COVER STORY

ALATHUR BROTHERS
By music conjoined

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PHOTOS COURTESY: FAMILY OF ALATHUR BROTHERS

The finest singing duo of the 20th century, in the field of Carnatic music, was the Alathur Brothers – formally Srinivasa Iyer and Sivasubramania Iyer, and informally Cheenu and Subbu. In this centenary year of the more popular but the younger of the two, Alathur Sivasubramania Iyer, much has been written, said and telecast about the duo, revealing that they were musical brothers hailing from two different families from different linguistic backgrounds.

The story begins with Alathur Venkatesa Iyer, their guru. Venkatesa Iyer learnt music from Dasavadyam Krishna Iyer of Tiruvaiyaru. Krishna Iyer, according to some accounts, was a disciple of Tillaisthanam Panju Bhagavatar, a direct disciple of Tyagaraja. Another version says that Venkatesa Iyer was a disciple of Manambuchavadi Venkatasubba Iyer. Either way, the line traces back to the saint-composer.

Venkatesa Iyer (born 1894) had drifted from a vedic-chanting family to learn music. He mastered the harmonium and could even demonstrate gamakas on the instrument, goes the story. Moving forward to the 1910s, Venkatesa Iyer married and settled down in Tiruchi. The first son, born in 1914, did not survive even for a year. The second, born in 1916, was named Sivasubramaniam.

Meanwhile, at Ariyalur was Angarai Sankara Sroutigal, a poor Tamil Brahmin with a large family of twelve children. His sixth child, Srinivasan provided vocal assistance to his elder brother Viswanathan, who was into Harikatha. Sivanandam Pillai, a local nagaswara artist, heard Srinivasan sing, was impressed and took him for formal music training to Alathur Venkatesa Iyer in Tiruchi in 1923.

The eleven-year-old Srinivasan and Sivasubramaniam – the seven-year-old son of Venkatesa Iyer – began learning from the basic lessons, under a watchful and strict disciplinarian guru. The routine included staying awake between 2 am and 5 am to listen to violinist Malaikottai Govindaswamy Pillai, who chose to play during those undisturbed, unearthly hours.

Venkatesa Iyer’s association with Pudukottai Dakshinamurthy Pillai and Palani Muthiah Pillai, and his opportunity to tune the lyrics of Tiruppugazh, which had a variety of complex rhythmic settings, rooted him strongly in laya. This was meticulously imparted to the two boys, making them experts in this aspect of music.

Their debut occurred in 1928 at Tiruvaiyaru, during the Tyagaraja Aradhana festival, then conducted by two camps, chinna katchi and periya katchi. They first sang at the chinna katchi’s festival; the fare included Adaya Sreeraghuvara (Ahiri) and Entunti vedalitivo (Darbar). The organiser, Soolamangalam Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar remarked, “They are like Lava Kusa. It seems
Tyagabrahmam composed these kritis especially for these boys to sing them”. Subsequently, they also sang at the periya katchi’s festival conducted by the eminent violinist, Govindaswamy Pillai. Their first “paid concert” took place at the Narasimha Bharati utsavam in Srirangam, with the brothers earning a sum of Rs 50. Pudukottai Dakshinamurthy Pillai, sitting amidst the audience, was floored. He praised Alathur Venkatesa Iyer lavishly for the quality of his training and invited the musicians to his guru pooja in remembrance of Mamundiya Pillai. They were invited the next year too. Apart from Dakshinamurthy Pillai, Palani Muthiah Pillai also accompanied them on the mridangam for this occasion. He introduced his son Subramania Pillai to the brothers and they remained a team for several years thereafter. Palani Subramania Pillai seemed to be the only mridanga vidwan to cope with the rhythmic complexities of the Brothers. In the same year, they were invited to perform at Jagannatha Bhakta Sabha, Egmore, in Madras. Dakshinamurthy Pillai who nursed high ambitions for the boys, accompanied them on the khanjira for several of their performances and on the mridangam on a few occasions.

Soon followed an invitation to perform in the presence of Krishna Rajendra Wodeyar, the king of Mysore. He had a grading system for the musicians who sang at the palace. Such stalwarts as Bidaram Krishnappa, Mysore Subbanna and Seshanna, present in the court, would grade the artists. The highest amount was paid to those rated to be of the first grade. Those who fell short were placed in second grade and paid less; those who failed to make even this grade were merely given the travel fare. Needless to say, Alathur Brothers were placed in the highest grade.

There are stories that Venkatesa Iyer, accompanying him on the harmonium, hit Subbier on the head with the lid of the harmonium, when he committed a small error. On one occasion, after such a public reprimand, Subbier is said to have sung the mangalam and ended the concert. Gradually, this paved the way for the withdrawal of Venkatesa Iyer from providing harmonium accompaniment. Mayavaram Govindaraja Pillai, a senior disciple of Kumbakonam Rajamanickam Pillai, started accompanying them on the violin. The brothers were keen on presenting a good team effort on stage; hence their complex pallavis were explained to the accompanying artists ahead of the concert and even rehearsed, if required.

Another important musical association of the Brothers was with the famous veena duo, the Karaikudi brothers. When the brothers visited Venkatesa Iyer’s home, the host family listened to them play the veena and they, in turn, would listen to the Alathur Brothers’ singing. The association continued with Sambasiva Iyer after the untimely demise of the elder sibling, Subbarama Iyer. Subbier learnt to play the veena and khanjira, thanks to his proximity to the Karaikudi brothers and Pudukottai Dakshinamurthy Pillai. Subbier had jamming sessions with Karaikudi Sambasiva Iyer and his wife, all three taking turns to play spells of tanam.

As the circle of friends and admirers grew, there was a concert for Alathur Brothers at the griha pravesam of a Chettiar in Kothamangalam village. Kumbakonam Rajamanickam Pillai and advocate C.K. Venkatanarasimhan, a connoisseur and patron of music, roped in Palghat Mani Iyer for mridangam accompaniment. Rajamanickam Pillai played the violin and Palani Subramania Pillai the khanjira on this occasion. It was the first time Mani Iyer accompanied them, but also the beginning of a partnership that lasted beyond Subbier’s lifetime. Meanwhile, Palani Subramania Pillai put in a good word about the Alathur Brothers to the Music Academy where they made their debut in 1939. They chose to reside in Madras for a while. It seemed a strategic location to find opportunities, to develop contacts, to be known better to the listening public and to the organisers and to grow in the field. Srinivasa Iyer’s brother, Krishnamurthy, living in Rangoon then, helped arrange for an invitation to the Brothers to perform there. The tour took place despite Venkatesa Iyer’s objection to the Brothers’ crossing the seas. It was a successful tour both artistically and financially.

(to be concluded)