

## M.K. THYAGARAJA BHAGAVATAR

### An unsung concert singer

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In the history of south Indian performing arts, there perhaps exists no parallel to the case of M.K. Thyagaraja Bhagavatar (1910 - 1959) where the tremendous popularity of one facet of an artist is matched by a near oblivion of another. So high is his stature in the history of Tamil cinema that he is popularly regarded as the first ‘superstar’, while the general awareness about him as a Carnatic concert singer is very low. There are some photographs of MKT in concert, but the unavailability of even one recording of his concerts is responsible for the fading out of this aspect of his artistic personality.

In MKT’s autobiographical sketch published in a special issue of *Thirai Ulagam* in 1948, he has shared memories, as a little boy, of hearing concerts in Tiruchi and, being then ignorant of the nuances, pining to appreciate the music as the learned did. His father knew music, though to what extent he does not reveal, and taught him the viruttam *Kulam tarum selvam tanthidum*, which was the first piece he learnt, and for some time, the only piece he could sing in Bhairavi. He then commenced formal training in music with ‘fiddle’ Chinnayya Pillai, whom he described as his ‘Adi Guru’ (first teacher). He desired to become a concert singer after hearing vidwans sing at the Thyagaraja aradhana in Tiruvaiyaru. Then he took music lessons from Ponnusami Iyengar, a violinist in Tiruchi, under whose tutelage MKT became trained enough to present concerts. In his first concert, Ponnu Iyengar played the violin, and we learn from Vinthan’s biography, that the redoubtable Pudukottai Dakshinamoorthy Pillai presided over the event.

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Thyagaraja Bhagavatar in concert with Mysore Gururajappa (violin), Kuthalam Sivavadivelu Pillai (mridangam), T.S. Vilvadri Iyer (ghatam) and Mannargudi Natesam Pillai (morsing) at the Tamil Isai Sangam in Madras (25-12-1944)



After that, there is a cavernous gap in available information about MKT’s concert career, for invariably, the focus shifts to his drama career and the more spectacular film career starting with *Pavalakodi* in 1934. But we are not left entirely clueless about him as a concert singer in that period. In one of its issues in 1935, *Sangeeta Abhimani*, a magazine devoted to classical music and allied subjects, said in a review of *Pavalakodi* that MKT “comes across as an expert in music”. That remark was possibly occasioned mainly by the *Somasekhara* song in the film, set in the same tune as Thyagaraja’s *Rama neeyeda*, and sung with swaras as if it were a concert rendition. A direct reference to his concert singing in that period comes from more recent times. Arcot Easwaran wrote in *The Hindu* dated 2 April 2010 that sometime in the 1930s, MKT gave a three hours concert at a wedding reception in Bangalore, in which he sang many compositions of Thyagaraja, Swati Tirunal, and Purandaradasa. “A memorable incident it was,” recalled Easwaran.

MKT commenced advanced training in music from Alathur Venkatesa Iyer, though I am unable to find out precisely in which year. Among the many interesting memories shared by his grandson Alathur Thyagarajan, Venkatesa Iyer had heard MKT practise pallavi singing using his name *Thyagaraja Bhagavatar*, and would insist that he sang swaras too!

It is only from the time of the advent of the Tamil Isai Movement, in which MKT’s involvement was ardent and proved invaluable for attracting large crowds, that we find material relating to his concerts in contemporary sources. It was only after hearing a concert by MKT at a Tamil Isai

conference that ‘Kalki’ Krishnamurthi learnt that MKT was versed in concert singing too and capable of singing swaras with aplomb. Kalki’s admiration is apparent from his reports of MKT’s concerts at the Tamil Isai conferences.

MKT has sung on many occasions in All India Radio, Tiruchi, in which he was an ‘A’ grade artist. While reviews of his radio and live concerts between 1940 and 1943 speak appreciatively of his renditions, they are invariably short reviews that do not throw ample light on his competence as a classical music singer. It is only of his concert at the first Tamil Isai Conference in Madras in December 1943 that a detailed review is available in the ‘Programmes Special Issue’ released by the Tamil Isai Sangam, which too does not help to get a picture of the finer aspects, such as his spontaneous or even rehearsed creativity in raga and swara singing. Nevertheless, the general impression you get from the review is that it was an excellent concert. In a pen-picture description, it says that no sooner than he had finished a viruttam in Anandabhairavi, Kanada, Hindolam, Mohanam, Kapi, and Athana, he began *Nee irangayenil* and remarked that the joy experienced by the audience at that juncture could not be described in words. I found as many as three reviews of the same concert, and while all the reviews are rave, the one that appeared in *Talk-a-Tone* (a film magazine) written by someone called ‘A.C.S.’ commented that his concert stood out in the Tamil Isai Sangam series that season. The vocalists, apart from MKT, in that series included reputed artists as M.M. Dandapani Desigar, GNB, Madurai Mani Iyer, N.C. Vasanthakokilam, DKP, MS, and Brinda-Mukta.

The reviews I have gathered of MKT’s radio and live concerts in 1943 and 1944 have, without exception, showered high praise on his renditions. For example, a review in *Kalki* of his radio concert in December 1944 said: “A long concert in Tiruchi [radio] by M.K. Thyagaraja

Bhagavatar on 4 December. He filled the ears with reverberating music for one hour and fifteen minutes. He showed all his craftsmanship in Kambhoji. Most of the explorations were in the upper octave. Tirelessly exploring for considerable time with long karvais in the upper gandharam, madhyamam, and panchamam, he liberally unfettered his creativity. The niraval swaras in the *Mata pita* song in Mukhari and the beauty of the sangatis in the *Adiya padam* song stole the heart. In the end, he sang in a moving manner *Kalyanaguna mahibane* containing names of the ragas, the last song in the movie *Sivakavi* (1943).

Perhaps MKT’s greatest contribution to Carnatic music was the notable part he had played in distributing the enjoyment at least, if not the nuances of it. The inherent catchiness in Papanasam Sivan’s compositions found an outstanding medium through the remarkable effectiveness with which MKT rendered them. ‘Bhagavatar’s song’, they called it, held spellbound both learned and lay listeners. In popularising Carnatic tunes among the masses, he easily occupied the topmost position, for which there were hardly any rival contenders among the film singers of that era. Precisely at a juncture when MKT was poised to attain greater success both as an actor and singer, a deep tragedy struck his life, and it is generally acknowledged that the 27 months long imprisonment (February 1945 – April 1947) had a catastrophic impact on his life and career. (See *Sruti* 307 and 308).

The decisive shift in the trend of films from devotional and mythological themes to social themes, a few of which were produced especially for atheistic propaganda, compelled MKT, post-release from prison in 1947, to reduce his film engagements and focus rather on concert singing.

Concert at Pallathur accompanied by Tiruveezhimizhalai Subramaniam Pillai (violin), Valadi Subramaniam Pillai (mridangam) and Pudukottai Dakshinamoorti Achari (khanjira), in the early 1940s



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