

G.N. Sir

The late Sri G.N. Balasubramaniam (G.N. Sir to many of us) was hailed as a genius by his distinguished contemporaries. Veterans who were with us when GNB started his career showered on him their affection and encouraged him with their appreciation. Profound vidwat, rich imagination and a voice vibrant and agile – these enabled him to explore unexplored regions and draw daring patterns with dexterity and speed, which thrilled his listeners. He reached the top of his profession in record time and stabilised himself there for two decades and more. He evolved a style all his own which has come to be described as the “GNB Bani”. Several talented disciples have popularised it and it has now become part of the heritage of Carnatic music. This style has reigned supreme for over four decades and has become so pervasive that you find glimpses of it in the music of all the top ranking performing artists of today – maybe without their being conscious of it.

It has been my good fortune to have accompanied GN Sir in countless performances all over the country. Many of these were memorable. I shall refer here to one such star performance which has remained green in my memory for more reasons than one. The occasion was a marriage celebration at Kallidaikurichi. The venue was a decorated pandal in front of a bungalow near the railway station. The pandal was packed to capacity with knowledgeable rasika-s – men and women – who are ardent admirers of TNR, Semmangudi and GN Sir himself. The performance started at about 9.30 pm as is usual in that village. GN Sir was in fine fettle. From the very start, the performance settled to a high level of excellence. After spiritedly singing a few kriti-s and raga-s as was his wont, Kalyani was taken up for RTP. It had a two-hour duration. GN Sir exhaustively covered the three octaves in all three time scales. Sanchara-s in mandara sthayi and swara-s in vilamba kalam had more than their usual share. All his inventive faculties were in full play in the rendering of alapana and there were subtle laya variations in his pallavi singing. Even to me who was familiar with GN Sir’s Kalyani, some rare prastara-s with twists, turns and glides came as a revelation. S.V.S. Narayanan (son of S.V. Subbiah Bhagavathar of drama fame) played on the mridangam. Both of us played at our best and keyed up the concert to a high level of excellence. GN Sir acknowledged and appreciated our contribution. Among senior vocalists, GN Sir always believed in giving ample opportunities to the accompanists to prove their mettle and when they rose to the occasion he was never niggardly in his praise. He always got the best out of them.

GNB in concert with T.N. Krishnan (violin), Palghat Mani Iyer (mridanga), T.H. Vinayakram (ghata) and Trichur Ramachandran (vocal support)



Sangita Kalanidhi Dr. T.N. Krishnan

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Sangita Kalanidhi Dr. T. N. KRISHNAN

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The RTP that day had a swara ragamalika. Then came the light pieces – all listeners’ choices. The last item before the tillana was a slokam rendered in several raga-s. Some rare raga-s were featured. While singing such rare raga-s, GN Sir would invariably start with a passage pinpointing the arohana and avarohana of that raga so that there may not be any room for confusion or mistaken identity. The delineation of such raga-s will always be short, sweet and sparkling.

Altogether, the performance lasted for about 4½ hours. When we started for our resting place after the performance, we could see the items for the next morning breakfast ready and steaming.

Fans of GNB were overjoyed. Everybody felt happy over the fact that they were able to hear the master at his best. But that which amazed me and has since remained in my memory was the sight of the lay listeners perching on the parapet wall, glued to their seats all those long hours,

not minding the physical discomfort. It was not merely a tribute to GN Sir's phenomenal popularity. It established beyond doubt that classical Carnatic music can have as much appeal to the lay listener as to the connoisseurs and the critics.

A cult figure

By 1940, G.N. Balasubramaniam was an established star in the Carnatic music firmament. He was young, handsome, glamorous in fact, was a graduate, Honours in English literature, no less, had acted in a few films and had brought a breath of fresh air. None of the films, including the latest, *Sakuntalai*, had seen a sparkling performance or captivating songs from him but his standing in the music field was totally unrelated to his film career. He did act in one or two more films but that made no difference. GNB had accumulated a large number of followers, mostly young, and had become a cult figure.

He brought to the concert platform a number of kriti-s not generally in vogue. *Vararagalaya* (Chenchukambhoji), *Kalala nerchina* (Deepakam), *Yagnadulu* (Jayamanohari), *Chalamelara* (Marga Hindolam), *Marugelara* (Jayantasree) were Tyagaraja compositions that no one appeared to have handled in the contemporary music scene. *Kari kalabha mukham* (Saveri), a Dikshitar kriti with the way he began the pallavi, was an immediate hit. *Vidajaladura* (Janaranjani) was particularly attractive for the way the charanam 'Tanuve panulaku' came dancing. This is not to say that he neglected the major raga-s. Certainly not. His Kalyani was the favourite of the cognoscenti.

I remember his starting the 1948 Academy concert at the

In the passing away of GN Sir, Carnatic music has lost one of its greatest exponents. I have lost one who was dearer to me than an elder brother, one who took abiding interest in my welfare. We cannot see the likes of him again. ■

K.V. Ramanathan

Rasika Ranjani Sabha with *Teliyaleru Rama*. It was sheer delight. On coming home and switching on the radio, I found that AIR was broadcasting the recorded concert and it was a double delight.

Not that there was no criticism. It used to be remarked that adherence to sruti was less than perfect on some occasions. But he could carry it off and it did not matter. In the teeth of opposition and violent criticism, he took up sruti bheda in his concerts to an admixture of puzzlement and admiration.

And the tukkada-s – oh, the tukkada-s! Most of them were ragamalika-s. Bharati's *Dikku teriyada kaattil* was an early one. Soon came *Radha sameta Krishna* and *Radha nukha kamala*. And then there was *Chintai arindu vadi*. The story of Madurai Mani making a listener's request for it needs no repetition. In the mid-forties, some more ragamalika-s made their appearance. *Sonnadai seydidu sahasama* was followed by *Kannanai kanbadeppo*. *Karanam kettu vadi* was one of his most engaging songs.

What a tragedy that he was snatched away at a comparatively young age. What would he not have achieved had he lived longer? But we are more than grateful for the heights of pleasure he made us scale in his short life. ■