

Vishwapalam Sri Padmanabham

Two of the oldest and most special musical presences in my life are M.D.Ramanathan and Kishore Kumar. Together, they make up such a vital and integral part of my life itself that I would not be complete without them.

My earliest musical memory is of Shri M.D. Ramanathan (whom my great grandmother Maharani Setu Parvati Bayi affectionately used to call M.D) squinting away grotesquely, yet adorably at the Navaratri mandapam and singing bhAvayAmi raghu rAmam which in my childhood innocence I used to imagine, was about me, as I was called Raghu at home.

His eyes would twinkle mischievously, his long and exceptionally sensitive and artistic hands would paint ethereal images in the air, and his utterly unique voice would penetrate the very core of my being, the existence of which I am made aware of, only when I listen to him even now.

Writing about M.D.Ramanathan is akin to baring my very soul itself to the reader, this being the most cherished and private of all the treasures that enrich my life and reinforce my faith in God on a day to day basis. MDR is more real, tangible and vital a presence in my life than many persons I mix and move with on a daily basis. Call it an obsession, call it madness! I simply don't care. I would not have it any other way. Over the past two decades I have tried to find out why this was so. And the mystery remains just the same essentially. But I did manage however, to find out a number of reasons why the man and his music appeals to me so much. And I would like to share some of these discoveries with you, though writing about them would be like trying to describe in words the taste, aroma, texture and effect of a good cup of South Indian coffee, for example . One simply has to experience it.

The following are my opinions that I believe in totally. You are free to agree with them or not of course. The most important factor characterising his music was the fact that he was a composer or vAggEyakAra himself, apart from his almost childlike innocence which came through in his music too, and his devotion to God as well as to music itself. The approach of "Just a singer" and of a vAggEyakkAra to the compositions of other vAggEyakAras is totally different, though there are a few exceptions of course, in both ways (of vAggEyakAras making a mish mash of other compositions, as well as of non vAggEyakAras raising existing compositions to sublime levels and great heights, if you want me to spell it out for you).

Though he was born and brought up in Kerala, he taught himself Telugu, Sanskrit and Tamil to such an extent that he could read, write and compose in all these

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languages. With the result that when he sang a composition of Tyagabrahmam or Dikshitar or Syama Sastry or Swati Tirunal he became one with the composer and with the composition. When I hear most other musicians blasting Tyagaraja Kritis, mangling the lyrics, ruining the sentiments contained within them, beating out the rhythm aggressively and earning several rounds of applause during the concert and a fat envelope full of hundred rupee notes at the end of it, I wonder if they had the slightest inkling of what the composition meant. That poor Tyagaraja was crying out to his beloved Rama to come and protect him from his relatives who thought he was crazy, for example....would they butcher the piece like this, singing it at supersonic speed, cutting almost all the words in the wrong places and smiling smugly when the words scream out the torment of the composer's heart? When MDR sang he literally spoke to us, understanding, feeling and living each word of the composition with his emotional, intellectual and technical involvement being complete and perfect.

Take a look at these random examples and you will see what I mean:- vAtApi gaNapatim bhajEham, vAraNAsyam varapradam, (Where people sing vAraNA!...syamvarapradam) or any caranam of endarO mahAnubhAvulu. Let's take the first one now, sAma gAna IOla,manasija lAVaNya dhanya mUrdhanyulu (it pains me even to imagine what people do with this line). bhlma ananta ajnAna timira bhEdana mihirAyitE from dEvi pAvanE which people sing as 'bhlmananda jnAna timira' changing the meaning drastically from 'One who destroys the darkness of ignorance' to 'One who destroys the Joy of Knowledge' in the bargain!

Almost any caraNam from amba kAmAkshi,the immortal svarajati in bhairavi by Shyama Sastry, kambugaLa nlrada cikura (sung kambugaLa nl....rada cikura), tAmasamu sEyaga ,(sung tAmasamusE....yagavara mOsagi), nata varadAyaki, (sung natavaradA.....yakiyanusu), vEdamu mOralidagaligi(sung vE....dAmu mOralida)...and so on and so forth.

When M.D.Ramanathan sang these lines, one suddenly realised that the lyrics actually meant something and that the compositions were not just things on which one prefixed a bit of rAga AIapana and a little nEraval and complicated svaram exercises later....and they were living entities....the children of the composers...meant to be treated with love, attention, respect, reverence and care, like God himself. The singer becomes nothing other than a medium between the listener and the composer and the composer speaks and communicates to God and to the listeners through the singer.

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An educated person fluent in English too among other languages like Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu and Sanskrit, M.D.Ramanathan described music as morality, universality, sincerity, individuality and creativity...and actually practiced what he preached, as opposed to so many showmen amongst us who give the most fantastic interviews on television, dressed in their Sunday best, and do the exact opposite of what they say, in real life. This was the basic difference between MDR and others. He had a shocking level of honesty, both in music and in life . He was one of the few truly great artists who never deviated an inch from his concept of what and how music should be, however high be the price he had to pay for this.

A few words about his own compositions now. He composed more than three hundred songs in Sanskrit, Telugu and Tamil, though he was almost shy to sing them much. Mostly he would sing one or two at the end of a concert...and a tillana. His tillanas were rather simple in structure, but with very beautiful lyrics usually. The following are some samples.

pAda yugamu nammiti,

patita pAvani purANi,

nI daya kOrina nannu

naliNAkshi kApAdumu

nA tarama

nI mahimalu nata jana pAlini pOgada

Adi shakti nIvEgada

Adi varada dAsanutE.

(This is from his kApi tillana which he sang more frequently than all the others, and this was recorded in his LP record with another of his own compositions. More about that later.) muraLigAna IOluDaina

murahara nagadhara

mOhana rUpa

guru pavana purAdhIshvara

varada varada dAsa pOShaka.

(bEhAg tillAna on shri guruvAyUrappa.)

vara kailAsa girlsha sarvEsha

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karuNa sindhu bhairavi prANeSha
parama bhaktitO ninnE pOgaDu
varada dAsanuta pArAvAra.
(sindhu bhairavi tillAna on Lord Shiva)

His mudra or signature was Varada Dasa, or the SLAVE of Varada as opposed to a servant. Whereas a servant is paid for his services and has the option to leave the job if he likes, a Dasa has no such choice. He simply HAS to serve and be devoted to the master totally.

M.D.R was so diffident about singing his own compositions that he would often slur the word "Varadadasa" while singing them!

(Though in the kApi tillAna he has proudly called himself "Adi Varada Dasa" too!)

And in real life Shri M.D.Ramanathan was a true Dasa of his guru, his most beloved and revered Guru "Tiger" Shri Varadachariar thus named because of his gestures which reminded one of his aristocratic patrons of the Magnificent Big Cat, now on the list of endangered species. It makes sense somehow, when one looks at the similarly endangered condition of the kind of music Tiger stood for in the present music scene.

Many of MDR's compositions have the name of the rAga interwoven into the sAhityam ingeniously. He gave a concert at the Music Academy Madras the year Balasaraswathi was awarded the Sangita Kalanidhi. He then sang a song in her honour "sarasvati, sarasavANI! sarasijabhavuniki rANI!" in khamAs. He discreetly brought in the name of the rAga in the lyrics by saying "kAmAdi samhAriNi! bhakta kAmAshu pOShiNi janani!" In sAgara shayana, one of the most beautiful of all compositions composed by Anyone in Any system of music Ever, he describes Lord Vishnu standing with Sridevi and Bhodevi on either side as "bAga shri bhUmi sahituDai vElayu" bringing in the name of bAgEshri so beautifully....and when one hears this song one literally SEES the scene described above!

In janani natajana pAlini he describes Goddess Ambika as "tripura sundari! trilOcana mOhini! TrailOkya shankarAbharaNa bhUShitAngi!" and so on and so forth. The list runs long. He made very few commercial recordings in his time. The first was a small EP Record with just two songs, accompanied by Shri M.S.Gopalakrishnan and Shri T.V.Gopalakrishnan respectively on the violin and the mridangam. On one side we have "paripAlaya" in rItigauLa, one of Tyagaraja's most evocative compositions describing his mAnasa pUja to his beloved Lord Shri

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Rama. This Utsava sampradAya composition makes sense and reveals itself in its full glory only if all the caraNams are sung and MDR not only does sing them but actually does a pUja himself with the song and to the song. The second side has another song on Rama, again sounding like an utsava sampradAya composition of Tyagaraja "rAma rAma" in nllAmbari one of Shri M.D.Ramanathan's own compositions, deliberately composed in the Tyagaraja mode, without the Varada Dasa signature, to mislead the listener! ("cumma angu pODi! "He would laugh! "Who would sing it if they knew it was my own composition? At least let a few people sing it thinking it is a composition of Tyagaraja!") His most popular recording was an LP record with Shri T.N. Krishnan (Violin) and Vellore Shri Ramabhadran (Mridangam) containing crisp and tight versions of mahA gaNapatimim manasa smarAmi, hariyum haranum, sAmaja vara gamana, giripai nElakOnna rAmuni and the aforementioned kApi tillAna. This continues to be reissued and to be played in hundreds of homes and on the radio regularly to this day, nearly thirty years after it's release. hariyum haranum is yet another gem from this vAggEyakAra asking if there is anyone who doesn't know that Hari (Vishnu) and Haran(Shiva) are one and the same.

He draws parallels very diligently (pannaga shayanan hari,pannaga bhUShaNan haran,for example) and finally concludes wryly by poking fun at the idiots from each clan saying "Well, yes...there ARE some people after all who still don't know that these two are one and the same!"

His last cassette recorded commercially breaks one's heart because one can obviously see all the signs of a spent force while listening to it, though accompanists Dr.L.Subramaniam and Vellore Shri Ramabhadran do a commendable job filling the gaps, as it were. During the past few years there has been a resurgence of MDR interest to such an extent that it has become almost FASHIONABLE to claim to be a "Fan" of this most unassuming and unfashionable man. The good thing is that some wonderful recordings of excerpts from his live concerts have slowly started trickling into the market. (One doesn't see the names of the accompanists on the cassette covers and can only pray that they have been paid something by the company which has released these tapes...To make an MDR kind of joke.... I feel they should be given either Cash...or Credit.... if you get my drift.)

If there was anything as wonderful as the music of M.D.Ramanathan,it was his sense of humour. He seemed to have followed not just the Sangita Parampara but also the hAsya parampara of Tiger Varadachariar, who was a great wit himself. One of MDR's students from Kalakshetra told me that there was a lady teacher

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there who was less than loved by most of the students and staff, including MDR himself. And whenever the said teacher passed by the classroom MDR would suddenly shift from whichever song he was teaching the students at the time to a line from bhAvayAmi raghu rAmam...Guess which one!!.."ati ghOra shUrpanakha!" with the appropriate gestures directed at the teacher who innocently though demonically passed by. The students would burst into giggles and of course, MDR would join them.

Once a music lover was travelling from Madras to Thiruvananthapuram by train. He was a big MDR fan too and always carried a portable tape recorder with him and played music. But as he was a very busy person he never had a chance to attend live concerts. And had no idea what most of his heroes looked like. But he had heard enough gossip about them to have his own idea of them. M.D.Ramanathan was famous for his onstage mannerisms made with his eyes, face, mouth and hands. This gentleman was playing a tape of one of MDR's radio programmes in the train and as many music lovers do, he liked to talk to others about the object of his adulation. The only other person near him was a tall, grim looking man who seemed to be singularly immune to the charms of MDR Music. But our friend persisted, as one tends to do at times and struck up a conversation with his reticent travelling companion. He went on to explain who M.D.Ramanathan was, how wonderful his music was and how grotesque were the faces he made while singing. The grim gentleman remained unmoved and did not say anything. After some time the music lover gave up trying to get him to talk and went off to sleep. The next day when they arrived at Thiruvananthapuram he found a group of Brahmins, some of whom he was acquainted with, receiving the tall grim gentleman at the railway station. And to his horror he discovered that he had been describing MDR's mannerisms to MDR himself!

Dr.Balamuralikrishna fondly remembers a similar train journey again from Madras to Thiruvananthapuram in the delightful company of M.D.Ramanathan. Balamurali Sir was travelling in the "C" compartment, while MDR was travelling in "D" and when MDR entered the train with his wife he kept asking the wife "EngEDEE?" with a pun on "D" laughing gleefully. Once, at the fag end of a MARATHON concert in Mumbai with M.S.Gopala Krishnan and T.V.Gopalakrishnan, just as MDR was about to sing the mangaLam a lady from the audience requested him to sing varugalAmO ayya, the beautiful song from Nandanar Charitram which nobody has sung quite the way MDR has. In a flash MDR asked "Sing varugalAmO NOW? I was thinking more in terms of pOgalAmO!"

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Every single individual who has met this man seems to have been left with a treasure chest of smiles and warmth from him. In my own household itself he was one of the few musicians who were like members of the family. And he was probably the single musician who never quaked and quivered in the formidable presence of my Great Grandmother Maharani Sethu Parvathi Bayi. She loved his music like few others did. Another such formidable woman was Rukmini Devi Arundale who was the founder cum driving force behind Kalakshetra. (Not many people know that M.D.Ramanathan wrote the music for many of her highly acclaimed dance dramas.)

M.D.Ramanathan started performing at the Navaratri Mantapam from the late nineteen fifties onwards till nineteen eighty-three, which was the last Navaratri he lived to witness. He was one of the few musicians who had the opportunity to sing on all the nine days, over the years, with a variety of accompanists.

Many of Maharajah Swati Tirunal's compositions found a special place in MDR's repertoire; paripAlaya mAm, padmanAbha pAhi and bhAvayAmi raghu rAmam and mOhanam ayi tava muraLIgAnam ahO in particular.

In fact MDR himself composed a song on Goddess Meenakshi of Madurai-mangaLa caraNE mAm ava satatam, a rough take on padmanAbha pAhi.) His tAnams at the Mantapam were unforgettable, grand and magnificent affairs, with veterans like T.K.Murthy, Umayalpuram Sivaraman, Palghat Raghu, Vellore Ramabhadran singing along with their mridangams. One is reminded of some grand procession or Ezhunnallippu when one hears these tAnams which he reserved especially for the Navaratri Mantapam. He literally took the copyright over certain rAgas, rendering it difficult for any other musician even to attempt them. Some of them were yadukula kAmbOji, sahAna, rltigauLa, mukhAri, shri & kEdAram. (What article on MDR will be complete without a mention of kEdAram in which he sang almost all existing kritis by the great Masters and composed one of his own too for good measure, a masterpiece on Tyagaraja?) The list goes on and on.

One of the greatest tragedies was that the day after he passed away, an official from the Kalakshetra Foundation (The late Shankara Menon) visited his house and asked for his compositions for publication. Poor Mrs.Ramanathan, who in her grief and innocence gave him all the original notebooks containing all his compositions...And that was that. To this day, nearly twenty years after his death, one is yet to get any news of what happened to them. One can only pray that some good soul will hunt them up and bring them to life again.

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Shri M.D.Ramanathan used to conclude all his concerts with a very elaborate mangaLam, which was a cocktail of three songs actually. The usual Tyagaraja's mangaLam in saurAShTram, followed by alakalalla, another Tyagaraja Kriti in madhyamAvati and the last stanza from Swati Tirunal's bhAvayAmi raghurAmam 'kalitavara sEtu bandham'...ending with 'vishva pAlam padmanAbham' where MDR characteristically used to add 'akhila', 'nikhila' and 'sakala' before 'visvapAlam' and a HUGE big 'shrl' preceding 'padmanAbham'. Each time one hears this, one's heart sinks, knowing that yet another MDR concert has come to an end. But when one looks at the way things seem to be going at present I am convinced that this is only the beginning! And things have come a full circle. MDR's music is getting more recognition and understood by more and more people the world over. An American recorded a single video of his , and this is the only one known to exist with one more waiting in the wings.... God bless his soul...and is sold for \$50 in the United States now.

One finds musicians, music lovers and musicologists making desperate attempts to put in their two cents worth, about the man and his music as this very article seeks to do. And MDR lives on.... The usual story of a genius and an innovator born before his time, whose true worth is realised long after he has left this world. I hope he is sitting somewhere up there and looking down on us benignly and indulgently and laughing his mischievous MDR laugh, with his squint eyes twinkling with mirth and goodwill.