

Following MS around the country

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I was blessed to hear the music of MS right from my childhood from my mother, a good singer, who would sing all MS songs – the film songs of *Meera*, *Sakuntala*, *Sevasadanam* and *Savitri* as well as the classical songs released on vinyl records. Those are the best examples of MS Amma's voice and its versatility. The film songs written by Papanasam Sivan and Kalki, set to music by the likes of S.V. Venkataraman, cannot be labelled as light songs. The contents were of the highest order in terms of bhakti, and the classical tunes sung by M.S. Subbulakshmi in her ethereal voice were haunting. Her voice could do wonders with its reach and modulation. Long karvais were followed by moments when the voice would flash out a mind-blowing briga.

Then came a set of three LPs, with V.V. Subramanyam, T.K. Murthy and T.H. Vinayakram as accompanists. That set of LPs provided the gold standard for many classical gems like *Viriboni*, *Meenakshi memudam*, *Akhilandeswari*, *Palimsu Kamakshi*, *Harihara putram*, and *Bhogeendra sayinam*. My music teacher, while teaching me *Viriboni*, advised me to listen to its MS version for perfection. The alapana for the song *Enati nomu phalamo* was one of the best Bhairavis I have heard. Wholesome alapana with the choicest brigas tossed with nonchalance, delivered with

laser precision, with no loss of tone whatsoever – a virtually limitless sojourn into the octaves. Her sruti suddham was astounding. True she was gifted with a golden voice, but her sruti suddham was beyond the gift of God. It was the result of her assiduous practice right from her childhood with two tamburas, caressing that voice with utmost care and avoiding excess use or misuse. That I feel was the secret of her voice – retaining its tonal colours and timbre till the end.

We were a group of youngsters in Trivandrum deeply interested in the music of MS, with the desire to listen to a live concert of MS growing stronger by the day. In 1983 we came to know that MS was coming for a concert to Anandavadi – her annual pilgrimage to the ashram of Swami Atmananda in Malakkara near Chengannur. Three of us reached the venue by 7 pm, which involved a four-hour journey by train. It was a vast area of 50-60 acres covered with vegetation, mainly jasmine flowers with their heady scent. The inmates of the ashram – mainly Westerners and Malayalis – were dressed in silk sarees and flowers for the occasion. All the guests were received at the entrance and taken to their seats. We could see people sitting on fences and treetops to listen to MS. The concert started at 8.30 pm. I could see MS seated in the centre in an olive green silk saree, with daughters Radha Viswanathan and Vijaya Rajendran providing vocal support. I do not remember the name of the accompanists that day. With the two tamburas – Lakshmi and Saraswati – immaculately tuned and the nada pervading the vast area, when the customary invocatory sloka *Om nama Pranavarthaya* started, I felt goosebumps.

This was the moment I had yearned for. Then came *Tera teeyagarada* in Gaulipantu, a plaintive appeal for darsan. Very few at that age can capture that energy, that combination of clarity, perfectly aligned pitch, vocal dexterity, stage presence, total involvement and absorption, sadhana and bhakti that make any MS concert a divine experience. I remember the songs even now. *Tera teeyagarada* followed by *Aparadhamula*, *Sabhapatikku veru deivam*, *Jaya jaya Padmanabha*, *Seetamma mayamma*, *Sree Krishnam bhajamanasa*, *Swara raga sudharasa* and her favourite devotional pieces and bhajans which created a trance among the rasikas. One new song in that concert was a Malayalam song starting *Atmananda Gururdevo jaya jaya* – a very moving piece in Yadukulakambhoji. The elaborate alapanas of Latangi, Abhogi, Todi, Yadukulakambhoji and Sankarabharanam were pregnant with the choicest brigas, gamakas, glides and long akara passages, all in the right proportion. The liberal doses of niraval and swaraprastara appealed to connoisseurs and laymen alike.

MS with Vijaya and Radha



PHOTO COURTESY: RADHA VISWANATHAN



The niravals of MS were not a display of her virtuosity or vocal gymnastics. They revealed a skilful combination of the choicest sancharas, brigas, kampita gamakas, jaru prayogas, and akaram, artistically employed to portray the bhava of the lines chosen for niraval. She was one of the very few musicians who could delve into the mind of the composer and reflect the intended bhava. The thousands of listeners there, including the Swamiji, his disciples and other inmates, were blown away by the devotion, commitment and dedication which made the concert a rare experience. We recorded the programme on a portable tape recorder, and throughout our journey till Trivandrum, we relived those unforgettable moments listening to the music.

It was in that concert that an LP of MS, *Radhamadhavam*, was released, which later became my lullaby for many years. Verses composed by Swami Atmananda in Malayalam were set to the choicest classical ragas by Kadayannallur Venkatraman and rendered by MS in impeccable Malayalam, something very few non-Malayali musicians would attempt.

My next opportunity to listen to MS in a live concert came in 1986, quite unexpectedly in New Delhi. I had gone to attend a training programme in Lucknow and a

casual glance at a local newspaper gave the information that MS was being honoured with the Spirit of Freedom Award by VST Industries followed by her concert at the Siri Fort auditorium, New Delhi. That day she sang *Endaro mahanubhavulu, Nee irangayenil pugaledu, Rama nee samanamevaru*, a ragam-tanam-pallavi in Mohanam and some bhajans. Her elaborate alapanas of Athana, Kharaharapriya and Mohanam received thunderous applause from the listeners. She still had all her range even at that age. The serenity, musical acumen, variety of songs, sense of proportion and sincerity of execution cast a spell on the audience. We had heard about the hard work and practice she put in for each song before presenting on the concert stage. As a result, each of the songs sparkled like an elegantly polished diamond. The concert extended to two and half hours and the huge audience assembled there sat as if in a trance. I witnessed an unusual scene at the end. Besides hundreds of people taking autographs, scores of people, young and old, offered their sashtanga namaskarams to the goddess of music.

Another live MS concert was in 1989 at the Rama Seva Mandali, Bangalore during the Ramanavami Festival. MS was a regular performer there. People used to throng the area from nearby villages and towns right from the afternoon. When the curtain unfolded, I saw MS seated in a maroon silk saree with her familiar aura of peace and divinity spreading around, and Radha Viswanathan and Gowri Ramnarayan providing vocal support. That day, an LP record of MS, *New Classics*, comprising compositions of Mysore Yoganarasimham was released. This was another instance of her constant endeavour to expand her repertoire even at an advanced age. An earlier example were the *Balaji Pancharatnamala* records which revealed the passion with which she learned Annamacharya's compositions, even after crossing 65.

MS started the concert with her masterpiece, the *Viriboni* varnam, followed by many songs including *Devadideva* in Sindhuramakriya, *Manasuloni*, *Kamalambam bhajare* in Kalyani and *Nijathanija*, a composition of Yoganarasimham in raga Bhanudhanyasi, to the enjoyment of the huge crowd assembled in the venue. A Narayana Teertha tarangam, *Mamakaparadha satam* in Todi, preceded by elaborate alapana and *Tiruvazha tiruazhi* – an oonjal song by Pillai Perumal Iyengar in a ragamalika – were new to me. I had taken my mother who had been longing for many decades to see MS, to this concert and she felt so elated after seeing MS – her idol from childhood.

A music performance of MS was not a mere concert presenting a chain of songs, not a display of vocal gymnastics or a show of intelligence. It was a divine experience.

(The author is a connoisseur of music)