

SRI.MADURAI MANI IYER

(B.V.K.Sastry)

In his famous composition “Kaddanuvariki” in Todi Thyagaraja describes the ideal singer as one who discarding sleep, beautifully playing a Tambura with a pure mind and spotless tone (Suswara) without departing from tradition, sings of the Lord...Possibly such singers were numerous in his day. But nearly a hundred years later time has certainly changed this aspect of Karnatak music. That devotee, who blending his deep voice with sruti, singing with fervour and extasy has become rather the exception than the rule. The suswara which is commonly met with in Hindusthani concerts has become as rare in the South as the sight of twin thamburas flanking the vocalist.

The function of the Thambura itself seems now to be more or less decorative and its subdued tone and the gap separating it from the vocalist are significant. Considering the course of some concerts it seems more often than not an impediment- an indispensable nuisance- to the vocalist. In such circumstances a singer with *suswara* is as welcome as a cool shower to a parched field and this endowment by itself was enough to push Madurai Mani Iyer into the limelight when he appeared on the scene in the early twenties.

EFFORTLESS RISE

Mani Iyer, it is true, had an impressive background at home, in the tradition and in the eminence of his teachers. Still that *sunward*, that beauty of his tone, blending with the *sruti* and combined with his sincerity of purpose propelled him effortlessly into prominence. His voice has not a resounding timbre. But it has not the cloying strains which guarantee mass appeal. But it certainly displays the good warmth and polish needed to lend colour and definition to the vocalist's ideas. His style of singing is sedate, effortless and redolent of the older Karnatak music, particularly that of the deeper South. His absorbed way of singing suggests a vocalist intent on not merely entertaining his listeners but also on his personal elevation.

The deterioration of voice standards in Karnatak music is a topic engaging him always and possibly one that even haunts him. Whatever the course of the conversation it somehow turns to this theme. "Can there be good music without a good voice?" he asks he. Mani Iyer deplores the currently tendency to ignore this aspect and bring forward one excuse after another for the failure. On one such occasion I suggested that popular apathy might be responsible to some extent for the deterioration of voice culture in the South. Warming up immediately he rejoined "who is responsible for that?". The voice after all is the vehicle of our musical expression. It is our duty to keep that vehicle well cleaned and oiled in smooth order. If you are careless of this and take the public for a ride in a rusty and

decrepit vehicle & then find they do not enjoy it much less thrilled by the experience, who is to be blamed for that? After all the voice is a natural gift and it is up to the musician carefully to cultivate and mould it to his needs as a pleasant and effective medium of expression. How can there be a good musician without good tone? I am unhappy to note that the present trend is towards carelessness of voice with a tendency to blame the bored listener for his apathy. "Let us forget the audience for a moment. Can there be a greater happiness to a musician than to blend his voice beautifully with *sruti* translating his musical impulses and ideas through a steady and flexible tone and transporting himself in his flow of melody? Anyway such moments are my happiest in music. In light of this I say with all confidence: Enjoy your music first. It will automatically infect the listener". "Then what do you consider the factor that has contributed most to the current deterioration of voice standards in the South" I asked: "Certainly, the faulty foundations" said Mani Iyer. "The preliminary lessons in music are not there merely to initiate. They lay the firm foundations of both musical knowledge and musical culture. Practiced according to the right and age old methods, they give strength and steadiness to the voice and transform it into a perfectly flexible and enjoyable medium of expression which lends clear definition to the ideas. But unfortunately the present practice seems to skip the early steps as a mere routine ignoring their vital aspects.

REMEDIES PROPOSED

"Naturally, the uncultured voices produced are unequal to the tasks by classical music and leave the interpretation anemic and unappealing" said Mani Iyer. He expressed the same ideas in greater detail and proposed his remedies gently but firmly in his presidential address to the thirty-third annual conference of the Madras Music Academy. Even in conversation he emphasizes these points, though gently, for by nature he is shy and reticent in opening out his thoughts. He speaks as though his words as far as possible express his ideas but should never hurt. Modesty is writ large on his face. Despite marks of illness, his khadi-clad youthful figure with coal-black hair and pallid complexion belies the fact that Mani Iyer crossed the threshold of his fifties last month. He is not at all the grave, moody vocalist one might have imagined. On more intimate contact he proves to be very cordial with a touch of subtle humour though careful with words. The keynote of his conversation will generally be: "Cultivate a good voice and adhere strictly to the tradition that has sustained the vitality and splendor of our music" and not without reason, for Mani Iyer is steeped in tradition. He is a product of the Dhikshithar School and could be said to have been almost born in the middle of music. Besides his musically inclined father Ramaswamy Iyer Mani Iyer's uncle was the famous Pushpavanam Iyer. Consequently with music ringing in his ears around him, he had his initiation at home and after a period of training from Rajam Bhagavathar he came under the wings of the late Harikesanallur Muthiah

Shagavathar the eminent teacher and composer a towering personality among musicians no less in the excellence of his scholarship than in the breadth of his vision. The influence of Muthiah Bhagavathar is very pronounced in his music and in his views on the subject. Though inclined towards tradition his outlook his music has nevertheless a touch of catholicity and appreciative of contemporary needs as well.

MODERN FACILITIES

At a time when the question of amplifiers had generated much heat and controversy (between the purists and moderates of the South),

Mani Iyer despite his firm belief that nothing could equal a good voice- a gift of nature- remarked to me "I see nothing wrong in adapting any facility whether ancient or modern to further the interest in classical music. The microphone diffuses music to a larger area and to a larger assembly. It also conveys the fine in addition to the subtle nuances which in earlier days were enjoyed and appreciated only by the few in the vicinity of the musician". "What if the microphone also amplifies the faults?" I asked. "All the more reason for the musician to be more careful about his voice and art" countered Mani Iyer.

He made his debut when he was twelve at a place called Alavakkotai near Madurai but his first real break three years later at the music festival accompanying the All India Congress session in 1927. And after three and a half decades since then the debonair figure of Madurai Mani Iyer has been familiar to all concert-goers of the south. His music is considered to reflect the positive side of what is accepted as

the classical tradition in Karnatak music today. Apart from his winning *sruti-suddha* voice and the *suswara* of his singing it exudes a homely touch. In addition a strong undertone of feeling is there behind the expression. It is also notable that he has popularized a great number of indigenous compositions of Tamil Nadu both classical and devotional.

CONVENTIONAL PLAN

The program of his concerts follows the conventional plan. It has some notable features. A judicious selection will be there of the songs of the trinity and of the other composers of the South; also a good number of Tamil compositions. But the list will incline towards Thyagaraja and Dhikshithar. "Without their compositions where is the living tradition of Karnatak Music?" asks Mani Iyer. Among Dhikshithar's compositions will be found one each of the Navagraha and Navavarna series, the former propitiating the planet of the day and the latter connected with the esoteric Sri Chakra cult. Other significant pieces will be one by his guru Muthiah Bhagavathar. In recent times it is *Jalandhara* in Valaji a raga devised by the Bhagavathar and closely resembling Kalavathi of Hindusthani music.

Among the lighter pieces used for rounding off-mostly by Tamil Composers- will be found also an English Note a piece simulating a band tune. It is the faith and elegance of the interpretation that invests his songs with a direct musical appeal apart from the choice interpretation that invests his songs with a direct musical appeal apart from the choice attuned to popular fancy which however changes periodically. A few years back it rested on *Sarasasamadhana* of Thyagaraja in a

serpentine raga called Kapinarayani. The *Nadathanumanisam* by the same composer in Chitaranjani claimed this kind of attention as did also *Thayaes Yasodha* of Oothukadu Venkatasubbier in Todi. In recent days it seems to have become the turn of *Chakkanirajamargamu* of Thyagaraja in Karaharapriya with a rich modal scheme and stately movements ideally fitting the lofty import of the song.

CREATIVE FACILITY

Whether it be in free flowing *alapana* or Impromptu Improvisation of passages in songs the abiding feature of his music is their *manodharma* or creative facility. The style he has developed ideally suits the modulations of his voice and he sings with ease and abandon. Often when presenting the variations he seems to savour their beauty and sustaining a theme draws it out with subtle and strong nuances in obedience to the mood. These nuances and phrases are imbued with the *rakthi* the rich essence of the raga lending a whole character to the scheme. On the other hand despite so many engaging features his singing also displays occasional faults. Often his impulsive articulations seem very inartistic. This is equally true of his habit of spinning out the terminal note in passages of the *Swaraprasthara*. Yet lapses like these are forgotten in the over-all graceful and unpretentious modal scheme.

He is popular especially for a distinct style of Swaraprasthara (Sargam). Built around the nucleus of a single *Swara* or a bunch of the *gradually expanding cycles* flow out in impressive clusters, effortlessly and naturally, instead of tailored patterns. They seem to come sometimes at a slow pace and at a gallop at other

times and appear to ideally suited to the medium measure-*andante*- at which his music is seen to best advantage. Despite the rhythmic variations it is rather the modal contours that are followed and the figures are alive with natural colour and informed with a mature aesthetic sense. Naturally whether it is a common raga like Sankarabharanam or such infrequent ones such as Kapinarayani, Purnachandrika, Saraswathimanoohari, or Umabharanam their intricate and crooked contours maintain their natural beauty and unsophisticated charm in his *sargams*. How did he develop his individual and appealing style of *swaraprasthara*? "I do not claim credit for having devised any distinct style in *raga alapana* or *swaraprasthara*. I pay equal attention to them all" said Mani Iyer when asked which he considered his forte. "There is nothing unusual or exclusive in them. Other musicians have presented such *swara* designs in plenty with livelier and more diversified arrangements coming in earlier. Principal among them may be mentioned the late Mazhavarayal Subbarama Bhagavathar who was a disciple of Ettaiyapuram Ramachandra Bhagavathar. The latter was a teacher of my guru. Thus the source of this interesting style of *swara* could be traced to the Dhikshithar School. But I must admit I too have an advantage in a way. I have lived in times of technical advances that have carried my music to enhanced numbers often in distant parts causing these flattering impressions".

FAILING HEALTH

Mani Iyer has been in indifferent health for some time. Not infrequently his faculties fail to respond to his ideas and impulses. As we have seen in some of his recent recitals the result is a struggle against unfriendly elements. Nevertheless when either transported by the mood or challenged by the accompanist he will suddenly surge back to his old form. And despite his failing energy and consequently reduced range his voice still radiates its familiar warmth. When I met him not long ago he deplored as always the slowly deteriorating vocal standards of the South and said sadly " Alas if I were endowed with good health I would like to start a movement for the improvement of the voice culture of the South or at least contribute my best efforts to that end. Anyway situated as I am I can only appeal to younger musicians. Look to your voice. Keep it fresh and warm, a shining and supple medium of expression. Practice steadfastly in the time tested methods, attached firmly to *sruti* and *laya* which are the foundations of music. Remember, there is no short cut to proficiency in this art except through hard work and dedication."