

MANGALAMPALLI BALAMURALIKRISHNA

A youthful, gentle giant

Sangita Kalanidhi Mangalampalli Balamuralikrishna was a charismatic Carnatic vocalist of great popular appeal, with a career length that spanned seven decades. Debuting as a child prodigy in the 1940s, he was a constant presence in the concert scene of the twentieth century, and achieved elder statesman status in the new millennium.

The traditionalist found him a somewhat idiosyncratic singer, but had to concede that he had a powerful voice undiminished by age. A versatile modern composer, he was also a creator of ragas, a claim hotly contested in some quarters. Balamuralikrishna was often a controversial figure too, an innovator who questioned so-called tradition in a manner that shocked the purist. He once told *Sruti* that tradition was to him merely the grammar of music, the seven swaras and the laya systems.

Though he crossed swords with those who questioned his authorship of new ragas, he forgave and forgot easily. He filed a defamation suit against Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer for derogatory remarks he made against him, and forced him to apologise in writing before the presiding judge, but later, the two became good friends.

Balamuralikrishna's vocalisation was different from that practised by many of his seniors and contemporaries in Carnatic music. With a voice that easily traversed three octaves, he revelled in displaying his virtuosity in his concert singing, but constantly stressed the emotional aspects of music. He enunciated the lyrics in his native Telugu perfectly and was quite



at home in songs in Tamil, Sanskrit, Kannada and Malayalam, or even Hindi or Marathi. His manodharma was unique in raga alapana, niraval, swaraprastara or ragam-tanam-pallavi, very different from the norm. He was as strong in laya as in sruti suddham or fidelity to pitch.

A Padma Vibhushan awardee, Balamuralikrishna achieved almost every distinction that a musician could hope to achieve, but remained the eternal outsider, questioning established values, interpreting classical music in his own, largely self-taught ways, always giving originality greater importance than conformity. Interested in a variety of genres of music, he embraced film music, fusion and jugalbandi, even Rabindra Sangeet.

Born Muralikrishna to vocalist Pattabhiramayya and vainika Suryakantamma—daughter of Prayaga Rangayya, a composer—on 6 July 1930, at Sankaraguptam, a village in Andhra Pradesh—he was a child prodigy who performed for the first time at age nine. The prefix Bala was added to his name

on that day, to denote that he was a mere boy. He stayed Balamurali all his life, the perennially youthful vidwan. He is survived by wife Annapoornamma, three sons and three daughters.

In time, Balamurali grew up to become a confident purveyor of an original style, so different from the famous Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar school of music. If the traditional approach was marked by an emphasis on azhuttam and gamaka, Balamurali seemed to favour the relatively plain notes, which he virtually breezed through. Unlike the best among the orthodox practitioners who tended to announce the raga in the opening phrases of raga alapana, and maintain the raga swarupa by repeatedly visiting the fundamental phrases of the raga, Balamurali, ever the iconoclast and rebel, was different in his approach. A firm believer in innovation, he could manipulate the notes in ways different from the traditional, in ways that gave the raga a form at variance from the known. It was as if a sculptor took the correct dimensions of his subject and gave it different features.

Balamuralikrishna was a versatile composer. While still in his teens, he was advised by his spiritual guru Vimalananda Bharati to be a pioneer like Tyagaraja. Balamurali remembered this piece of advice, and composed a 72 melakarta ragamalika. His tillanas are much sought after by musicians and dancers alike, and his contributions to film music as composer and singer were quite brilliant.



Balamuralikrishna inherited a love of verse from his poet grandfather. He recorded his subtly worded songs in his beautiful handwriting in a notebook. "You'll know this song is about Venkateswara though I don't mention his name or the seven hills," he told an interviewer.

Balamurali eschewed elaborate preparation before his concerts,

preferring to give free rein to his imagination and creativity on stage. He joked to a disciple that he never practised his art at home because deliberate sadhana was habit-forming, and habits led to addiction! He offered an ever smiling countenance on and off stage.

Balamuralikrishna was also a brilliant instrumentalist. He could play the violin, the viola, the mridangam and the khanjira. He provided

accompaniment on one or other of these instruments to such icons as Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar, Chittoor Subramania Pillai, Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer, Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, Voleti Venkateswarlu and K.V. Narayanaswamy.

Supreme confidence and a certain belief in the mystic and romantic appeal of his music marked Balamuralikrishna's approach to his life.

To what did he owe his longevity as a performer? "My father's guidance and guru Parupalli Ramakrishnayya Pantulu's blessings."

Vidwan Mangalampalli Balamuralikrishna was truly blessed. His legion of rasikas felt blessed by the grace of his music making, too.

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