

DR. S. RAMANATHAN

A doctor in every sense

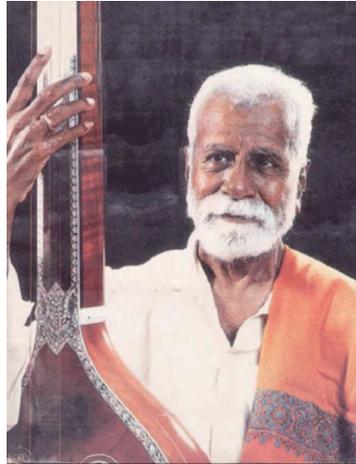
The first thing that comes to mind about Dr. S. Ramanathan's music is his sense of proportion. He was an example of how the simplest things could weave the most wondrous magic and leave listeners asking for more.

Wide repertoire

About vidwans like Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer, it has been said that the highlight of their music was creative alapana and that kriti rendition was a mere formality. Other musicians, like T. Brinda, made the rendering of the composition the hallmark of their style or the base on which the style was developed. Dr. S. Ramanathan belongs to the second category. The variety of kritis he offered is quite unmatched.

Be it the compositions of the Trinity, or modern day composers like Gopalakrishna Bharati or Koteeswara Iyer, the manner in which he rendered them in his deep voice, with all the sangatis, was captivating. Each sangati adhered to the tradition, with no improvised phrases, no compromise in the raga lakshana. Every note, every line was soaked in tradition and rendered powerfully, with no needless speeding. The kalapramana remained intact throughout his rendering. For a student of music, Ramanathan's rendition was a boon—it could be easily and accurately notated.

The compositions on which he left an indelible mark include *Yarukku daan teriyum* (Devamanohari), *Vel edutta kaiye* (Todi), *Dorakuna* (Bilahari), *Vara Narada* (Vijayasree), *Varalandu* (Gurjari), *Kadale vadu* (Narayanagaula), *Balamu kulamu* (Saveri), *Kanugonu saukhyamu* (Nayaki), *Na morala* (Devagandhari), *Sree Satyanarayanam* (Subhapanthavarali). He made every song he rendered his own, and every



concert of his had a new bill of fare with very few repetitions.

Also, he demonstrated his ability while elaborating any raga of his choice. It could be Bhoopalam (*Sadachaleswaram*), Jyotiswaroopini (*Anandamaya*), Lalita (*Nannu brovu*) or Reetigaula (*Bale balendu*). He handled every raga and it was possible for him to plumb the depths of each raga and present it in its grandeur. The same holds good for his swara kalpana. His rendering of swaras in ragas like Devaranji, Athana or Yadukulakambhoji proved his range of ragas, both common and rare.

His repertoire and his fertile analytical mind were great assets to his lecture demonstrations. Linking Muthuswami Dikshitar's *Santatam pahimam* to *God Save the King*, singing the swarakshara composition of Ramaswami Dikshitar, and describing the life of Subramania Bharati and rendering *Bhooloka kumari*, he did it all. He was a walking encyclopedia.

Manner of elaboration

One of the first records I acquired of Dr. S. Ramanathan had the alapana of

Anirudh Swaminathan

Harikambhoji followed by Tyagaraja's kriti *Chani todi*. The track was an excerpt from a live concert in which he was accompanied by Lalgudi Jayaraman (violin) and Trichy Sankaran (mridangam). This recording summarises S. Ramanathan's music and the values he stood by in his concerts.

To give you an idea of the time spent on each of the components in the rendition—the vocalist rendered the alapana for six minutes, followed by the violinist's exposition for the next five minutes. The rendition took five minutes, followed by niraval, first kala swaras and then second kala swaras for five minutes each. The time spent demonstrates the equal importance given to all the elements of manodharma sangeetam.

In alapana, Ramanathan did not follow the structured approach popularised by GNB, in which every note was taken up successively for elaboration. The initial portion of the raga exposition started with the range most suited for that raga, rather than the lower octaves. While it is the madhyama to nishada range in this case, it was madhyama to dhaivata in Saveri, the lower octaves in the case of Bhoopalam, Bhairavi, Devagandhari. In most cases, the upper shadja was reached within the second or third minute. Rather than restrict himself to a range and building the raga part by part, Ramanathan gave his flourishes using the entire range of the raga, resulting in a wholesome picture. There was no deliberate pause or split before the faster phrases were rendered. It was all seamlessly woven into the succinct alapana.

Coming to the next manodharma aspect, that of niraval, in this case the charanam—*Patitula broche*—is taken up for niraval. Ramanathan chose the

most appropriate places for niraval in all his renditions. The pattern of the line chosen was always kept in mind and he never strayed into completely different domains using the line as a vehicle. Instead he performed niraval within the close range of the initial sangati. One more interesting thing to note in his niraval was the way he came back to the original line and employed a new variation. Every time he completed a round of niraval, the original line had a changeover before the violinist started. The final variation of the charana line in this recording in which a brilliant glide from the panchama to the upper shadja is employed will stay on forever in the minds of the listeners. Sometimes, he also employed speed variations in niraval, as in a pallavi.

The swara segment was the highlight of Ramanathan's rendition. It was not rocket science or mind-numbing kanakku. His secret lay in the manner he offered a wide variety using simple combinations. For instance, using the five notes *SNDPM* is a common way for a beginner to come to the starting point. However, the variety in which he handled these notes made you sit up and admire his creativity—*NDDPM*; *N,D,P,M*; *NDPDM*; *NDN, DPM*; *S,N,D,P,M*; *SNNDDPM*; *SNDN,DPM* and so on. While Lalgudi used poruttams in his repartees, Ramanathan sticks to his approach of simple variety. The sarvalaghu patterns he used and the karvais in between the swaras add further beauty. This rendition also has a kuraippu portion around the dhaivata. However, the manner of structuring gives it a new flavour each time. Similarly, though the structure is the same, sometimes, a different start point adds a new dimension. He then concludes with a simple korvai.

In the whole episode, what differentiates Ramanathan is his simple approach to music and every part of it. However, the depth required for that simplicity to keep others spellbound is not attainable by everyone. The spontaneity and confidence with which he rendered each swara showed the effort he put in and how he imbibed or assimilated

every note of a raga. It is possible only for one who breathed music throughout his life.

Pallavi rendition

Ramanathan excelled himself in rendering ragam-tanam-pallavi. He chose to render simple pallavis, popular among those being *Era na sami* (Kambhoji, Tisra Triputa – 2 kalai), *Nirupuma sundarakara* (Kanada, Adi – 2 kalai), *Unadu padam tunaiye* (Chakravakam, Adi – 2 kalai). The list is endless, but these pallavis charm the listener with their beauty. Notable in each of the pallavi renditions is that none of them exceeded ten to 15 minutes, but they made the listener hum the pallavi line even after the concert.

One more differentiating factor was the absence of trikalam in his pallavi renditions. In some concerts, he chose to present the *keezh kalam* and then concluded with the madhyama kala. Contrary to the general expectation that pallavi is tough on the average listener's ears and is more kanakku oriented, Ramanathan made it all sound so graceful. He indulged the experts by choosing various places for his swara kalpana, adding yati sangatis in the rendition, and of course, not to forget his inimitable niraval. Certain renditions were also followed by ragamalika swaras. His lecture demonstrations on the subject revealed his mastery over the subject and his kalapramana suddham only added to the perfection of mathematical exercises. But the very fact that he chose to abstain from doing so in most of his concerts shows his simplicity and his interest in taking music to the common listener.

Creativity

Creativity was always inherent in his music though it was never expressed separately or in a conspicuous manner. Certain moments in his music just create that "aah" moment. For instance, the manner he concludes the Kambhoji Ata tala varnam by using just *N,D,M,G,S*, crossing the octave in under two seconds, made me wonder how anyone could be more precise in the conclusion.

I am sure even the violinist Lalgudi thought so as he goes on to repeat that after Ramanathan has concluded.

Similarly, in the swara rendition following *Sree Satyanarayanam* in Subhapantuvarali, he weaves garlands of swaras with just the three notes *Ni Sa Ri*.

Towards the concluding part, viruttam rendering further gave a fillip to his creative genius. Various ragas employed attain a sheen when he renders them as part of his viruttams. The manner in which the next tukkada flowed from the last raga in the viruttam was very engaging.

Every rendition of Ramanathan had the accompanist in his comfort zone which made him scale greater heights. Every accompanist had a good word to say about the doyen. The video recording of *Sarasa sama mukha* in Khamas with Lalgudi (violin) and Vellore Ramabhadran (mridangam) reinforces how everyone enjoyed the music and there was always that bonhomie among the artists on stage.

Style

Dr. S. Ramanathan evolved a style of his own, well suited to bring out the beauty of his deep voice to the fullest extent. His style was characterised by unhurried presentation, avoiding brigas in his rendition to the extent possible. Another striking feature of his style was using straight notes and avoiding excessive usage of gamakas. The straight notes coupled with the unhurried manner of rendition lent a different perspective and created a new style unique to the Master. Probably he realised what Sir Arthur Conan Doyle once said, "It has long been an axiom of mine that the little things are infinitely the most important".

Truly, his was a style which chose to sensitise and not sensationalise. It was unmarred and untouched by the world around and it was the result of the best traditions.

(The author is a Chartered Accountant and rasika)