

## GNB-The man & his music

What better article than a tribute to the legend-G.N. Balasubramaniam in this year of his centenary celebrations, I thought. As I put pen to paper or rather fingers to PC, I remembered the awe in which he was held by my parents and all the music lovers we knew then. There was talk of how handsome he was, what a fabulous voice he had, the brigas he could sing, his magnetic presence and so on. Being before my time and a genius beyond my comprehension, I thought it would be best to present this as a tribute to GNB by his peers-colleagues, friends, music stalwarts of his time and some memoirs in his own words.

### Early life

Gudalur Narayanaswamy Balasubramaniam was born on January, 6. 1910. Both his father, the popular Headmaster of the Hindu High School, Triplicane, Madras, G V Narayanaswamy Iyer & mother, Vishalakshi Ammal had a fine voice and were musicians in their own right. He was fondly called Mani in those days. Their house was the focal point of many music vidwans of that time. No wonder music entered the soul, sinews and skin of the young lad.

In his article written in 1957 -My first Kutcheri-Mani wrote ' Right from my birth I lived in an atmosphere drenched in music and this helped to nurture, develop and sustain my ardour in music. I learnt a good many kirthanams by just listening to them as sung by senior vidwans.'

Mani was also studying for a BA (Hons) degree in English Literature which he gained in 1930. Like most middle-class Brahmins of the day, his father dreamt of his son becoming a prosperous lawyer so the family could move to the 'posh street' in Mylapore. But Mani had already made up his mind to be a professional performing musician.

### First Concert

Destiny beckoned when he sang at a temple in Mylapore, Madras. He had received training under the noted violinist, Karur Chinnaswamy Iyer and Madurai Subramania Iyer, both neighbours in Triplicane.

In his own words, " Every year, a music festival used to be organised at the Kapaleeswara Temple, Mylapore during the Vasantha Utsavam. In 1928, Musiri Subramania Iyer who was scheduled to sing at the festival was unable to perform and it was requested that I may be allowed to sing that day. My father was naturally hesitant. Although he knew my ability and my ambition to become a musician, he was not sure if I could fill the bill successfully, since I had not had much of practical training in concert art." But Mani did sing that day. And how!!!

K.S.Muthuraman, close associate of Mani and later one of his biographers recalls this episode vividly:

"There he was fair in complexion, with sharp and handsome features, wearing glittering diamond ear-rings and a prominent 'Thilakam' on his forehead. Mani's melodious voice engulfed the large temple courtyard and he treated the large audience to vibrant music, spanning three octaves and kalais effortlessly and reeling off swaras in lilting cascades. He sang ' Vadapi ganapathim ' after the Varnam and took Panthuvarali for elaborate treatment. 'Chintayamam' in Bhairavi and ' Nee irangayenil ' in Atana stood out for sheer beauty. I can

say that this performance was the foundation stone of the musical edifice built by this great musician."

Besides formal training later for couple of years with Tiger Varadachariar, he had imbibed by sheer mental osmosis listening to the great legends , like Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer whom he greatly admired & Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar, about whom he wrote "In the matter of Kutcheri dharma, I took him as my ' manasika guru ' and adopted his methods of approach. I consider him as the most outstanding vidwan of his generation"

### **Accompanists**

His accompanists were usually Rajamanickam Pillai and Palghat Mani Iyer, or Chowdiah and Palani Subramania Pillai. Rajamanickam Pillai was very quick in assessing the talents of GNB and soon, a close bond of friendship developed, based on mutual respect and admiration.

Palghat Mani Iyer had an instant rapport with GNB. Both of them minutely studied old Kritis and modified and restructured them for concerts in a way that made the rasikas spellbound- for eg Marukelara, Sarasa Samadhana, Chalamelara, Thathvameruga Tharama. The duo composed inspiring chittaswaras for eg in Vara Raga Laya in Chechukamboji. The world of Carnatic Music owes a great debt to GNB not only for his intellectual feat in recasting some of these old kritis in an attractive manner, but also for his great pains in unearthing some rare kritis of the Trinity and with Mani Iyer presenting them as we know and love today.

After a particularly pleasing concert at the Academy in 1948, an admirer said to Mani Iyer how he reserved his best for GNB. Mani Iyer responded "I play for others, while 'GN Sir' sings for me also." A cryptic and profound observation indeed. He further referred to some pieces GNB sang that day and added that he couldn't have shown his special prowess if the musician hadn't offered opportunities for that. As a craftsman of the highest order, GNB knew the strong points of his accompanists and made ample provision for them to exhibit those.

He also gave many performing opportunities for young upcoming musicians like Palghat V. Raghunath, Lalgudi Jayaraman, M. S. Gopalakrishnan, his disciples the late T. R. Balasubramaniam and the late Tanjore S. Kalyanaraman also shared a part of his glittering limelight.

### **GNB Bani**

At a time when there were already many notable vidwans in the field, GNB emerged as a rising star in their midst. His ascent to the top position in the music world was rapid.

His engagement book used to be filled up one year in advance! With more than 20 concerts every month, how he found the time to practice and bring up so many new kritis and thukkadas remained a puzzle to most of his admirers. His style of singing found increasing favour with music lovers and a 'GNB-bani' emerged.....

He favoured Madhyama kala kritis and believed that they should form 80% of the concert. His Raga Alapanas were full of briga and jaru, innovative, for eg. stopping at Nishadam in Kamboji. His neraval & kalpana swarams were spell-binding in their combinations and swara

patterns. Though he sang RTPs in Melakarta ragams like Thodi and Kalyani, he also brought in ragas like Devamanohari, Saveri, Sahana etc. He would pick a Pallavi in a simple Thalam but as his most prominent student Dr. ML Vasanthakumari would say, they would be most complex. He introduced the concept of 'Sruti-Bedam' in the teeth of opposition. Though challenged by many of his counterparts as absurd and a taboo for it was claimed that it never existed, GNB identified literary and historical evidences to support the existence of this method in early Indian music.

To actually sing a sruti-bedam needs the ultimate in vidwat. As GNB described it, it is like adding salt to paal payasam-too little and its unnoticed, too much and its spoilt! His RTPs were so popular that the community ended up referring to the evening as the "Saveri concert" or "Devamanohari concert". The end of the RTP was a sign for the audience to start clearing the halls. GNB changed that with new, interesting and soulful thukadas ensuring the hall stayed full till the Mangalam! His concerts were carefully planned and never boring. For eg, even if he sang Subramanyaya Namaste twice in a space, the neraval etc would be in a different place. To quote Richard Burton, the great English actor, "sometimes there is a mystical interaction between an audience and the artist and it is that that distinguishes the great from the talented"

### **Accolades**

In the early forties, GNB was invited to sing at the palace of the Maharaja of Travancore. Gayaka Sikamani Muthiah Bhagavathar was the Principal of the Swati Tirunal College of Music at that time. GNB sang Sarasamukhi in rare raga Gaudamalhar prefacing it with a captivating raga alapana. Muthiah Bhagavathar embraced GNB after the kriti and said though I composed the song, I didn't realise such possibilities existed in the raga! He presented one of his four Thamburas named 'Bharata' to GNB as his devotion to music was like Bharata's to Rama.

Similarly in the Mysore Darbar when GNB rendered the Kriti 'Brocheva' in Khamas, Mysore Vidwan Vasudevachar, the composer who was present in the audience, wondered whether he had really composed such a magnificent song. GNB also sang kritis in Mohanam and Shanmukhapriya. The Maharaja patted him on the back- a rare gesture because royal hands never came into contact with commoners in those days. He used to refer to GNB as "that Shanmukhapriya boy" while talking about him to Muthiah Bhagavathar.

Amongst the many awards and accolades showered on him, the notable ones are Asthana Vidwan, Travancore Court 1939, Asthana Vidwan, Ettayapuram 1941. He was awarded the 'Sangeetha Kalanidhi' from the Music Academy, in 1958 and presided over their Experts Committee. Sangeeth Natak Academy award, known as President's Award was conferred on him by Dr S. Radhakrishnan in 1959. In 1955, GNB was appointed Producer of Carnatic Music in the All India Radio, Madras and Principal, Swati Tirunal College of Music, Trivandrum in 1964.

### **Cinema**

His innings in Tamil cinema yielded only five films-the most famous among them 'Sakunthalai' (1940) with the queen of Carnatic Music M.S. Subalakshmi. It is said that many a vidwan and fans of the time went only to listen to GNB's Kamboji Viruttam and left. Maharajapuram Santhanam said that it was GNB's electrifying Kambodi that inspired him to take to music seriously.

Soon after the success of " Bhama Vijayam" (1934) GNB much to his shock and surprise became a victim of the prejudice against cinema which prevailed in that period. For a concert in Thanjavur, accompanists refused him and several musicians shunned the concert. GNB rendered a masterly Bhairavi followed by the kriti 'Chintayamam ' and a veritable cascade of swaras. GNB then took up Andolika raga as the main piece and delineated it in his own characteristic style, embellishing it with majestic flashes and impeccable glides. All the stalwarts and doomsdayers dashed in to listen to an invigorating concert.

### **GNB-the man**

To enhance that striking personality, he was always immaculately dressed and favoured perfumes-all of which added to his aura. In a career which spanned more than 3 decades, lakhs of rupees passed his hands, but he did not leave a fortune to his wife and children. He was lavish –on himself, family and friends. Very early, the responsibility to support a large family also devolved on him. He had five sisters and a brother. In 1931, he married his aunt's daughter and had a son. He willingly supported struggling and upcoming musicians. He gave free concerts for indigent families.

His humility is also much mentioned. He helped jack up fees for artistes and was generous in sharing with his accompanists-both the money and the compliments. He won the gold medal as a junior at the Academy in 1927 and in 1958 was awarded the prestigious 'Sangeeta Kalanidhi' title. He always returned his concert fees to the Academy as donation in all of the 27 years that he sang there.

He composed more than 100 songs in rare ragams in Sanskrit, Telugu and Tamil mostly in praise of his Ishta Deivata 'Sri Rajarajeshwari'. He created new ragams like Amitbehag. But he didn't put in any mudra and never sang it in his concerts. He said 'if they had jeevan, they would live without his effort'

He was the first person to moot the idea of 'Indian Music' as a single entity instead of Carnatic & Hindustani. He was so overwhelmed at a concert by Bade Ghulam Ali Khan that he prostrated himself in front of him earning the sarcasm of the Carnatic musicians.

And he was as generous with his Music as with his money. In the recent history of Carnatic music, nobody has had the unique distinction of creating a sishya paramapara so large and of such high quality as GNB. Dr MLV, Radha-Jayalakshmi, Trichur V Ramachandran, to name a few and the next generation of the bani -Sudha Raghunathan, Charumathi Ramachandran are all keeping the banner high and proud.

But all this didn't come without a price. He evoked much jealousy amongst many vidwans of his time. In addition to being handsome and debonair, he was a graduate plus a film star. He had an ardent fan following. Added to that, there was the rage against the ' upstart ' who had made good without going through the rigours of a traditional Gurukulavasa. As a result, there was much malicious talk and vilifications which hurt his sensitive nature. He was dogged by this right to the very end.

### **The final phase**

He suffered a major illness in 1959 and did not sing at the Academy for the first time that year. He resumed in a brief radio recital in mid-1960. The thara sthayi was not as easily attained as before and had to be husbanded. Such was his dedication that he continued singing though he came out coughing blood quite often.

His concert in the Music Academy in December 1964, which proved to be his last in that institution, was a splendid one. It was really a wonder that in spite of his poor health, he was able to render, ' Dharini ' with all the usual intricacies. His last performance in Delhi in March 1965 was also equally remarkable for the Thodi Alapana that he rendered that day. The famous critic Subbudu wrote that he sang that Thodi "holding his life virtually in his hand."

He died on May 1, 1965 in Trivandrum. Chembai Vaidyanathan, a great vidwan of the time, on hearing the news said simply "Ragam has expired" But as Beethoven said about Handel "To live in hearts we leave behind is not to die"