

Sangita Kalanidhi M.S. Subbulakshmi (1916-2004).

Lakshmi Vishwanathan

With a profound sense of irreparable loss, the Music Academy dedicated the seventy eighth conference and festival to the memory of Bharat Ratna, Sangita Kalanidhi, Dr. M.S. Subbulakshmi. The festival was inaugurated on December 19th 2004, by Honourable Justice Sri. K.S.Bhaktavatsalam.

By a fortuitous circumstance, the internationally renowned painter, M.F. Hussain, an ardent admirer of M.S.Subbulakshmi and her music, had just unveiled his inimitable portrait painting of her, in Chennai, at the Lakshana gallery. By kind courtesy of Mr. Hussain, and the gallery, this remarkable painting of the great “nightingale of Carnatic music”, adorned the stage of the Music Academy on the occasion of the inaugural function.

The first woman to receive the prestigious title of Sangita Kalanidhi, in 1968, M.S. Subbulakshmi came to be universally perceived as the most revered musician of the nation. She was also the first artiste to be honoured with the highest national award, the Bharat Ratna, in 1998. It was a fitting crown for a great musician who had received innumerable titles and awards for her long and unmatched service to music. From her first concert at the Music Academy in 1932 when she was only sixteen years old, to the autumn years of her career, she not only enriched the institution with the wealth of her musical expertise, but also contributed her might to raise funds for the building of the present auditorium. The words of India's Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru as he presided over M.S.'s concert when he laid the foundation stone for the auditorium are etched in gold in the history of Indian music. He repeated what he had said of M.S. earlier in Delhi :

“..who am I a mere Prime Minister to say anything about a Queen, the queen of songs?”

M.S. and her husband Sri.T. Sadasivam were lifelong friends of the Academy. Rather, one should say that they were part of the family of the Academy. Even when they were momentarily pre-occupied with the Tamil Isai movement in the forties, they always kept an eye – a supportive and committed eye – on the Academy. Without exaggeration, one can say that they were a power-house of influence on the course that Carnatic music would take right through the twentieth century. Many a Rasika would recall with awe, the dignity, grandeur and grace with which M.S. conducted

herself when she received the Sangita Kalanidhi title. She virtually opened the doors for recognition of women musicians in a male dominated bastion.

One can recall vividly the graciousness with which M.S. and Sadasivam would be present at the Sadas of the Music Academy, year after year to applaud and bless the Vidwan who received the Sangita Kalanidhi title.

M.S.'s concerts generated not only funds for the Academy but also re-iterated the highest aesthetic values inherent in classical music. Whether she introduced the largely unheard Mela Raga Chakras of Maha Vaidyanatha Iyer, a completely new Annamacharya composition, or sang a simple Tamil spiritual ditty, she filled the air with the purity of melody, crispness of diction and total commitment to classicism. Every season that she sang, she introduced a hitherto unheard repertoire of the Trinity's classic compositions. Her Sankarabharanam raga alapana was truly an adornment for the Academy's stage. She would soar to great heights like an unbridled bird, and touch the heavens, taking her audience with her. Whether it was Tyagaraja's "O Rangasayee", or Syama Sastri's "Devi Brova", M.S. gave each song her magical touch, while the avid listeners of the Academy feasted on an experience of their life-time. Thus she set high standards for others to follow.

The musical presence of M.S. on the Academy's stage lent the institution unprecedented prestige throughout the twentieth century. Furthermore, it gave the young aspirants of music pride in the fact that they were in the company of the greatest. She was truly a source of inspiration for many musicians. As for rasikas, her music provided them spiritual bliss and unblemished joy. She lived for music, and generously contributed to many a worthy cause. The Academy dedicated its festival to her as a fitting tribute to one of the greatest legends of Indian music.

