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The Life and Art of M.S. Subbulakshmi

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A new biography gives us a sense of the many personalities that made up “MS”, the extraordinary exponent of Carnatic music, during her life-journey.

Dawn breaks and south India wakes to the celestial voice of Madurai Shanmukhavadiyu Subbulakshmi, “MS” to the world. Roused from their slumber too are the various gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon as MS sings-chants the *Venkateshwara Suprabhatam* or *Vishnu Sahasnamam* or *Bhaja Govindam*. This has been true for several decades now, and TikTok, YouTube and their mutating successors notwithstanding, it will probably be true for the next several decades as well. Even in this globalized world, the staggering cultural phenomenon that is MS, is insufficiently recognized beyond India’s borders. Why blame the world, it is inadequately appreciated even within India, north of the Vindhyas?

Keshav Desiraju’s superb new biography of the incomparable MS is therefore an overdue call to India and the world to take notice. *Of Gifted Voice* succeeds at many levels: as biography (mostly), but also as a kind of aesthetic and social history of Chennai and Tamil Nadu of the last century, and as a guide to the Carnatic music tradition.

For this reader, it was also a personal experience of remembrance and retrospective regret. Deracinated and itinerant as life has been, home is still Gopalapuram in Madras which happens to be a stone’s throw from the citadel of Tamil Brahmin musical and cultural dominance, the Music Academy.

The regret is that despite having grown up not far from this musical world, spatially and socially, and having had access to it at something close to its pinnacle (the 1970s), I had never actually heard MS live in concert. (I only once glimpsed or rather gawked at MS sing a short piece at a Madras High Society wedding. Divinely, asexually radiant in her multi-colored zari-shimmering Canjeevaram, her diamond nose rings, her multiple gold necklaces, the white-and-orange jasmine in her oil-coiled hair, and the smudged sandalwood and flaming vermilion on her forehead, I want to believe today that I must have felt then, “Jeez, I can’t find my knees.”)

That loss was of course a direct consequence of—and deserved payback for—the then adolescent wanting to learn the guitar and play *Killing Me Softly* to fit into hip, beckoning Delhi. I was to discover over time that nothing would ever come close as an aesthetic-cum-spiritual experience to that of MS: singing the refrain “*meena lochini pasha mochini manini kadamba vana vasini*” in the Raga Purvi Kalyani or lingering at the end of the crescendo “*shambho*” in the Raga Bauli or repeatedly invoking “*govinda, govinda*” to summarize a fulfilled lifetime in the Rajaji creation “*Korai onrum illai.*” And to rub salt in the wound, when I did arrive in Delhi, it had moved on to Bob Dylan, Jethro Tull, and the more acidic forms of rock. Neither cool enough for St. Stephens College nor rooted enough in Gopalapuram, mine was the fate of many of midnight’s children, *Na Ghar Ka, Na Ghat Ka*.

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In *Of Gifted Voice*, Keshav Desiraju, the highly regarded bureaucrat-turned-author gives us—in rough chronological sequence—five MS’s: the Sanskritizing devadasi; the project of the strategic, even scheming, Sadasivam, her husband; the contemporary of other artistic talents, especially women; the changing, re-inventing musician; and, finally, the transcendent public and international performer and star who now inhabits the Indian public consciousness as the Singer Celestial, anointed as such by no less than Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru (“I am the Prime Minister. But I stand before a queen; the queen of great art, music.”).

MS’ childhood, the stuff of gossip and doctored history, is fascinatingly described. That MS was probably the daughter of one of the great musicians, Madurai Pushpavanam Iyer, that she might have been the “cousin” of another Carnatic music giant Madurai Mani Iyer, and that MS herself re-wrote her biography to change the identity of her father, all make for some titillation (although the tone of Desiraju’s book and its broader sensibility is anything but).

More seriously, the critical decisions of MS in her early life provide vivid, textural evidence to M.N. Srinivas’ famous thesis of upward mobility—“Sanskritisation” in his immortal term—in India. MS at the age of 20 abandons her unmarried mother in favour of her future

husband T. Sadasivam as a means of escaping the stigma of being a *devadasi* (court musicians who historically almost surely doubled up as courtesans). Acquiring permanent legitimacy in caste-ridden south India was the not-unhappy not unintended consequence.

Sadasivam sees her and falls for her even while being married. Quickly dispatching his pregnant wife to her *maika*, and spotting the talent in MS, he sets about taking her under his wing, and embarks upon Project MS—a vehicle for Sadasivam’s own Sanskritization, of becoming a player in the world at large. He carefully manages MS’ early foray into cinema; he scripts every MS performance over many decades, including the minutiae of what she would sing, in what order, at which concert; and he deftly steers MS through the power-jockeying among the Madras sabhas and the tricky politics of resurgent Tamil assertiveness, making, it must be admitted, the right calls.

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To give the schemer his due, Sadasivam succeeds, and in spades. MS does become a household name and international star, the couple do get to hobnob with the rich and famous, and Sadasivam gets to create Kalki gardens, his Camelot-on-the-Cooum, where elite Madras society congregated, gossiped, and intellectualized. And, Sadasivam, when the Ramon Magsaysay award was conferred upon MS, gets acknowledged in the glare of global spotlight as her creator: “My all, I owe to my husband...” As Desiraju wryly notes those words were probably written for MS by him and is of course read by MS back to him. Self-praise alchemizes into glowing praise.

Tantalizingly, through the hundreds of pages, we never really get a sense of the mix of proximate desire and future ambition when Sadasivam falls for the adolescent MS; indeed the author hints that perhaps there may have been little desire at all.

Of Gifted Voice really sparkles when describing the musical firmament of 1930s-1970s, the music sabhas, artistes, their inspiration, their styles, the strikingly few rivalries and bruised egos (the complete absence of the eccentric genius M.D. Ramanathan is, for this reader, a surprise and disappointment).

Many characters are brought to life in this part of the book, including MS’ two women contemporaries, D.K. Pattammal and M.L. Vasanthakumari, who were arguably no less gifted than MS in talent, musical knowledge and innovativeness. But the character that really stands out is the feisty, devadasi dancer Balasaraswati.

Unlike MS, Balasaraswati eschews sanskritization, remaining faithful to and even taking pride in her devadasi status and its traditions. Chafing under the acclaim garnered by the great Rukmini Devi Arundale, not just for her dancing but for breaking the taboo against Brahmin women exposing themselves to, and inviting the, marauding gaze of lascivious men, she complains, “upper-caste women have taken up our profession and left us only their art”. And as long-time mistress of, not married to, India’s first Finance Minister, Shanmukham Chetty, she is deemed unworthy of mention in his obituary.

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Few Carnatic musicians have acquired the wider appeal and audience of their Hindustani counterparts. And that has been truer of Hindustani instrumentalists—Ravi Shankar, Ali Akbar Khan, and Hari Prasad Chaurasia—than Hindustani vocalists even those of the stature of Amir Khan or Bade Ghulam Ali Khan. So, for a Carnatic vocalist to achieve a modicum of wider appeal (still narrower than that of Hindustani performers) is rare. MS achieved that musically in two ways: by adding to her repertoire bhajans from all over India, especially those of Meera, which extended her reach beyond the South, while the addition of religious shlokas extended it beyond upper-caste Hindus.

Had MS remained a pure classical musician she would not have become the national and international star that she did. But she did pay a small price. The gifted, contemporary singer T.M. Krishna, in his terrific book, *A Southern Music*, argues that MS’ changing repertoire—forced by the expectations of patriarchal Madras society and probably also by Sadasivam’s calculations—precluded MS from displaying her considerable talents as a classical musician that were comparable to those of the best male performers.

MS received awards too numerous to list. But the greatest tribute may well have been to compose and sing for the Mahatma himself. After a performance by her in Delhi a few months before Nathuram Godse’s bullets killed him, he said: “To sing a bhajan is one thing; to sing it by losing oneself in God is quite different.” It was only fitting that in the aftermath of that event, AIR played MS’

hari tum haro, a composition in Raga Darbari that she learnt for the Mahatma’s last birthday.

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Keshav Desiraju has given us access to many MS’. Alas, the one MS we don’t get much of is MS the person. Is it because a reticent MS and/or patriarchal Chennai just did not leave enough biographical material to mine? Or, is it because Desiraju’s fastidiously decent sensibility does not want to ‘go there’? Or, because this ground has been covered in previous biographies of MS? It is difficult to know. One is reminded of Anita Desai’s very positive review of *A Suitable Boy*, wishing nevertheless that Vikram Seth had given a glimpse of the “dark heart of even the most ordinary man or woman.”

If only we had been given a peek into the heart, dark or not, of the extraordinary MS. What drove her embrace of Sadasivam, cold expediency or something more? How did she take the disruptive downsizing in their lives occasioned by her husband’s indebtedness and mismanagement of the periodical *Kalki*? What, for example, did she think was the cause of the latter? Did it grate? It is especially puzzling that Desiraju does not really tell us what was contained in the epistolary exchange between MS and GN Balasubramanian. Could one detect longing, however masked? To read a whole book about such an important public figure, indeed phenomenon, and have little sense of the individual leaves a residue of incompleteness.

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One opportunity missed in the book was this. For this reader, one of the most astonishing facts was to know that MS even late in life would learn to sing particular compositions from fellow artistes. Accustomed as we are in these cutthroat times to accusations of plagiarism and property right violation, the idea that great artistes have to learn even at the pinnacle of their careers and that such teaching is provided by ‘competitors’ is truly mind-boggling. It is almost like Beethoven soliciting Bach’s help for the writing of the Ninth Symphony. What the reader would have given to be a fly on the wall of these teaching-learning sessions. Did MS have to learn the raga *ab initio* or just the composition or the core emotion to convey, or the notes to stress in the *arohanam* and *avarohanam*?

Minor quibbles apart, we should be deeply grateful to Keshav Desiraju for the offering of *Of Gifted Voice*. It is also an offering of the times, when the battle for India’s soul is well under way, provoking thoughts pertaining to India’s two fissures, caste and religion.

The life of MS, and the Carnatic music tradition more broadly, raises some uncomfortable truths. The fount of its aestheticism and the deep pleasures it provides is a set of social arrangements that is hierarchical, patriarchal and frankly, worthy of “annihilation.” To invert Thomas Paine’s famous phrase: the plumage is there to be savoured but there is a dislikable creature it adorns.

It is to the credit of artistes like the brave T.M. Krishna that they are trying to address some of the tensions. He, for example, has taken upon himself the difficult task of democratizing the tradition, at both producer and consumer ends: expanding opportunities for learning Carnatic music as well as for disseminating it beyond the narrow confines of elite, Brahmin South India.

Of Gifted Voice is now accompanied by a biography of India’s other internationally renowned classical musician, Ravi Shankar. MS and Ravi Shankar, two extraordinary musicians, were the greatest exponents of India’s two great classical music traditions, Carnatic and Hindustani.

One might (reductively) argue that these traditions represent the two competing claimants for the Idea of India. Hindustani—a syncretic product of miscegenation, bastardization and accretion—is the perfect metaphor for the Nehruvian Idea of India. Carnatic—religious and Hindu—is potentially the symbol of an alternative based on a perceived civilizational continuity, purity and commonality.

Ideally, these two Ideas of India should not have to compete, they should happily co-exist. Ideally, the typical household in India would rise at dawn to M.S. Subbulakshmi’s music of collective piety and find solace at dusk in the secular interiority of an Amir Khan khayal.

What an India that would be! Alas, how that India “year by year recedes before us”, not just as quotidian reality but even as imagined possibility.