

Ananthalakshmi Sadagopan: (1928 - 2013)

South Indian middle class society in the 1930s expected the girlchild of the family to be knowledgeable in one art form or other. With competent music teachers not averse to visiting individual homes, most of the womenfolk took to music – only to learn and sing in private, not to come out on stage or cut a record yet. By the 1970s, however, this tradition faded away, gradually; like the family-doctor, the family-music-teacher became extinct.

In this scenario, renowned musician Sathur A.G. Subramanian, hailing from Virudhunagar, offered to teach music by visiting homes. Out of this ‘Sathur School’ several talented women artists blossomed. Three to be mentioned in our context were Sitamani Srinivasan, Sulochana Pattabhiraman and Ananthalakshmi Sadagopan. They received their share of accolades from ‘Aarabhi’ – music critic of *The Hindu* – who wrote reviews every week, of the radio programmes that were aired on Madras A and Madras B. Many women musicians, who were rich in talent but seldom heard on stage, won appreciation in these columns.

Born on 28 April 1928 in Madurai to A.R. Narayanan and Alamelu, Ananthalakshmi trained under multiple gurus like Ganesa Bhagavata, Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, Nedunuri Krishnamurthy and V.V. Sadagopan. She also learnt Hindustani music from Vamanrao Sadolikar, a training that helped her to keep the two styles distinct. Ananthalakshmi was known for



her powerful voice, flair for raga singing and concert ability. She settled gracefully into an early radio-singing career, rendering several hits tuned by C.R. Subbaraman and V.V. Sadagopan.

During this period, she cut a disc containing several Carnatic gems, besides two Bharatiar songs tuned by C.R. Subbaraman and included the popular *Ganamazhai pozhigindran*, an Ambujam Krishna song. It was set to music by V.V. Sadagopan, whose mother, like Alamelu, hailed from remote Ananthakrishnapuram village in Tirunelveli district. Ananthalakshmi also sang an abridged version of the four raga pallavi *Sankarabharananai azhaittodi vadi Kalyani darbarukku*, popularised by Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar. Brevity – as often dictated by the record time limitation – brings out the best in an artist, and it did in Ananthalakshmi’s delineation of the quintessence of the four ragas. The temperament of such artists is to be

appreciated for the free exchange of similar swara patterns among ragas purely on the merit of their inherent melody, without confusing the identity of the raga.

As marriage took her to Delhi, Ananthalakshmi’s early career revolved around programmes in AIR-Delhi. This relationship with All India Radio flourished for six decades, as a performing artist and as a judge for auditions. A little known fact is she has set to tune *Meenakshi Ammai Pillai Tamizh* of Sri Kumaraguruparar.

Later, when she was able to visit Madras, her live concerts in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s were exemplified by her adherence to tradition even as she attempted essays of less familiar ragas and compositions. A distinct memory is the scintillating rendition of *Bhajana seyarada* in Dharmavati, a raga not popular then in the concert circuit. Another less known composition of Ambujam Krishna, *Kolam kana vareer* set in Natakurinji by Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, was delivered with élan. Vidwat is essential to sing unknown kritis with impact and verve. Aply supported by her prime disciple and daughter Sujatha Vijayaraghavan in these concerts, her pallavi singing in Kalyani needs mention – for the pallavi *Taraka brahma swaropini; tamarasa vilochani* set in Adi tala.

A remarkable instance of Ananthalakshmi’s musicianship occurred during the dance arangetram of her niece when she gave an impromptu alapana of Kambhoji during the interval. To some connoisseurs, that rendition remains fresh in memory,

relegating the rest of the show to the background. Archives bear testimony to Sathur A.G. Subramanian's felicity and creativity with Kambhoji; it is hardly surprising that his disciple shone likewise. It is unfortunate that only a short *Emmayarama* (of Bhadrachala Ramadas) in Kambhoji survives in the known archives from her concert years.

A regular visitor and a keen but silent observer at the Music Academy during the music season, Ananthalakshmi was at her self-effacing best four years ago. When one of us introduced the other to her in the Academy hall saying "This chap likes your music very much," she drew her silk sari tightly around her neck and shyly remarked, "Those



were sung several years ago; are you still listening to them? *Romba santosham*." This humble musician passed away on 15 May 2013.

Stalwarts of the art form ruled the stage in the early decades after Ariyakudi harbingered a concert method aimed at sustaining Carnatic music. There was little room in the top-tier for scores of up-and-coming artists of even phenomenal competence; they either were withered by sustained competition or suffered neglect. We could easily identify some twenty musicians who, if born in a different era, would have achieved fame and top-tier concert status purely on their competence. Ananthalakshmi Sadagopan was one such artist.

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