

Remembering MSG

The birth anniversary of violin maestro M.S. Gopalakrishnan falls on 10 June, while 3 January 2021 marked the ninth death anniversary of the violin vidwan popularly known as MSG. It has been my good luck to have known him for a long time.

I was taken by an uncle to meet Parur Sundaram Iyer about whom and his two sons M.S. Anantharaman and M.S. Gopalakrishnan, I had heard so much. In fact, I had attended a few concerts in which MSG was featured as the violin accompanist.

I paid my respects to Sundaram Iyer and we then indulged in some small talk. In the course of the conversation, he said that contrary to general perception, there was no basic difference between the Carnatic and Hindustani music systems. Both had the same basic notes: *sa, ri, ga, ma pa, dha, ni*. The difference, such as it was, lay in the manner of treatment of these notes and the importance given to lyrics in the Carnatic system and the overwhelming importance given to melody and less importance to words

in the Hindustani system; there were a lot more of gamakas in the former.

I also learnt that the Parur residence, a non-descript, two-storied house in Apparswami Koil Street in Mylapore, had been hallowed by a succession of musicians of both systems. It had reverberated to the tunes of sitar maestro Ravi Shankar and the renderings by leading Hindustani vocalists. It had also hosted Yehudi Menuhin.

Sundaram Iyer and MSG had accompanied the redoubtable Omkarnath Thakur and D.V. Paluskar. It is said that when Omkarnath visited Chennai for a concert, he was asked whom he would prefer to accompany him on the strings. He responded, "When my son, Gopalakrishnan, is here, there is no need to look further."

MSG and his brother were put through a punishing schedule of lessons, practise, practise and yet more practise. That accounted for the tonal purity and impeccable fingering techniques of the brothers. In fact, this style of playing is popularly known as the Parur bani.



I have been a very keen fan of MSG since the time both of us were young. The first time I heard him play was in Tiruvananthapuram in 1945 or thereabouts. He was the violin accompanist to yesteryear titan, Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavata.

Chembai elaborated a raga for some time, and then it was the turn of MSG to do so on the violin. I remember that he was only 15 or so and was perhaps hesitant or was looking for a green signal from Chembai who then declared on the mike for the audience to hear: "*Vaasi, vaasi. ennai kekkavaa ivaal ellam vandirukka? Unnai kekka than!*" (Do you think they have all come to listen to me? Its to listen to you!) Such encouraging words for the young MSG from the great man whose heart was as large as his physique! Chembai was responsible for encouraging and propelling many promising youngsters to the fore.

Thereafter, I do not think I have missed any concert of MSG as soloist or accompanist in the places where I was posted.

In Delhi, my wife and I had hosted MSG for about five days; he had concerts on all these days. He stayed

(L to R): Anantharaman, Sundaram Iyer and Gopalakrishnan



with us but his presence was hardly felt as he did not make any demands on us, quite unlike many others.

Before he left, I requested him to play tanam in the ghana raga panchakam. He agreed and also played Brindavana Saranga and Revati. I had recorded the event, but alas, now the cassette player is dead and I am unable to play the music any longer!

As far as I could gather, MSG was not one to run after or fawn over sabha secretaries for a “chance”! He took concerts as they came his way. He was also among the few violinists in his times to accompany women vocalists. From reports, I gather that he had accompanied M.S. Subbulakshmi and K.B. Sundarambal. I myself have attended a few concerts of M.L. Vasanthakumari where MSG was the violin accompanist. I remember that they were marked by a kind of friendly rivalry that brought out the best in both. But all this ended after a while for reasons I could not fathom.

MSG was not given to being interviewed. However, in a rare interview, when asked about the playing of the then top violin trio, his answer was as truthful as it was diplomatic. He said that T.N. Krishnan’s violin concerts were replete with saukhyam, and Lalgudi Jayaraman was the undoubted master of layam. As for his own style, he said he was trying to carry forward the ‘Parur bani’ assiduously inculcated in him by his father.

M.S. Gopalakrishnan provided violin accompaniment to almost all the leading stalwarts of Carnatic music in his time. In my view, whenever MSG played for K.V. Narayanaswamy, Voleti Venkateswarlu, S. Ramanathan and M. Balamuralikrishna, the artists complemented each other



Accompanying Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavathar. T.V. Gopalakrishnan (mridangam)

so well as though they were made for each other.

I would like to briefly touch upon a few memorable concerts wherein MSG excelled himself. One was a solo recital in All India Radio. His swaraprastaram for Nalinakanti (*Manavyala*) still remains etched in my memory though the concert was in 1966. If I remember right, the previous day, he had accompanied the incomparable flautist, Mali. Two pieces stood out—one was in Kalyani, the other in Kapi. The noted connoisseur ‘Aeolus’ wrote in *Shankar’s Weekly* that it was hard to say who was leading whom in the concert.

The other concert was in Chowdiah Hall in Bengaluru. The titan Emani Sankara Sastry was playing the veena and MSG the violin. The concert was truly memorable but two pieces stood apart, they were simply out of this world! One was a kriti in Khamas and the other was *Nadaloludai* in Kalyanavasantam. The second was verily a friendly clash of two titans. It was a veritable deep dive by both into melody and rhythm, rising to ecstatic heights.

As we know, MSG was equally adept in playing Hindustani music.

He learnt the ropes from Krishnanand, a veteran teacher settled in Madras. I had on my tapes even a piece by MSG playing a Fritz Kreisler composition. Alas, there is no way of listening to the tape now!

Before I close this piece, I would like to narrate an incident that shows the man. Narmada, MSG’s daughter and disciple was playing solo violin at Sastri Hall in Mylapore. It was one of her early concerts as a soloist. After some time, MSG came to the hall and the secretary rushed to greet him and requested him to take a front seat. MSG politely declined and after quietly listening for some time he left. This rather peculiar behaviour must have been occasioned by MSG’s natural anxiety about how Narmada was faring. More importantly, he did not want to stay on, which would have put pressure on the youngster and cramped her flow.

MSG passed away on 3 January 2013, leaving behind a void that is hard to fill. The *New Indian Express* aptly reported the event thus: ‘The bow has fallen silent’.

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