



PIX: PAT RAMAN/SRUTI

# The voice that cannot be stilled

There is no singer quite like Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer. The last of an illustrious breed of Carnatic vocalists, time after time he announces his retirement to enormous crowds. And the same crowds again tow him back to stage. At the recently concluded music season in Madras, the patriarch emerged from retirement yet again to satiate the appetite of his legion of fans. V R Devika glimpses the magic of the octogenarian who's made a seminal contribution to the corpus of southern melody

SEMMANGUDI Srinivasa Iyer should call it a day. The *rasikas* must be reconstructing in their minds some wonderful concert of his that they may have heard decades ago and nostalgically enjoying his music...". Thus wrote the much respected critic, Subbudu.

I could not attend the *kutcheri* that Subbudu reviewed. There was the disappointing 'house-full' board, forbiddingly reclining against the wall. But the ticketless unfortunates did not have to retrace steps home. Nor were they expected to take the 'box-office' spurning in their stride. There were closed circuit television sets relaying the concert outside the hall.

Obviously this was no ordinary event, and the event certainly no ordinary singer. Semmangudi announcing his retirement from the concert platform is a bit. Semmangudi has periodically announced his retirement since 1968, when he turned 60. He keeps getting dragged out of his grand repose of comfort which draw huge crowds.

Semmangudi R. Srinivasa Iyer is perhaps the only musician in south India singing professionally at the age of 82 and still enjoying a mass following. Hailed today as the patriarchal *Pitamaha* of Carnatic music, Semmangudi has travelled the long road to an eminence to which few contemporary musicians have attained.

He came into the limelight in the early 'thirties or slightly before that. Carnatic music was, at that time, dominated by the likes of Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer, Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar and Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavathar.

Maharajapuram had brought to Carnatic music a romantic temper and the delicateness of suggestion. Ariyakudi had invested it with the strength of wit and Chembai had imparted it an incantational simplicity. It was left to Semmangudi to add that element of pageantry. To-

day, he remains the sole link with the music of the titans of a bygone era.

Semmangudi was born in 1908 to a family closely associated with music. Apprenticeship under his cousin Semmangudi Narayanaswami Iyer was preceded by training under Saktharama Rao of Pottuvadyam fame. Thence the exacting stint under Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer.

This imposing musician was not born with a good, vibrant voice, and the added accoutrements of a good range and intrinsic *gamakas*. "It was incessant *tapas* alone that tempered my voice enabling it to execute the refractory and difficult concepts of my musical imagination..." And his manner of singing, admit his fans, set the seal of appeal, endowing grace and melody to his renderings.

"The cardinal elements of his music were the rich *manodharma* of his raag *alapana*s. His was Maharajapuram's legacy tuned to a different fluency and melody; panoramic vistas; *kritis* sung with intense involvement to which he often imparted a sheen...an overall efficiency achieved with its base fully in tradition, but supplemented by tremendous inputs of imagination and effort..." says music critic K S Mahadevan.

For those born after Semmangudi was past his prime, his music introduces the trace of the didactic power of the past, the

sanction of authority and the intangible vintage quality of music.

Srinivasa Iyer played a very constructive role in giving life to the compositions of Maharaja Swati Thirunal and virtually made Kerala a place of pilgrimage for all *vidwans* of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra. He has set to music more than 200 compositions of the composer-king, earning the gratitude of the royal house of Travancore, but not without pitching himself in the thick of a big controversy.

While getting the credit for propagating many compositions of the Maharaja while teaching, reciting and writing, Semmangudi also became the focal point of a bitter attack by veena *vidwan* S Balachander for spreading the Swati myth. According to Balachander, Swati Thirunal is credited with the authorship of many compositions he never wrote.

Semmangudi does not like to dwell on the controversy. "By his attack," says he, "Balachander has possibly achieved the unique distinction of having made Swati Thirunal better known than before."

It is masterly diplomacy with which he tacks his way through controversy. Semmangudi has this quality of never plunging headlong into unseemly rows. He is full of praise for his adversaries, but with subtle geniality, drives home his point.

About Subbudu, the one crit-



Semmangudi: no musical sanyas for the legend

ic who has been bitterly criticising his singing, advising retirement in no uncertain terms through his columns, he says: "Oh! He only speaks the truth. I said I would like to quit long

before he suggested it, but what do you say to the full houses I draw? Subbudu has to be critical to survive as a critic. I know he has as a great regard for me as I have for him. His reviews

are interesting because he attacks the topmost musicians."

But wonders will never cease. Semmangudi has been invited to felicitate Subbudu at a function this month. It would be interesting to see how he couches all his anger in sweet words. "We are great friends and I respect his knowledge in music, but he writes against his conscience," says Semmangudi. A typical harbinger of what's in store at the function.

Prof T N Krishnan, Prof T M Thiagarajan, V R Krishnan, P S Narayanaswamy, K J Jesudas, even M S Subbulakshmi, musical heavyweights in the contemporary Carnatic scene, have all trained under Semmangudi at some stage in their career. As the principal of the Swati Thirunal Music Academy at Trivandrum, he has groomed hundreds of young musicians for the concert platform.

Semmangudi's flair for mixing with the higher echelons of governments, universities and foundations is the envy of his contemporaries. You name a title conferred on a musician, and you make the simultaneous discovery that he has already received it.

The Padma Bhushan (1969) and the President's award (1953) plaques adorn the walls of his simple but elegant house, while the Kalidas Samman sits quietly in his bedroom. There is also a photocopy of the cheque for Rs 1 lakh that came with the

*samman* in an album.

Innumerable other honours just get collected in boxes. "I cannot keep nailing my walls, it is my own house," he observes. The big, balmy bungalow in the centre of Madras city testifies to the fact that this musician has reaped much more than glory through the arduous practice of his trade.

Through elaborate raag *alapana*s, spirited singing of *kritis*, lightning and thunder in *swara prastharas*, he has created a brand identity so strong that it could survive noticeable shifts in customer preferences. It is also exactly what enables him to remain a top trader of classical music even sixty years after his debut!

"Every curve, every inflection, must be implanted in your voice until you can never go wrong. Repeat the song a hundred times until it becomes your own. And then you embellish it with your *manodharma*," he tells his students. And that has been the only secret of his success, he says.

"I also received uninhibited encouragement from the great Ariakudi, Chembai, Musiri and Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer when I began my career in earnest. Without their help I may not have come up the way I have. If they could not accept an engagement, they would suggest that I might be given a chance instead," he graciously admits.

Semmangudi's brilliant life has been free of the dramas of rejection that seem to characterise famous men. "I am extremely gratified to see the new interest in classical music among the young. They seem to want heavy, serious music. The afternoon concerts at the Music Academy's annual conference in December had some excellent young singers — educated and highly motivated. Did you see the crowd that thronged the academy at 1 p.m. even on week days?"

He names Unnikrishnan, Seetha Rajan, Sowmya and Sanjay Subramaniam as youngsters of great promise. "Their technique is very good. They will attain maturity with experience and age. Many musicians are fighting for the 4.30 pm prime time concerts at the academy. But they may soon begin asking for promotion to the 1 o'clock slot soon," he observes.

"One must remember that the raags and *kritis* of our music have been sung for hundreds of years. Still, they do not sound stale. Each time a musician starts singing, his impulses are fresh and the songs too. This is sustained and even perpetuated when he sings with due devotion, feeling and understanding of their beauty and spiritual values. A musician's approach to the art should not be like a master's, but of a devotee's — one who always offers fresh flowers and fruit during worship."

"There is great hope for Carnatic music," continues this octogenarian who has carved a unique place for himself in the arena of Indian music with his extraordinary energy and the heartfelt lyricism of his art, carrying the flavour of the old world Carnatic music into the 20th century.

He insists that the Music Academy performance this December was his last public appearance. He would like to sit at home and immerse himself in *poojas* and meditations. But his legion of fans say no, emphatically.