

Murali and Me

As the title of the article suggests, this is a very personal account of my own experiences with Padmavibhushan Dr. Mangalampalli Balamuralikrishna and not a profile of this very public figure. An unfortunate but inevitable snag with such a kind of story is that I will be forced to use the first person singular rather frequently. But then what has to be done has to be done, I suppose. So here goes.

My first exposure to South Indian Classical Music was when I used to attend the concerts organised at the Navarathri Mandapam, Thiruvananthapuram as a child. Usually more or less the same set of artists were invited year after year and the list reads like a virtual who is (was) who of Carnatic Music. But there were some exceptionally notable artists who were not called even once, because of sordid internal politics, which is beyond the scope of this story. One such exception was Dr. Balamuralikrishna or Murali Gaaru as his Telugu-speaking admirers call him or Guruji as his numerous students (Both actual students and those who have mentally accepted him as their Guru without having taken even a single lesson from him) call him...or Muralikkutti as I sometimes think of him affectionately. His given name was simply "Muralikrishna" meaning, "Krishna with the Flute", but then "Bala" was added by an affectionate fan as Little Murali started making waves even as a two year old child.

I had the pleasure of seeing him for the first time in my own home where he was brought by an organizer to meet the Late Maharaja Sree Chithira Thirunal Bala Rama Varma.... another case of the Bala prefixed to the given name for the same reasons as with Murali Gaaru. At this time some noble souls were trying to mediate between the royal family and Dr. Balamuralikrishna to make him sing at the Navarathri Mandapam, but the damage had already been done and there seemed to be very little hope of a compromise as the Navarathri Mandapam Rules were very rigid and so were the Murali Rules.

I was faintly aware of all this but I was more or less a child when all this happened. The thing is that my exposure to music was so utterly restricted to the concerts at the Navarathri Mandapam that I had never heard of this great man properly till then.....and believed that Dr. M. Balamuralikrishna, G.N. Balasubramaniam and S.P. Balasubramaniam were the same person whose name seemed to metamorphose Kafkaesquely from one to the other in various situations (Okay, okay! I was a particularly under intelligent and over imaginative child...So sue me!). Anyway, the conversation eddied around between the mediators and the members of my family with Little Murali himself contributing very little by way of words but drenching all of us in his ever so sweet.... and a bit cryptic.... Murali smile, which I have come to love and observe in it's various shades since.

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That evening I heard his voice for the first time. After all these years I can't forget how totally I was blown away by his Sound! God! He started with his own Varnam "Amma Aananda Daayini! Akaara Ukaara Makaara Roopin i!" with the miraculous Charanam "Sive! Sive! Sive!" I couldn't believe that this thunderous voice was originating from the sweet little man who was sitting before me...and the smile still playing around his lips and in his eyes. Though I didn't know it at the time I was hooked! But as his music was so utterly unlike anything I had heard at the Navarathri Mandapam I still couldn't accept it as "Classical" as I had been led to believe till then.

The composition itself was a miracle which was completely original and utterly unlike anything which had been composed by anybody ever before. The Swarams have Literature to go with them, which makes one's pulse rise.

Ni Sa Ga Ma Ga Ma Ga Ma Ga Ma Ga
Pa Ma Ga Sa Ni Pa MA Ga,
Ma Ga Sa Ni Pa Ma Ga,
Ga Sa Ni Pa Ma Ga,
Sa Ni Pa Ma Ga SA GA!
Sa Ni Pa Ma Ga SA GA! SA GA!
Sa Ni Pa Ma Ga SA GA! SA GA! SA GA! Becomes
Vidhi Hari Ganapathi Sarava-
nabhava Shuka Sanaka
Asura Sura Gana,
Rathi pathi, Sura-Pathi Vinutha SIVE!
Nirathishaya SIVE! SIVE!
Parama Para SIVE! SIVE! SIVE...BOOOM! I

It is like the scene of the Thunderstorm from Beethoven's Sixth Symphony and an unparalleled opening piece for any concert of Carnatic Music.

My next meeting with Balamurali Sir was several years later at a concert of a common acquaintance. As I mentioned, my family had never been close to him and I also carried the seed of contempt towards him, which was inculcated in me by the local Anti Balamurali Mafia of which my family was a part. Around halfway through the concert, which I was attending, suddenly there was a hubbub among the audience and I noticed that Murali Gaaru had made his entrance. I was led to believe that he was self opinionated and arrogant... and with arrogant people I normally respond in kind. To my horror I noticed that the only empty seat in the front row was next to me...and Little Murali was slowly making his way towards

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me, stopping to greet every single person in the front row, who had stood up reverentially.

I suddenly made a decision: - "I will NOT get up when he comes!".... And there I remained, with my eyes glued to the stage. Finally he reached the seat and I couldn't help shooting a quick glance 'Muraliwards', as P.G. Wodehouse would have put it. And lo and behold! Before I knew what was happening there was Murali Gaaru shaking my hands, patting my shoulders and asking me to sit down...which I did in a sort of daze only after he was seated himself. The thing, which struck me most, was the kindness in his eyes and the graciousness with which he asked me to sit down. I felt that the Arrogant Bastard Theory had to be reconsidered very seriously, because the man seated next to me was one of the sweetest and kindest I had ever seen...and I have always been more than partial to people older than me who have a certain quality of peace warmth and tranquility emanating from them.... and in the case of this gentleman it was so obviously palpable...rather, so palpably obvious.

Still I didn't bother to make his acquaintance as I had a real treasure of a Guru back home in the form of Vechoor Shri N. Harihara Subramania Iyer with whom I was more than happy. And most of my Heroes in music had left for a better world; so I could love them and hero-worship them as much as I liked, without any negative side effects.

The years passed and I heard snippets of Murali Music (Still not quite able to leave the idea of despising him and equally unable to resist him) most memorable of which was a Televised concert with Pandit Bhimsen Joshi (The very first of their innumerable Jugalbandis) where he did South Indian Classical Music more than proud.

One day my beloved Guru Vechoor Sir passed away unexpectedly. I was completely devastated. The field was full of competent musicians who were horrible as human beings, nice enough human beings who were horrible musicians and the worst of the lot...horrible musicians being horrible as human beings too in the hope that at least their bad behavior would make others think "He/she MUST be a fantastic artist to be able to AFFORD to be SO horrible!".... I am sure you must have come across the kind more than once in life, whatever be your profession.

The bond I had with my Late Guru was as sacred as the one shared by the partners in a perfect marriage; assuming such a situation can exist in reality too of course.... and it was next to impossible to think of any other person occupying his

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place in my heart, mind, music and life. One day, while pondering over certain differences between the West and India like the fact that while dozens of letters written by Beethoven and Mozart were still preserved carefully in the West we had very little memorabilia left from our Great Composers who also lived at the same time as them and so on, a thought took shape in my head: -"What if I could learn a Thyagaraja Krithi from Thyagaraja himself?"

It was a bit too late for that though...and I couldn't stand modern compositions from the little I had been exposed to till then. Then I suddenly remembered the cassette of Thillanas by Dr.Balamuralikrishna. What exquisite creations they were! How wonderful it would be if I could learn them from the composer himself! Wow! The very thought made my skin tingle! But then I was scared how he would react to my request to teach me because I came from the family with whom he had had nothing to do till then. But I thought, "Nothing ventured nothing gained" and proceeded to give him a call. I didn't know any Tamil at the time and spoke to him in English, though I had heard that he had never gone to school nor learnt English in his life. I was taken aback not only by the fact that his telephone voice was as impressive as his onstage version, but also by his command of the language, spoken ever so sweetly in his own utterly quaint and disarming accent.

I said simply "I am Varma." And he said equally simply "You can call me some other time." So that is exactly what I did. I called him again...and again...and again...twice a year as I didn't want to become a pest.... for more than two and a half years. Finally an audience was granted for ten minutes at nine twenty in the morning...around the time I normally wake up.

I found out his house a little before eight o'clock and sat on the low wall of a building nearby till the appointed time reading a book (I always carry one. One of the few good habits I have). Then I stepped in to the his house (Called Mahathi which was the name of his youngest daughter, the only one among his six children who has given concerts professionally and the name of a Raga which Murali Gaaru created which uses just four notes, Sa Ga Pa and Ni.) which has become a home away from home for me during the course of the next few years.

He was, as usual, very polite but he made it very clear how he had established himself right at the very top of the heap without any help from the Travancore Royal Family, Thank You Very Much. I said that I couldn't be blamed for things, which happened decades before I was born. Then I said I would like to learn a few of his compositions. He was rather shocked at this request because people generally criticized him for singing his own compositions. And here I was coming all the way from Kerala Seeking his compositions. He asked me "Which one?" and

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I said I would love to learn his Thillanas and a few other songs like Omkaaraakaarini in Lavangi, another Amazing four note Raaga created by him. He said "Hmmmmmm" and really was in a quandry, for he had no legitimate reason to turn me away now. Finally I offered to sing a song against his faint protestations...and as God seemed to be in a good mood that day he liked the sound of the sounds I produced.

And thus began my lessons with him. I had heard that he loved money, so I was terrified of what he would charge for lessons. But then the lesser heard Murali Story proved to be true.... that he never accepted money for teaching. Though I joined him with the sole intention of learning a few compositions from him, after the first couple of minutes of the first class itself I started yearning to be his Disciple in the fullest sense of the word. His generosity was amazing! If I asked for a composition, which I had heard him sing in an old recording, which he had forgotten completely, he would hunt up ancient books with yellowing pages and refresh, sing and teach the said composition to me.

As a mere fourteen-year-old child he composed songs in all the 72 Melakarta Raagas, which form the very backbone of the South Indian System of Raaga Music. When he finally finished teaching me the seventy second of these he exclaimed in sheer delight and childlike pride, in a booming voice very much resembling Amithab Bachchan in Kaun Banega Crorepathi "YOU HAVE WON ONE CRORE NOW!!!" followed by a cascade of Murali Laughter. Many people think he is arrogant. The fact is that I have been dealing with musicians as a lover of music, as an artist myself and as an organiser for more than half my lifetime. And I am yet to meet another person in the music industry who is so universally polite and kind as this man. Whether he is chatting with another world class musician like say Ustad Zakir Hussain, whether he is playing around with his little grandchildren, whether he is joking around with one of the boys who brings coffee during the breaks during his numerous CD recordings, whether he has just finished giving a very successful concert in a top class venue, he is always the same Balamuralikrishna. The more people I meet, in various walks of life, the more I witness role playing and not just duplicity, but multiplicity at various levels, the more impressed I am by his consistency.

At seventy-five years his voice is more golden than ever. He has released hundreds and hundreds of cassettes and CDs. He was one of the earliest South Indian Classical Musicians to perform abroad. He has acted in films, sung for films and even scored the music for films. Apart from his own compositions numbering more than two hundred he has breathed life into compositions of other composers whose original tunes were lost in the sands of time like Narayana Theertha,

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Annammaachaarya, Purandara Daasa, Kaiwara Amara Nareyana, Sadasiva Brahmendra, Bhadraachala Raamadaas and Maharajah Sri Swathi Thirunal. He has recieved awards too numerous to list including the Padma Vibhushan so many years ago, several Doctorates, the coveted Sangeetha Kalanidhi, the Fellowship from the Central Sangeeth Natak Academy and the latest being the Chevalier des Lettres et des Arts from the French Government. He has top grading in the All India Radio for singing, violin playing, viola, Mridangam, Kanjira, Music Direction, Devotional Music and for the spoken voice. He is probably the only South Indian Vocalist loved, feared and respected in equal measure by almost all the artists of the North Indian Classical Tradition (Not to mention by the film industry and by the man on the street and by the connoisseurs alike). With all this and more under his belt simply because of the fact that he doesn't put on a sickening air of false modesty which others seem to be so good at doing, there are people who have condemned him as "Arrogant" for it is against our "Aarsha Bhaaritha Samskaaram" to be aware of one's own worth...and this sense of insecurity about one's own identity more than amply reflects in the state of affairs in our country as the newspapers show day by day.

From him, I learned the importance of taking the trouble to study the word-by-word meaning of each song I sing. In fact if I ask him the meaning of a word in a composition of Annammacharya in archaic Telugu for example which he doesn't know he takes out an old well-worn dictionary and finds out the word commenting, "I am also learning!" with a little laugh. He allows students to record all their classes...as I said, without charging anyone a single pie. His kindness and magnanimity has to be experienced to be believed. I for one have never forgotten my original and much beloved Guru Vechoor Shri Hariharasubramania Iyer...and keep mentioning his name from time to time. Instead of being jealous or angry or disapproving of this, Murali Gaaru blesses me for remembering him. He himself thinks the world of his own Guruji Paruppalli Ramakrishna Pantulu Gaaru on whom he has written several incredibly beautiful compositions.

Here is an example: - For those of you who are not familiar with South Indian Classical Music, a normal composition in this form is divided into three parts called the Pallavi, the Anupallavi and the Charanam. In his composition in Raaga Sushama (One of his own creations incidentally) he says: -

Ayya! Guru Varya! (Oh Sir! Precious Guru of mine!)

Nee aanathi tho paadu chuntinayya! (It is only with your blessings/permission that I sing)

Nee Mridu PALLAVA Vachovilaasamu PALLAVIga (The soft lotus petals of your conversation is my Pallavi) Nee ANUBANDHAMU ANUpallaviga (The relationship

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I have with you is my Anupallavi)

Nee CHARANAMULE CHARANAMUGa (Your feet are my Charanam) and finally Nee AAKRITHIYE MA KRITHIga (The whole of your physical aspect is my Krithi or composition).

His compositions are chock full of literary content and poetry instead of simply being lines of synonyms, descriptions, requests, complaints or praise. He has written beautiful love songs, songs harshly criticizing the ways of the world, taking a jab at politicians, religious heads and even musicians. He takes total care to sing each language, as a native would speak it whether it is Telugu, Kannada, Tamil, Malayalam, Hindi, Bengali or Sanskrit. Which is one reason the Rabindra Bharathi University gave him an award for his impeccable rendition of Tagore songs and the reason why the Life Insurance Corporation of India has chosen him to sing their advertisement on TV in Malayalam, Tamil, Kannada and Telugu.

I have learnt so much from him not just about music but also about life in general. Once I saw a terrible review for one of his Best Ever CDs of Purandara Dasa Compositions. I was really and truly upset. So I blurted out to him "How COULD the idiot write the way he did? It is such an EXTRAORDINARY CD!"...Then Balamurali Sir smiled and asked me softly "Do you really think it's extraordinary?" I said "Of COURSE I do" emphatically. And then he smiled and said, "That is the problem.... It is extraordinary, isn't it? So ordinary people will find it difficult to understand or appreciate!" followed by a cascade of Murali laughter, which seems to be his constant and adorable companion. His critic's rant and rave all they can, but the man quietly takes it in his stride, being fully aware of who and what he is.

After more than two years of my association with him he finally relented to break all His Rules and perform at the Navarathri Mandapam following all the rules of the Mandapam like a good little Murali including the fact that he had to sing without wearing a shirt. The crowd that turned up for the event was nothing like anything witnessed ever before at the Mandapam. When Little Murali made his entrance the whole gathering stood up deferentially without making the slightest sound or applause and finally the festival of the Goddess reverberated with the magic voice of Dr. Balamuralikrishna for the first time...and everyone who had the good fortune to be present there on that day agreed that it was well worth the wait.

It seems to be human nature not to accept or appreciate the true greatness of the truly great when we have the good fortune of still having them with us. But Jesus Christ had His disciples, Ramakrishna had His disciples, Van Gogh had his brother, Mozart had Sussmeyer, who all had the blessings from God to realize the exact worth of their Masters while they were still around. And I thank God for

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having blessed me to be one of the Chosen Few vis-à-vis my beloved Guruji, Dr. Balamuralikrishna.