

Tribute to M.D. Ramanathan – Unsung genius

M.D. Ramanathan was first and foremost an artist, a musician and a devotee himself. Had he been alive, the legend would have been 87 on May 19.

Young Narendra used to go around asking so-called enlightened people of his time: 'Can you see God?' before he became celebrated as Swami Vivekananda. With the few who dared to mumble 'Um....yes.....sort of....,' he used to follow up with the question 'Can you show me God?' and that would settle things, when the person in question would turn tail and run away. Till Narendra met Ramakrishna Paramahansa and the rest, of course, is history.

It is not easy to get to see God and it is even more difficult to show God to others. One of the few people I have come across who used to do both with apparently the greatest of ease was M.D. Ramanathan. He was one of the few musicians of any time who seemed to remember who Tyagaraja was and why he composed, while singing his compositions. Tyagaraja was not a performer who went around giving concerts on various platforms, earning money, applause and adulation. He, like most of our great composers of the past, used music to express his devotion to god as well as to make observations and pass comments on various aspects of the human mind, society, devotion and so on.

“How ethical is it to make a living performing these expressions of devotion by the great masters?” is a question very few practicing musicians seem to ask themselves. And the answer probably wouldn't be an easy one either.

M.D.Ramanathan was a musician who obviously had his priorities worked out rather clearly. He was first and foremost an artist, a musician and a devotee himself. It seemed almost incidental that he happened to give concerts on stage too from time to time. Many uninitiated and superficial listeners who are used to performers diluting their art and spoon feeding it to them, find M.D. Ramanathan's approach frustrating since, to appreciate him completely, there needs to be a healthy effort on the part of the listener too.

Lyrical purity

Much of his genius and refined aesthetics came out in the way he handled the lyrics of the songs he sang. He had complete mastery over Malayalam, Telugu, Tamil and Sanskrit and sang the compositions of the great masters in these languages with total understanding and sensitivity to the finer nuances and cadences of the poetry contained within.

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A great deal of the charm of an M.D.Ramanathan rendition of a masterpiece like 'Endaro Mahanubhavulu' or 'Mokshamu Galada' is lost on a listener who does not know Telugu. Yet, I have come across many a sensitive listener who has been profoundly moved by the music of M.D.Ramanathan despite not knowing anything about Telugu, Sanskrit or even Carnatic music. These were all people who were exposed to the finest of music and poetry from some culture or the other. Which suggests that art at its most sublime level is remarkably universal and cuts across boundaries of time, geography, race, language and religion.

When M.D.Ramanathan sang 'Amba Kamakshi,' the immortal swarajathi in Bhairavi by Syama Sastri for instance, he would seem to metamorphose into Syama Sastri to begin with. The transformation would continue magically till he became the song too... and Bhairavi itself. And finally things would come to a state where M.D.Ramanathan, his accompanists, the shruthi, Syama Sastri, the Swarajathi, Bhairavi ragam, Goddess Kamakshi herself and the sensitive listener, all fused together to become one single entity, brimming with music, completeness and perfection. It is this experience that I had in mind when I talked about "seeing God and showing God to others."

Although his career lasted just a little over two and a half decades, he succeeded in putting his own unique and special stamp on so many ragas like Kedaram, Shahana, Yadukula Kamboji, Sri, Suruti, Kedaragowla, Reethigowla, Mukhari and so on, as well as on numerous compositions like 'Endaro Mahanubhavulu,' 'Bhaavayaami Raghuraamaam,' 'Paripalaya,' 'Giripai Nelakonna Raamuni,' 'Saamajavara Gamana,' 'Divaaakara Thanujam' and 'Harihara Puthram,' rendering it difficult for others to sing them because of the risk of getting completely eclipsed by the MDR versions of these.

Eminent accompanists like T.N. Krishnan, Lalgudi Jayaraman, M.S. Gopalakrishnan, V.V.Subramanyam, Umayalpuram Sivaraman, T.K. Murthy, T.V. Gopalakrishnan, Palghat Raghu, Vellore Ramabhadran and others all agree that it was a unique experience to accompany him, because of the extremely low pitch at which he sang, because of his ease in all speeds, absolute grip over rhythm and most of all, because of his complete unpredictability and spontaneity.

'Varadadasa'

No tribute to M.D. Ramanathan would be complete without mentioning the beautiful relationship he shared with his guru, Tiger Varadachariar. MDR called himself 'Varadadasa' and used this as his signature in all his compositions,

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numbering more than 300. Despite being the principal of Kalakshethra in Chennai and despite receiving a few awards, most rasikas feel that the man did not get his due. He passed away in April 1984. Had he been still alive, he would have been 87 this May.

But during these last decades, more and more people have started to discover the wonderful world of M.D.Ramanathan and more and more of his recordings are getting uploaded at various sites in the Internet. During these days of instant fame, success, money and gratification, the lofty ideals and values that M.D.Ramanathan quietly held on to become more relevant than ever before.