

A titan passes

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Three great Indian musicians have left us in the recent past — Ustad Ali Akbar Khan and Gangubai Hangal from the world of Hindustani music and D.K. Pattammal, the last of the Titans of Carnatic music. All three of them were pioneers in their field, the ustad playing a major role in the propagation of Hindustani music in the West, the US in particular, and the two women storming male bastions with their powerful voices and uncompromising musical values.

The success of *Sruti* was assured when Pattammal offered her unconditional cooperation in a two-part profile with which we launched the magazine in October 1983. This is how that profile began — with a graphic description of a Madras Music Academy kutcheri:

“The auditorium is full; a young woman has cast a spell over the listeners. Clad in a maroon silk saree with mustard and gold border, the pallav covering her shoulder, she presents a picture of modesty and feminine grace. The coruscating diamonds on her ears and nose enhance the old world elegance of the occasion. There are no sudden or jerky movements either in her person or in her music. She has sung Vachaspati raga elaborately, with subtle and imaginative touches. Now she is singing the tanam in the same raga, weaving rhythmical patterns skillfully into melodic phrases. There is palpable excitement and as the tanam draws to a close, the audience visibly holds its breath in avid expectation of the main attraction of the evening. This is the pallavi. The singer now renders it in a complicated rhythmic structure. The development of the pallavi “Navasakti swaroopini, nada omkara roopini”, follows the dictates of classical tradition, and niraval leads to kalpana swara-s. Nowhere is there the slightest infraction of artistic decorum. Nor is the intellectual handling of rhythm allowed to become a mere display of vocal gymnastics or solfa without soul. The emotional content runs through the whole like a luminescent silver thread. Perspicuity and poignancy, held to be the two aspects of all great art, fully realised on the razor’s edge balance of intellect and emotion. This finesse and depth coupled with original creativity amaze listeners.”

Born in Kanchipuram on 28 March 1919, Damal Krishnaswamy Dikshitar Pattammal was over 90



D.K. Pattammal

when she breathed her last, her death bemoaned by the lifelong admirers of her magnificent, sonorous rendering of unadulterated traditional Carnatic music, austere in intent and execution, crystal clear in enunciation, faithful to its creators in word and spirit, soaring in its adventurous exploration of the most complex of its rhythmic variations.

Spotted by a school headmistress, Pattammal learnt from the great guru-s of her day by indirect assimilation Ekalavya style rather than through gurukulavasa, which her gender at any rate ruled out. Kanchipuram Naina Pillai’s impact led to her mastery of ragam-tanam-pallavi at a time when women if heard at all on the concert stage were expected to confine themselves to song-rendering in a demure, proper manner. The brief tutelage with Ambi Dikshitar meant that she would one day become synonymous with the Muthuswami Dikshitar oeuvre. The graduation – through adulthood and marriage – to direct learning from Papanasam Sivan gave her a command over Tamil compositions that was at once enviable and

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poignant in the visible bhakti of her exposition of those moving lyrics.

For all her orthodoxy, Pattammal took many a daring step in her youth, especially in her courageous espousal of the nationalist cause through song. She did not shy away from lending her voice to film songs either, provided the songs were based on classical music and had high meaning. They were usually of patriotic content. She gave new life to some of the best creations of poet Subramania Bharati in this genre.

Pattammal and her brother D.K. Jayaraman were a rare combination on stage, completely devoid of sibling rivalry, creating vocal excellence in a role reversal that meant the younger brother had to sing in a kind of falsetto to support the elder sister's deep voice. It is only when Jayaraman started to perform solo that the real depth and range of his voice came into prominence.

Pattammal was a much loved, respected teacher too. While son Sivakumar is a mridanga vidwan, his marriage to Palghat Mani Iyer's daughter resulted in the passing on of extraordinary musical genes to the next generation. Granddaughter Nithyashree Mahadevan is the best known among the musicians from the Pattammal lineage but her aunt Sukanya and sister

Gayatri too are trained vocalists. Many frontline musicians belonging to the Jayaraman school had the good fortune of learning from Pattammal too, especially after Jayaraman's premature death. Vijay Siva and R.K. Shriramkumar are perhaps the most prominent of them. Pattammal remained a loving and devoted teacher almost until the end. She listened to and appreciated good music of all kinds, including film music, jazz and opera, but her views on Carnatic music remained unwaveringly traditional, classical.

When the end came, on 16th July 2009, Pattammal had been more or less silent for about a year, though she radiated love and concern for her near and dear ones and visitors who triggered old memories, through eyes and gesture. Mourners at the Pattammal household were told that husband Iswaran had promised her mother that he would not die without taking care of her till her last breath. Thus came the end of a long relationship of interdependence, in which she submitted totally to his guidance.

Sruti salutes the memory of this giant among Carnatic musicians and prays for the continuance of her great tradition through her disciples. ■