

MANAKKAL S. RANGARAJAN

Speed was his forte

Manakkal Rangarajan was looked upon by fellow musicians for his pioneering approach to Carnatic music. He was a self-taught musician who trod his own path. Vocalist T.M. Krishna once addressed him as “the musicians’ musician”. Rangarajan was popular in his heyday and his concerts were sought after. He had quite a few rasikas and one of them was former chief minister M.G. Ramachandran. MGR listened to one of Rangarajan’s recitals on All India Radio and developed a great liking for his music. It is said that MGR requested Rangarajan to sing at the wedding reception of actor N.S. Krishnan’s daughter, but since Rangarajan had a concert on that date, MGR adjusted the event to accommodate his schedule.

Among several other rasikas who knew him through his radio concerts, was R. Pathmanaba Iyer, a London based Tamil publisher. Upon knowing that his favourite singer was living in Indira Nagar, Chennai, he established contact and immediately arranged for his concert tour to England in 2006. This tour also brought Manakkal Rangarajan closer to the younger generation rasikas living there. Six years later, Pathmanaba Iyer capped off his admiration for Rangarajan

by producing a documentary on him which, I had the honour of directing. It gave me an opportunity to know the singer first hand, listen and record a good number of musicians—old and young—who were enraptured by Manakkal’s music.

Rangarajan was born on 13 September 1922 in Manakkal, a tiny village near Lalgudi in Tiruchirapalli district in Tamil Nadu to Santhana Krishna Bhagavatar and Seethalakshmi Ammal. The couple had five sons and Rangarajan was the youngest. His father was a Harikatha exponent and as all his siblings were musicians, the child grew up in the midst of music. After completing high school, Rangarajan discontinued his studies and chose to pursue music full-time. In the midst of an imposing gurukula tradition he rose to heights as an autodidact. He set for himself a rigorous routine of several hours of practice each day. At a time when Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar, Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer, Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer and other stars were ruling the roost, fifteen-year-old Rangarajan presented his debut concert in Madras. Quite early in life, Rangarajan had developed a style of his own. He could maintain precision in his fast-paced renderings.



Even when his voice rode on the higher octave, he came out with clear swaras and gamakas. It was a gamble, but it paid off gloriously and he soon captured the attention of critics and peers.

He was a regular at the Tyagaraja aradhana at Tiruvaiyaru. On one occasion, when Musiri Subramania Iyer and Rangarajan were waiting for their turn, Musiri allowed Rangarajan to sing one song. Rangarajan was accompanied by famous violinist Rajamanickam Pillai and he chose to sing *Ninnuvina*. Each of his rapid-fire sangatis won thunderous applause from the audience and it was clear that Rangarajan had made the grade. However, according to Rangarajan, he got his major break during his concert at R.R. Sabha in 1940 with Kumbakonam Rajamanickam Pillai (violin) and Palani Subbudu (mridangam). Subsequently, Rangarajan was also accompanied by some of the greats of his time like Mysore T. Chowdiah and Palghat Mani Iyer amongst others.

Speed and full-throated singing were the hallmarks of Manakkal

In concert with his wife Padma (vocal support) and M. Chandrasekharan (violin)





With Parur M.S. Anantharaman (violin)

Rangarajan's bani. Brigas came naturally to him. His rendition of kritis like *Ninnuvina* (Navarasa Kannada), *Sarasa samadana* (Kapinarayani) and *Nenarunchinanu* (Malavi) were eagerly looked forward to by his rasikas. His voice could produce lightning patterns that were possible only on an instrument, but he was equally at home in rendering vilamba kala kritis. His impeccably rounded brigas sometimes had a Hindustani slant. On many occasions, while providing violin accompaniment to Rangarajan, Chowdiah would get emotional as he watched him sing sprightly sangatis and brigas with elan. Chowdiah even challenged artists to match Rangarajan's skill. Flute maestro Mali is said to have admitted that he could not match his speed. The same was echoed by clarinet maestro A.K.C. Natarajan who was all praise for Rangarajan's devotion to music.

Rangarajan soon became a sought-after musician and had a packed concert schedule. He got married to his disciple Padma, daughter of Thumilan, former editor of *Ananda Vikatan*. Padma provided vocal support to him in many of his concerts.

Mridanga vidwan T.V. Gopalakrishnan, accompanied him on some of his tours. Though they were on stage together, they exchanged only a few words as Rangarajan was an introvert. Gopalakrishnan recalled an experience, "He

used to perform for six hours in a concert. Once, he was on a hectic schedule—it was a six-day concert tour halting at every place within four hours distance, but he bore no strain. On the fifth day my shoulders ached. He simply told me that I would be all right if I went on playing. His concerts were always lively".

Rangarajan was in the limelight until the sixties after which there was a gradual decline in attendance at his concerts. Rangarajan however continued to remain active with his tuitions and limited concerts. He was also a regular performer at the Cleveland Tyagaraja festival, U.S.A. Recognition in the form of awards also came to him. Some of the awards he received include the Kalaimamani from the Tamil Nadu Eyal Isai Nataka Manram, Gayaka Samrat and Sangeeta Kalasikhamani from the Indian Fine Arts Society, Sangeeta Simham from Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar, Ugadi Puraskar from the Madras Telugu Academy, Ganakala Ratna,

Rangarajan receiving the Sangita Kalasikhamani award from T.N. Krishnan at The Indian Fine Arts Society, Chennai (2010)



Ganakala Sagara, the Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer Award and the TTK Award from the Music Academy, Madras.

Rangarajan was a quiet, unassuming and a non-controversial person. He shared his tersely worded opinions only when warranted. To quote him, "We should sing with commitment and without compromise. Music is beyond everything; the world will dance to it. It gives happiness, health and cures incurable illness. Just as meditation controls the mind, *akara-varisai* practise helps develop voice control. It can modulate the ups and downs in the voice and control breath. If we cannot regulate the voice it can be embarrassing. Singing with emotion finds an echo in the listener".

Despite his advanced years he was very cooperative while the documentary was being produced. Whenever I saw him he looked clean shaven, well-dressed and even powdered his face. Earlier photos revealed he was a handsome, muscular person; not surprising, that he bagged the role of Nandanar on stage in 1952. I took him along with his family to Manakkal for the shooting. His ancestral home in the agraharam had not undergone any physical change but had changed hands. Rangarajan grew nostalgic the moment he arrived there after a span of forty years. He sat on the oonjal or swing with his wife Padma and they sang a Tamil song in praise of Lord Muruga—it was indeed one of the touching moments captured in the film.

Manakkal S. Rangarajan breathed his last on 26 February 2019, he was 96. Rangarajan is survived by his wife and three children. His son Sriram plays the mridangam and daughters Seetha and Bhanumathi play the veena and violin respectively.

AMSHAN KUMAR
(An award-winning Indian filmmaker and writer)