

Here is an Interview with one of the sincerest rasika of carnatic music in general and Madurai Mani Iyer in particular!

Shri.Balasubramanian, hails from the great 'S.A.' family, Kumbakonam, that was patronising Carnatic Music in the early 20th Century. He was born on October 20th, 1947 to Sri.S.A.Nataraja Iyer a famous Advocate and Smt.Sitalakshmi.

His association with Madurai Mani Iyer started since his infancy. Mani Iyer sang at the first birthday celebration of Shri.Balu. The function held at the residence of Shri.Nataraja Iyer (SA family Residence) at Shankara Mutt Street. The concert began at evening 4 p.m, the sound speakers for the concert were extended along the crowded Kamakshi josier street. The concert went on till 9.30 p.m. The Mridangist for the concert was none other than S.A.Venkatrama Iyer! (Father of the famous ethno musicologist Dr.S.A.K.Durga) As a mark of friendship with Venkatrama Iyer, Mani Iyer denied to accept any money for that concert.

From the tender age Shri.Balu was attracted to Mani Iyer like an Iron to a Magnet. Soon, he became a devotee of Mani Iyer. He never missed to listen the Radio concerts of Mani Iyer. However, it was during the early 1960s, when he came to Chennai, he became closer to Mani Iyer. No matter, where the concert was, if it was held in Chennai, Shri Balu would make it to the concert. He was just 14-15 years old, but he used to somehow manage to attend every concert that was held in Chennai. Since Mani Iyer was known to his family, he used to follow behind Mani Iyer, walk with him straight to the concert hall! Since he stood closer to Mani Iyer, he was never asked for tickets at the concert venues!

He was so attracted to Mani Iyer, that he used to have glimpse of Mani Iyer on his way to his College. He used to gaze through the wicket gate of Mani Iyer's house, once he gets the sight of his master, he would then push off to the college without anybody's notice. One day, when no one was around, he managed to peep in to the residence of Mani Iyer, but only rushed back out of fear, ofcourse he did miss having a gaze at Mani Iyer. Vembu Iyer who noticed Balu's eagerness to meet his master, asked him who he was and then recognised Balu's parents and grandparents, who were close to Mani Iyer. From this point, the interaction between Balu and Mani Iyer started.

Whenever Balu visited Mani Iyer, (it was almost every day) the later used to ask about the studies of Balu. Mani Iyer used to stress Balu that, education is more important, listening to concerts should be only once in a while and that should not affect the studies at any point.

Shri Balu narrates how Mani Iyer used to say that one should not miss that "age" for studying. *"You should not miss the right age of studies. See, now at this age will I be able to study anything? So do not lose focus from education. It is more important than attending my concerts"* Balu's cousin Thyagarajan was a lecturer (retired as Principal) in Vivekananda College, he was a fan of Mani Iyer and he used to visit him regularly. Mani Iyer used to ask Thyagarajan, about Balu,s studies. Thyagarajan used to complain to Mani Iyer that Balu is addicted to Mani Iyer's music and never takes studies seriously. "He always talks about you and your concert" said Thyagarajan. Mani Iyer would again give his dose of advice to Balu and even warned that if he sees him in his concerts he would complain to Thyagarajan. *"Don't spoil your studies, I should not see you following behind me to the concert halls"* quipped Mani Iyer.

After that occasion Balu started going to Mani Iyer concerts on his own. So wherever there was a free concert he used to go to the hall, if not he used to stay outside and listen! Thus his affinity to Mani Iyer and his music grew more and more.

It was solely for recording Mani Iyer's music, Balu learnt Radio Engineering and Electronics, so that he could repair their old worn-out Spool Taperecorder and start recording Mani Iyer's music that was relayed on the Radio. He recalls recording a radio concert, by winding manually with the failure of the motor of the tape recorder! Once he even missed a semester exam in IIT Madras (MSc), for the simple reason that on that day there was Mani Iyer Radio Concert that was relayed in the Morning and he preferred listening to it than attending the exams!

In Balu's view, Mani Iyer was a divine person, compassionate and caring. All the great qualities of Mani Iyer was transformed into his music. "That is why his music is divine" claims Balu. "I have attended lots of his concert in and around Madras, not even one of his concert failed to impress the audiences" The repetitions of krithis in Mani Iyer concerts are because of ill health and frequent fail in memory due to his health problem. I have personally seen Mani Iyer singing lots of krithis that was not normally sung at the concerts by him, at his home with his friends gathering. For example, the Abheri Krithi "Panchashat peetaroopini". Upon asking why he was not singing those krithis in the concert hall, Mani Iyer replied that he used to sing them in his younger days, but due to loss of eye sight and memory, he had confined himself to singing the krithis that were popularised by him.

Balu recalls a golden moment where he helped Mani Iyer crossing the road just in front his house on his way walking to Mylapore Fine Arts for a concert. "Mani Iyer had little vision then, but he somehow managed to walk till Mylapore Fine Arts from his residence. I even remember the concert hall in which the dias was erected at the centre of the hall with audience sitting around the stage. I remember some krithis that was sung at the concert like Rarama Intika, Niravadhi Sukhada & Ethavunara"

"I have attended several temple concerts of Mani Iyer in and around Mylapore. Even a small temple festival will have a Mani Iyer concert!". "I have even seen the great Papanasam Sivan, M.D.Ramanathan, K.V.Narayanaswamy, Alangudi Ramachandran frequently attending Mani Iyer's concerts". Balu also recollects an incident in which he was advised by Alangudi Ramachandran not say sabhash or Bale while such a great Vidwan like Mani Iyer singing. In another incident while discussing about Mani Iyer's music with the great M.D.Ramanathan *"One should not analyse the Music of Mani Iyer, as it is beyond human analysis, something divine! (Dheiveegam), his music was natural and instant. Mani Iyer never planned anything before the concert"* said MDR!

At several instances I had asked Mani Iyer what he is going to sing in that day's concert. Mani Iyer would say that he is planning to sing say Thodi or Shankarabharanam as the main raga for that day. But most of the time, he would sing some other raga.

Whenever Mani Iyer visited Kumbakonam, invariably he used to visit Maasi Magam festival and have a dip in the holy Mahamagam tank. He would stay at S.A.Venkatarama Iyer's house and have food at our home. Everytime he visited our house, he used to sit under an ancient wall clock, that clock got a name as Mani Iyer clock!".

"When I heard the death of Mani Iyer in the Radio News, I rushed back to Chennai from Kumbakonam on the same day and visited his house. I could not eat or sleep for 3 days! Then I realised that he has become inseparable in my life, since then not a day has passed without listening to his music" said Shri Balu.

Shri Balu is now a popular name among Madurai Mani Iyer rasikas. He lives in Chennai, and can be contacted at 28190311, 4/1, Sait Colony, I Street, Egmore, Chennai - 8.