never demanded any particular amount and the organizers pay according to their abilities. To him his audience was paramount and I remember his asking before starting a concert "Has L.I.C. SSV arrived yet?".....He also exercised great judgement in his choice of accompanists including considerations of properly projecting them in their favorite cities etc. Once there was a concert in Kodambakkam and V.Govindaswamy Naicker -popular hero in that area- was to accompany him. We had visited him that day to place our requests and during the conversation he said the concert is in Kodambakkam and therefore Naicker should shine and he must plan his choices for the concert accordingly!

At a personal level my entire life, attitudes and behavior changed for the better after I listened to and met MMI. My interest in not just music but life itself blossomed after I met MMI. His Gandhian life implemented in PRACTICE inspired me

to wear Khadar shirt& dhoti till I came to USA in 1959 to the point I wore that dress to the I.A.S. Interview which resulted in my getting 34 percent in the so called personality test-35 being the minimum! He was instrumental in my life long attempt to understand the profound compositions of the trinity, Sivan as well as other Tamil composers and my interest in Tamil Literature took off after discussions with him. When my son requested me to write an account of my life when I could not locate a picture of my mother the cover has MMI'S Picture along with the statement that MMI occupied the "Sthanam" of my mother as well as manaseeka guru.

While I have had the occasion to meet & know many great persons of the twentieth century I place MMI as the foremost as an inspiration as well as a remarkable one of a kind human being who could exist and communicate at various levels irrespective of the level of the other person. This to me is the great genius of MMI. I am indeed very fortunate to have lived at the same time and met such a noble genius.

Many have paid their tributes to MMI. He was so humble that one wondered whether he knew of the greatness of himself (like Anjaneya being aware of his greatness & strength) due to the TRUE "Knowledge" or BRAHMA JNANAM that is ego-lessness. Let us hope his second century will illuminate us to acknowledge, reflect and properly revere his place among the great souls that have graced the Earth.