

Remembering MDR

Vandeham Varadadasam, a celebration of the music of Carnatic music legend M.D. Ramanathan (MDR), was organised recently by his son Balaji Ramanathan at Raga Sudha hall in Chennai. It was an enjoyable evening listening to the introductory speech of Sangita Kalanidhi T.V. Gopalakrishnan who recounted his association with MDR—providing insights into the late musician’s personality.

With TVG providing the emotional connect, the “Sound, music and meaning in MDR’s art” were “deconstructed” by the erudite musician Sriram Parasuram. Some of these were familiar to the “MDR-bhaktas” who made up most of the audience. Recordings of MDR’s music in the second half of his presentation supported the observations in his opening summary—MDR’s flowing manodharma which refused to be “straitjacketed” into prevailing formats; how he made a kriti his own, not as a “maverick” but with reverence to the composer; his attention to lyrics, and the pauses that had as much meaning as his music itself. Sriram also briefly pointed out how MDR would sometimes struggle in the faster pieces, but would be totally honest about it. In fact, honesty was a hallmark of MDR’s music, in general.



Sriram presented deeper insights too in a manner as only he can. One such is MDR’s “minimalist” approach: presenting the bare-minimum “central” theme, devoid of fanfare or gimmicks, and without indulging in a show of virtuosity. For example, a lecdem by MDR (where Sriram noted how surprisingly different his softer speaking voice was compared to the leonine singing voice) showed that MDR could also use his “head voice”; yet, he rarely did so in his concerts. Another was the concept of “pre-sound”. Great musicians, such as Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, could imagine the sound in their head before singing it, which was exemplified that evening by MDR’s wide-ranging jarus. There was a beautiful explanation of how MDR,

would choose to sacrifice consonant-clarity to emphasise the raga. One of MDR’s favourite pieces, *Samaja vara gamana*, was presented as an apt example.

The hall was overflowing with musicians, rasikas and students—with people sitting on stage and the walkways. It highlighted MDR’s popularity after more than two decades of his passing away.

Ramakrishnan Murthy, who concluded the evening with a befitting concert, seemed to be on the same wavelength as Sriram Parasuram. He did not imitate MDR, but there was MDR’s stamp in his presentation—meticulous sahitya suddham, exquisite niraval at *Rama bhakti* (not to mention starting the Pancharatna kriti at “mahanubhavulu”), and the immaculate choice of songs, two being MDR’s compositions *Tyagarajagurumasraye* and the immortal *Sagarasayanavibho*. Violinist Mysore Srikanth ably responded to the vocalist while percussionists J. Vaidyanathan (mridangam) and K.V. Gopalakrishnan (khanjira) gave the concert a boost. The full “MDR-mangalam” appropriately brought the memorable evening to a close.

VENKATASUBRAMANIAN
VIRARAGHAVAN

(A Carnatic music rasika and an ardent fan of MDR, he is a researcher at Tata Consultancy Services Ltd., Bengaluru)

Sriram Parasuram and T.V. Gopalakrishnan



(L to R): J. Vaidyanathan, K.V. Gopalakrishnan, Ramakrishnan Murthy and Srikanth

