

Tribute to Sri Madurai Mani Iyer

I normally turn to music whenever my mind is agitated, tormented or weakened. The music of Mozart and the songs of Kishore Kumar never fail to help. In Carnatic music, it is normally M.D.Ramanathan that I turn to. But when one is sad and one desperately needs doses of pure unadulterated Joy, whom else can one think of but Madurai Mani Iyer? Cherubic, gentle, lilting, innocent, joyful, buoyant and pure, the very thought of the man brings a smile to one's heart. From the tentative and endearing little "Madurai Mani sound" on Ga (Roughly but not quite resembling the "LEA" from the word "Learn".....pronounced correctly but rendered with a smile....almost as though the singer is gently checking to see whether the Ga is still there in it's proper place) before plunging delightfully into Vathapi, rather like a child would, into a swimming pool for kids and splash joyfully around, till the similar Madurai Mani sound on the upper Sa (A bit like "Uay" this time.) before shooting off a breezy Pavamaana as the Mangalam, one is transported into an enchanting world of light and joy for three hours or so, the after effects of which continue to linger for a long long time.

"Cute" isn't an adjective one would normally associate with one of the Titans of Carnatic music.(A Sangeetha Kalanidhi too at that.) But Madurai Mani Iyer was, among a host of other adjectives, Extremely cute. And utterly disarming. From the way he sang syllables like Tharana and La La La, vowels like Oooo and Oueee to phrases that sounded almost like "I love you" at times during Raga Alapanas, to the way he would spontaneously burst into song from time to time with syllables like "Tatta tada" and "Tuttu Tudu" when the violinist played Thaanam, to the way he would joyfully repeat the same word with little squiggles and charming variations at the end while doing Neraval (Kapi Vaaridhi, Kaalinil Chilambu, Hithavu Maatalentho, Chsadvulanni, Raaga Thaala, Raja Raja Vara, Maanikkam Vairam, Paluku Botini.....the list goes on and on), to the way he sang Swarams ending with Ninni in Reethigowla which became Lilly at times, to the squeals of delight whenever his accompanists played beautifully, virtually Everything about him was cute. The sweetness that the man and his music embodied inspired many to call him "Madhura" Mani Iyer. I remember an old LP record of Mukesh with the title "That Old Feeling." With Madurai Mani Iyer, it would be "That Joyful Feeling."

Since my Carnatic Music listening as a child was restricted mostly to those who sang at the Navarathri Mandapam, Trivandrum and since Mani Iyer never performed there, I had never heard him or even heard Of him till I was late into my teens. Step One of the joyful event was attending a concert by Shri T.V.Shankaranarayanan. The pep, verve and positive energy Shankaranarayanan Sir imparted, blew me away and I became a fan instantly. I would catch an afternoon train from Trivandrum to Cochin to attend a TVS concert, accompanied by people like M.S.Gopalakrishnan and Karaikudi Mani and come back by the

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midnight train. Those days, I had no idea about his Guru cum Maama or his music. After someone told me that TVS was the nephew and disciple of someone called Madurai Mani Iyer, I started to search for his music and finally found the delightful recording of his (With T.N.Krishnan and Vellore Ramabhadran accompanying him brilliantly as they always did) containing songs like Thathvamariya Tharamaa, Maa Janaki, Eppo Varuvaro, Saarasa Mukhi, Nija Marmamulanu, the English Note and so on. And there was no looking back.

I have often heard the word "Heavy" being employed to indicate something that is solid....and "Light" to indicate something frivolous. But Madurai Mani Iyer's voice was "Light" in the most charming way possible. (Luminous and effervescent would be two more apt adjectives.) Even so called "Heavy" Ragas like Thodi, Bhairavi, Asaveri and Varali resembled snowflakes falling gently, when handled by Madurai Mani Iyer. My beloved Guru, Shri K.S.Narayanaswami used to tell me that Swarams should be sung with the same mindset with which one would shower flower petals on an idoland not like one would sling stones at someone or something. Madurai Mani Iyer sang Swarams like showering flower petals, be it in the slow or fast tempo. Some schools of music write Swaram singing off as mere "Spelling." But the way Mani Iyer sang, never Ever sacrificing the proper Gamakams, aesthetics or a perfect sense of proportion, Swaram singing was elevated to great heights, be it in pentatonic ragas like Mohanam or Valachi, heavy ragas like Thodi or Shankarabharanam, Hindusthani Ragas like Behag or Sindhubhairavi or typically Carnatic Ragas like Durbar or Asaveri. Like Swaram singing, his Viruththams too were a class apart. One feels one could go on listening to him singing Viruththams till the end of time. It is said that every single hair on the body of Shri Anjaneya is soaked in Rama Naamam. Similarly when Mani Iyer sang a viruththam (Or for that matter, anything at all), Each note would be a perfect sample of that particular Raga. Ranjani, Hamsanandi, Kapi, you name it. So much so that when he sang Hamsanandi, one felt that even the Shadjam itself was a "Hamsanandi Sa."

To my ears, violinists from the time of Shri T.N.Krishnan, Shri Lalgudi Jayaraman and Shri M.S.Gopalakrishnan seem to have done a more refined job of accompanying the exquisite music of the maestro than the great masters who preceded them. As did the melodious and uplifting band of percussionists from the Pazhani Subramania Pillai school of percussion. The way he played, especially during the Neravals of Madurai Mani Iyer, was a celebration in itself....accompaniment at it's glorious best. When certain mridangam "accompunishments" sit and make heavy, plodding "statements" by one's side, doing absolutely nothing to aid the music, one is tempted to shout "Go listen to Pazhani play with Madurai Mani Iyer and learn how (And what) to play !"

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I have always been drawn more to songs in Telugu, Sanskrit and Kannada than ones in Tamil or Malayalam. But the Tamil songs by composers like Papanasam Sivan, Gopalakrishna Bharathi and others glowed like jewels and acquired a special Madurai Mani Iyer sheen when he sang them. In fact many songs became more strongly identified as Madurai Mani songs.... Eppo Varuvaro and Vellai Thaamarai Poovil for instance....than as products of the people who composed them. The Western Note "Gaa Ma Ma Ri Ga Pa" composed by Dr.Harikesanallur Muthaiah Bhagavathar is actually called the "Madurai Mani Iyer Note."

I find it amazing that a man who passed away forty years ago, on June 8th 1968, a couple of months before I was born, happens to be one of the most real, vibrant, palpable and special presences both in my life as well as in the lives of thousands of others like me. With advances in technology, more and more recordings of Mani Iyer's divine art are becoming available on the internet, uploaded by kind souls with good taste, in sites like sangeethapriya.org. One can easily presume that whatever changes may happen in the music field, there would always be an ever increasing family of Madurai Mani Iyer lovers, with joyful music in their hearts, spread all over the world.